



Bob Blake

As much as I like Earl Tindol and Fred Caldwell, I can't picture myself shopping their dealerships for a suit of clothes! So why did a major department store think they could be a success marketing their own brand of cars? Did Sears really have such brazen self confidence to believe they could crash the automaker's party during the 1950s?

The real story behind this bold move can be traced to Theodore V. Houser, the Sears vice-president of marketing. He was also a board member of car maker Kaiser-Frazer. He envisioned K-F slightly modifying their new compact Henry J. and naming it the Allstate. He had grandiose ideas of the car riding on Allstate tires, cranking with an Allstate battery and plugs, and being serviced by Allstate Service Centers, which just happened to be next to their department stores. And just to make the fit even more complete, Sears and Kaiser-Frazer shared ownership of a metal company. A car would complete the family circle!

The 1952 Allstate was actually Sears' second venture into the world of wheels. They began with the 1908 Sears, a crude buggy type vehicle named after the company's founder, Richard Sears. His career began as a mail-order watch seller. The company started clicking when he and watch repairer Alvah Roebuck began publishing a catalog. It quickly became the "in and out house" favorite of rural America.

The Sears had a 1909 catalog price of \$395. Despite this low cost, it didn't sell. It was literally crushed by the 133,000 Model Ts built by Henry Ford. When the Sears production ended in 1912, their total number was less than 3,500. Part of the reason was that the Sears arrived in pieces and required the buyer to put much of it together! Is this where the catalog phrase, "some assembly required" began?

By 1952, the Sears was only a vague memory...and remember... history repeats itself! Kaiser-Frazer introduced the Henry J in 1951 and the department store saw a winner. Their car would be the Allstate – a perfect second car for American families.