ARKANSAS HISTORIC
PRESERVATION PROGRAM

Sandwiching in History Tour
Climber Motor Car Factory, Unit A
1823 East 17th Street, Little Rock

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By: Ashley Sides
Special thanks to: Mike Winn at MicroGrinding Systems
and Alan Hoelzeman and staff at the Museum of Automobiles

Hi! Thanks for joining us for another virtual Sandwiching in History tour! I'm Ashley Sides with the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program. This factory in eastern Little Rock has been in use for over a century. During that time, it has produced different products for various companies. Today it's home to MicroGrinding Systems, Inc., but one hundred years ago, it was an automobile factory.

Did you know that Arkansas used to have its own native car company? Well it did—for about five years—and here's the story…

The automobile era was in full bloom in post-WWI America, but Detroit was a long way from the South, and some Little Rock businessmen saw an opportunity to capture the regional market with locally made cars. With high ambitions, the Climber Motor Corporation was

incorporated in early 1919. It immediately purchased 20 acres on East Seventeenth Street and started by building this building.

Climber sought to produce high quality, durable cars. According to Climber's advertising, "The South demands a sturdier and a stronger built car than any other part of the United States, and it is with a full understanding of the needs and uses of the people of the South that this car is designed and manufactured.

"The CLIMBER is built with a high road clearance to care for the ruts and stumps of the worst roads, and yet the underslung construction is of such a nature that it gives a perfection of poise and balance found in few cars of less road clearance."

After a slow start to manufacturing due to hiccups with the availability of parts, Climber began producing automobiles in the early fall of 1919. Now with actual cars to back them up, the company launched into even more aggressive promotional campaigns. In October of that year, they paraded 19 cars up Main Street in Little Rock—meant to represent one week's production—with Governor Charles Brough riding in the lead car. In another spectacle, they drove a Climber up the steps of the State Capitol Building. As they liked to advertise, "Performance suggested the [car's] name." If it could climb the capitol steps, the Ozarks shouldn't be a problem.

But their most audacious publicity stunt came in the winter of 1919-1920 when they embarked on an "endurance test" in a Climber car. Starting in Little Rock under the supervision of the state highway commissioner, the vehicle set out on a nonstop journey of 20,239 miles of "winter mud and rain over the nearly impassable roads of the South, WITHOUT A STOP OF THE MOTOR," until Governor Brough finally shut off the engine in a ceremony on the grounds of the State Capitol.

By all accounts, the Climber *was* a good, sturdy car. Most of its parts were brought in from elsewhere to be assembled in the Little Rock plant. It came in two base models depending on the engine: a six-cylinder model with 50 horsepower, called the Climber Six, and a four-cylinder with 40 horsepower, called the Climber Four. Both engines were manufactured by the Herschell-Spillman Company, whose cloverleaf logo, incidentally, may have inspired Climber's own cloverleaf logo.

Climber ultimately produced a variety of body styles: the Four could be had as a touring car or a roadster, and the Six came as a touring car, roadster, sport model, coupe, or hardtop sedan. In reality, it seems the majority of Climbers produced were of the touring style, which was a five-passenger vehicle with four doors and a collapsible top. There were no side windows, and the windshield was mounted in an adjustable frame for ventilation. Then again, according to someone who had driven a Climber Six touring, "the narrow windshield affords little protection from the weather." The bodies were built of twenty-gauge rolled steel mounted over a handmade wooden frame. Seats were covered in leather. Short drivers would find themselves peeping through the steering wheel to see the road. An owner who had driven it up Petit Jean

Mountain said it "will climb like a tractor, yet run well on the highway. The car has a heavy, solid feel, especially when you try to push it." Although the company claimed the Climber Four got 19 miles to the gallon during its endurance test, experience with the Six indicated more like 10.

According to a 1923 company appraisal, the Climber Motor Corporation also produced a three-quarter-ton truck and a one-and-a-half-ton truck, which saw use as mail trucks in Little Rock and North Little Rock.

The Climber Corporation aggressively advertised their car and promoted the sale of company stock. Shares cost $10 apiece. They launched a Climber magazine and took out ads in the paper to convince prospective buyers that this car was the intelligent choice and to assure investors that the company was a guaranteed bet.

But a Climber Four cost $1,385 and a Six cost $2,250, while a Ford Model T could be bought for $355. In 1922, there were 96 Climber passenger cars and eight Climber trucks licensed in Arkansas and over 43,000 Ford cars and 5,000 Ford trucks. Neither vehicle sales nor stock subscriptions brought in enough money to supply the funds Climber needed to succeed. They also happened to hit the market at a bad time. No sooner did the Climber factory reach full production than the U.S. economy fell into a sharp recession that lasted until 1921. The company never reached profitability, and in February 1924, Climber underwent bankruptcy proceedings, with all assets being finally sold off on March 17th. Luck had run out. The company had lasted five years.

According to best estimates, between 1919 and 1923, the Climber Motor Corporation produced and sold about two hundred cars—one hundred each of the Four and the Six—plus 75–100 trucks. Only two of the vehicles are known to have survived, both Climber Six tourings—one a 1920 model and the other from 1923. Both were discovered and purchased in other states by Atley Davis of Little Rock in the 1960s and '70s, and both now belong to the Museum of Automobiles at Petit Jean State Park. The 1920 model is undergoing repairs, but the 1923 model is on permanent display.

But now we go back to the factory because the story continues. It may have been the end of the road for Climber, but there was nothing wrong with the facility in which they were built. This factory would prove to be the ideal manufacturing center for another ambitious Arkansas transportation startup.

So before we tell that story, let's look closer at the factory itself. Climber had originally envisioned a large complex consisting of several buildings. Of that early concept, only Unit A, which was going to be the Truck Department, was built. It would have had a much larger Auto Department next door, but apparently plans were scaled down, or the company just never had the chance to grow into their vision. There were apparently other buildings on site, but they were smaller and do not survive today.

Unit A is a large one-story frame building with a monitor roof. It has large steel-framed casement windows along all the walls and the monitor to let in plenty of natural light, and panels within the windows can be opened for ventilation as well. Some of these windows have been covered in recent years by siding for security reasons. The building's wood frame is cypress and is still in good shape at one hundred years old.

The layout of the factory is simple and adaptable to various uses. Offices are housed in one corner of the building, but the rest is a vast, open space.

The assembly line ran down the center of the factory, and different parts were manufactured in the different bays, so as the vehicle came down the line, the parts would be added to it as it went along. This would prove to be suitable for more than just cars.

The factory's location on the eastern outskirts of Little Rock was ideal because it was out of the way of the residential areas and it was adjacent to preexisting spur tracks of the Rock Island and Missouri Pacific railroads, which was useful for supply and distribution.

These advantages made the site attractive to other manufacturers. After Climber went under, the factory was used to manufacture airplanes. The Arkansas Aircraft Company, founded in 1926, took over the factory that same year. Its large open interior space was perfect for airplane construction, and they built two runways on the adjacent land, neither of which survives today.

And so a new era opened in the life of this factory.

The Arkansas Aircraft Company was a bit slow to get off the ground. Its first plane was built in the spring of 1927, but it didn't fly well, so they hired an engineer named Albert Völlmecke from the Ernst Heinkel airplane factory in Germany to redesign the aircraft. So it wasn't until the spring of 1928 that the Arkansas Aircraft Company began commercially producing a viable airplane.

In the meantime, Charles Lindbergh's famous transatlantic flight in 1927 had touched off a boom in the aviation market. Whereas there had previously been five major aircraft manufactures in the nation, by early 1928 there were well over 100 companies competing to sell planes. It was in this crowded field that the Little Rock-based company now found itself trying to gain a foothold.

Albert Völlmecke's new model became known as the 3C3. It was a conventional three-seat open-cockpit biplane that was targeted at the trainer and private owner market. To keep costs low, it—like many similar planes of its era—was equipped with the Curtiss OX-5 engine, an older model available in a large surplus from World War I.

The 3C3 initially cost $3,350 and distinguished itself from the competition by its remarkable stability. As a publicity stunt to show off the plane's steadiness, the pilot would climb out of the cockpit during flight and ride the plane for a while away from the controls.

The plane sold well enough, but the Arkansas Aircraft Company was struggling financially. It was kept afloat in the fall of 1928 by a timely investment and a reorganization of the company, in which it was renamed Command-Aire, Inc.

At the start of 1929, Command-Aire was not a major player in the national aircraft market, but by the end of that year, it had become the South's largest manufacturer and was in the top ten in the country. 1929 saw the introduction of a new model, the 5C3, which looked the same as the 3C3, but improved upon it in terms of engine power, range, and speed. It also cost almost twice as much.

The 5C3 was able to be refitted for aerial application and used as a crop duster. The Curtiss Flying Service, a Command-Aire distributor, had at least 16 5C3s in service and treating 200,000 acres of cotton in 1929 alone.

With its increased speed, the 5C3 was also a strong contestant in air show competitions. Command-Aire biplanes won or placed in several races and contests around the country from late 1928 through 1929. One of Command-Aire's most impressive showings to date came in the Daniel Guggenheim International Safe Aircraft Competition in late 1929. Out of fifteen of the world's top aircraft manufacturers, only Command-Aire competed with a stock plane, which only narrowly lost out to the two finalists.

By the end of 1929, Command-Aire had sold close to 300 airplanes, making it one of the major aircraft manufacturers of that time. But in October of that year, the stock market crashed, starting the Great Depression. The airplane market was already oversaturated, and Command-Aire found itself struggling for survival, along with most other airplane manufacturers. In January 1930, the plant was closed, and in May, the company declared bankruptcy.

Command-Aire went out with a flourish, though. Völlmecke had created a small monoplane—the only one Command-Aire ever built—to race in the 1930 Cirrus All-American Flying Derby, a 5,541-mile multi-stage race across the country. The specialty plane, named the *Little Rocket*, won the Derby by a wide margin. The pilot, Lee Gelbach, took home a staggering $15,000 prize and was paraded through the streets of Little Rock to the adulation of the crowds.

There are still a handful of Command-Aire planes still to be seen in museums or even perhaps the occasional air show, as some have been restored to flyability. Pilots say they fly as stable as advertised.

After Command-Aire left the building, it was taken over by Great Northern Paper for the manufacture of toilet paper. In 1936, they built an addition onto the west side of the building for storage and office space. This addition, made of pine and with a flat roof, has not proven as

durable as the cypress frame of the main structure. A heavy snow collapsed part of the roof in recent years.

In the 1950s and ’60s, the Yoder Manufacturing Company occupied the old Climber factory on East 17th Street. They were known for making bicycle horns, Klaxon horns, Hollywood wolf whistles, and other specialty items.

The company with the longest relationship with the factory is Creative Engineering / MicroGrinding Systems. They manufacture fine and ultra-fine grinding systems for industrial uses, and they go back some forty years at this location.

In 2005, this long-serving factory, originally known as the Climber Motor Car Factory, Unit A, was listed in the National Register of Historic Places with statewide significance for its associations with Arkansas automobile transportation and also for its associations with industrial development in the Little Rock area. At over one hundred years old, it has undergone very few alterations and is still going strong.

Next month’s tour will be virtual again as we take you to Camp Robinson in North Little Rock and turn back time with old photographs to tell you about the German prisoner-of-war camp there during World War II. Look for it on our social channels at noon on Friday, December 2nd. See you then!

For more information about the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program, check out ArkansasPreservation.com.

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