

cast-iron frames, motors, controllers and related mechanical parts. Non-motorized, trackless pull-toy or wind-up trolleys manufactured by Converse itself have been found with paint schemes that were the same as the ones supplied to Lionel as well as with schemes that were different. Converse's own trolleys typically were ochre and orange or yellow and blue, and powered by a patented key-wind motor.

Converse's success mass-producing tin beach pails and shovels drew Morton Converse to attempt to manufacture in similar huge quantity the period's favorite Christmas toy — the drum. He made some drum bodies of wood, some of tin, and as noted, he used real sheepskin for the heads, buying skins by the carload. But sheepskin and calfskin, for the most expensive, top of the line drums, could not stand the heat and dampness of a long ocean voyage from New England to West Coast ports. Shipment by rail was prohibitively expensive. So Converse devised a system whereby drum bodies and hoops were shipped by boat to Panama, hauled across the isthmus by a smaller boat, and then, after being unloaded and loaded aboard a ship a third time, hauled up the coast to California markets. Meanwhile the sheepskin and calfskin drum heads were shipped by rail and the complete drums were assembled at their destination.

While Converse was solving his transcontinental logistical problems, his competitors, led by the old-line leading drum-maker Noble & Cooley, decided to gang up on the consumers and conspire to fix prices by forming a "toy trust." Many well-known toy firms joined up, but Converse refused and even sent out a card to the trade, declaring: "We have no trust but in God and our customers." The "toy trust" vowed to teach the maverick a lesson, and they drastically cut prices on drums, hoping to ruin him. Converse, as usual, had kept a shrewd jump ahead of the competition. He was already experimenting with new materials for drum heads, such as parchment paper. The tough paper proved to be much less expensive and far more stable than the skins. Converse responded to the toy trust's price-cutting challenge by rolling out a broad new line of drums at roughly half the trust's price — and he sold out his production. For many years, Converse prided itself on turning out more than 100,000 drums each Christmas season.

Morton's son, Atherton D. Converse graduated

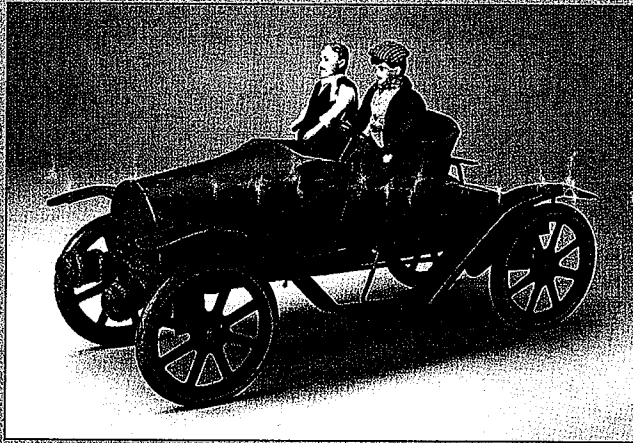
from Harvard and then joined the firm in 1890. He followed in his innovative father's footsteps, became a toy industry leader and a founder of the Toy Manufacturers of the U.S.A. Decade after decade, through the Great War and into the booming 1920s, the Converse company expanded its product line and prospered. It introduced tool chests, miniature ice chests and cabinets for the kitchen (complete with child-size food packages), toy pianos, building blocks, stults, railroad trains with elaborate stations and villages, and an increasingly popular array of automobiles, trolleys and other heavy tinplate and pressed-steel vehicles. The vehicular toys came carefully packed in quarter-inch wooden boxes with sliding tops, and some are still carefully preserved in their original "mint and boxed" condition.

Morton believed in giving something back to his adopted hometown. He set up a seven thousand dollar trust fund in 1917 that will have grown to over \$1.5 million a century later. He also planted many hundreds of elm and maple shade trees on the town's streets, in testimony to the wood that had helped make his fortune.

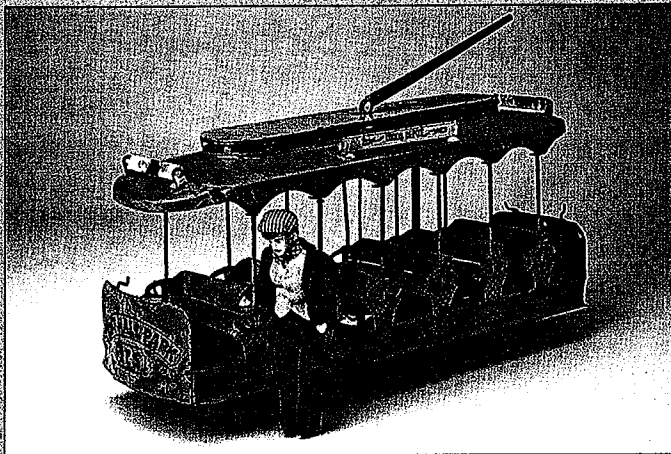
Everything went splendidly for Converse, at least until the 1929 stock market crash and the coming of the Great Depression. Gradually the wheels came off the world's largest wood toy company. The company's catalogues, which ran to more than 120 pages in its heyday, dwindled to only 59 pages by 1932. The more expensive metal toys vanished in favor of the cheap old standby, wood. Converse collapsed financially in the early 1930s, was merged with a furniture company and soon vanished.

Today, "Toy Town U.S.A." still has a small manufacturer of toys within its borders, a plastic fabrication company that makes novelty items and some hockey equipment. When last seen, the original monumental rocking horse was afflicted with dry rot. As noted, it has been replaced by handsome replicas. The glory that was Converse survives in its durable, no-nonsense toys, which collectors cherish as artifacts of a vanished American industrial civilization.

Over the years, many collectors have been drawn to the fascinating variety of Converse products. For Dr. Maurice Converse, a retired Maumee, Ohio, physician, it's a more personal matter. He's reaching back to his family's roots. A couple of years ago, a friend of Dr. Converse's, a well-known Kent, Ohio collector,



Converse coupe runabout, c. 1912. 15" long with dockwork motor. Hand-finished interior with red upholstery. Note large spoked wheels and low-slung wooden chassis, typical of the company's vehicles.



Converse's self-propelled open trolley, with key-wind motor and reversible seatbacks, runs (according to onboard signs) from "City Hall Park" to "Union Depot," 15' long, c.1908.

Dick Everhart, introduced him to the toy hobby by declaring, "Here's a toy with your name on it." The generous Everhart handed him a handsome Converse phaeton, and the good doctor was bitten by the "bug." Soon he was retracing



All that remains of the Converse Toy factory. Photo by Shirley Parks.

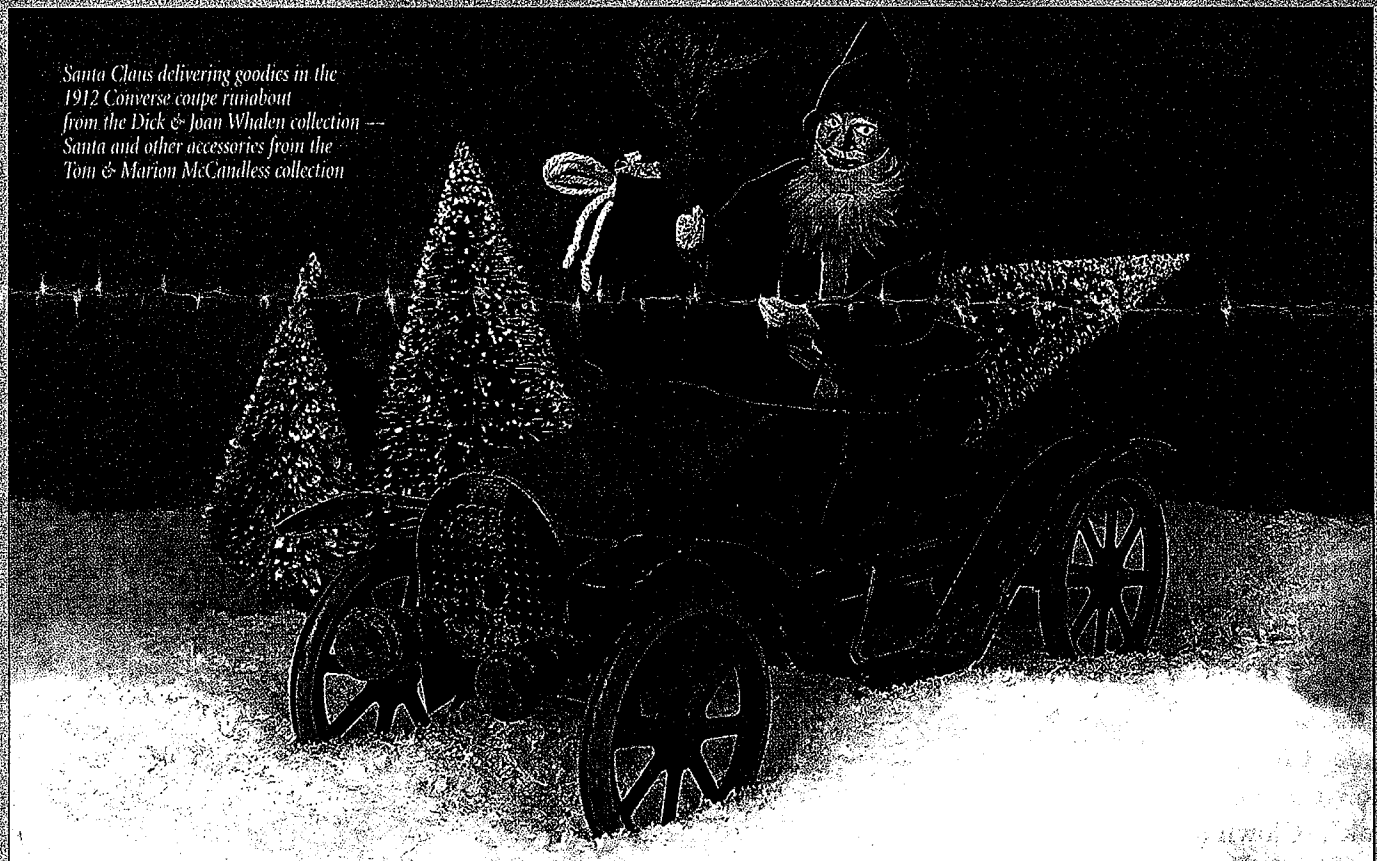
his family's distant New England branch, tracking down people in Winchendon who recall the company's history, and assembling factory photographs, catalogues and memorabilia. He's added steadily to his collection, but says modestly, "I'm just getting started."

Converse collectors usually feel that way, thanks to the challenging scope and diversity of the company's output during its ninety years of existence. Mrs. Shirley Parks, the co-curator of the Winchendon Historical Society, is assembling a collection of Converse toys and original company catalogues that she hopes will help restore "Toy Town's" importance as a research and tourist mecca for antique toy collectors and toy historians. But she finds the toys are scarce and few collectors are willing to part with them.

The author wishes to acknowledge the generous assistance of the following persons: Dr. Maurice Converse of Maumee, Ohio; John Goulet of Hubbardston, Massachusetts; Curtis Holstetter of Mechanicsville, Virginia; Donald and Sally Kaufman of Stockbridge, Massachusetts; Mrs. Shirley Parks, co-curator of the Winchendon Historical Society; David Townsend of Galois, Maine; Marge and Joel Weissman of Passaic, New Jersey; and Mrs. Julia White, director, Beals Library, Winchendon, Massachusetts.

*Editor's note:*  
Richard J. (Dick) Whalen lives in New York City. He and his wife Joan collect Converse toys as well as late 19th century and early 20th century American and European tin toys. Joan is a Dream of Joan Whalen Fine Art, 24 West 57th Street in midtown New York. Dick was an editor of The Wall Street Journal and Fortune and is the author of two books.

*The layout and color photography for this article are by Joel Jay Weissman, Design, Passaic, New Jersey.*



Santa Claus delivering goodies in the 1912 Converse coupe runabout from the Dick & Joan Whalen collection — Santa and other accessories from the Tom & Marion McCandless collection