

MR REPUBLIC TRUCK

Photos: Jennifer Somervell



Joe and family L-R Julayne, Jennifer, Jailyne, Jaidyn, Jack and Joe

Recognised children's book writer and correspondent, Jennifer Somervell recently travelled to America for a well-earned break. Whilst there she became aware of Joe Butcher, a famous Republic truck restorer. Given the family history with a Republic Truck, she felt compelled visit Joe in Alma, the home of Republic Trucks. This is her story of that memorable trip.

Driving out of Michigan towards the US-Canadian border, all I can think is "We should go back!"

"I think we should go back," I say. Silence.

I can hear my husband's economic drive shaft calculating the lost hours and days, extra petrol, the destruction of our itinerary.

"I really think we should visit him!"

Two days later, well into Canada, a deal was struck. We would cut short our trip over the top of the Great Lakes and 'duck back down' to visit Michigan's famous truck restorer, Joe Butcher.

A Republic truck-a-holic

Seven days and 1500 miles (2400 km) later, we pulled up at Joe's 1,300 acre farm on the outskirts of Alma, Michigan. One step into Joe's massive shed and I knew we had made the right decision. It's a Republic truck museum! Not only does it house three immaculate, restored Republic trucks – with more in process – but lining the walls and benches are artifacts and treasures detailing the history of the once-famous Republic Motor Truck Company since its inception in 1913.

I first came across Joe's name while researching the history of 'Old Truck', my brother John Somervell's 1921 Model 10 Republic, and the central character of our children's book, 'The New Old Truck.' An unlikely chain of events transpired, and six months later we launched the book at a heritage day in Alma, Michigan, the home of Republic trucks.

And that was where I met Joe and his trucks in person. First, a 1914 Republic celebrating its 100th birthday, chugged its way onto the library frontage! A few minutes later along came a 1916 Republic, proudly driven by Joe's eldest son Jack. Finally Joe's first restoration, a 1928 Republic.

Every truck had its story.

Joe is a quiet, laid back sort of guy, but start him talking about Republic trucks and he can't stop.

A self-described work-a-holic, Joe's passion began when he stopped off at the local drugstore after having a wart removed on his foot. With the unsavoury prospect of being couch-bound for a week, he bought a book, 'The History of Alma,' discovered the story of Republic trucks, and was hooked.

"I was intrigued. Two thousand people in Alma (today a city of only 9,500) worked at the Republic Truck Company! I had no idea – it amazed me that something so big was here and no one knew anything about it! I started finding a few trucks on the computer and I'm like, 'I gotta buy one!'"

Joe found his first Republic on eBay and was devastated when he failed to win it at the auction.

Bitten by the truck bug, he pursued the seller, pestering him by phone on a weekly basis. About week six he got the phone number of the new owner who said he wasn't interested in selling.

"So I put a bug in his ear saying, 'If you ever want to sell it at a profit I would be interested.'"

A few weeks later the new owner called saying, 'he couldn't seem to get around to picking the truck up' and a deal was struck.

Other than his son, Joe didn't tell anyone about his new purchase, not even his wife. He just 'hooked up a trailer and headed for Arkansas.' But somehow the word got out and when he got back to Alma, people were waiting.

"I was bringing a Republic truck home to Alma eighty-two years later! They followed me home. And when I did the truck up, they made such a fuss of it!"

In Joe's words the truck was in 'pretty terrible shape.'

"The engine had frozen. I literally took a vacuum and sucked the rust out of the engine. When I pulled the oil plug nothing came out. I shoved a screwdriver in and it came out in a plug, ▶



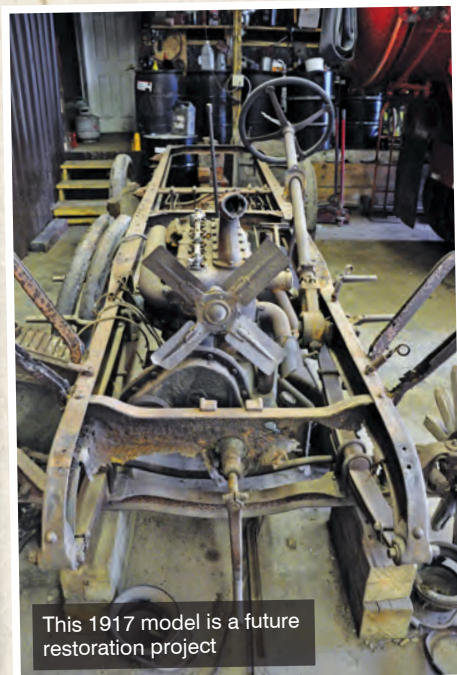
Joe's favourite truck
a 1916 Model 10



Jack at the wheel
of Joe's 1914



The Model 10 in the
foreground with the 1928 truck



This 1917 model is a future
restoration project

then after about 30 seconds the water started running out! I got one of my wife's gardening shovels and shovelled the oil out – it was like tar!"

And so began the first of many restorations. Joe described how they "disassembled the engine, got it going, found the oil leaks, fixed them, got it running again, fixed them..."

The day came when it was ready for a ride. Amazingly, at that moment, David McMacken, local historian and author of the book that first captured Joe's attention, turned up at the door.

"We went for a drive down a country lane in a snowstorm. We were busting drifts in the cab!"

Joe had no idea how rare the truck was but David immediately appreciated the rarity of the Model 85 H1 1928 Republic. In 1929, the company was nearing the end of its life and only 500 trucks were made.

Nevertheless it is not Joe's favourite.

"I went through a lot of bloody knuckles on that truck! The points end condenser is in the cab. If it's raining it don't want to run, if it's too cold, too hot – it's a moody bugger!"

Joe's 1914 truck, Model 79489 N, obtained from Litchfield, Minnesota, is even rarer. It was used as a mail delivery truck and Joe initially turned it down, thinking he had enough trucks. Then on a whim, he asked the owner to check the chassis number, and was astonished to discover it was made in 1914. As David McMacken said, "The stamp on the chassis said 14-121. The company's 121st truck built in 1914! It was hard to believe he was that fortunate. This was a truck that was made about a year after the company started making trucks."

Joe has heard there is a restored 1913 model which is chain driven, and he is keen to see it. While he has the paperwork to say they were made, he has yet to see one.

Of all his trucks, the 1916 Model 10 from Virginia is his favourite.

"All these trucks are a lot of work. This one – it just runs!"

In the summer Joe and his team of six workers work long hours. Joe runs an excavating business and crops 1300 acres with his son Jack. But in the long 4-6 month Michigan winter, when temperatures plunge to -34OC they hole up in the heated sheds, while the snow blows outside. At a comfortable 23-25OC, entertained by a flat-screen TV, Joe and his team work on vehicle maintenance and his favourite job – truck restoration. Joe describes his trucks as 'pretty original'. He restores all the original woodwork where possible and even saves the bolts and paints them.

"This is my fun time!" says Joe.

"I like taking these pieces of junk. You see pictures of them – there's no value in them – they're literally falling apart! I don't know everything. But between us, someone knows how to do it. You put our guys together we can fix anything!"

Joe uses the trucks he isn't restoring for spare parts. His family are all involved and share his pride in the trucks. Joe shows me photos of his kids sanding and painting. His wife, Jennifer, reminds me of my brother John's late wife, Fran, somewhat bemused, but graciously tolerating his obsession.

And it isn't just trucks that Joe collects. Some days he will pop into town in one of his trucks.

"I can spend half a day down there talking to people and listening to their stories. Then – oh my gosh! – they'll take off and come back with some Republic memorabilia. Here's Grandpa's time card or whatever!"

"All the early trucks have 4 cylinder Continental engines until 1919 when you start seeing Lycoming 6 cylinders (which I have two of) and Waukesha and Buda engines which I have never seen." Says Joe, "They sure made quality stuff!"

All the Republics Joe has seen have axles from Torbenson Axle Co, which later became Eaton; these axles are in many



Jennifer Somervell with Joe celebrating 100 years of Republic Trucks



The family in the shed of memorabilia

trucks today. They have Fuller transmissions, also found in many modern trucks.

Joe reckons it takes about \$US10,000 to restore a truck, and that's not including time. These days he doesn't have to look for trucks, he says "they find me!"

"Every three months or so I'll get a call from somewhere... 'we got one in the barn'.... 'we got one in the fence row.' Now people call me!"

At the 'Made in Alma Day', a grateful Alma community presented Joe with a Certificate of Appreciation for his service in promoting the town's history through Republic truck restoration.

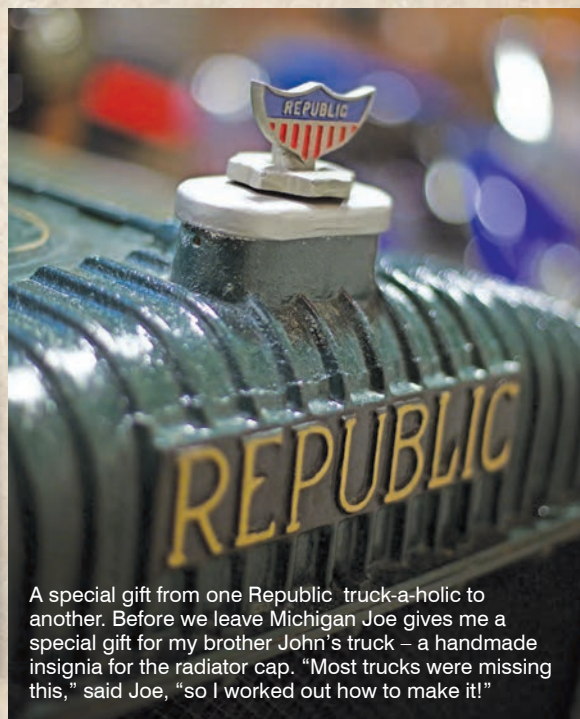
Joe's response is typically understated – "I'm just an old farm boy who knows how to fix stuff!" **PA**



An original Republic insignia



Under the bonnet of the 1928



A special gift from one Republic truck-a-holic to another. Before we leave Michigan Joe gives me a special gift for my brother John's truck – a handmade insignia for the radiator cap. "Most trucks were missing this," said Joe, "so I worked out how to make it!"

The History of the Republic Motor Truck Company

The Republic Motor Truck Company manufactured commercial trucks between 1913 and 1929 in Alma, Michigan, USA.

From a small, fledgling factory, the company underwent explosive growth. By 1918 it was the largest exclusive truck manufacturer in the world, employing a workforce of 2000. Every ninth truck on United States roads was a Republic.

Republic trucks were marketed in over 40 countries including Australia and New Zealand. From 1913 to 1921, 340 were shipped to Australia and 260 to New Zealand. Half of the trucks in New Zealand were Republics. Republics were economical on fuel, tires and oil, which were expensive at the time. Maori chiefs purchased them to cart wool in the shearing season.

During World War One the Republic Motor Truck Company produced about 2,500 'Liberty Trucks' for use on the Western front for carrying supplies, troops and ammunition.

However, the return of these trucks after the war lead to a major reduction in demand. Production fell from 30,000 in 1918 to 1,453 in 1921, when the 'Old Truck' was built.

Despite sales of assets and restructuring, the company failed to regain its former status and by 1932 'it was defunct.' A parts depot continued in Alma until 1957 but as local Alma residents said, "it was never the same."



Acknowledgements: David McMacken: Flash and Fizzle: The Rise and Fall of the Republic Motor Truck Company of Alma, Michigan, Alma Public Library
The largest repository of Republic truck information, including David McMacken's book, is held at Alma Public Library, Michigan.
Contact: republic@alma.lib.mi.us, www.alma.lib.mi.us, phone 001 (989) 463 3966