

AUTOS AND ALLIGATORS - MR. REED'S GARAGE

The Ambler Garage, Ambler, Pa.

by Newton M. Howard

No doubt about it, the automobile was here to stay, and no longer just a fad. It was 1909, and to keep these "horseless carriages" in running order, several garages were under construction in Ambler. One of these was being built on Butler Avenue for Harry W. B. Reed, plans having been drawn up by architect Milton B. Bean of Lansdale. Completed in 1910, the garage was turned over to Harry's son, J. Clayton Reed, who called it "The Ambler Garage". It was better known locally though as Reed's Garage. In addition to servicing autos, he had dealerships for new cars and trucks.

The business flourished for about twenty years, at which time Reed made a drastic change based on something he had seen on a visit to Florida in 1929. Clayton Reed became interested in something new, called the "Tom Thumb Golf Course". It was the first miniature golf course to appear, and it motivated Reed to such a point that he converted his garage in 1930 to an eighteen-hole indoor miniature golf course. It was described as most attractive and a very difficult course,



An early view of The Ambler Garage erected in 1910. Reed's alligators were kept in the open Honey Run Creek behind the building. One of them escaped from the barricade, came up the slight hill next to the building and was sunning itself on the sidewalk when discovered on a Sunday morning in July, in the early 1920's. Present tenants of the structure are the State Store and a general merchandise store.

Photograph Courtesy of Mrs. Harry Reed Woodmansee

complete with water hazards, sand traps, bunkers, fountains and rock gardens, as well as attractive murals on the walls. Open every day and night, the charge was 35 cents per round, 25 cents for repeats.

Next, the premises were leased to the Ambler

Postoffice from 1934 until their brand-new building just across the street was ready to be occupied in 1938. Acme Market was next to lease the space for a number of years, prior to moving into their present building. The Variety Center of Sol Gill became the next tenant, with Gill

eventually buying the property and dividing it into two stores. The State Store rented the larger of the two, while his Variety Center occupied the smaller side. On retirement in 1985, Gill rented the smaller store to a general merchandiser.

The garage venture in 1910 was not the Reed family's first introduction to business in Ambler, for way back in 1880 Harry W. B. Reed came to the Village of Ambler and established his tin-smithing business. It was located on the southeast corner of Race and Spring Garden Streets, now a part of Denney Electric's parking lot. Reed occupied the second floor of a small building erected on the site of the old saw mill, in operation before the Civil War. He leased the first floor to Ben Meyers, and later to Arthur Hayden, both early Ambler blacksmiths. The gases from the blacksmith shop, however, drifted up to the second floor ruining Reed's tin, making it necessary for him to move.

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Autos and Alligators in Ambler

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The move took him to Main Street, where he erected a building for his tin-smithing business and established a successful hardware store. On January 1st, 1908, Reed leased his tin-smithing and hardware business, with an option to buy, to Garnett M. Deck and M. H. Shoemaker, both from Norristown. This move, ninety years ago, led to the establishment of Deck's Hardware, still going strong on North Main Street, and at present one of Ambler's oldest continuously operated businesses.

But what about the alligators? Well, here's what happened. The Reeds, frequent visitors to Florida, became fascinated with the alligator, often bringing several home with them and, in the warm summer months, keeping them in the stream

behind the garage, moving them into the basement for the Winter. Sometime after the end of the first World War, Mr. Reed had a crate of alligators sent up from Florida, and these he kept in the Honey Run Creek. To restrain them he made a makeshift cage of chicken wire. Occasionally one would get loose, but would not go too far astray.

Chief of Police Dick Ford warned Reed often to be sure the alligators didn't get out of the caged area. The Chief said, "Clayt, you know that if your 'gators get loose and work their way down to the Wissahickon Creek, they just might end up in Philadelphia, and before you know it they could find their way into the center of the City, and end up roaming around City Hall".

Well, it was no surprise to Chief Dick Ford, on this warm Sunday morning in July, when a group of young boys approached him excitedly as he was patrolling on horseback at the Forest Avenue School. "Mr. Ford,

you gotta come down to Butler Avenue real quick. You won't believe what we just saw. One of Mr. Reed's big alligators got loose and it's sunning itself on the sidewalk in front of his garage. Apparently it had broken through the chicken wire barricade and walked up the slight incline next to the garage. Tying his horse to a hitching post, Ford found owner J. Clayton Reed, and said, "Clayt, do you know what one of your 'gators is out on the sidewalk? I told you before to try to keep them under control. So I'm gonna have to tell you this time you gotta get rid of them for good."

Well, Reed did get rid of them as promised. He had them stuffed and presented to friends and relatives. He saved the best ones for himself, hanging them on the walls of his living quarters above the garage. One relative, who received a specimen about three and a half feet long, kept it in the cellar until protests from his wife forced him to part with it.