

## WOEBER: MOVING DENVER AHEAD

By: Donald Harold Woeber

In 1840, the Woeber family departed Elsenfeld um Main in the Province of Bavaria (Germany) for the United States. Young Adam, just three years old, left with his parents (Aloyius and Mary), two brothers (Amandus and Gallus), and a sister (Lena). The family left Germany by way of the Rhine through Holland embarking at Rotterdam. They landed in Baltimore and proceeded through Harve-de-Grace and Pittsburg to Cincinnati, Ohio. Family tradition states they left Germany because of Militarism although Aloyius was too old and his sons were too young to serve in the military. However, during that era, any army that invaded Europe from the North, South, East or West, they went through Elsenfeld am Main.

The occupation of the Woeber family was wagon makers. It is worth noting that the city crest of Elsenfeld am Mine carries the symbol of a wheelwright. German city crests generally depicted the occupations or trades that were significant of their location.

Amandus, the eldest son, resided in Cincinnati for thirteen years and learned the wagon making trade by serving an apprenticeship there. He moved to Davenport, Iowa in 1853, establishing the first carriage factory in the state under the name of Woeber Brothers in partnership with his brother, Amandus. Adam Woeber joined the firm in 1857 and became a full partner with Amandus and Gallus in 1864.

The exact date of when the Woeber Brothers arrived in Denver, Colorado, has not been documented. Nearly all secondary sources give 1867 as this is the founding date mentioned in all the advertising by the various Woeber companies. Two secondary sources list 1864 as the purchase date of the Keller House in Denver by the Woebers. Harold William Woeber Sr. stated his grandfather (Gallus) and great uncles (Amandus and Adam) came out during the Civil War. The first recorded primary source found was a legal notice in the Rocky Mountain News on 26 December 1867.

### *Notice of Dissolution*

*The co-partnership heretofore existing between Gallus Woeber, Adam Woeber, Amandus Woeber and Henry Feurstein, under the firm Furestein and Arndt, is this day dissolved by mutual consent to whom all indebtedness due said firm is required to be paid forthwith.*

*Denver, December 16, 1867*

*Henry Feurstein  
Gallus Woeber and Brothers  
by Geo. G. Arndt*

By 1868, it appears the business was in full operation and prospering. Ads and news items in the Rocky Mountain News in 1868 list the company as:

*....the Denver branch, A. Woeber & C. of Davenport Carriage Company on Ferry Street, occupies the whole lower floor of the building known as the Keller House. The manufacturing of this firm has proven to be among the best ever brought to Colorado.*

The Woebers purchased the Keller House and restored the building for their Woeber Carriage Company. The Keller House had been a brick hotel erected by three men (Kenney, Kelley and Richards) in 1860 as a means for profitably investing the profits from their grocery and hardware business. The first building ever erected on the site of the Keller House was the old Vasquez House erected in 1859 by A. Pike Vasquez, son of the famous Barony Vasquez who had been one of Pike's guides during his explorations in 1806-1807. Such was the site of the first Woeber building in Denver on what was then called Ferry Street (now 11th) between 4th (now Walnut) and 5<sup>th</sup> (now Larimer), a location that the Woeber Carriage Company was to occupy for over 86 years. This gave them the distinction of occupying one location longer than any other firm in Denver. They were one of Denver's oldest firms and carried down through the years the traditions found by the Woeber family.

By 1869, the business was in full operation. It is assumed that the business was run by Adam and his two other brothers returned to Davenport. Until 1872, the firm was mentioned as the A. Woeber & Company. The A: could have stood for Adam – or the senior Woeber brother, Amandus. The March 12, 1869 Rocky Mountain News carried this news item:

*The carriage manufactory of A. Woeber & Co. is becoming one of the institutions of Denver. It has been greatly enlarged in every department and will employ about twenty-five men during the coming season. The firm will soon make their business known to the public through our columns when we will give an extended notice of their establishment and their facilities for doing business.*

In 1872, the middle brother, Gallus, moved his wife, Margaret J. Noel, and five children to Colorado. Although he became associated with the firm which now referred to itself as Woeber Brothers, his primary interest may have been mining. His wife and two of the children died from exposure and diseases coming across the plains. Gallus died in Denver, 30 March 1875 and is buried there. His son, Charles William Woeber, and two daughters, Naomi and Alice, returned to Davenport and were raised by their Grandmother Noel. Charles returned to Denver and at the age of 21 to claim his father's share of the company as his inheritance in 1879.

The Woebers were quick to recognize and grasp opportunity and mold it into reality. This is the reason the firm prospered and helped to guide the destiny of a young frontier town known as Denver. Adam was a city councilman in the early 1870's. They were quick to

recognize the value of advertising and put it to good use. In the New Year edition of the Rocky Mountain News of 1881 appeared the following advertisement entitled:

### DENVER'S MAGNIFICENT DRIVES

*If there is any one city in America where people really enjoy carriage and buggy riding, Denver is the place. Every street in the city is a splendid drive. This being admitted, there is another fact that all our citizens should consider before making purchase of a vehicle. In this dry climate, buggies or any other vehicle go to pieces in a short while unless they are made of thoroughly seasoned timber. It behooves us to look well to the man or men from whom we make purchases of these articles. The best plan is to buy only of a responsible house who will make good all representations. This suggestion turns our attention, of course, to the firm of Weber Brothers at 236, 238, 242 11<sup>th</sup> Street, West Denver. These gentlemen established themselves in 1867. Their goods and manner of dealing is all the reference necessary. They season the timber; they manufacture their vehicles at their Davenport, Iowa house. The finishing being done in Denver. Carriages, phaetons, buggies and light wagons are a specialty. They build the best mountain buggy made. Fine work and repairing in the best possible style.*

The Woebers manufactured not only heavy ore hauling wagons that Colorado was famous for but also the light mountain buggy so steady and strong which was purchased by the wealthy people of the state. Built with luxurious interiors and exteriors, these buggies encouraged Denver society to promenade through the streets, thus helping spread the fame of Denver as a beautiful city. One of the finest carriages of this era was the one made by the Woeber Carriage Company for the fabulous Baby Doe Tabor as well as the carriage mentioned in Death Comes to the Archbishop for Archbishop Machebeuf.

Many are the tales of early Denver that tell the story of its growth from a frontier town whose population was more cattle than people to a metropolitan city. Denver had the spirit and drive to carry it ahead and the Woeber Carriage Company kept ahead of the fast growing city. The fast development of transportation during this era is reflected in the progress of the Woeber Company and the City of Denver.

Although it was pleasant to build carriages for the great, the Woebers' bread and butter came from construction of commercial vehicles. Light delivery wagons, built in large numbers, were used by such pioneer retailers as the Denver Dry Goods Company and Daniels and Fisher. Beer wagons were used by Zang, Coors, Tivoli-Union, and the Denver Brewing Company. Heavier and more ruggedly built ore wagons were shipped to Central City, Leadville, Aspen, Silverton, Creede, and after 1891, the Cripple Creek District. Thousands of tons of rich rock moved from mine to mill or railroad siding in Woeber-built wagons during one of the fabulous periods of Colorado's history. In addition, the firm built a number of extremely ornate but functional vehicles such as omnibuses, ambulances, hearses, and fire wagons.

After the Woeber Brothers became an established progressing firm, a representative from the Weickter Transfer and Storage Company ordered a very strong wagon. When questioned about the use of the wagon, Weicker's man was very vague. Adam Woeber knew enough not to question too much so he constructed a wagon, delivered it, and promptly forgot the whole matter. Some weeks later, the wagon was returned for repairs. When Adam saw the large hole in the center of the floor, he was annoyed at such treatment of a wagon that he had built. He said to the driver, "What have you been hauling in this wagon, gold?" At this, the driver was startled and asked, "So you heard about it, eh?"

The decade of the late 1880's saw the largest impact to streetcar manufacturing. Two companies had been formed to service Denver's transit needs. From 1888 to 1890, the Denver Tramway and its arch rival the Denver City Railway constructed 29 miles of double-tracked cable car lines at a cost of several million dollars. A large part of the rolling stock required small, single-trucked open and closed cars built by Woeber Brothers. Thus Adam Woeber was a passenger on the first cable car to roll up 15<sup>th</sup> Street and out East Colfax on 22 December 1888.

After 1890 when an increasing number of streetcar lines were being powered by electricity, the golden age for Woeber-built streetcars was to come. Their cars were attractive and better constructed than cars from the Midwest and East because of the materials used. The lumber for car building was purchased from St. Louis and veneers from Joel H. Woodman of Hoboken, N.J. After the lumber was shipped to Denver, it was seasoned in from eight to eighteen months. Since they were built of wood seasoned in Denver's high, dry climate, the new cars cost less to maintain than those cars constructed in damp eastern and Midwestern climates. Wood panels of those cars tended to dry and warp, having to be expensively replaced with local seasoned wood.

The construction of streetcars was more than the 11<sup>th</sup> Street factory would handle with its business of wagon building. In 1890, shops were constructed five miles from Denver on the southwest corner of West Colorado and Bannock Streets. This facility is more adequately detailed in the February 1893 edition of the Streetcar Journal.

*...These shops have a capacity of four cars a week located in a five-acre tract of land owned by the company, find from which a delightful view is had of neighboring mountains.*

*The buildings are all of brick, one-story in height and are heated by a Buffalo system of overhead pipes, through which hot air is forced by means of a Sturtevant fan, branch pipes with valves being located in suitable intervals throughout the shops. The paint shop is 46 x 125 feet, having a L 30 x 36 feet in which are four tracks. The erecting shop is 46 x 125 feet, having an L of 45 x 75 feet. There is also a second erecting shop of 30 x 100 feet, having a pit for electrical work. The machine and a blacksmith shop is 50 x 100 feet. The workshop is 75 x 65 feet and*

*there are two lumber sheds, one 75 x 65 feet and the other 30 x 100 feet. There is also a large storeroom for the storing of mahogany and other choice woods, also offices and storerooms.*

*The power equipment consists of a sixty-horsepower engine, built in Denver by Jas. H. Jackson and a boiler by the same maker. The woodworking department is equipped with a fine assortment of woodworking tools including planers, mortising and tennon machines, scroll saws, sash blind slot machines and an Invincible sander. It is the intention of the managers soon to equip the shops with exhaust pipes for collection of dust and shavings. The iron working department is also well equipped with iron working tools, including drill presses, screw cutting machines, etc. There is also one Bradley hammer and four forges.*

*Among the orders which were being filled during the visit of our editor were four closed cars for Galveston, Texas and six combination cars which were part of the same order.....The company also builds mining cars for the mountain railways and has in the ships a number of ore dumping car which are mounted on trucks with wheels twenty-two inches in diameter.....*

The 1892 Denver City Directory lists the following individuals as officers of the Woeber Brothers Carriage Company on South 14<sup>th</sup> and Colorado: Amandus Woeber, SR., President; Adolph Zang, vice president; Adam Woeber, Treasurer and Manager; and Charles William Woeber, Secretary. Harold William Woeber, Sr., son of Charles William Woeber, stated that he worked in the streetcar shops during summers as an office boy (1905-1913). He stated that Rudolf, son of Adam, ran the car shops while Uncle Adam and father ran the carriage shop.

Between 1898 and 1914, the firm was to build almost all of the cars for the Denver City Tramway Company. Some 317 streetcars were constructed for the tramway consisting of 197 motor cars and 120 trailers for its interurban subsidiaries. Also constructed were more than thirty cars for the Pueblo Street Railway, two trollies for Trinidad, four for Fort Collins, and three cars and an electric locomotive for the Grand Junction and Grand River Railroad in western Colorado. An unknown number of cars were made for lines in Colorado Springs, Cripple Creek, Victor and Boulder, Colorado in addition to Cheyenne, Wyoming and Salt Lake City, Utah. Passenger cars for various narrow gage mountain railroads were also built.

Unfortunately, the Woeber plant burnt to the ground in 1983 and had to be rebuilt. This disaster coupled with the silver crash of 1893 almost proved disastrous for the company. Even my grandfather who had to struggle to raise a family during the Depression of 1929 stated that the latter depression was nothing compared to the crash of 1893! It was during the 1890's that the Woebers established and had in operation a streetcar manufacturing plant in St. Louis, Missouri. This was sold out to LaClede Car Company, perhaps to recover from the losses of the 1893 crash.

Another means of increasing streetcar business was by building car trailers. These were invented by Adam Woeber and were unique to American trolley systems. In order to

accommodate rush hour crowds, considerable use was made of trailers pulled behind trolleys. They followed the same general lines of construction as the powered cars but much lighter for ease of pulling. They were used extensively in all city lines as well as the standard and narrow gage inter-urban lines.

A unique type of trailer constructed was a funeral car built to carry a casket along with the relatives of the deceased. This was pulled by another trolley filled with mourners to Fairmont, Riverside and Mt. Olivet cemeteries. In order for Crown Hill Cemetery to obtain the trolley funeral service, they had to build their own line a mile and a half from the end of the tramway line at West 29<sup>th</sup> and Sheridan to the cemetery at West 29<sup>th</sup> and Wadsworth.

With the company's advance into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it recovered somewhat from the 1893 crash by the building of 317 streetcars for the Denver Tramway and its subsidiary and other cars listed above. Many of these were constructed in the former Denver City Cable Railway car house at West 41<sup>st</sup> Avenue east of Tejon Street, which was rented to the Woeber Car and Carriage Company for construction purposes.

The last rail cars were 26 trailers ordered by the tramway in 1913 and 1914. After that, automobiles caused the bottom to drop out of the trolley car market and the plant near Overland Park off Broadway was closed forever. During the 1920's, many of the Woeber craftsman worked in the tramway shops converting cars to one-man operation.

The last street car the Woebers worked on was in 1951 when they rebuilt the Cherrelyn car, after constructing it some 60 years earlier. During this era of the horse-drawn streetcar, the Woeber Brothers made a great many cars but, perhaps, the most famous one is the Cherrelyn car. This car was unique in transportation circles because the horse got a free ride on every round trip. The land extended from Hampden Avenue, Englewood ten blocks, a mile, up Broadway Hill. This is primarily on a grade and the horse would pull the car up the hill, then, when the car was ready to start down, dobbin climbed aboard and enjoyed a free ride. He seemed to really enjoy his vantage point on the rear platform and he would stick his head around the side of the car so he could catch the progress of the car downhill. He seemed to be more certain than many of the paying passengers that streetcars were here to stay. The car with dobbin standing on the platform not only was a familiar sight to Denver but the fame of this car and horse spread throughout the state and nation. This is the same Cherrelyn car that Carl Selle, Sr, one of the last owners of the Woeber Auto Body and Manufacturing Company, used to ride on as a boy. He rode on the car but not so his father. Carl recalls the time his father took him to a friend's house out in what is now Englewood for a Sunday dinner. After dinner, the friends drove the two to the end of the Cherrelyn car line. Carl was given a nickel for his fare and his father started to walk. Carl says of the incident, "Father considered such a new-fangled things unsafe. He wasn't going to risk is neck. However, I enjoyed the ride and when I got to the end of the line, I had to wait for father. He was much slower than the streetcar." Old Dobbin is gone now but the Cherrelyn car

is still in good condition, having been renewed because of this historical importance and placed on the lawn of the Englewood City Hall by the Englewood Rotary Club. When the decision was reached to refinish the old car, the Woeber Auto Boy and Manufacturing Company was selected to do the job because of their fine reputation and as the original builders. Although very small by modern standards, this car was adequate and Denver had a very high rate of traffic on its streetcar, one paying passenger per day per inhabitant.

The end of the street car era was bound to have hard effects upon the Woeber Company. After building up a large inventory from contracts, one of the municipalities cancelled a large order of streetcars. This caused a crippling blow to the company. The Denver City Directory of 1919 lists Adam Woeber as a Trustee and Charles William Woeber as Manager of Woeber Car and Manufacturing Company. It also lists a Woeber Auto Body Company on 208 Broadway, recognition of the new era in transportation. The sons for the Woebers must have decided there was no future in the company for them for none elected to join the company. However, the future of the company was guaranteed for another two generations when Carl Selle Sr joined the firm in 1918 as an apprentice.

After 1914, the streetcar business was abandoned and all efforts of the company were centered on the building of motor truck bodies. In the early days of the automotive age, the horseless carriage for industry was known as the truck. Initially the early models were nothing more than wagons with motors instead of horses. In the early days, the automotive manufacturers of the East did not manufacture trucks as we know them today. They simply produced a chassis with an engine attached. All of the bodies were produced totally. Then Woeber Brothers became a sole Colorado manufacturer of Ford and Packard trucks which were the best of the line up until the depression.

Here again, Woeber's foresight came to the fore. In building the original Woeber plant, he put such high doors on the building that his business friends and workers thought him foolish. During this automotive transition period, the Woeber shop was the only one in town that could accommodate those high trucks. Consequently, many of the early trucks, through made by others, had to come to Woebers for repairs, and other firms had to finish their trucks out in the street. The monsters that now came off assembly lines are not only larger but are designed for different industries according to the job they were to do and many were even individualized according to a person's particular requirements.

Mr. Carl W. Selle, SR began with the firm in 1918 at the age of 26. He quickly showed his ability, demonstrating proficiency in woodworking and showing a remarkable grasp of business management and he was soon made foreman. After the death of Charles William Woeber in 1930, he began to assume more management of the company. As Mr. Rudolf Woeber was well advanced in years, he encouraged young Carl to take over more and more the

responsibilities of management. In 1940, the widow of Charles William Woeber sold her interest in the company to Rudolf.

In 1934, Selle bought an interest in the company and in 1943 when Mr. Rudolf Woeber died, he purchased the balance of the stock and became the owner and president of the concern. The company had continued to prosper under Mr. Selle. He learned the real reason for the original success of the company has never deviated from the pathway set by the Woeber Brothers years before. That policy of “best materials and workmanship” carried the Woeber Company for over 103 years, through the depression and inflation, from a humble beginning to a firm of prominence in the transportation field, a firm with a reputation for quality merchandise, fairness in business dealings that has never been surpassed.

Woeber was characterized by its ability to adapt to the future based on its heritage of the past. Although undocumented, it was one of the earliest builders of the sleeper type railroad coaches for the Colorado narrow gage railroads. It carried the concept through by making the first of sleeper-type cabs for truck bodies. This patent and its royalties proved quite profitable until major truck manufacturers began incorporating this as an integral part of their manufactured cabs, thus popping the balloon.

Another innovation the firm came up with was the “Range Rover” which was an early version of the camper or recreational vehicle. However, it was years ahead of its time and never caught on. A generation later, Colorado mountain roads were clogged with campers, vans and Winnebagos.

Like young Adam Woeber and Carl Sr. before them, Carl W. Selle, Jr. entered the company in 1933 as an apprentice. He learned as they did the building of truck bodies from actually doing the job. He progressed rapidly and in 1938 was made plant superintendent. The traditions and ideals of those before him are fresh in his mind and the quality of the work reflects it. In 1941, Ray G. Moore joined the company as a worker in the shop. By hard work and good judgement, he advanced over the years to be Treasurer and General Manager. Three years later, in 1948, Robert F. Selle, then 20, joined the company as an apprentice. He had found out how really rugged were the Woeber bodies from actual experience during World War II. It was like meeting an old friend to find one. As Secretary and Office Manager of the company, Robert Selle, known more generally as Bob, took over the duties of advertising and promotion along with the general administration of the business.

It seems strange to reflect that during World War II, the horse and wagon staged a comeback and the Woeber Auto Body and Manufacturing Company turned back the calendar a few years and made wagons. The gasoline and tire shortage became so acute that several dairies and breweries were forced to supplement their delivery service with horse and wagon for city deliveries. This was in addition to the large war production contracts. For the most part, these



Army contracts were building ordnance shop vans which were mounted on 2 1/2 and 5 ton, 6 x 6 military truck chassis.

With such a background of administrative personnel on its staff, it is easy to see that the Woeber Company progressed to keep pace with the ever-changing world. As Mr. Carl W. Selle, Sr. so aptly said, "We believe, as the Woebers believed, that progress cannot be stopped. In fact, we will encourage it." This was evidenced by moving to a new facility after being in the same location for 86 years. In 1953, Selle built a new larger facility and moved the company to 4950 Jackson near Commerce City.

Progress was further experienced by Woeber's entry into the Space Age and the Cold War competition enhanced with Sputnik and ICBMs. The company made a highly specialized and classified van which was crammed full of electronic gear and installed at CU Boulder. These vans were sent all over the world in an effort to keep track of missiles and satellites. Although the trailers were fitted with the gear at CU in Boulder, much of the design specifications for the trailers themselves were highly classified. During this period, the company continued to manufacture commercial auto truck bodies.

As the Selle brothers reached retirement age, it became apparent that they too, like the Woebers ahead of time, did not have sons that desired to continue the business. In 1970, the business closed, ending an era in Colorado that spanned over a century. However, some of the traditions continue. The building and the physical assets of the company were purchased by the Kois Brothers who had previously worked for the Woeber Company for several years. They continue to operate the business now known as Kois Brothers Equipment Company. They continue to manufacture truck bodies and trailers and solid waste equipment of the highest quality in the same tradition handed down and taught to them.

This brings the Woeber story to the end of the road and the end of an era. Much has been written about the men who used the various forms of transportation to build Colorado but very little has been written about those who built those forms of transportation. Perhaps this will be of assistance to those who are in process of recording and documenting this important element of Colorado history.