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TOP STORY

Flashback: The story of Gov. Thompson's Normal-made red coupe

Kurt Erickson

Aug 15, 2020



Former Gov. James R. Thompson is shown in the first 1990 Mitsubishi Eclipse manufactured at what was then the Diamond Star Motors plant. Thompson was reunited with the car during a November 2012 appearance in Bloomington.

Steve Smedley, The Pantagraph

Kurt Erickson

Gov. James Thompson, who died Friday, was a key figure in the creation of the Diamond-Star Motors assembly plant in Normal. In August 2015, when Mitsubishi was closing the plant, The Pantagraph looked back at the story of a red coupe given to the governor for his efforts. The story is being republished below.

SPRINGFIELD — Illinois government is forever linked to the soon-to-be shuttered Mitsubishi auto plant through a little red coupe.

In appreciation of his hands-on involvement in helping to lure the joint venture between the Japanese company and Chrysler to a site west of Normal, the first car that rolled off the Diamond-Star Motors assembly line back in 1989 was presented to then-Gov. James R. Thompson.

In its 25 years, the sporty Eclipse has chauffeured multiple chief executives and their children, and served as a display piece in a museum.

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The first load of new Eclipse sports cars leaves the Diamond Star plant at the end of 1988.

WILL DASSOW/For The Pantagraph

And now, with the plant set to close in late November as the company pulls its manufacturing out of the U.S., whereabouts of the vehicle hit a dead end two states away.

The coupe spent many of its years tucked away in the garage of the Executive Mansion on Fourth Street in downtown Springfield.



A 1990 Mitsubishi Eclipse is inspected as it is about to leave the Diamond Star Motors assembly line in October 1989. The auto plant, now Mitsubishi Motors of North America, is scheduled to close in late November.

Steve Smedley, The Pantagraph

The car, a 1990 model, had rolled off the assembly line to great fanfare and was soon presented to Thompson. Over the next 21 years, workers at the plant produced a total of 906,876 models under a variety of names, including the Eagle Talon, the Plymouth Laser and, as most know it, the Eclipse.

The car that wound up in Springfield boasted all the options someone in early 1990s might want, including a top-of-the-line cassette deck stereo system. Its speedometer said it could hit 145 mph.

Once in Springfield, however, the car was used sporadically.

Thompson took and passed his first driving test in more than a decade while sitting in the driver's seat.

Ron Cooley, who is now executive director of the Illinois State Police Merit Board, said the tall governor was too big for the little car.

"It was mainly driven by the security guys," said Cooley, who is president of the Illinois State Police Heritage Foundation.

The car remained in the mansion garage through the transition from Thompson to former Gov. Jim Edgar in 1990.

In one of his last acts before transitioning from Secretary of State to governor, Edgar assigned 26 new license plates, one with each letter of the alphabet. The letter "I" was reserved for the sports car.

During Edgar's years in office, he let his children, Brad and Elizabeth, drive the car, but mostly left the vehicle alone.

As a testament to how little it was driven, a news report from 1997 showed the vehicle had only 6,400 miles on the odometer. A decade later, it had recorded only 26,400 miles.

In 2005, after 15 years of life at the mansion under four governors, the vehicle was moved to a state garage on Springfield's southeast side.

It was driven only occasionally, sometimes serving as a prop at events featuring made-in-Illinois products.

The car and Thompson were reacquainted in 2012 when the former governor served as the keynote speaker at an economic development forum in Bloomington.

The Pantagraph

44 pages, 4 sections

Bloomington-Normal, Ill., Tuesday, October 8, 1985

Twin Cities Final 25'

Plant work to start this year

By EMILE KRIBB

Pantagraph staff

DETROIT — Diamond-Star Motors Corp. will operate the new \$60 million auto assembly plant in Bloomington-Normal, producing a two-door sporty subcompact car for the year 1986. Chrysler Corp. Chairman Lee Iacocca announced yesterday.

Plant construction is expected to start this year and will be completed by the spring of 1986. The property will be included in Normal's city boundaries.

The site is an 636-acre of farmland west of the Twin Cities in Dry Grove Township. The building itself will cover almost 40 acres under roof. The cost of the plant was pegged at \$60 million yesterday, although earlier estimates set the cost at \$50 million.

The plant is to use the latest in assembly-line technology and will export 60 percent of its auto parts from Japan. The other 40 percent will come from American firms.

Production will be 300,000 cars annually with 1,500 employees on two shifts. Hiring and training will take place starting in the summer of 1987 in the Bloomington-Normal area.

The plant is expected to be represented by the United Auto Workers, but no agreement has been worked out.

Iacocca announced the site and the new corporation's name at the company's Highland Park headquarters early yesterday, along with Mitsubishi Motors Corp. President Tetsuo Yano.

The two auto leaders said Illinois' \$40 million training grant package was a key element in its selection. Iacocca said tax savings over a full 10-year period and savings on the cost of energy were also points that swayed the Chrysler-Mitsubishi selection team.

Iacocca said the incentive package did not include financial benefits for Chrysler's Illinois plant in Belvidere. However, Governor Thompson said later that he'd consider the same type of incentives



Diamond-Star Motors Corp. officials G. Glenn Gardner, left, and Yoichi Nakane joined Governor Thompson yesterday in a Chrysler automobile after a press conference in Chicago.

for the Belvidere plant, but on a smaller scale.

Plans in Michigan, Indiana and Ohio also were considered. Iacocca said a Motion site was rejected because it was not vacant, allowing the concept of building from the ground up.

At an afternoon press conference at the State of Illinois Center in Chicago, Thompson said, "This is a great day for Illinois. This decision recognizes the fact that manufacturing is an industry in a state and we'll for Illinois."

Thompson was joined by Diamond-Star executives and state and local government leaders, including Bloomington Mayor James Smart and Normal Mayor Paul Harmon.

Smart said he had a good feeling about the plant from the beginning. "When you first get together, the chemistry is either there or it isn't. On this project, the chemistry was there. I knew it was right from

the beginning."

Harmon noted that the project will be annexed to Normal. "I'm very happy the project is coming to the Normal-Bloomington area. This is the first time two communities have split the costs and benefits of an industrial project."

Iacocca termed the joint agreement between the two automakers a "win-win scenario because we're taking a 30-30 approach to help assure a stronger future for both companies."

The automakers will each invest \$30 million to build and equip the plant and to introduce the cars.

Mitsubishi will design and oversee construction of the plant. Production of two-door cars will start in the second half of 1986. A four-door sedan will be introduced during the latter part of the 1986 model year.

Iacocca said he could not get a retail price tag on the car.

Officials boast landing plant

By DAVE HAAKE

Pantagraph staff

State, federal and local government officials praised each other yesterday for patience and cooperation in landing the Mitsubishi Chrysler automobile plant — the largest manufacturing investment in Illinois in more than two decades.

The \$60 million Diamond-Star Motors Corp. plant west of the Twin Cities will begin producing 100,000-model subcompact cars in 1986-1988.

"This project has just landed Central Illinois," said Bloomington Mayor Jesse Smart. "Eaton your seat belts. We're in for a long and exciting ride."

Peoria Mayor Jim Matoff and U.S. Sen. Alan Blumenthal joined in the celebrating.

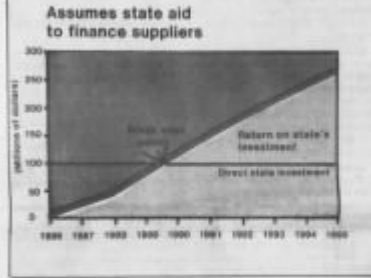
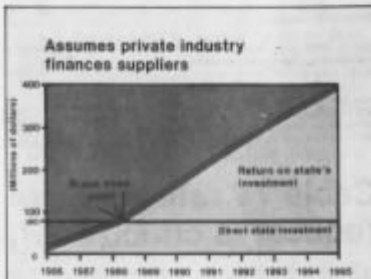
Led by Governor Thompson and Michael Woeffler, director of the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, the official Illinois management took place along U.S. 50, about a mile northwest of Normal's West College Avenue-U.S. 130 intersection.

A sign declaring that location as the future site of the Diamond-Star plant was erected on more than 500 officials, citizens and reporters invited to a broadcast of the Mitsubishi-Chrysler news conference in Illinois.

"Lee Iacocca (Chrysler chairman) and Tetsuo Yano (Mitsubishi president) don't make mistakes," Thompson said of the site decision.

The back-to-back announcements made Bloomington-Normal's selection official, ending a six-year effort by Thompson and state officials to entice Mitsubishi Motors Corp. to build in Illinois.

The governor praised Smart of credit for their patience despite frustration — frustration often caused because "no state officials did not know ourselves" what was happening.



Rich dividends expected for state

By DAVE HAAKE

Pantagraph business writer

A combined \$303.3 million state and Bloomington-Normal investment in Diamond-Star Motors Corp.

the state has a competitive business climate. We didn't buy the plant."

Thompson and local officials said economic benefits — both from the

During that period, however, the car transitioned from state-owned property to a museum piece.

Vehicles declared as surplus property are supposed to be sold at a public auction, but Thompson used his influence to get the car into the hands of a museum run by retired state police employees, including members of the security detail that once protected him.

"He influenced the state to give it to us," Cooley said.

About two years ago, however, the museum decided it wasn't going to keep it.

"It was costing us too much to maintain it," Cooley said.

Plus, it appeared out of place in a museum that featured old police cars.

"It didn't seem to fit into their law enforcement theme," said Judy Mills, a retired state police employee from Ashland, who is active in the retiree association.

"People weren't as interested in it," added Heinz Mueller, a retired state police officer from Sherman.

So the museum foundation put the car up for sale at a classic car lot in Glenarm, south of Springfield.

Cooley reports the vehicle was purchased by a Minnesota man; the dealership thinks it went for about \$6,000. And that's where the trail goes cold.

Laimutus "Limey" Nargelenas, a Springfield lobbyist who was commander of the state police, said he was on a team that reviewed security measures at the plant before it opened in late 1988 as part of one of the promises Thompson made to the Japanese co-owners.

Nargelenas also was on hand for the ribbon cutting, where Thompson basked in the glow of bringing a major manufacturing facility to Central Illinois.

"It was quite the to-do," Nargelenas said.

The last Eclipse produced at the plant raised \$35,000 for Japan Red Cross earthquake relief efforts.

Slideshow: Models produced at the Mitsubishi plant

Since it opened in 1988, the Mitsubishi Motors North America plant in Normal has produced 12 models, some of them when the facility was initially a joint venture with Chrysler and known as Diamond-Star Motors.

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