

Homer B. Roberts

Automobile Dealer
1888-1952

by Susan Jezak Ford

Homer Roberts was as persistent in the 1920s as any car salesman today, but his goals reached well beyond the next sale. With enduring determination and a love of the motorcar, Roberts was the first African American to own an automobile dealership in the country.

Roberts was born in Ash Grove, Missouri, and grew up in Wellington, Kansas. He attended Tuskegee Institute and studied electrical engineering at Kansas State Agricultural College. He moved to Kansas City, but found no one here willing to hire a black electrical engineer. The army put Roberts' talents to use during World War I, where he served in the signal corps and rose to the rank of first lieutenant.

Roberts began selling automobiles in 1919, using a curb stone as his office. He soon moved to indoor quarters and his sales increased. In 1923, he purchased a two-story building at 1826-30 Vine that fronted the corner of 19th and Vine. The \$70,000 Roberts Building contained a restaurant, several shops, offices, and a garage and showroom for Roberts' "Motor Mart."

By 1928, Roberts had sold more than \$2 million worth of cars, most to African Americans. His entire sales, clerical, and garage staff was African American. Although he specialized in the Hupmobile, Roberts sold many other domestic models. His status as a dealer to the black community gave him permission from automobile manufacturers to sell several makes.

Roberts moved to Chicago in 1929 to open the Roberts-Campbell dealership in the Grand Hotel. He served with the Army in World War II and was transferred to the Pentagon, where he served in the public relations department. He continued working in Chicago in the public relations field after the war until his death in 1952.

The Roberts Building still stands on Vine Street, its glazed brick walls a tribute to a local automobile enthusiast and solid businessman of the 18th and Vine community.

Sources

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