

“Kaiser Flyer # 5”

Joseph W. (Jeeps) Frazer



*Joseph W. Frazer
in his Willow Run Office early 1946*

Joseph W. Frazer was the automobile “expert” part of the Kaiser-Frazer Corporation. He was respected by the Detroit “in” crowd and was well-known as an outstanding automotive expert and salesman.

He was born in Nashville, Tenn in 1892 into a well-to-do family. His brother operated a Packard Agency in Nashville and young Joe would doodle with drawing pictures of cars during his school days. He could have started his working career at various high-salary jobs in an executive position in other industries but chose instead to begin work at Packard as a mechanic’s helper at less than 20 cents per hour. He wanted to be close to his love - automobiles.

Although he was very successful in several aspects of the automobile business, including starting the first technical school for automotive mechanics, his heart was always in sales and promotion. He sold Packard motor cars in New York and at his brother’s Nashville dealership and by the end of World War I he was ready to begin his quest for making his mark on the automobile industry.

He first took an opportunity at GM’s Chevrolet Division in sales. He was soon promoted into the GM Export Division as Treasurer and helped to organize the General Motors Acceptance Division, one of the first strictly automobile credit agencies established in the country. GM later loaned Joe to Pierce-Arrow to assist them in creating their own credit agency. About this time, Walter P. Chrysler met Joe and hired him away from GM in 1924 to head the sales organization at the newly Chrysler acquired Maxwell-Chalmers.

Walter Chrysler had previously served as the president and general manager of the Buick division of GM but quit over a policy dispute and went on to reorganize and salvage the failing Willys-Overland Company. Mr. Chrysler then went to Maxwell-Chalmers and used his reorganization skills to salvage them also. Chrysler drastically increased the production of the Maxwell motor car and Frazer sold enough of them to put Maxwell back at it’s pre-World War I sales levels.

Walter Chrysler's next step was to introduce a new low-price car bearing his name and Frazer was there to sell them at such a pace that by the end of the thirties Chrysler was the third largest automobile manufacturer in the industry, along with GM and Ford. When Chrysler introduced their new low-priced leader in 1926, Frazer came up with its name, the "Plymouth." A name that was very familiar to the mid-west farmers - the targeted market. The Plymouth name was well-known and respected in agriculture products.

Chrysler's new car was a smash hit and Frazer promoted Plymouth to third place in total sales of all cars. Joe Frazer stayed at Chrysler from 1923 until 1939. He was instrumental in introducing the new DeSoto for Chrysler and served in numerous positions including being elected Vice-President of Chrysler.



In 1939 Willys-Overland Motors again found itself in trouble. Their financial position was a mess and only 16,000 cars were sold which placed them 15th in the industry. They needed someone to salvage them again as Walter P. Chrysler had accomplished in 1919. In stepped Joseph W. Frazer.

Frazer had learned many lessons from Mr. Chrysler and Chrysler Motors had benefitted greatly from Joe's organization and sales ability. Now Joe took his newly learned skills, and a few good men, from Chrysler and put them into practice at Willys. Under Joe Frazer's leadership the "new" 1941 Willys Americar was introduced with many new mechanical and styling features. Sales jumped 60 per cent in 1940 and doubled by 1941. The next few years for Mr. Frazer would bring about a new nick-name for this ingenious automobile executive.



When the US Army asked for proposals for a new universal all-terrain military vehicle Batam, Ford and Willys presented their ideas. Although Batam actually created their running prototype first, they were unable to provide a design that could be put directly into production and they did not have sufficient production facilities. The final Willys production design pushed by Frazer won out and both Willys and Ford were given contracts to build the vehicles for the military. Most military units wanted the Willys version as it was considered the more reliable and was greatly favored over the Ford Unit. The infamous "Jeep" was born and Joe Frazer would forever after carry the nick-name of "Jeeps" Frazer. Willys sales increased from \$9 million to over \$170 million in a little over 4 years. Joe "Jeeps" Frazer had another success on his hands.

But now Joe Frazer had another idea he wished to pursue. He wanted to get a new post-war car ready for the American market before the war's end so production could be started immediately after the end was declared and war-time production facilities could be released for private ventures. He set his sights on a "has-been" automotive company - Graham Paige Motors. Graham-Paige was originated in 1927 and had built several successful models. The supercharged models were fine cars and the "Shark-Nosed" 1938-39 models remain very collectible today.

Superchargers were available on Grahams from 1934 through 1940. A concept that would be remembered by Henry J. Kaiser. Graham even used left-over dies from the famous Cord 812 model to build its still-remembered 1940 "Graham Hollywood" model but ceased to build cars in 1940 and turned its efforts to more lucrative war production contracts.

Frazer first manipulated his way into being asked to help reorganize the Warren City Tank and Boiler Company, a Graham-Paige subsidiary. With a loan from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation he acquired all the assets of the Boiler Company. Frazer had his foot in the door! In 1944 the Graham-Paige people were floundering without any idea as to what it would do once the military contracts were terminated. Joe Frazer's persistence paid off in mid-1944 when Joseph B. Graham offered Joe Frazer the opportunity to "buy-in" and help steer the company into the Post-War era. Frazer immediately sprung into action and by September he gained controlling interest in the company and was elected President and Chairman of the Board.

Frazer immediately announced that Graham-Paige would start to work a new Post-War car and Graham-Paige stock skyrocketed. Frazer had his sales group recruit new dealers all across the country to sell his new, but yet developed car. He hired the services of two very different automotive men, Howard "Dutch" Darrin and William B. Stout. Each of these two men have a story of their own which will not be told in detail here. Darrin was well known throughout the world for his superb styling of custom-bodied cars in Europe and in the United States. He personally designed cars for European Royalty and Hollywood personalities. He had also designed the famous Packard-Darrin models. Stout, on the other hand was known for his revolutionary, and sometimes very unorthodox, engineering ideas.

Suffice it to say that "Dutch" Darrin was the more flamboyant of the two and his design work was well known in the industry, especially his work on the Packard-Darrin Victoria and with Rolls-Royce, Stutz, Mercedes-Benz, GM and Duesenberg. Howard Darrin was also an excellent engineer but was better recognized for his design excellence. Joe Frazer knew his new post-war car would need styling that would stand out from the other makes and felt that Darrin could design a car with a pleasing but modern unique appearance. He was right. Sadly, later the Kaiser-Frazer combined engineering team would greatly compromise his initial design.

Stout, on the other hand, was known for his solid engineering skills in the aircraft industry. Stout was also interested in building a new post-war car and had been toying with several designs since 1929. Most of his ideas were totally impractical but demonstrated many advanced concepts, such as, tubular frames, rear engines and MacPherson-type front suspension. He actually did build a few of his cars, named the "Scarab" in 1936 but they were not accepted by the public or the industry. But Joe Frazer recognized that the unique engineering ability and experience of Stout would be very helpful in creating his new post-war car.

In late spring of 1945 Joe Frazer was having no success in finding source for sufficient capital. When he approached the Bank Of America in California, Mr. A. P. Giannini knew that Henry J. Kaiser was also working a his idea for a new car and felt that these two should meet. Within two days after their first meeting Henry J. Kaiser and Joseph. W. Frazer drew up an agreement to form a combined company, the Kaiser-Frazer Corporation. A move that Frazer would later

become to regret. The original plan was for Graham-Paige Motors to build the Frazer car and the new Kaiser-Frazer Corporation was to build the Kaiser. The Frazer design was almost complete, including the engineering. The tooling and rights for the original Graham-Paige 6-cylinder engine had been sold to Contential Motors who had agreed to provide engines for the new Frazer. The Kaiser, however, was a far different story. Kaiser had convinced Frazer that his car too was almost ready but it wasn't. They decided to share the basic body design created by Howard Darrin but none of the mechanicals were to be the same.

Contrary to Richard Langworth's opinion in his book "The Studebaker Century," Kaiser and Frazer would not settle for a car with conventional styling. They wanted something entirely "new." The Darrin design was a first in modern car design in that there was no hint of separate fenders as all other American cars had for the 1947 model year. Even the so-called newly designed (and good-looking) Studebaker sported "fake" rear fender panels to imply separate fenders. Of course the no-fender look of the first Kaiser and Frazers was to be quickly adopted by all American makes within a few years. Ford followed in 1949 and Chevrolet in 1955 although the '55 Chevrolet did incorporate a "Darrin dip" in the rear fender belt line, copied from the 1951 Kaiser styling which was actually patented by Darrin on February 21, 1950. Thus General Motors had actually violated Darrin's patent in it's design of the 1955 Chevrolet.

The Frazer car, under Frazer's insistence, was to be of conventional mechanical design but the body designed by Darrin was to be entirely new. All mechanical components were to be supplied by regular industry outside suppliers and most parts, including brakes, transmissions, ignition, differentials, carburetors, suspension springs, etc., would be shared by other makes of automobiles. This would make for a much easier car to sell as it could be advertised the mechanical components were "proven" in other well-known cars. Joe Frazer was a true salesman and knew the value of using parts from suppliers whose names were already known and whose products had public acceptance.

The Kaiser car, on the other hand under Henry Kaiser's direction, was to be revolutionary in its mechanical design. It was to be a smaller car with new front-wheel drive and torsion-bar suspension. (See Kaiser Bill's "Kaiser Flyers" #8 and #9 for more on this)

The Frazer was planned sell for \$1,200 to \$1,500 and the Kaiser was to be priced around \$1,000. Of course these figures would change drastically by the time actual production started. The 1947 Frazer sold F.O.B. for \$2,053 to \$2,550 and the 1947 Kaiser was priced F.O.B. between \$1,868 to \$2,301. Far above the original target pricing. This would later become a critical factor in a decline in sales once Ford and Chevrolet introduced their first new post-war models in late 1948. Kaiser-Frazer would just not be able to compete with their prices.

(More later on Joseph Frazer in a future issue)

This series of "Kaiser Flyers," currently numbered 1 through 10, has been written by "Kaiser Bill" Brown to help inform the general public about these fine automobiles and their history. These "flyers" are distributed at "Kaiser Bill's" Utah Automobile Museum and at car shows where "Kaiser Bill" displays one or more of his Kaiser, Frazer, Henry-J or Kaiser-Darrin cars. Each flyer in this series explains a different aspect of the Kaiser and Frazer cars. For a list of available "Flyers" refer to the "Preface."