

Bert Robinson: Artist and Inventor

Every house tells a story, but some are certainly more interesting than others. However, it's pretty clear that any house Bert M. Robinson lived in, including the one at 503 Spruce Street, would have more than its share of interesting stories.

Bert was a man of many trades and talents. He followed in his father's footsteps, owning and operating Robinson's Paint and Wallpaper Store in the village, as well as a painting and decorating business. He was also a sign painter, who was well known for his billboard work. He decorated most of the storefronts of his day, painting most of their signs on an easel in his studio. He also served as manager of Michigan Gas and Electric's Vicksburg office, was a member of the Village Council, served as Village Clerk, and was a charter member of the Vicksburg Rotary Club.

Bert was born in 1875 to Harriet Porter Robinson and Ellery J. Robinson, who were pioneer settlers of the village. Harriet and Ellery lived on Spruce Street, just north of the home Bert later built for his own family. Bert was schooled in Vicksburg, married Myrtie C. Richfield in 1902, and moved to Detroit looking for work. After his father's death in 1904, they returned home, and Bert took over his father's business.

Bert and his wife built their new home on the corner of Rose and Spruce in 1905, where they raised three children and maintained an apartment upstairs for his mother. One interesting feature of the house, according to daughter Bea Robinson Hill, was a dumb waiter, a shelf built into the walls of the upstairs and downstairs kitchens that could be raised and lowered with a rope. This was used to send food, messages or what have you up and down, thus saving countless steps.

Bert, like many of his generation, was highly interested in the challenges and possibilities posed by the dawning of the automobile age. Early autos were fascinating, but frustrating in many ways. The fragility of automobile tires was one of the biggest problems faced by every car owner, who soon became accustomed to the ritual of at least two tire changes per trip of any length. Early tires used a cotton canvas-like material for the tire's plies, and the cement used to hold the canvas and rubber together was prone to failure.

Early automobiles had other weaknesses, too, especially in winter. It was a real chore to drive a car once the temperature got below freezing, because, until someone eventually came up with the idea of antifreeze, the radiator had to be drained after each outing. Also, there were few good roads and no snowplows, so sometimes it was just easier to drain the radiator, put the auto up for the entire winter, and get out the trusty all-season horse. Putting the car up included actually jacking it up so the weight was off the fragile tires. Some manufacturers even suggested tires would wear longer if you jacked the car up every night. That was a laborious processes, often involving the use of blocks of wood and other "cribbing" to keep the car in place, and it doubtful if very many people actually did what they were "supposed" to do.

Then Bert Robinson had an idea. Why not invent a simple jack, one so easy to use that anyone could jack their car up overnight quickly and safely? In 1913 Robinson

came up with just such a jack and began production in the family's barn next to their Spruce Street home.

Robinson, of course, understood the value of advertising. He actively promoted his new invention in an advertising pamphlet which read in part: *"We call this device a Tire Saving Jack and will ask you to decide whether or not in your own mind, you think it is a money saving tool. Whether or not it will pay for its cost, if you should use it, not only in the winter as a storage jack, but every night throughout the running season.*

"We say, buying a set of four Jacks is the same as taking out insurance, as it is an every day protection to your tires. Its use guards as far as possible against over-straining the canvass, while your car stands. It keeps the tire-chains from begin embedded into the tire. It keeps the tire from coming in contact with the greasy floor, which you know any tire firm will tell you is a deadly enemy. If your tire becomes hot while running, it should not cool out in an unnatural position. It should be relieved of the weight of the car and allowed to return to its natural roundness and not hold the heat in the space of which it stands, as continued heat will rot and decay the cement. This one precaution might be the means of side-stepping a blow-out."

The business was just beginning to prove a success when World War I broke out and production had to be halted because all available steel supplies were being shifted to the war effort. After the war, improvements in tire construction, the invention of antifreeze and road and car improvements meant it was no longer necessary to "jack 'er up" for the winter.

Bert and his family moved to Kalamazoo and Long Lake in 1924. His mother continued to live in the upstairs apartment, renting the lower half until her death in October of 1936. The family sold the home in 1943.



Bert Robinson, a man of many talents.

By Maggie Snyder for the Commercial-Express, 1999