

THE NORWALK COMES HOME

By Daniel J. Friend

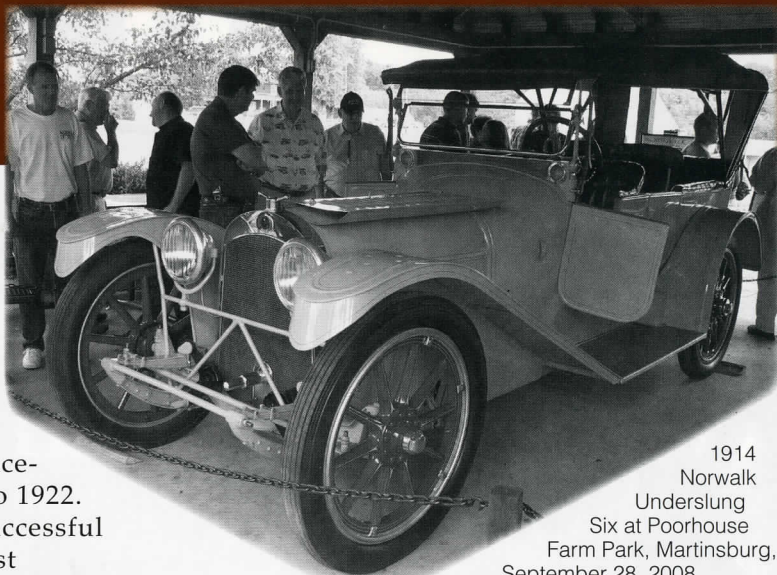
On September 10, Frederick and Dianna Gantt of Hedgesville, Berkeley County, hitched a trailer to their motor home and headed west to bring home the last known example of Martinsburg's automotive heritage — a 1914 Norwalk Underslung Six touring car. The Norwalk Motor Car Company built cars and trucks in Martinsburg's once-thriving woolen mill district from 1912 to 1922. They were the longest-made and most successful motor vehicles ever manufactured in West Virginia. [See "The Norwalk: Martinsburg's Motor Car," by Daniel J. Friend; Summer 2003.]

With Vic and Shelly McFillan following in a separate motor home, the two couples made the 3,400 mile, 10-day trek to return the bright yellow vehicle with a burgundy top from Longmont, Colorado, to Berkeley County. The journey was the culmination of six years of careful negotiations with the former owner by members of the Norwalk Antique Car Club, who formed the Friends of Norwalk Foundation, Inc., a non-profit group that will raise funds to pay off a \$280,000 bank loan that brought the historic car home.

The total cost of the car was \$300,000. Owner Shirley Hoffman informed car club member Christopher Breeze last spring that she was planning to sell it, most likely on the Internet through eBay.

After Hoffman called, Breeze immediately called Dianna Gantt and notified her that the car could be put up for open bidding. Thirteen car club members quickly formed a foundation and raised a \$20,000 down payment, which was wired in June to Hoffman. The foundation board then set to work finding a local bank to finance the remainder of the \$300,000 asking price. Centra Bank of Martinsburg agreed to a no-interest loan, and the funds were wired to Hoffman. The Gantts and McFillans then set out to retrieve the car.

The Norwalk arrived back in Martinsburg on September 20, and the car club hosted a special event on September 28 to mark the return of the



1914
Norwalk
Underslung
Six at Poorhouse
Farm Park, Martinsburg,
September 28, 2008.
Photograph by Daniel J. Friend.

low-riding luxury vehicle, billed as the "Car of Absolute Exclusiveness." Among those present to celebrate the return of the Norwalk were Circuit Court Judge Gray Silver III and Martinsburg attorney Clarence E. "CEM" Martin — both grandsons of Gray Silver, one of the original stockholders of the Norwalk Motor Car Company.

"I think it's a wonderful thing for the community," Silver says. "It's part of the heritage."

Martin agrees. "This is a truly significant event," he says, commending the foundation members who made it happen. Martin calls the return of the Norwalk car to Martinsburg "one of the greatest achievements" among volunteer historic preservation groups in the Eastern Panhandle.

Breeze says the most important thing now is to raise funds. "The only way this car will remain in Martinsburg is through contributions to pay off the debt," he says. "This is the only remaining Norwalk car known to exist in the world, and it is an integral part of history for Martinsburg and West Virginia."

For more information or to send donations, write to Friends of the Norwalk Foundation, Inc., P.O. Box 1464, Hedgesville, WV 25427.

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