

Roberts Motor Company Collection (AC139)

Introduction:

The Roberts Motor Company Collection contains a book on the life of Homer B. Roberts as well as photocopies of advertisements for the eponymous company during the 1920s. The Roberts Motor Company was the first Black owned car dealership in Kansas City and the United States.

Descriptive Summary:

Creator: Roberts Motor Company

Title: Roberts Motor Company Collection

Date Range: 1920-2001

Bulk Dates: 1920-1930

Size: 2 Linear Feet (1 Box)

Collection Number: AC139

Donor Information:

Rusty Restuccia, May 2009.

Citation Note:

Roberts Motor Company Collection (AC139), Black Archives of Mid-America, Kansas City, Missouri

Administrative Information:

Reproduction Restrictions: Unrestricted.

Access Restrictions: Unrestricted.

Biographical Sketch:

Homer B. Roberts, a military veteran and businessman in Kansas City, was born in Ash Grove, Missouri in 1888 and raised in Wellington, Kansas. After studying electrical engineering at what was then Kansas City Agricultural College, he relocated to live in Kansas City. In 1917, he enlisted in the military during World War I and became the first Black commissioned officer in the Signal Corps. In 1919, after leaving the military, Roberts started his own company selling

cars in Kansas City. In 1923, he bought a building at the corner of 19th and Vine which included a restaurant, offices, different shops, a garage, and the Roberts Motor Company car dealership, as well as other businesses that he dabbled in such as in the entertainment industry. Roberts would go on to become highly successful, selling more than \$2 million worth of cars by 1928. After the collapse of his company, Roberts re-enlisted in the military during World War II doing public relations work, during which he was awarded the Legion of Merit. After the war, he worked at other white-owned car dealers who wanted to get more Black customers before dying in 1952.

Historical Sketch:

The Roberts Motor Company was one of the first African American car dealerships in the United States and the first in Kansas City in 1919. Companies such as Oldsmobile, Rickenbacker, and Hupmobile, took notice of his success over the ensuing years and made his store a franchise. He also became a distributor and broker for 15 other dealerships as well. In 1928, Roberts joined with fellow two other Black businessmen named Kenneth Campbell and Thomas Brown to expand the Roberts Motor Company. Roberts and Campbell moved to Chicago in 1929 to open a new dealership while Brown maintained the store in Kansas City. These two events led to the renaming of the company from the Roberts Motor Company to become Roberts-Campbell Motors, Inc. Like many businesses, the Great Depression meant the end of Roberts-Campbell Motors, Inc. in the 1930s. While the Kansas City store did close in 1930, there is little information available on the fate of the dealership in Chicago; however, it did last until at least 1936.

Scope and Content Note:

Series 1: Book

This series contains a copy of the book *Homer B. Roberts: An Extraordinary Man* by Rusty Restuccio.

Series 2: Advertisements

This series contains photocopies of advertisements for the Roberts Motor Company.

Collection Inventory:**Series 1: Book**

f. 1 *Homer B. Roberts: An Extraordinary Man*

Series 2: Advertisements

f. 2 1920 Advertisements

f. 3 1921 Advertisements

f. 4 1922 Advertisements

f. 5 1923 Advertisements

f. 6 1924 Advertisements

f. 7 1925 Advertisements

f. 8 1926 Advertisements

f. 9 1927 Advertisements

f. 10 1928 Advertisements

f. 11 1929 Advertisements

f. 12 1930 Advertisements

f. 13 1936 Advertisements

f. 14 Undated Advertisements

Processed by David Rocha, AmeriCorps VISTA Member, May 2025.

Sources:

AAAA. "Hall of Fame | African-American Automotive Association," n.d.

<https://www.aaaassoc.com/hall-of-fame>.

Hodge, Lawrence. "Homer Roberts: The First Black Dealership Owner." Jalopnik, February 28, 2021. <https://www.jalopnik.com/homer-roberts-the-first-black-dealership-owner-1846230034/>.

"Homer B. Roberts." *Kansas City Black History*, n.d. <https://kcblackhistory.org/articles/homer-b-roberts>.

Restuccia, Rusty. *Homer B. Roberts: An Extraordinary Man*. Rustic Enterprise, 2001.