

## The Other Albert of Spark Plugs

By Rich Street

H. Albert Schmidt started building spark plugs with Albert Champion at the Albert Champion Company in Boston around 1906. The small Boston garage housed big egos. There was Champion, who was considered one of the most “colorful” men of his generation and later went on to create AC Spark Plugs; the brilliant and ambitious Stranahan brothers, who later carried the remnants of that small Boston company to Toledo and turned it into Champion Spark Plug Company; and finally there was the creative and passionate engineer, Schmidt. Despite his Germanic name, he claimed to be an Alsatian of French parents. Schmidt is said to have had a fiery temperament equal to Albert Champion’s. The two Alberts quarreled often and violently over the years they were associated, but continually made up.



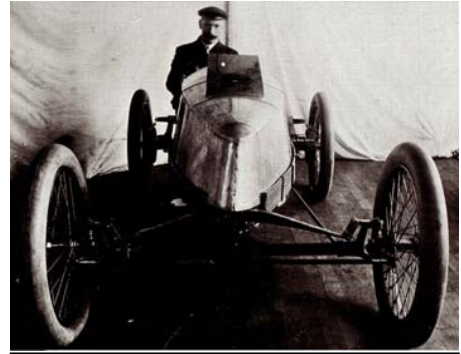
Photo from the Flint Journal, 11/13/1942

Schmidt, though a precise engineer, was always vague about his exact age. This leads one to believe he may not have known his exact birth date. Different documents from the U.S. Census, the U.S. Immigration Service, and even his obituaries leave the year of his birth in France anywhere from 1863 to 1869. The documents that he filled out in his lifetime all cite different dates, which seem contrary to the very specific birth date of December 24, 1866, that was put on his death record. According to census documents, his official immigration to the U.S. was in 1907, but exactly when he first came to America is unknown.

How did the Alberts meet? To answer that question, let me introduce Albert Schmidt’s younger brother Charles. Charles was a few years younger than Albert, born in 1869, but earned his fame and fortune prior to his brother. Charles was a graduate of the École des Arts et Métiers d’Angers, engineering school. He was a superintendent for Mors automobile company in Paris and had a French patent for a bevel drive gear under belt, before coming to America in 1901. In his new country Charles worked at the Mors facility in Brooklyn, New York. Stories have it that about this time, while driving in Bronx Park, New York, J. W. Packard and Mr. Henry Joy of Packard Motors met Charles. Subsequently they found and “rescued” Schmidt from a jail in Greenwich, Connecticut, where he had been incarcerated for running over a dog with his car. Schmidt was courted and joined Packard in April of 1902. The stories of Charles Schmidt’s exploits at Packard are many, but what has kept his name alive in automotive history was his design of the legendary “Gray Wolf” racing car. This race car, unknowingly, may have also “sparked” the thread that started the two biggest spark plug companies in the world.

Late in 1903, Packard called Schmidt back to the factory. With designer and sometime driver, Charles Schmidt, not present, the racing team took the car to Brooklyn for the last races of the season. They made the decision to entrust the Gray Wolf to a professional bicycle and motorcycle racer named Albert Champion. In the series of races Champion’s famous ego grew as he took a third in his first race, then a second in

the second race. On the second lap of his third race it all ended when he lost control and crashed through the fence. Champion, a “bloody mess” was taken to Kings County Hospital with compound fractures of the thigh that all but ended his professional bicycle racing career. Schmidt had been supposed furious at Champion for wrecking his engineering masterpiece. The wrecked Gray Wolf was soon resurrected and Charles Schmidt went on to drive it to several victories and records, before leaving Packard for Peerless in January of 1905.



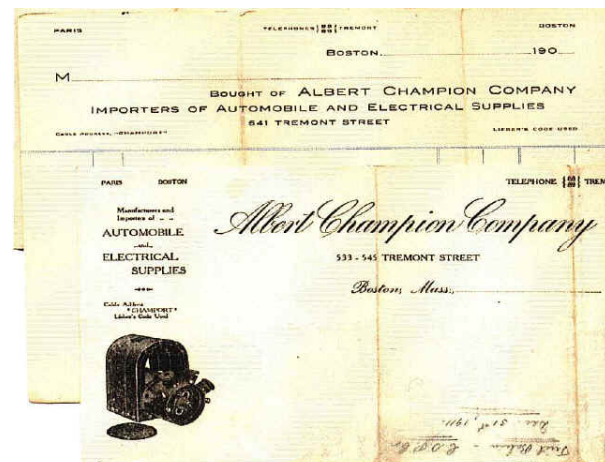
Charles Schmidt at the wheel of the Packard Gray Wolf.  
Photo from Automobile Quarterly.

Out of the wreckage of this racing accident, lives were changed and new relationships formed. Champion, no longer a competitive bicycle racer, formed his small company to sell ignition parts and start manufacturing his own spark plugs. Within a few years to build better spark plugs Champion hires Albert Schmidt, brother to the man whose car cost him his cycling career.

Schmidt was an engineer, and he used that talent to design and build the manufacturing machines for the Albert Champion Company. The manufacture of spark plugs required machining and threading steel shells and gland nuts, then assembling fired clay insulators between the metal parts. Like all the other manufacturers of the time, the Albert Champion Company imported insulator clay from France. Evidence supports the contention that Schmidt, not Champion, was the expert at making the critical porcelain shells.

In 1908 both Alberts left the Albert Champion Company in Boston and moved to Flint, Michigan. In a calculated move, they were up and producing spark plugs just prior to the incorporation of the Buick Motor Company on September 16, 1908. Schmidt and Champion set up shop in a third-floor room of the Buick factory. The early plugs met Buick engineers’ standards and saved Durant a dime a plug over the previous supplier.

The new Champion Ignition Company, not to be confused with the Champion Spark Plug Company, was incorporated on October 26th, 1908. Seventy-five percent of the initial funding share value went to William Crapo ("Billy") Durant; the remaining quarter was split, with 17.5% going to Albert Champion and 7.5% to Albert Schmidt, who became vice president.



Document Images courtesy of S. Stranahan

A year later, in 1909, Champion Ignition moved to its new 33,000 square foot home in Flint, Michigan. The two-story

building, located on the southeast corner of Industrial Avenue and Harriet Street, is where Champion and Schmidt produced their AC spark plug and other AC items. Also in 1909, Champion Ignition became a subsidiary of the General Motors (GM) organization and the Alberts each took 25% of that stock issue.



The Champion Ignition Company produced the first AC spark plugs.

Schmidt traveled back to his native France about every two years between 1907 and 1914. In 1914 Schmidt traveled to Europe to gain more expertise in ceramics. Sailing from Cherbourg, he arrived back at Ellis Island on May 9, 1914, just a few months prior to the outbreak of World War I. With the supply of European clay threatened by war, Schmidt consulted with Arthur Watts, an Ohio State University professor, on domestic sources. A blend of clays from Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, and North Carolina was selected and Champion Ignition Company became the first American manufacturer to use domestic clays for spark plug porcelains.

When World War I broke out in 1914, Schmidt returned again to France with his brother Charles. Albert joined the air corps, but his enlistment was brief. The only public explanation for his short stay of a few months in France was his near capture at Antwerp.

Schmidt returned to America aboard the *Rochambeau*, a ship out of Le Havre, arriving at Ellis Island on January 15, 1915. Upon his return to Flint, he became an engineer at Buick. He also remained a vice president and consulting engineer at AC until 1919. Also in 1915 he remarried. His new wife, Eva Kennedy, was a native of Michigan and about half his age. Their first daughter, Andree, was born within a year of their marriage. Another daughter, Rosemary, was born sometime after 1920. After World War I ended, the family made annual trips back to France, starting in 1919.

Between 1909 and 1917 Schmidt's name appeared on more than a dozen patents, which he assigned to Champion Ignition Company. World War I saw the company expand its product line to include aircraft spark plugs and by war's end, Champion Ignition was producing 50,000 AC aircraft plugs a day. Schmidt was not with the company for the later flights of Lindbergh, Earheart, Byrd, Maitland, Chamberlin, and others that AC powered.

In the 1920 census, Schmidt claims the occupation of "engineer, Macadam, working on own account." He was clearly done building spark plugs or Buicks.

The Champion Ignition Company officially became AC Spark Plug in 1922, and Schmidt retired. Albert sold his shares to GM in the transition. He was about 55, a quite wealthy man, and still full of life.

In 1925 Albert Schmidt was CEO of Continental Motor Corporation. A company that specialized in engines. Schmidt became enthralled with Albert Guyot's valveless engine technology. A relentless innovator, he ended up having Continental Engine purchase the rights and worldwide patents for the construction of the McCallum valveless system.



Schmidt tinkering with one of his 1926 Indy 500 Guyot Specials. Photo from *Le Fanatique de l'Automobile* magazine article by Jacques Iuri. Courtesy of Laurent Friry.

Schmidt became a passionate racing fan.

He designed and built several racing cars in Europe, entering them in the Indianapolis 500 races. He was a regular at Indianapolis until his health limited his attendance.

The outbreak of World War II prevented the family from enjoying the luxury of its usual winters on the Riviera, so Schmidt started spending the winters in Southern California.

Schmidt died at age 76 on Thursday, November 12, 1942 and was buried in Encino, California the following Monday. The motoring world of the time mourned his loss as an automotive pioneer and founder of AC Spark Plug. In his obituary, the newspaper *The Flint Journal* newspaper called him "one of the most colorful personalities in the early automotive industry." It seems quite ironic that these are nearly the same words used to describe his previous business partner, Albert Champion, who died 15 years prior. Today, H. Albert Schmidt, like many of his peers, is all but forgotten.

This man of many mysteries and talents leaves us with numerous questions, but chief among them should be whether there would even be an AC Spark Plug Company or Champion Spark Plug Company today had it not been for H. Albert Schmidt