

Out of the ashes: Astoria's auto row

By Jaime Lump For The Astorian Oct 27, 2023



If you're driving down Duane Street in Astoria, chances are you're looking for a bite to eat, a coffee, maybe a beer, but a hundred years ago, it was where you would have gone for all your automobile needs. For a time, Downtown Astoria's Duane Street was known as 'Automobile Row.' While most are already familiar with the household name, Lovell Auto - its history wrapped into the Fort George Brewery empire on Duane St. between 14th and 15th - many would never know that just down the block, multiple, less-assuming, buildings were built to house dealerships, garages, repair shops, and tire shops. One of those buildings is the Sovey Motor Company, known today as Munktiki and Dead Man's Isle. While it's not obvious that the one-story building, with its recessed retail entry, was originally an auto showroom, visitors may be

delighted to know that they may be enjoying their dinner in the same location where a bright and shiny 1927 Dodge Brothers Fast Four once beckoned Astorians to buy into the age of the modern automobile.

Clues to Astoria's auto history and automobile row are sprinkled throughout its main streets. Before cars, the hearty folk of Astoria relied either on their own two feet or on horses. Roads in early Astoria were planked with wood, but most were unpaved, rutty, and fairly muddy. In 1888, the streetcar line was officially established connecting Astoria's Uppertown to its Downtown, then later on to Uniontown. The streetcar was horse-pulled until 1892 when electric trolley service began. Around that same time, the first American Automobile was designed by two bike mechanics in Springfield, Massachusetts. The gas-powered vehicle hit the market in 1896 and before long automobiles made their way to Astoria. The first car in Astoria, a 1903 Rambler, belonged to brothers Ferdinand and Augustus Fisher, whose Italianate mansion at 12th and Grand was also the location of Astoria's first automobile garage.

Sherman Lovell was early to the scene, founding Lovell Auto Company in 1910 opposite his father's foundry company on the northeast corner of Franklin and 18th. Lovell became the first agent in Astoria to represent Ford Motor Company.

By 1920, Duane Street was lined with automobile dealerships, garages, body shops, tire services, fueling stations, auto supply and accessory retail stores. On the south side of Duane between 12th and 13th streets, opposite the Weinhard-Astoria Hotel, Sidney S. Sovey was running and operating Western Motor Car Company, a Buick repair and tire shop. Lovell and his business partner, Norris Staples,



decided to join forces with Sovey under the Western Motor Car and Lovell Auto company names selling Buicks and Dodges.

As the auto industry boomed, tourists began driving their vehicles to visit Astoria and the coast. Since the infrastructure was still only really accommodating to foot, horse, and rail traffic, all those visitors needed places to park their cars. The three businessmen decided to expand their model and created Astoria Tourist Garage: “Located in a three-floor brick building in the heart of Astoria’s Automobile Row on Duane Street is the Astoria Tourist Garage... devoted exclusively to catering to the tourists and those who desire downtown storage for their cars.” It turned out that the partnership was not exactly a match made in heaven and it dissolved in March of 1922, just two years after it began. Sovey re-established his business as Sovey Motor Company and carried on selling Dodge cars while Lovell and Staples focused on running Lovell Auto Company out of his building on 14th and Duane.

Fates worked out differently for all three men on the night of the great fire in 1922. Sovey’s building burned to the ground. Lovell’s building remained standing due to his tenacity to keep fire officials from purposely razing it to create a fire break along with the tireless efforts of



his garage employees throwing fire extinguishing powder at any encroaching flames. Staples’ heart gave out while he was pushing their inventory of cars up the hill to safety. The fire destroyed most of the downtown buildings, causing the streets to cave in and the streetcar tracks to contort every which way. Astoria’s streetcar business continued to operate on either side of downtown but stopped running in 1924. That

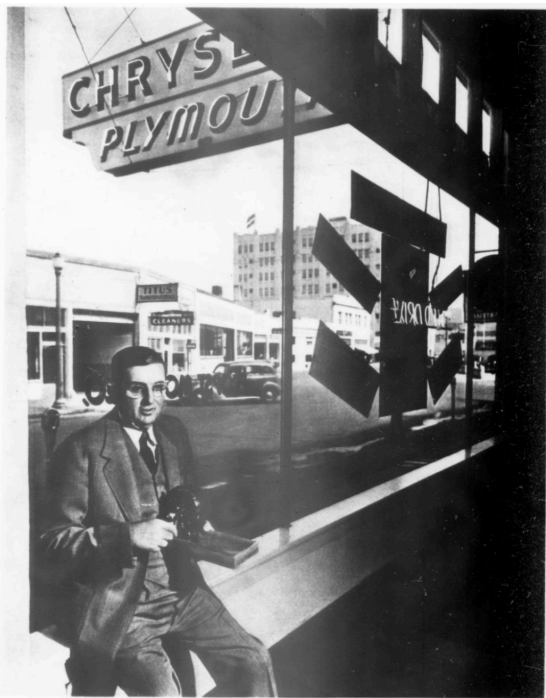
same year Lovell established a new transportation system for the city:

the bus. During the rebuild, engineers recognized the need to build the new infrastructure around the automobile and designed the streets to be considerably wider to make driving and parking more accessible and convenient.

Even beyond downtown, Astoria continued to make modern auto-related advancements. Highways flanked both ends of the city inviting tourists to drive through and stop for a bite to eat or stay the night and paved rural roads made transportation of agricultural goods faster and easier for local farmers.

The need for Astoria's Automobile Row pressed on. Showrooms and garages sprang up all along both sides of Duane Street. Sovey's modest one-story building was designed in 1923 with a large center showroom window beneath the parapet with a garage door on the left side. Around the back, a robust concrete ramp, the remnants of which still exist today, allowed vehicles to enter the building from the basement and drive up to the showroom. Sovey continued selling Dodges in his new building until 1928 when he and his family moved to San Francisco. After his departure, Sovey's building continued to serve auto-related businesses until the 1930s. The auto industry proved robust through the Great

Depression but came to a screeching halt for dealerships in 1942 when the manufacturing of consumer vehicles was shut down by the U.S. government in favor of war production. Just two months before the industry froze, Astoria's Automobile Row was featured in Fortune Magazine as a sampling of how small cities across America would fare during the progression of the war. Edgar Claude Propst, who had set up his Chrysler and Plymouth dealership, Propst Motor Co., in Sovey's old building was featured as a newcomer



E. C. PROPST CAME FROM PORTLAND TO CASH IN ON 1941 PROSPERITY

to the auto scene. Described as “more defiant than disgruntled about the choking off of his stock in trade,” Propst stated that he already had to let go of multiple employees. Propst’s dealership closed shortly after the article was printed.



Astoria’s Automobile Row never recovered and many of the auto buildings adapted to the ever-changing needs of the city. The Duane Street facade of Sovey’s building transformed into a fashionable retail space - the showroom window was removed and stylized into a recessed entry and the garage door was replaced with vertical windows. The building operated as a Sears location for a time then later an automatic dry cleaner. Today, all of Astoria’s Duane Street auto businesses are

gone, but the showrooms and garages remain relics of the city's auto-centric past.

Photos:

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Morning Astorian March 7, 1920 Advertisement for Western Motor Car Company

12th and Duane Streets during rebuild Sovey building at center, 1923 CCHS

E.C. Propst featured in Fortune Magazine November 1941

Sovey Building 1950s as Sears credit: Sara's Old Photos