

WABASH VALLEY

P R O F I L E S

A series of tributes to hometown heroes who have made a difference.

Claude E. Cox

Vigo County native Claude Ernest Cox was building horseless carriages before anyone considered Henry Ford an automobile pioneer.

Cox designed and assembled the first Overland Runabout, forerunner of the Willys-Overland autos, within a year after graduating from Rose Polytechnic Institute of Technology in 1902. The son of David and Armanda Cox, Claude was born April 10, 1879, near Libertyville in Fayette Township, and graduated from Terre Haute (later Wiley) High School in 1898. During college, he experimented with auto design, assisting classmate Arthur J. Paige with the "Rose Technie," an innovative four-seat auto. Cox landed a job as a traveling salesman for Standard Wheel Co. in Terre Haute, a manufacturer of railroad and wagon wheels and spokes with a production complex at 13th and Beech and offices at 671 Ohio Street. Within a few months, he convinced management to establish an automobile division. His pioneer creation – a one-cylinder, five-horsepower carriage on an oak frame – made its initial test drive on Terre Haute streets Feb. 12, 1903. At age 23, Cox was named superintendent of auto manufacturing. Kathryn, a daughter of Standard Wheel vice president Edward Sendlebach, suggested the name "Overland." By late summer, Cox's Overland Runabout was advertised in national magazines. Sales were brisk.



After a fatal boiler explosion Jan. 25, 1905, at the North 13th Street plant, Standard Wheel management's interest in the motor vehicle business waned, allowing Cox to buy all rights to the Overland for \$8,000. However, he needed additional capital. David M. Parry of Parry Manufacturing Co. – fabricator of two wheel horse drawn carts – and president of the Indiana Southern Railroad, temporarily came to the rescue. On March 31, 1906, Parry and Cox formed Overland Automotive Co. and relocated to Indianapolis. Parry owned 51 percent of the company. An economic depression of 1907 prevented the company from meeting orders and caused Parry financial troubles. John North Willys, an Elmira, N.Y., car dealer, ordered 500 new Runabouts but Cox could not deliver despite Willys' \$10,000 deposit. With assistance from Willys and his friends, Overland Automotive survived, moving to a new Indianapolis facility in 1908. By the end of the year, however, Willys bought out Cox and purchased a former automobile plant in Toledo, Ohio, reorganizing to form Willys-Overland Co. That year, Cox became chief engineer for Interstate Motor Co. of Muncie, to plan a factory and design the Interstate automobile. He also dabbled in photography, securing several patents on photo processes.

Meanwhile, Claude earned additional degrees from Rose Poly in 1904 and 1906. Hired as director of research at General Motors Institute in 1912, he continued his distinguished career in mechanical engineering. Upon retirement from General Motors, he became president of Bartlett Research Institute in Detroit. In 1957, his college presented him with an honorary doctorate. Cox died Aug. 14, 1964, at age 85, while on vacation in Beirut, Lebanon.

TERRE HAUTE

(812) 238-6000



NATIONAL BANK

Always Close to Home



FREE
bus ride
FRIDAY

Ride the Terre Haute buses **FREE** the
FIRST FRIDAY of every month, compliments
of Terre Haute First National Bank.