

Perfection Mattress Co. Model “S” Truck

A story with an unanswered question.

by Clay Nordan



Perfection Mattress & Spring Co. Birmingham, Alabama. 1920's International Model S “Red Baby” truck.

It all started with a photograph of a 1920's IH Model “S” truck that you see here.

Ben Jackson is my insurance agent in Birmingham, AL. He became aware of my interest in International Harvester products and Chapter #23 several years ago when I first talked to him about insuring my Cub tractors. Some Chapter #23 members may remember Ben from a short presentation he made at our meeting at Hackleburg in 2009 about insurance coverage that he could provide for owners of collectible tractors.

This past August, Ben sent me this photo of an IH truck that his great-grandfather bought and used in the mattress business that he was principal owner of in downtown Birmingham, AL.

According to *150 Years of International Harvester* by C.H. Wendel, the model “S” was introduced in 1921 and was produced with variations until 1929. Due to the 1921 economic slump, “Alexander Legge, the new IH president, conceived a brilliant idea to improve sales. New Model “S” trucks were painted bright red and sold to dealers at a reduced price. Soon known as the “Red Babies”, these loaded trucks invaded the

countryside, carrying IH equipment to farmers”, and serving as an advertisement on wheels for IH.

As you can see from the photo, the name of the Jackson's business was Perfection Mattress and Spring Co. When I expressed interest in the photo, Ben said that very little is known about the photo, but he put me in touch with his father, Ivey Jackson, who added that his grandfather, F.M. Jackson, founded the company about 1915. Their factory was located on 26th Street between 8th and 9th Avenues. Interstate 20-59 took the property about 1974 and they built a new factory in Homewood on West Oxmoor Road. The Jacksons ultimately left the business when it was sold in 1979.

As I studied the photo, I made the assumption that the building in the background must be the Birmingham IH “Branch House” at the time. I had learned about IH branches from previous reading and knew that there were many of these regional IH bases and service centers all across the U.S. In an attempt to confirm this assumption, I went online to the McCormick – International Harvester Co. Collection Archives at the Wisconsin Historical Society (<http://>

www.wisconsinhistory.org). I did a simple search of their collection of photos of IH branch houses and discovered the second photo you see here that was cataloged as the Birmingham branch house.

The information on the website with regard to this photograph says: “External view of International Harvester Company’s Birmingham branch building, located at the intersection of 10th Avenue and 24th Street. A railroad car stands beside the building. Railroad tracks are across the street in the foreground. An automobile is parked along the curb on the right.” They indicate that the photo was made around 1925. Note that the streets, 10th Ave. and 24th Street are marked in ink on the photo.

At first I was hopeful that this information would lead me to what might remain of this building on the southeast corner of 10th Ave. and 24th Street, but when I tried to find the spot on a map of downtown Birmingham, I realized that the IH Branch House met the same fate as Perfection Mattress. It was swallowed up by the Interstate too!

I had made the logical conclusion when I first saw the Perfection Mattress truck photo that it must have been shot at the Birmingham branch house as it was being delivered to Mr. Jackson. Once I knew the exact address of the Birmingham branch, I compared it to the location of the mattress factory and realized that the two business were only a few blocks apart in downtown Birmingham, so I began to theorize that it would make a lot of sense for someone to shoot a photo of the truck just before it was driven away to its new home down the street.

But when I took the time to carefully compare the two photos (they are similar) I realized that I was looking at two different buildings. The main basis for my conclusion came from comparing the lettering on the sides of the buildings as well as the number and design of the windows. So much for my theory!

That led me to start thinking that the truck must have been prepared and the custom sign painted at a branch house in some other city. Once again I called upon the resources at the McCormick – IH archives, hoping that they might have a photo of the branch house shown with the truck that I could use to make a comparison.

I soon discovered that the archives had photos of IH branch houses all across the south: Jacksonville, FL; Columbia, SC; Charlotte, NC; Nashville, TN; Knoxville, TN; Little Rock, AR; etc.; as well as Wichita, KS, Springfield, IL, and others. After an exhaustive search and discovering that all the branch houses of this era resembled each other I was unable to locate a branch house that matched the one



with the truck. So, that is why a significant question remains about the photo of the Perfection Mattress Model “S”.

While we do have the story about the truck, we don’t have the full story about where the photo was shot and which branch house or dealer the truck came from. Perhaps someone will read about Ben’s photo who knows more about the scene it depicts and share that knowledge with us. If that happens, we will do a follow-up in a future issue and bring this story to a satisfactory conclusion.



Birmingham, AL International Harvester Branch House around 1925.