



# 1927 Gotfredson

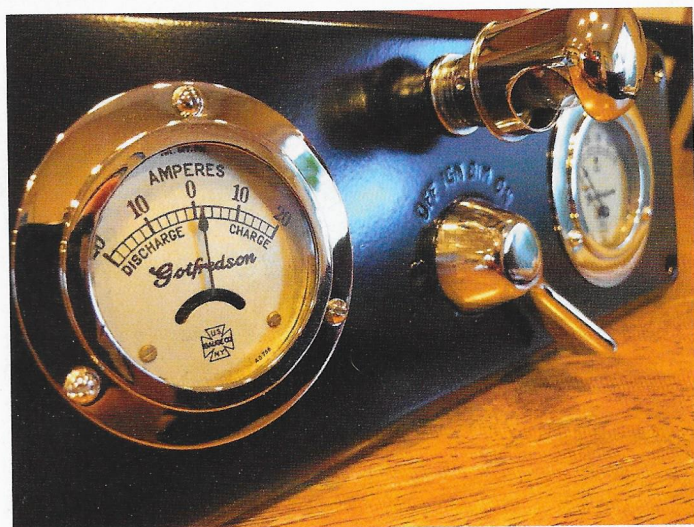
Model 20 B Stake Bed

Text and Photos By David Gotfredson

As a child growing up in the Detroit suburbs, I remember hearing family tales of Gotfredson trucks, manufactured by my great grandfather, Benjamin Gotfredson. I had collected a few dozen black-and-white photographs of the old trucks, taken at the Gotfredson factories in Detroit, Michigan, and Walkerville, Canada, before delivery to customers like Shell Motor Spirit, Dominion Express, M.R. Houck Company, Mary Lee Candies, and many more.

When I was a teenager, our family moved to San Diego. In 1998, at the age of 36, I decided to scan the truck photos and articles I had gathered, and create a website dedicated to the history of Gotfredson trucks ([gotfredson.org](http://gotfredson.org)). With the assistance of Marcia and Bob McCrary of Ypsilanti, Michigan, owners of seven Gotfredson trucks, the website came together nicely with hard-to-find information, vehicle specs, and even more vintage photographs. We also launched a Gotfredson truck Facebook page with photo albums and a roster of the 35 or so Gotfredson vehicles known to exist.

Yet, I had never seen a Gotfredson truck in person. The worldwide reach of the Gotfredson truck website led to an estate attorney contacting me in 2014 to inquire about the worth of a 1927 Gotfredson stored in a family's barn in Carlyle, Illinois. The owner, Richard Sum, had passed away in 2012 and the truck had passed to his widow, Sherry. My brother, Paul, and I flew to Carlyle. It was the first time we had touched or crawled underneath or even seen a Gotfredson truck. We snapped more than 100 photographs of the stake bed truck, and decided to make an offer. It would be our first restoration project.







Gotfredson





Most, but not all, of the Sum family wanted to sell the truck to us; after all, our last name is on the radiator! Sherry Sum liked the idea of passing the truck on to the Gotfredson family. However, one of her adult sons was against selling it because he had intended to restore the vehicle for himself. The Sum family took a vote, and the Gotfredson brothers won! My brother and I purchased the truck and trailered it to San Diego for a complete frame-off restoration.

Starry-eyed and wielding wrenches, we tore into the 88-year-old prized antique with the help of some truck addicts at the Motor Transport Museum in Campo, California. One old-timer, the late Carl Calvert (who founded the museum and led many restoration projects) pounded into our heads and hearts his best advice: our restoration needed to keep that 1927 Gotfredson as authentic as possible.

**The plot thickens (and thins our wallets)**

I had a basic mechanical understanding of vehicles, as I relentlessly busted up a 1973 Bronco as a kid off-roading in San Diego and Baja, Mexico. Carl taught us the ins and outs of doing a valve job and using Plastigauge to adjust the bearings, but there was something else staring us right in the face. At first, we tried to ignore it. We tried to block it out of our minds by rebuilding

the carburetor, magneto, starter, generator, radiator, water pump, steering box, Stewart vacuum tank, and brakes.

The elephant in the room? Two words: wood replacement. The hardwood white ash frame supporting the cab's sheet metal had rotted away beyond repair, and most (if not all) of the wood needed to be replaced. We remembered what Carl had taught us, so we knew the replacement wood needed to match exactly to the original wood supporting the cab. We were lucky to find Aaron Radelow, a custom woodworker in Escondido, California, who (like us) had never worked on an antique vehicle restoration project but was willing to do it.

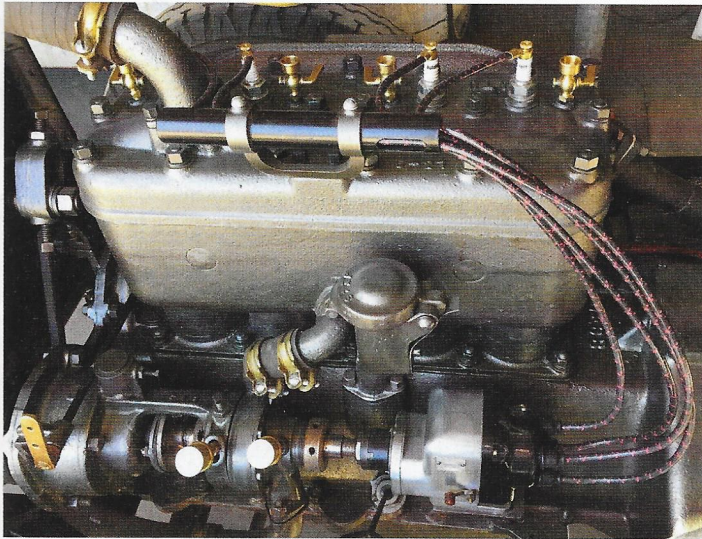
Aaron spent months disassembling the cab, replicating each and every piece of hardwood. He lives down the road from Allan Schmidt, of Horseless Carriage Restorations fame, who completed the sheet metal, paint, and body work. Another museum contact, Ross Brock of San Diego, helped us with the wooden stake bed, made of sapele mahogany and hand-finished with tung oil.

The truck restoration took three years, and Paul and I now drive it around the neighborhood once a month to keep it happy. We take turns driving the vehicle in local parades, and it's always a hit at family gatherings. I lean toward the mechanical part of its story, while my brother favors talking up Gotfredson company history at AACA shows. The Gotfredson Model 20B was equipped with a Buda WTU 4-cylinder engine. Its 226.4cid powerplant produces approximately 22.5hp (SAE). It features a 4-speed Brown-Lipe transmission and has a top speed of 35mph. It was advertised as a "Speed Truck" to compete with the popular REO Speed Wagon.



Our great grandfather, Benjamin Gotfredson, manufactured one- to five-ton trucks, buses, fire engines, and taxicabs from 1920 to 1929, but specific production numbers for Gotfredson trucks have not been documented. In October 1929, Toronto's *National Post* reported an estimated 4,000 Gotfredson trucks were on the roads of Canada.





Detroit factory output over the nine years of production has not been tallied or verified. We estimate total production ranged from 5,000 to 8,000 vehicles.

Gotfredson truck production fell off significantly following the 1929 market crash and Great Depression. Our grandfather, Robert Gotfredson, continued limited truck manufacturing in Detroit until 1948. Employees of the Gotfredson operation in Canada reorganized with limited truck manufacturing, and eventually engaged in body-only work for other manufacturers until 1960.

The history of our one-ton stake bed (Frame #20B-391) was traced back to Wisconsin, where the still-unidentified owner used it as a work truck into the early 1970s. In 1977, Richard Sum of Illinois purchased it from the Wisconsin owner, then drove the vehicle approximately 125 miles from Wisconsin to Calumet City, Illinois (south of Chicago), according to storied recollections of his widow, Sherry Sum. Averaging perhaps 25mph and avoiding highways, the Gotfredson truck could have made the long drive in approximately six hours. At some point, the truck was trailered 260 miles from Calumet City to Carlyle, then stored in the Sum family barn for more than three decades.

I continue to research the history of our Gotfredson stake bed truck. We find it interesting that our truck spent its working years in Wisconsin. The Gotfredson Truck Corporation of Detroit, Michigan had roots in Wisconsin. In 1878, Benjamin Gotfredson and his brother, Lawrence, launched Gotfredson Bros. Hardware, eventually opening stores in Cooperstown, Seymour, and Green Bay, Wisconsin. The Gotfredson brothers became "Dealers in Hardware, Farm Machinery, Wagons, Buggies, Cutters, Sleighs, etc.," according to 1889 sales literature.

In 1905, Benjamin Gotfredson moved to Detroit and incorporated the American Auto Trimming Co. It became one of the largest paint and trim companies in North America and Canada, working on bodies for Ford Motor Co, Saxon, and Studebaker. Gotfredson truck production first started in 1920 in Canada,



under the name G&J Trucks (Gotfredson-Joyce Corp, Ltd.). The vehicles were named Gotfredson starting in 1923. The Gotfredson Truck Corp manufactured trucks in Detroit with branch offices in Chicago, Cleveland, and Los Angeles. Gotfredson Truck Corp, Ltd. made trucks in Walkerville, Canada, with branches in Toronto, Montreal, and Hamilton. International branches also were established in London and Sydney, Australia.

We have to believe that many more Gotfredson vehicles remain undiscovered. I have photos of a Gotfredson rusting away next to a barn in Montreal (the owner wants to keep it). Another Gotfredson found its final resting place on National Park land on Santa Cruz Island off the coast of Ventura, California, where it was part of the sheep-farming history of the island. Most of the hidden Gotfredson truck gems are located in the Midwest or Canada.

Our Gotfredson truck earned a First Junior award at the 2019 Western Fall Nationals in Fallbrook, California. The truck, which we named "Carl" in honor of our departed mentor, recently earned its Senior award at the 2021 Special Western Fall Nationals in Phoenix, and was further honored with a 2021 AACA National Award.





# Antique

## AUTOMOBILE

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE ANTIQUE AUTOMOBILE CLUB OF AMERICA

