

THE BERLIET FOUNDATION IN LYON: AT THE CROSSROADS OF INDUSTRY, CULTURE AND RESEARCH

□ Creation in 1982

During the restructuring of the French automobile industry in 1975, Automobiles M. Berliet was forced to leave the private group Michelin-Citroën; it was re-assigned to the Régie Nationale des Usines Renault, with the support of the French government. At this time Berliet represented 24,000 employees, 17,000 of them based in the region of Lyon where the main offices were located. The new shareholder had no desire to preserve the 80-year-old historical heritage or culture of Berliet.

Paul Berliet, the founder's son and president of Automobiles M. Berliet until 1975, realized that this rupture in continuity demanded that « something should be done » to preserve the memory of the company as well as that of the history of the Lyonnais automobile industry that was the home of 140 brands and 168 brands of the French truck industry.

This « something » he envisioned as an autonomous entity that would be in charge of finding, maintaining and enhancing the value of a historical heritage, an industrial culture that bears witness to the knowledge and know-how of men and women who forged this industry from its beginnings and contributed to its evolution.

This « something » he envisioned as a body that would raise this industrial heritage up to the rank of a cultural heritage and be a resource center where museums, collectors, students, and industrialists could find products and information on the multi-faceted history of the Lyonnais automobile industry and the French truck industry. For it to be understood and accepted by future generations, it would have to be visible.

The chosen legal structure was a foundation “reconnue d'utilité publique” (a state-approved non-profit-organization), which would insure its continuity – the estate is inalienable and non-transferable – in exchange for the generosity of its founders. Renault Véhicules Industriels accepted to join this effort as a co-founder.

The *Fondation de l'Automobile Marius Berliet* was approved as a non-profit organization on January 8, 1982, and includes the home of Marius Berliet, villa Art Nouveau, located in Lyon; 50,000 documents, essentially those of Berliet; 55 vehicles that are of the same brand and a small financial endowment. First employee: an archive research assistant with some volunteers

□ Where are we in 2006?

300,000 documents, representing practically 2,000 linear meters, on over 200 makes. The information can be accessed with research tools. The production and capitalization of knowledge has grown owing to about thirty university research papers and about a hundred studies written by specialists.

The people who consult the Archive Center vary: truck aficionados, journalists, writers, researchers, junior and high school students working on a team project for school on various subjects (industrialization, the region, symbolic industrialists etc.), exhibition organizers and companies who

are coming to realize the importance of the role of history in what they are communicating; all told there are about 300 inquiries per year.

Several books have been written with the help of our archives: “Camions de Légende” (Legendary Trucks), “Marius Berliet” and four in 2005: “Les Camions de la Fondation” (The Trucks of the Foundation), “L’Abbaye de Sénanque et le mécénat industriel Berliet” (The Sénanque Abbey and the industrial philanthropist Berliet), “Berliet”, “Renault Trucks”; and in 2006 “La Grande Aventure Automobile Lyonnaise” (The Great Adventure of the Lyonnais Automotive Industry)

Our « physical metallic souvenirs » comprise 300 vehicles from 1885 to today; half of them have been restored. We manage the restoration projects that are carried out by carefully selected sub-contractors, using techniques that are in danger of being forgotten. The objects are restored to their original and noble state in appearance, equipment and performance. There is a direct link between the objects and the documentation. These documents not only allow for an authentic restoration but they also place the product in its historical backdrop.

In our « conservatory » area that is 6000m², 140 vehicles from 27 brands and dozens of engines from 11 brands are stored under suitable conditions. It is not a set up that can accommodate the general public; however, our co-founder can invite customers, VIP’s and employees. Further, we individually cater to historians, automobile experts and students. Basically our approach is from one professional to another.

Our efforts are primarily focused on protection and preservation but we are also concerned with enhancing the value of our work: a bimonthly newsletter is published, edition 121 came out in June 2006 and we have our own website. We manage a file of about a hundred journalists. We regularly participate in professional events, for example automobile and cultural fairs and exhibitions. A permanent team of 7 paid employees and two volunteers are employed full-time and about sixty volunteers contribute their expertise two to four days a month.

We belong to regional, national, international, scientific and specialist networks that are geared towards the industrial and historical automobile heritage.

European manufacturers consult us as they are aware of the importance of their own industrial heritage, trusting our expertise in the domain of preserving a tangible and intangible industrial heritage.

□ A determined and rigorous pursuit

From the start, Paul Berliet, the initiator and actor of this achievement, lent his entrepreneurial spirit, his vision and his generosity to serve the cause of this cultural project. He was aware of the major role that roots play for people and organizations and took up the challenge of embarking on this new path. His involvement attracted the support of former Berliet employees and other companies of the mechanic industry who wished to voluntarily contribute their expertise.

The exchanges between the two employed qualified archivists and the ex-specialists have been mutually beneficial and have also enriched the base of archived documents.

Basically, we have implemented an industrial approach in order to develop a cultural project using the values and company culture present at Automobiles M. Berliet, such as a strong work ethic, a professional approach, quality work, a long-term vision, an international outlook and an emphasis

on operational investment.

Finding financial resources is a permanent concern: The *Association des Amis de la Fondation Berliet* (Association of the friends of the Berliet Foundation) was created at the same time as the Berliet Foundation. Its members are committed to the mission of the Foundation; the avenue of private philanthropy is also being explored. Public grants have been inexistent for ten years.

Throughout the years, a few events have become milestones.

In 1988, a truck from 1910 became a historic monument, two other vehicles followed suit. In the same year, the Société des Historiens de l'Automobile (Automotive Historical Society) awarded a prize for « the contribution of the Berliet Foundation to the historical knowledge of automobiles ». Partnerships followed with the Direction Régionale des Affaires Culturelles (Regional Office of Cultural Affairs) for events, with the French Defense Ministry for official commemorations, with the Conservatoire National des Arts et Métiers (French National Conservatory of Arts and Trades) for the restoration of a 1897 car, with the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme (Center for Human and Social Sciences) for the creation of a CD-Rom educational series entitled "Mémoires Industrielles" (Industrial memoirs) in 2003, with "La Poste" (the French Post Office) for the issue of a limited edition of collectors stamps in 2004.

The future? From a long-term perspective and in harmony with our defined mission, we will continue to:

- regularly enrich/add to the available resources,
- promote the quality of services,
- raise the awareness of a new targeted public, especially teachers and manufacturers,
- manage with accuracy,

while living and communicating the passion that drives us.

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