



A History of Transporting Cars to Auto Recyclers as Remembered by Industry Founders.

BY MICHELLE KEADLE-TAYLOR

“As I look back at everything I see the automotive industry starting out just pulling cars with chains, then we progressed to picking them up and letting them swing behind,” Max Spalding, Spalding Auto Parts. “Then we let them ride against the back of the truck. As things went along, we would put an old tire between the truck and the car. Then, came tow-bars which held the car back from the truck.

“As things progressed, we started fastening onto the front tires which seldom causes any damage, and that is where we are at today.”

Of course, Spalding is talking about the early days of towing, an important aspect of auto recy-

cling, and at times a controversial topic in today's economic landscape.

Most likely, the earliest roots of transporting cars to the auto recycler lay in the tow truck. In 1916, Ernst Holmes built and patented the first twin boom wrecker in Chattanooga, Tennessee. He used a 1913 Cadillac touring car to build the first tow truck and constructed it by cutting out the back. He was inspired earlier that year when his friend John Wiley's Ford Model T (known as a Tin Lizzie) ran off the road and landed upside down in Chattanooga's Chickamauga Creek. It reportedly took Holmes and six other men eight hours to retrieve it. They finally used three poles, a pulley, and a chain hooked to the frame of a 1913 Cadillac. This inspired Holmes' new creation, built to avoid repeating that scenario in the future.

After patenting his invention, Holmes started

Trucks used by Spalding Auto Parts in the 1940s and 1950s.

Courtesy of Max Spaulding, Spalding Auto Parts



manufacturing and selling wreckers and towing equipment to automotive recyclers or anyone else who wanted to tow wrecked cars. As the automotive recycling industry grew, Holmes's business expanded to eventually become a worldwide, well-known name synonymous with good quality, high performance products.

For those auto recyclers that couldn't afford to buy a Holmes wrecker, a make-shift tow truck made out of parts from cars they had in their own yard had to suffice.

Over the years, the type of tow truck auto recyclers used became more sophisticated and more recyclers were able to purchase Holmes tow trucks. Some recyclers could even purchase car carriers that held up to four or five cars.

The earliest models of car carriers can also be traced back to Ernst Holmes who produced perhaps the first ever model of a car carrier in 1917—just one year after he patented his tow truck. However, car carriers as we know them today didn't really take off until much later. In the early days, they were more commonly used in the equipment business, especially on farms to haul farm equipment.

Chevron and Schwartz were also among the early manufacturers of car carriers. Chevron built their reputation on building carriers that could hold up to three or four cars at a time.

Miller Industries, the world's largest manufacturer of towing and recovery units, eventually acquired the Holmes company. Formed in 1990, Miller Industries is a consolidation of leading brands such as Holmes, Century, Challenger, and Eagle. In later years, Vulcan, Chevron, and Boniface Engineering were added in the Europe. They operate four plants in the U.S., one in the UK and one in France.

With main headquarters in Ooltewah, Tennessee, Miller Industries manufactures light, medium, and heavy duty towing and recovery units with up to 75 ton rotators. They played an important part in shaping the development of the way cars are transported to the recycler with their car carriers.

"Most of the changes in the car carrier industry came with the change in chassis and in the Gross Vehicle Weight (GVW)," said Randy Olson, Vice President of Marketing for Miller Industries. "As the GVWs and chassis increased along with bigger tires and bigger brakes, carriers could haul more weight. In the 1980s tow trucks had a 10,000 lb. payload, which meant by the time you considered the weight of the tow truck itself and the bed on top of it, its payload was already almost used up. With the changes, the payload increased and more cars could be carried. Today, although we have trucks that go up to GVW's of 80,000 lbs., the most common GVW is 25,000 lbs."

This evolution in technology and the establishment of auto auctions spurred a change in the way recyclers purchased cars and in turn, their need for different equipment to transport the cars back to their yards. Instead of transporting a single car from less than 100 miles away, auto recyclers needed to transport multiple cars from the auctions at the same time. Today, most auto recyclers contract haulers to bring cars purchased at auctions back to their businesses.

A Peek into the Future

In carrier design, one of the latest developments from Miller Industries' large dedicated engineering team is the Low Center of Gravity carrier. This patented design lowers the deck height by six to nine inches from that of a conventional carrier. This lowers the load angle, provides better stability when transporting, and provides ease for the operator to secure the load from the ground.

"We are in the process of working on a multi-car carrier that will be easier to work with than the over-the-cab rack that is traditionally used in auto salvage," said Olson. "The advantage for the auto recycler is that the new carrier will be quicker and easier to load as well as safer to operate."

Snapshots from the Past

There are many ARA members who have grown up in the business and experienced the various methods of transporting cars back to their yards over the years. Jerry Brock, Max Spalding, and John C. Vander Haag are among those industry veterans who have witnessed the evolution of transportation in the auto recycling industry. They share some of their experiences and memories.

Jerry Brock

The tow truck holds a special place in the heart of Jerry Brock, Chairman of the Brock Supply Company, in Tempe, Arizona. In fact, he believes he owes a large part of the success of his business to it.

Brock grew up in the salvage business and remembers his dad using a Model A Ford tow truck that featured a hand crank wench. In 1969, he opened his own salvage yard, Brock's Auto Parts, and had a 1958 Chevy Holmes wrecker. He used this tow truck to do a lot of police towing for



the Tempe police department, Maricopa County Sheriff's office and the Arizona Highway Patrol.

"This police towing really helped me to get my business going," said Brock. "If a car was wrecked, I had a better chance of buying the car if I towed it. This was important because back then we didn't have auctions like we do today to buy your salvage. We had to buy our cars sometimes 100 miles away and tow it back to our facility."

In the 1960s Brock used the tow truck to haul cars and offered 24 hour towing. It was not uncommon for him to wake up his wife and five-year old daughter at two o'clock in the morning to answer a police call to tow a vehicle from an accident.

"I was a young man and was really thrilled to do the police towing," said Brock. "I would do it day or night. I found it exciting. At the time, there were no EMT's, so I would arrive at the same time as the police and ambulance or even before the ambulance and try to help them free someone who was pinned in the vehicle."

In 1966, using his auto salvage experience, Brock implemented a telephone communications network known as the "Hot Line." It consisted of Brock's own company and several other auto parts businesses as members of the line. Eventually, this membership grew to include 150 members.

Soon after, Brock expanded his business to include selling supplies to members, sending flyers and eventually catalogs to the automotive industry throughout the U.S., Canada, and internationally. This became an integral part of the business.

"In the late sixties, we started selling markers to mark cars and saws to cut cars, and by the early seventies, we had moved more into aftermarket parts," said Brock. "As much as I enjoyed towing, I decided to focus on expanding our growing business instead. We sold the salvage part of our business in 1980 and became the Wholesale Automotive Aftermarket Parts Company."

Now, Brock Supply Company operates in four locations; their administrative office in Tempe, Arizona, with distribution centers in Texas, and Virginia, and a purchasing office in China.

Although many years have passed since Brock used the tow truck to bring in extra revenue and salvage, he still has fond memories of that time.

"I really enjoyed using our wreckers in our busi-

We had to tow one car at a time back to our facility. Some of the larger companies had car carriers that could hold up to five cars.



ness. We had to tow one car at a time back to our facility,” said Brock. “Some of the larger companies had car carriers that could hold up to five cars.”

Several years ago, Brock restored a 1958 Chevy Holmes 525 wrecker (above) just like his original one. (You can read more about that in the July/August 2010 issue of *Automotive Recycling* magazine). Every now and then, he takes trips down memory lane when he takes part in car shows and local parades.

Max Spalding

In 1934, when Spalding Auto Parts was established, its founder Dolph Spalding, used a car and big chains to pull a car to the store. It didn't take long before Dolph realized he needed to come up with a better way to transport the vehicles he purchased. Soon, he decided to create his own version of a wrecker. He took a Studebaker sedan body and a frame and married them with the motor and rear end of a Model A truck.

He accomplished this by making one cut to the Studebaker body behind the front door and another behind the rear door. Then he put the front and rear back on the Model A, making a wrecker body from miscellaneous pieces from the scrap yard.

This wrecker had a power winch which was extremely modern in those days (top row, left).

Dolph used this one for his business for several years. Then, in 1938, he purchased a new truck that had been burned. He used that to build another wrecker, and later, Dolph and his team used those parts on a 1941 truck and used that tow truck for 25 years (second row).

Dolph's son Max grew up in his dad's business and eventually took over what has now grown to be a thriving auto salvage business operating on 50 acres in Spokane, Washington.

He remembers their first Kenworth wrecker.

“In the late forties and early fifties, my Dad decided to put together a large Kenworth wrecker. We started recovering wrecked trucks and towing for hire which greatly enhanced our opportunities to purchase the wrecked truck,” says Spalding.

“From there, we evolved with our business and in 1961 we constructed a bed that we used on several different trucks throughout the years (top row, right). In 1975, we started using our first Chevy one ton.

Spalding Auto Parts then used a 1975 Ford slide back truck with a T.I.C. body on it and acquired its first three T.I.C. car hauler, their first multi-car hauler that featured fully hydraulic loading.

“All of these trucks would use some type of a sling on the rear car, which caused damage to the car being towed,” said Spalding. “Today we use a newer version of these trucks with aluminum beds and damage-free hitches that are produced by Chevron, which bought out T.I.C. in the late seventies. That's about the same time we became a Chevron dealer.”

Today Spalding Auto Parts not only sells Chevron trucks, but also uses them to transport its vehicles. Unlike, many other recyclers, they normally do their own hauling using the new Chevron car hauler – not surprising with their heritage. Today, they also operate two self-service auto salvage yards along with their full-service yard.

According to Spalding they sometimes hire a contractor to haul cars if they've been purchased 200-300 miles away. The contractor they hire just happens to be a customer that they sold a four-car hauler to years ago!