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ROCHESTER
 December 10, 2014
Historical Society debuts 19th Century surrey in parade

By Mary Beth Almond
 C & G Staff Writer

ROCHESTER — The Rochester Avon Historical Society debuted its fully restored 100-year-old surrey with strong ties to Rochester during the annual Rochester Hometown Christmas Parade Dec. 7.

The four-seat, light-duty carriage was originally owned by David Wagner Butts and was used mostly by his daughter, Elizabeth "Lizzie" Butts Casey Case, according to Historical Society member Deborah Larsen. In the late 1960s or early 1970s, the Knapp family purchased the surrey during an estate auction at the Butts farm near Avon Road, where the Bill Fox dealership is today. The farmland, she said, had been in the Butts family since 1855, when David's father, Elias, settled in Avon Township.

In 2009, Roger Knapp donated the surrey to the Rochester-Avon Historical Society, which began raising funds to have it restored.

"They had it in storage, and they gave it to the Historical Society, and we decided that it would be a good project to restore it and put it back on the street again, so to speak," Larsen explained.

The surrey, Larsen said, also has ties to the history of the automotive industry. It was manufactured by the Dunlap Vehicle Co. of Pontiac, which was launched in August 1898.

The Dunlap company lasted only 10 years, and in 1908, it was merged with the Oakland Motor Car Co., which Larsen said became part of General Motors in 1909 and was the ancestor of the Pontiac brand.

The surrey's manufacturer's plate identifies both Dunlap and its early distributor, John G. Wilkinson, and is likely an earlier example of a Dunlap surrey.

"The surrey actually has a part in the lineage of the Pontiac Motor Division, which is very interesting to us. It never moved very far from home, because it was purchased by a Rochester family and stayed in the area, so it has been right here in Oakland County for its entire life," she said.



Elizabeth Butts Casey Case and her granddaughter, Laura Wilson, pose with the surrey sometime in the 1930s. — Photo provided by the Rochester-Avon Historical Society

Before the restoration, the surrey was in very good shape structurally, but it had a lot of cosmetic issues. — Photo provided by Leslie Mack



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After years of fundraising and research, society members took the aged surrey to a carriage craftsman in Indiana in April.

"Structurally, the carriage was in very good shape, but it had a lot of cosmetic issues having to do with its age and where it was stored and what have you. It needed all new upholstery, because over the years, the mice had made their home in the upholstered seats; it needed to be re-leathered; the body needed to be repainted; the wheels needed new rubber on them; and then the top of the surrey, the roof, needed to be re-leathered and new fringe put on it," Larsen said.

Historical Society member Carol Tough said the carriage restoration cost \$6,000.

"Our members donated \$5,000, and Rochester Avon Historical Society donated \$1,000," she said. "It was beautifully restored."

The surrey was returned to the Historical Society in September.


"Given the amount of work that had to be done, I was surprised at how quickly it came together," Larsen said. "He did a masterful job."

The Historical Society plans to use the surrey for select events around town in the future.

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