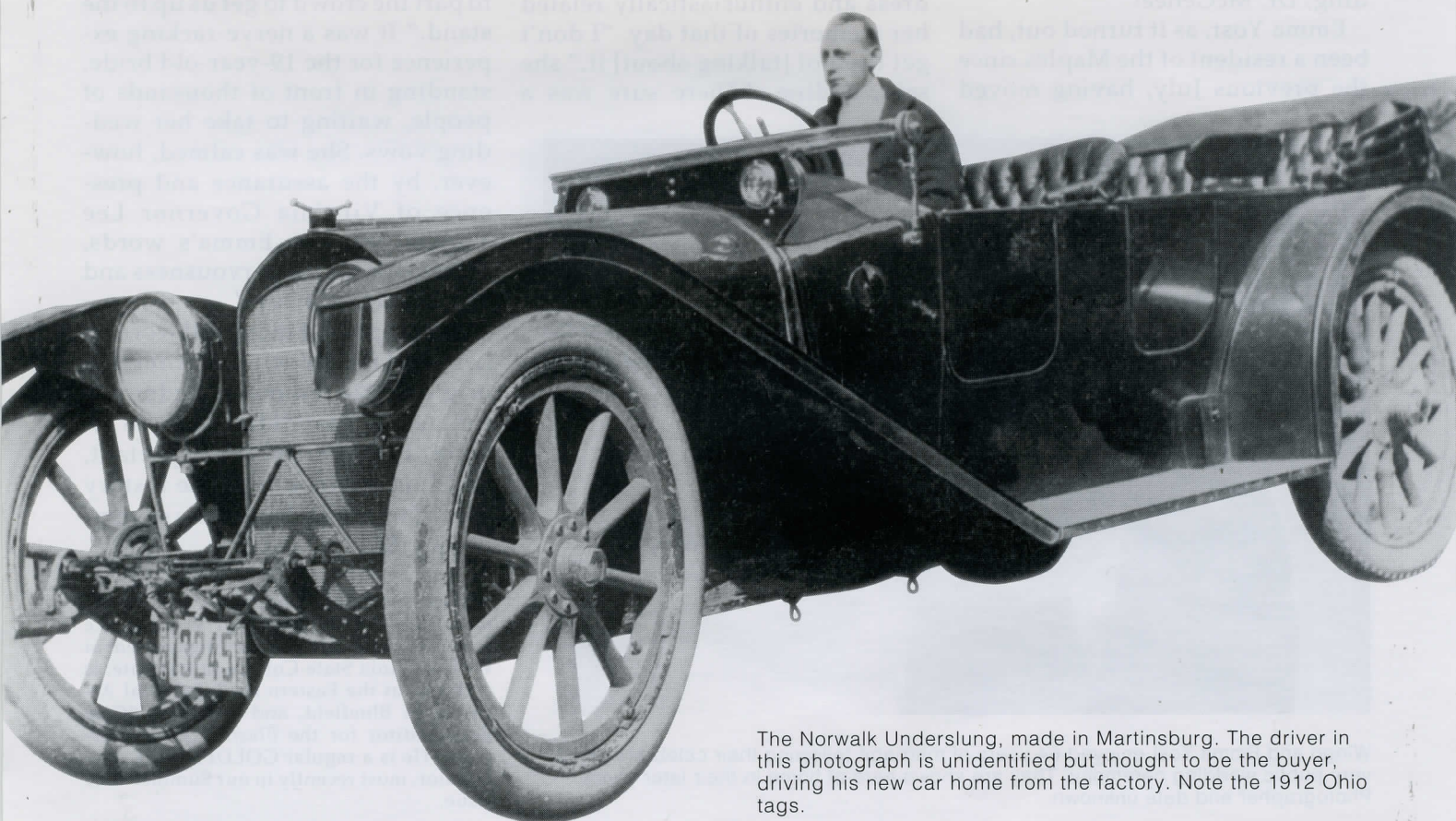


The Norwalk

Martinsburg's Motor Car

By Daniel J. Friend



The Norwalk Underslung, made in Martinsburg. The driver in this photograph is unidentified but thought to be the buyer, driving his new car home from the factory. Note the 1912 Ohio tags.



The Norwalk Motor Car Company operated out of this building in Martinsburg's woolen district from 1912 until 1922. This photograph was made in about 1920.

In the early 1900's, a low-riding luxury car was built in Martinsburg's industrial center. The long and lavish Norwalk Underslung Six was billed as "The Car of Absolute Exclusiveness." It remains Martinsburg's primary claim to automotive history and stands as the most successful and longest-made motor vehicle known to have been manufactured in the Mountain State.

The Norwalk Motor Car Company assembled cars and trucks from 1912 to 1922 on Miller Avenue — recently renamed Norwalk Avenue — located along the Winchester & Western Railroad tracks in Martinsburg's once-thriving woolen mill district.

The auto manufacturer started in Norwalk, Ohio, in 1910. It faced

financial trouble there, however, and a group of local investors bought out the company and its remaining parts stock, and moved everything to Martinsburg. The company began assembling the Underslung Six in 1912 in a building formerly occupied by the Brooklyn Brass Works.

The hulking Norwalk Under-

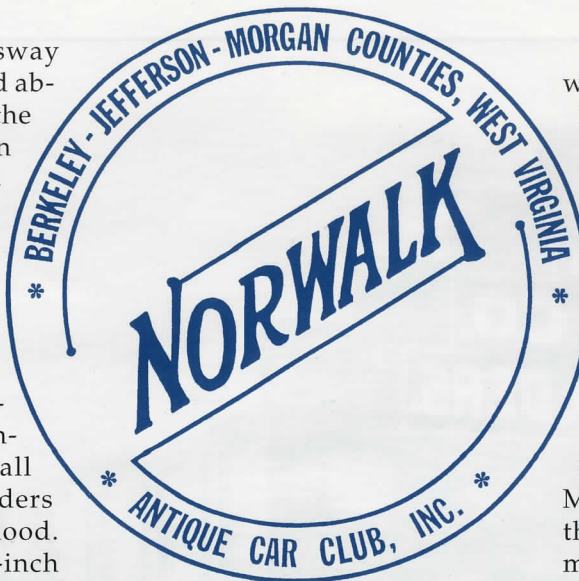
slung featured unique and expensive design concepts, many of which became standard features on later models. The Norwalk Underslung frame and suspension design lowered the car's center of gravity, making for less sway in curves. Engineers mounted the Norwalk's axles on top of the frame, while most manufacturers mounted the frame on top of the axles.

An advertisement in the 1913 edition of *Motor* magazine detailed the advantages of the low-riding car. According to the advertisement, "The keynote of Norwalk Underslung construction lies in the fact that we have brought the center of weight, the point of suspension, and the point of support to coincide in practically one point. Flat springs are used all around, sup-

ported on top of the axle. Side sway and body swing are eliminated absolutely. In rounding corners, the centrifugal force is not taken up by the springs vertically, but the stress is lateral. As a result, the Norwalk, when rounding curves, carries the same weight on all four wheels as on the straight-away."

The standard Norwalk Underslung Six was a huge convertible with 40-inch tires tall enough to bring the front fenders level with the plane of the hood. The tourer offered a 500-cubic-inch in-line, 6-cylinder, 8.6-liter, overhead-valve engine. By comparison, one of today's larger engines used in many General Motors vehicles is the 350-cubic-inch, 5.7-liter, V-8. With room for six passengers, the Underslung Six boasted a 136-inch wheelbase. By comparison, a modern, full-sized 2003 Cadillac Deville's wheelbase is 115.3 inches.

In 1912, the two-passenger Underslung roadster was offered for \$2,900, the three-passenger roadster for \$3,000, and the six-passenger tourer for \$3,100. According to



The local antique car club is named in honor of the Norwalk, though none of the current members has actually owned a Norwalk automobile.

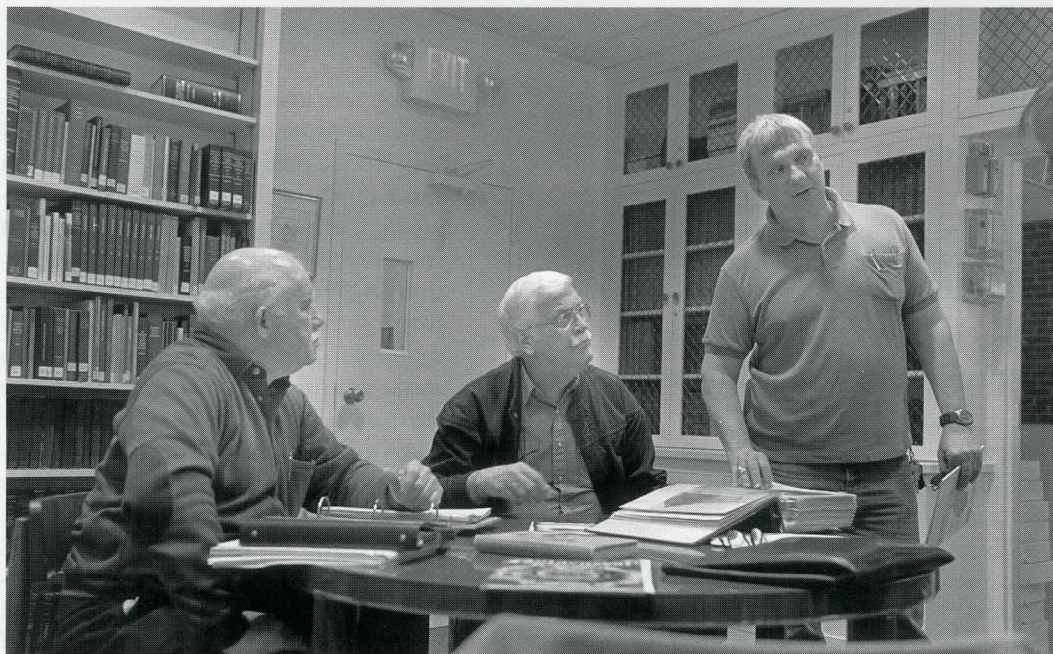
an advertisement, those prices got the owner the following equipment: "Top with curtains and cover, glass folding windshield, complete dynamo and battery, electric lighting system, self starter, speedometer, electric cigar lighter and trouble lamp, extra demountable rim, electric horn, coat rails, foot rails, trunk, all tools, etc."

A top-of-the-line Underslung would cost a buyer about six times Henry Ford's \$500-\$600 price for a standard passenger car of the same era. Not a car for the common man, the Underslung was mainly marketed and sold in the more opulent sections of New York, Philadelphia, and Toronto.

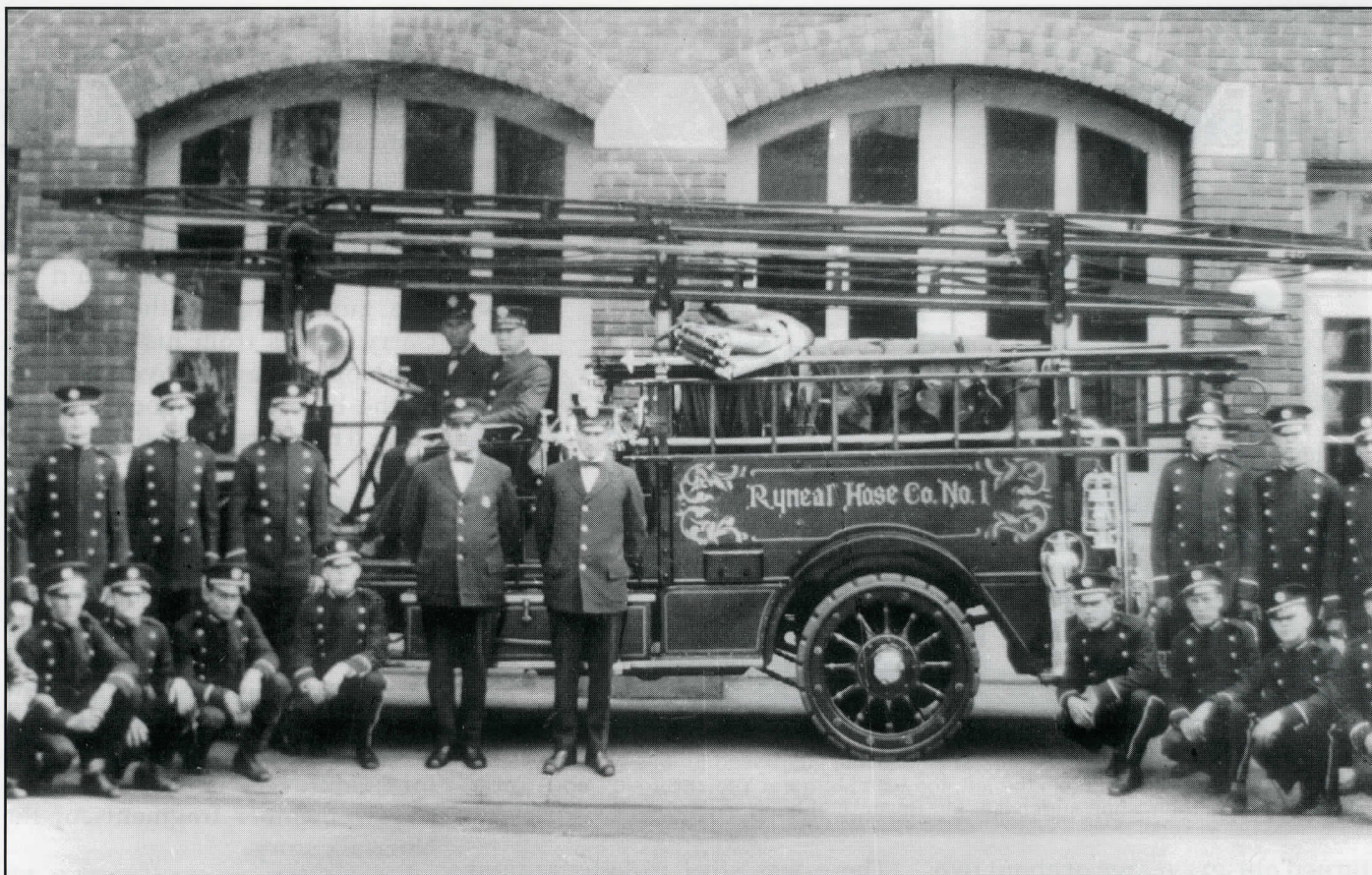
"We're talking a lot of money for ol' Martinsburgers in 1912," says Garry Murphy, historian for the Norwalk Antique Car Club of Martinsburg, named in honor of the local vehicle. Garry has spent many of his 64 years tracking local lore and information associated with the Norwalk Motor Car Company and has given numerous talks about the car and its history to collectors and other groups.

"At this time, an automobile wasn't a necessity," Garry says. "Henry Ford was just getting started. This [Norwalk] was still a plaything for rich people. Hey, there's been over 3,000 cars built in this country since 1900, or names on file. Some, they only built one of, some a half-a-dozen. And some never got beyond the drawing board." [See "The Elusive Jarvis Huntington: Early Automobiles of West Virginia," by Joseph Platania; Fall 1999.]

After about 1915, few, if any, Underslung models were built. The Norwalk company began instead to produce smaller and less expensive four-cylinder models with standard suspension. Utility trucks — with an "out-house cab sitting on a frame," Garry Murphy says — were also built during the final five years. A Norwalk truck was put into service for Hose Company No. 3 as Martinsburg's first motorized firefighting



Virtually unknown to most Martinsburg residents, the Norwalk Motor Car Company is a subject of great interest to Berkeley County car buffs and historians. Left to right, Garry Murphy, Paul Boltz, and Jeff Hollis gather at the Martinsburg Public Library to share information about the Norwalk. Photograph by Doug Chadwick.



This rare Norwalk fire truck was among the first motorized firefighting equipment in Martinsburg. Here, the Ryneal Hose Company No. 1 has its picture made by their shiny, new engine. Date unknown.

equipment. Hose Company No. 1 soon purchased a Norwalk fire engine, as well.

Information about Norwalk vehicles is not scarce. The company advertised in all of the popular trade journals, and several articles were written about Norwalks. Much of the literature is very "forward-looking," however, and often overstates the company's success and the performance of the automobiles. Some of the advertised features, and even the car styles themselves, were available only if a buyer placed a special order for the car.

Martinsburg was no Detroit. The low-production Norwalk assembly plant was never financially stable. In fact, it was ordered to close in 1915 by a Berkeley County circuit judge, but was reorganized and kept operating through sales companies and at the mercy of the bankruptcy courts until its final closure

in October 1922.

According to an April 13, 1967, *Martinsburg Journal* article, about 35 people were employed by the company, "their work week consisting of 10-hour days, six days a week, for about \$10 a week."

George E. Anderson, born in 1900, worked at the factory in his youth

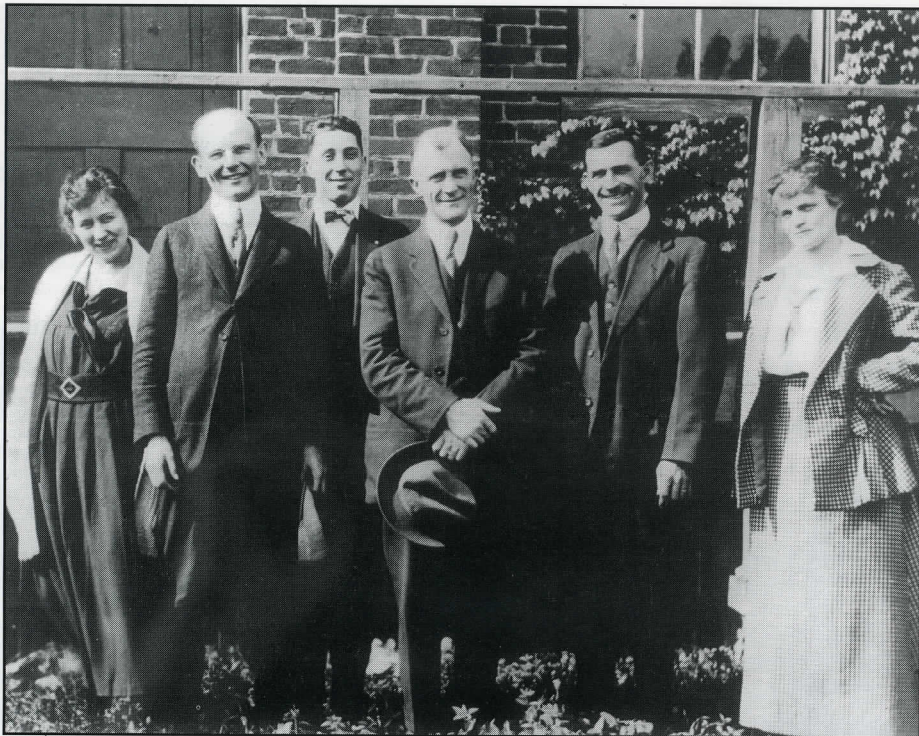
Not a car for the common man, the Underslung was mainly marketed and sold in the more opulent sections of New York, Philadelphia, and Toronto.

and was one of Martinsburg's last surviving Norwalk employees. Before George Anderson died in 1992, Garry Murphy interviewed him at

his West Virginia Avenue home about his work experience at the factory.

"[George Anderson] was a tall, lanky, rough-cut fellow," Garry remembers. "I talked to him one time. I was very impressed, and I really regret that I didn't go back and talk more." George showed him "several pieces off of Norwalk cars," Garry says, including an isinglass oval rear window for the convertible top.

George Anderson said during the interview that he worked at the factory "wherever they needed him," giving him experience throughout the plant. The order of production, he told Garry, was frame, engine, wiring, and body. While major components were brought in from elsewhere, certain parts, such as spark and throttle control or brake parts, were made or finished in the shop. He told Garry that the body was built in two pieces, and that they



General manager Arthur E. Skadden, at center with hat, posed for this picture with his office staff in about 1916. From the left, they are Margaret Youtz, Gerald Coppersmith, Mr. Snapp, Skadden, shop supervisor Mr. Boyer, and bookkeeper Hattie Lockhart.

turned out an average of about two cars per week.

A few were sold locally; most of these were trucks sold to local businesses, such as Thatcher's Dairy and Miller's Orchard [see "Apple Royalty: Berkeley County's Miller Family," by Carl E. Feather; Fall 2001]. According to George, local sales were transacted right there at the factory. A New York City company held the marketing rights to the car, and many of the vehicles were exported overseas.

George recalled that legendary car racer Barney Oldfield came to Martinsburg when parts were being sold off in 1922 and drove away with enough frames, engines, and other components to build three Norwalks.

"Painting and detailing? We got into quite a bit of detail about that," Garry recalls. According to George, the fenders were dipped and dried, and the body was painted with a brush. The bodies were then finished on the factory's top floor. "There was a guy [upstairs] that painted them," George told Garry.

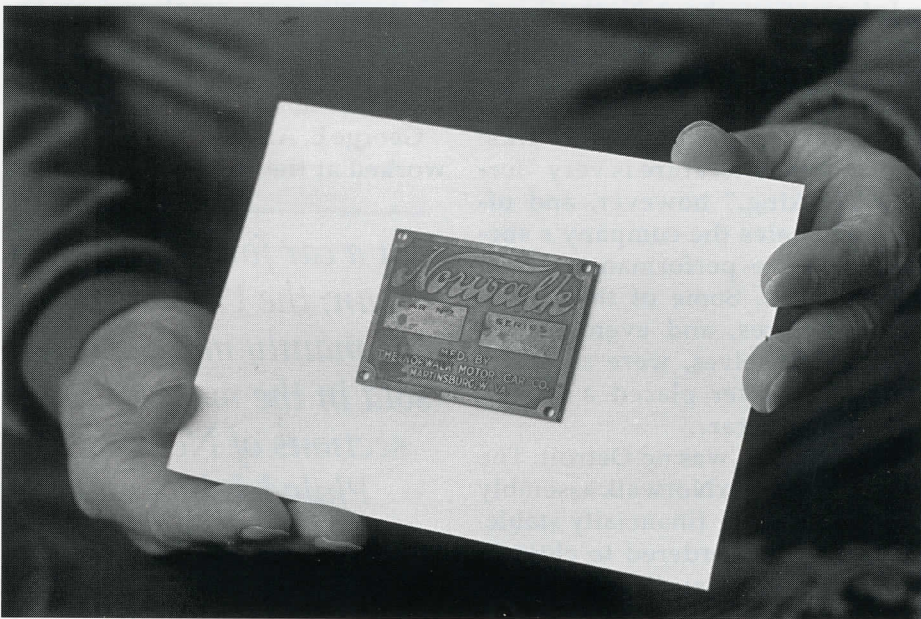
"There was steel troughs around the perimeter of the building. They poured gasoline in them steel troughs, lit fire to it, walked out and closed the door, and didn't come back until the next morning. That was how they

dried them bodies."

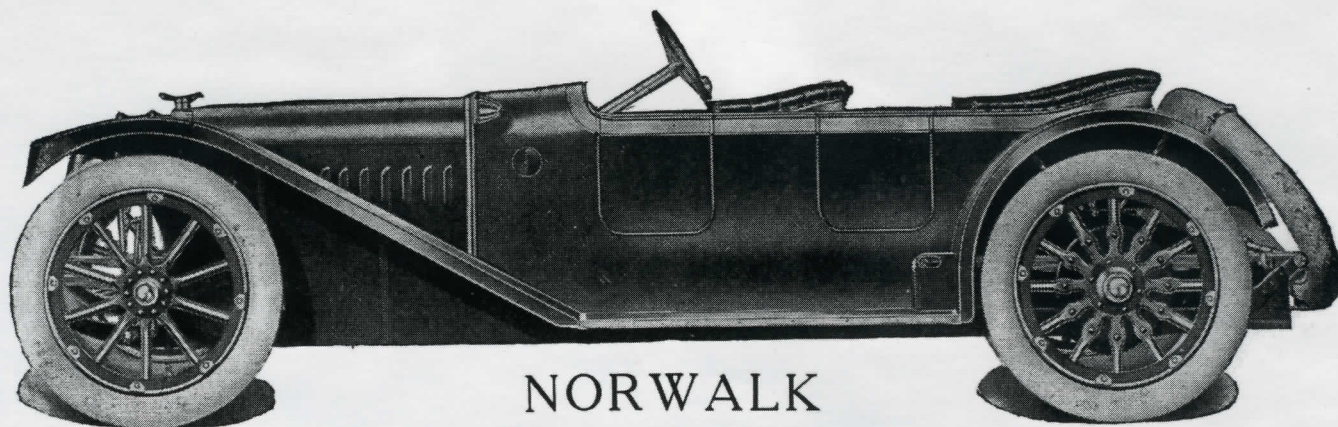
Mechanics drove the completed cars out King Street to the west end of town and used the Tuscarora Pike as a testing ground for the vehicles, according to conversations Garry Murphy had with Jim Noll, who ran a machine shop in Nollville. "Often times, you'd see this guy riding on the chassis," Garry recalls from his talks with Jim Noll. "They'd drive them out to the base of the mountain and back. They'd run the bugs out of them."

Though there is now a newly renamed Norwalk Avenue, and a popular picnic shelter in Martinsburg's War Memorial Park has been designated the Norwalk Antique Car Club Pavilion, Berkeley County residents at large know very little about the Norwalk or its history. None of the Norwalk factory employees is alive, but relatives remember fragments of the Norwalk story.

Janet Hiatt, owner of the All About Fabric shop on Queen Street in Martinsburg, is the granddaughter of Alvin O. Seibert, who worked at the Norwalk Motor Car Company in his early 20's as an apprentice and ultimately became a mas-



This unused nameplate, photographed recently at the Berkeley County Historical Society, is one of the few Norwalk artifacts still remaining in Martinsburg. Photograph by Doug Chadwick.



NORWALK

“The Car of Absolute Exclusiveness”

BUILT IN MARTINSBURG

¶ The scientific application of the **UNDERSLUNG FRAME** principle in connection with abundant, continuous **SIX CYLINDER POWER** makes the **NORWALK** the **SAFEST** car to drive at all speeds on all roads with the maximum of comfort, and really a revelation in performance and general road ability.

THE NORWALK MOTOR CAR COMPANY
MARTINSBURG, W. Va.

Advertisement from the *Martinsburg Directory*, 1913-14.

ter mechanic there. Seibert and his family lived within sight of the car factory. “He no doubt walked to work,” Janet says. She recalls that very little was ever said about the Norwalk plant. “It wasn’t dinner table conversation,” she says, but she remembers her grandfather as a “very Baptist and Christian” man.

Paul Boltz of Inwood, along with his brother Donald, owned and operated all of the former Interwoven woolen mills buildings in Martinsburg, during recent years, including the former home of the Norwalk Motor Car Company. Now 72 years old, Paul is also the nephew of the late Alvin O. Seibert.

“He was a little short fella,” Paul Boltz says of his uncle. “He was an excellent machinist. He had a little lathe and could do real small, intricate stuff. He and my aunt, and my mother and father moved into Martinsburg from the country around the turn of the century.”

Local historian Jeff Hollis, age 50, has amassed volumes of information and photographs from

Martinsburg’s early-1900’s industrial boom period, including the Norwalk. He obtained pages of details about the Norwalk and those who operated the factory from Bill Lewis, an automotive historian in California. Bill Lewis had taken written statements from

“Some had as many as seven different coats of paint and primer. \$3,000 was the price. Best-looking car on the market at that date. One man came here and saw his car built from start to finish, then drove it home.”

former Norwalk workers, including this June 6, 1966, letter reportedly written by Alvin O. Seibert. The letter reads:

“I worked for the Norwalk Motor Car Company from the start to finish. I was employed as an entered apprentice 1911, worked my way up, by 1919 I was master mechanic. I had the blacksmith department, machine shop, and truck assembly under my supervision.

“[In] 1912, we started to make the Underslung Six. We made them by special order, different specification and color. They bought the frame from some metal-stamping company. The castings were ordered from different foundries, and we machined them and assembled them. The motors were bought from Continental Motors. The bodies were bought in the rough. We upholstered them with split leather, painted to specification. Some had as many as seven different coats of paint and primer. \$3,000 was the price. Best-looking car on the market at that date. One man came here and saw his car built from start to finish, then drove it home. They built approximately 75 cars, of which 25 were electric gear shift.”



Vacant for many years, the old Norwalk Motor Car Company building went up in flames on November 30, 1989. Photograph by Jeff Hollis.

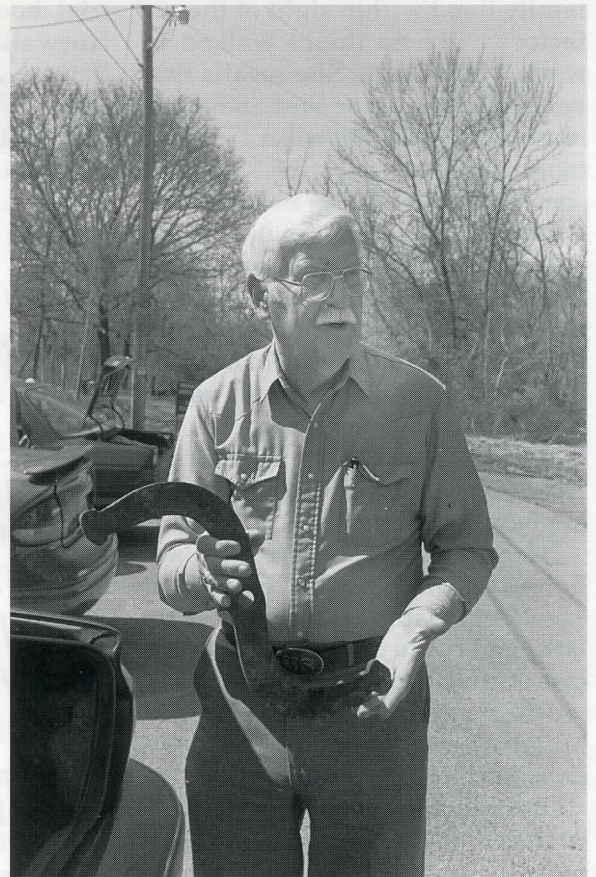
The original Berkeley County backers of Norwalk, holding one share of stock each, were Thomas W. Martin, F.A. Minor, Gilbert W. McGown, Gray Silver, James Rothwell, S.P. Hopkins, Xenophen Poole, H.L. Alexander, and Leon H. Ware. Arthur E. Skadden was the general manager for the company and owned the rights to the name and design. Gerald T. Coppersmith was his assistant, and W.S. Reed was chief engineer.

Bill Lewis and Jeff Hollis corresponded with Ruth Skadden Giblin, the daughter of Arthur E. Skadden, and spoke with her on the telephone. "[She] remembers roller skating through the building on both floors," Jeff says. "There were hardwood floors all through the building, and she would roller skate up and down while her father was doing some things in the office."

The company's continual money

problems forced manager Arthur Skadden to build smaller, lower-priced cars in the later years. The Underslung design was no longer used, and the overhead-valve engine was no longer affordable. Bush and Stork-Kar automobiles were reportedly assembled at the Miller Avenue factory for a time, as were Piedmonts. Most of these cars were simply "rebadged" Norwalks, according to some automotive historians.

Paul Boltz was co-owner of the Norwalk building at the time of the fire. He is shown here with an iron "S" brace, which he salvaged from the ruins. Photograph by Doug Chadwick.



Along with their financial difficulties, the onset of World War I dealt a major blow to the company, as nearly two-thirds of the 35 workers were drafted into the U.S. Army.

Arthur Skadden died in 1919, and his wife Clara B. Skadden took charge of the company. She finally moved to Indianapolis, where the company business offices were located until the Martinsburg factory closed October 24, 1922.

"As Bill Lewis' commentaries went, everybody in the world was in that business all of a sudden. Everybody that could nail two things together and stick a piece of metal across it tried to build a car," Jeff says. "Thousands of manufacturers go to hundreds, go down to a half-a-dozen. I don't think it was anything because of Martinsburg. It was the industry itself."

Paul Boltz and Jeff Hollis toured the old Norwalk building in 1989. "We wanted to find anything that would verify or authenticate that this was the place and find evidence of things. And we found evidence," Paul Boltz says. Handwritten parts labels were tacked onto the massive wooden floor beams above parts bins in the basement of the 50' x 150' building.

In December 1989, shortly after their visit, the building burned in one of the most spectacular fires in recent Martinsburg memory. "I could have cried when that place

burned," Paul Boltz says, looking through a stack of photos he and Jeff took of the building during their visit. "It just tore me up. I've thanked God many times that we got in there when we did. It was really that close."

Following the fire, Paul combed through the ruins and took home a carload of bricks, a massive iron gear from the factory's wooden elevator, and iron "S" braces from the ends of wall support rods. In 1990, the Martinsburg Jaycees bur-

own it. She reports that the car has been fully restored and is in good running condition, though she mostly keeps it locked securely in the garage of her Longmont home.

Shirley has offered the Norwalk for sale, reportedly for as much as \$900,000, and Martinsburg car enthusiasts have been in touch with her about it, as have other car collectors. While it is unclear whether any of these groups or individuals will be able to afford the asking price for such a rare and historic



The only known Norwalk Underslung still in existence belongs to Shirley Hoffman of Longmont, Colorado. This is Shirley, we assume, behind the wheel. Photograph courtesy of Bill Lewis, date unknown.

ied a time capsule at the intersection of West King Street and the Winchester & Western Railroad. Inside it, Paul Boltz placed a brick from the Norwalk factory along with photos of the fire.

After all these years, only one Norwalk car is known to still exist. Owner Shirley Hoffman of Longmont, Colorado, has owned her 1913 500-cubic-inch Norwalk Underslung since 1990 — she says that she is only the third person to

automobile, it is the fervent hope of many in West Virginia's Eastern Panhandle that this last surviving Norwalk motor car will someday find its way back to West Virginia, if only for a visit. 🍁

DANIEL J. FRIEND became interested in Martinsburg's history through his work as a reporter, columnist, and assistant city editor for *The Journal* newspaper. His weekly column, "The Rambler," has won several West Virginia Press Association awards. This is Daniel's first contribution to GOLDENSEAL.