

Tab 1



Little Red Wagons

When you enter the “Big House” at Salemtowne through one of the main entrances, you will likely see a row of little red wagons just inside the doors. They are not toys for children, but tools residents use to transport items between their vehicles and apartments. Some residents may hardly notice them, while others are reminded of the same wagons they played with as children, or watched their own children enjoy.

This article traces the history of the two most familiar little red wagons: the Western Flyer and the Radio Flyer—often considered the GOAT (Greatest of All Time) of little red wagons. Salemtowne has both Western Flyers and Radio Flyers, which were donated over the decades and are maintained in good working order by residents.

We will begin with the Western Flyer. Its story is brief. Western Auto sold many of these wagons over the decades, but little has been written about them because their history was fairly uneventful. Like all the other Western Auto products, the wagons were made by other companies; Western Auto itself did no manufacturing.

Then we will turn to the much richer history of the Radio Flyer.

WESTERN FLYER

Western Auto was founded in 1909 in Kansas City by George Pepperdine (who later used the proceeds to found Pepperdine University) and Don Davis. It was originally a mail-order auto parts supplier, but, as the chain grew, eventually topping 3,000 stores nationwide, it began selling its own store-brand lines of consumer goods, the way Sears did with Craftsman tools. The Western Flyer trademark was first registered in June 1931 and it covered bicycles, tricycles, scooters, wagons, pedal cars, sleds, and roller skates, all sold exclusively through Western Auto stores and catalogs.

No Factories

Western Auto did not manufacture its own products. Instead, at various times it contracted with established makers such as Shelby Cycle Company, Cleveland Welding, Huffy, Murray, Columbia Manufacturing, and of course Radio Flyer to build Western Flyer-branded products. The manufacturer could change from year to year, while the Western Flyer badge remained the same. This private-label model was common throughout industry. This is why some Western Flyers look just like Radio Flyers except for the branding.

Rival to Radio Flyer

For decades, Western Flyer wagons served as the store-brand alternative to Radio Flyers. They were sold in neighborhood Western Auto stores rather than department stores or toy retailers, often at a comparable price. Because Western Auto stores were frequently anchor retailers on small-town squares, Western Flyer wagons and bicycles came to evoke small-town Americana, much like Radio Flyers, but with a stronger connection to the local hardware-and-general-store tradition.



Western Flyer, Town & Country

Looks like a Radio Flyer because they made it

Decline and Collector Status

Western Auto itself was sold to Beneficial Corporation in 1961, went through a leveraged buyout in 1985, was sold to Sears in 1988, and was largely absorbed by Advance Auto Parts by 1998, at which point the Western Flyer brand stopped appearing on new products and the trademark was eventually cancelled.

Today, original Western Flyer wagons are prized by collectors, with values often comparable to—or higher than—vintage Radio Flyers. One reason is scarcity: Western Auto has been gone for decades, while Radio Flyer still produces new wagons.

RADIO FLYER

Few American toys are as recognizable as the bright red Radio Flyer wagon. With its steel body, black rubber wheels, and long pull handle, it has come to symbolize American childhood. For generations, children have used it for play, adventure, and hauling everything from stuffed

animals to younger siblings. Yet Radio Flyer began not with a major toy company, but with a young Italian immigrant in a small Chicago workshop and an idea for building children's wagons.

From Rosa to Chicago

Antonio Pasin (July 4, 1897 – July 5, 1990) was born in Rosà, Vicenza, Italy where he learned woodworking from his father and grandfather who did carpentry work at a palatial Italian estate. As a youth, Antonio helped them craft cabinets and other items, such as an indoor carousel, complete with hand-carved horses.

In 1913, the Pasin family sold a mule to pay for 16-year-old Antonio's voyage to America, the land of promise. After a while in New York, he settled in Chicago. At first, he had no money and didn't know anyone but he worked a series of odd jobs: washing celery for a vegetable distributor, toting water for a sewer-digging crew, working with road crews, and constructing pianos. By 1917, Pasin had saved enough money to buy used tools, rent a one-room shop on the West Side, and start a small business, the Venetian Furniture Company. He built and repaired phonograph cabinets and made furniture and other wooden products. To haul his tools and materials around the shop, he built himself a sturdy wooden wagon.



Antonio in his Workshop, 1920s
[enhanced]

As people were buying phonograph cabinets, many would ask, 'hey, can I get one of those wagons?' To fulfill the demand, Pasin began building wagons on the side. Pretty soon he was selling more wagons than phonograph cabinets. Since he was an immigrant born on the Fourth of July and he remembered how he was greeted by the Statue of Liberty on his arrival in the United States, he named the wagon the Liberty Coaster. By 1917, his wagons were outselling

the cabinets, and Pasin rented a one-room workshop dedicated entirely to building them. That year is considered as the founding of the company that would eventually become Radio Flyer.



The Liberty Coaster
[enhanced]

Growth and Changes

With a toehold on the market, Pasin put everything into his product. According to a company advertisement, the wagon was "the only wagon that outsells Ford station wagons." Pasin's approach was to keep the price and margin low so as not to invite a lot of competition.

Pasin's wagons quickly became immensely popular, so rather than remaining a small craftsman making individual products, he wanted to find a way to manufacture his wagons on a much larger scale. This ambition would transform both his business and the children's toy market.

Along the way, he married a fellow Italian immigrant Anna Baggio in Chicago. They went on to have three children, two girls and one son. The son, Mario, later took over the company when Antonio died.

By 1923, Pasin had numerous employees at his bustling company, but he had a passion for even greater things. One of the new innovations at the time was Henry Ford's use of an assembly line. Fired up by the carmaker's manufacturing innovations, Pasin toyed with metal stamping to mass-produce his wagon. Using scrap pieces, Pasin made a metal version of his wagon. The two hottest innovations of the time were — radio and aviation — so he named his new wagon the Radio Flyer.

In 1930, Pasin opened a metal-stamping factory in Chicago at 6041 W. Grand Ave and changed his company's name from Liberty Coaster to Radio Steel & Manufacturing Company. An order for 7,000 wagons put the business in motion. His borrowing of mass-production techniques from the auto industry earned him the nickname "Little Ford."

The changes allowed his company to manufacture wagons much more efficiently and at a lower cost. It produced steel-bodied wagons enormously, selling them for about three dollars apiece

(equivalent to about \$60 today) and marketing them as a toy "for every girl and boy," not a luxury item for well-off families.

The timing mattered. Even through the worst years of the Great Depression, when many manufacturers idled or shut down, Radio Flyer wagons reportedly employed about 140 workers and was selling wagons at a rate of roughly 1,500 a day, making it the world's largest producer of children's coaster wagons.

The Great Depression and the World's Fair

The 1933 Chicago World's Fair was an important moment in Radio Flyer's history. At a time, the United States was still suffering through the Great Depression, and it gave people a way to take a break from the hard times. The fair celebrated science, industry, and technological progress, offering hope for better times ahead.

Pasin saw the fair as a business opportunity, using it to introduce his wagons to the world. He borrowed \$30,000 to build a 45-foot-tall Coaster Boy structure of a boy atop a wagon. The massive art deco structure included a kiosk, where workers, including his wife Anna, put together tiny steel wagons that sold for just 25 cents each; they sold more than 100,000 of the trinkets. The Coaster Boy promotion was a huge success that helped spread the Radio Flyer name across the world. The gamble helped give the company national visibility and helped spread the Radio Flyer name across the world and also reinforced its identity as a modern American product rather than simply another children's toy.



Coaster Boy 1933 World's Fair
[enhanced]

War, Peace, and an American Icon

Production did not run uninterrupted forever. From 1942 to 1945, during World War II, the company halted wagon manufacturing entirely and retooled its factory to produce five-gallon steel Blitz cans that GIs used to carry fuel and water. In 1945, the company received an Army-Navy E Award for excellence in producing essential wartime materials.

After the war, the little red wagon found itself swept into Cold War-era patriotism. In the 1950s, as the launch of Sputnik and the rise of television culture reshaped American self-image, the company leaned hard into the wagon's identity as a wholesome, all-American product — one 1953 newspaper ad went so far as to suggest that buying your children a "big red coaster wagon" was practically a patriotic duty. The wagon had gone from a practical toy to a cultural icon of American childhood itself.



Children Playing, 1950s–early 1960s
[enhanced]

A Wagon Becomes an American Icon

Over the following decades, the basic Radio Flyer design became remarkably recognizable. Its steel body, four wheels, pull handle, and distinctive red finish created a visual identity that could survive changing fashions.

The wagon's appeal also came from its versatility. The wagon became associated with family life. Parents could use it to transport children or belongings, while children could turn it into a toy for imaginative play. Because the basic product was so durable, durability became an important part of the brand's identity. The company describes its products as designed to last, and notes that many of its wagons have been passed from sibling to sibling, and even generation to generation. The Smithsonian describes the company's century-long history as one involving more than one hundred million wagons sold.

Surviving Changes in the Toy Industry

half of the twentieth century. Plastic toys, battery-powered vehicles, electronic games, and increasingly sophisticated entertainment products competed for children's attention.

Radio Flyer nevertheless retained its appeal by emphasizing the qualities that had defined it from the beginning: simplicity, durability, outdoor activity, and imagination. As the sale of wagons surged, Radio Flyer branched out into making gardening wheelbarrows to meet changing demands.

In 1990, Antonio died at age 93 and his son, Mario Pasin, took over the company. Then, in the early 1990s, Little Tykes and Step2 introduced plastic wagons and sales of the Radio Flyer began to falter. These flashy, cheaper wagons could take on a wider range of designs than the company's classic metal-stamped variety.

In 1997, Mario passed the business down to his son Robert Pasin. At the time, growth was at a standstill, and the company was only marginally profitable.

Robert saw that the company was not talking to consumers as much as they should; they weren't asking moms what they wanted in products. The popularity of these plastic wagons caught them off guard. So, the company began exploring ways to push their way into the 21st century.

They prided themselves on the quality of the on-site stamped metal products but didn't have the means to produce other items; they didn't even have a product development team. They had to find designers and manufacturers to create a product that could compete in an already competitive market. They ventured into the plastics market. The first plastic Radio Flyer was too small and foundered. The second and third also tanked, but then the fourth and fifth versions were the real winners.

Robert began reinventing the company by focusing exclusively on children's toys, expanding product development, and moving manufacturing abroad. By 2014, the company's revenue was \$111 million.

As the company expanded beyond its classic wagon, they introduced tricycles, scooters, ride-on vehicles, go-karts, and other products. The company expanded even further into electric bicycles and scooters.

Though these flashy iterations are important for the company to keep pace with the times, nostalgia is key to the allure of the wagons. People give their kids what they fondly remember from their childhood, so the classic red wagon remains central to the company's identity.

Culture of the Radio Flyer

Film

- **Radio Flyer (1992):** This was by far the wagon's biggest screen moment. Directed by Richard Donner and narrated by Tom Hanks, the film follows two young brothers (Elijah Wood and Joseph Mazzello) who convert their Radio Flyer wagon into a makeshift airplane, hoping to fly one of them away from an abusive stepfather. The film's plot draws on an urban legend about a boy nicknamed Fisher who supposedly tried to fly off a cliff called "The Wishing Spot" on his bicycle. It was a critical and commercial disappointment on release, making only \$4.6 million at the box office on a \$35 million budget; however, it

has since become something of a cult favorite because the wagon is the emotional center of the story.

- **A Christmas Story (1983):** In the movie, Radio Flyer wagons appear in a store display scene, fitting neatly alongside the film's other classic-toy iconography (the BB gun, the leg lamp) making up a period-perfect 1940s set.
- **Taking Flight (2015):** A story about how a small boy's day with Grandpa transforms into an epic adventure. It's a company produced, Emmy award-winning, animated short film, inspired by Antonio's life, work and the enduring icon he created.

[Watch the film here on YouTube](#), it's only five minutes long but inspiring.

Television

- **Let's Make a Deal:** In a June 2013 episode, the wagon was parodied as a prize "Zonk," a joke, an undesirable consolation gift — dubbed the "Zonk Flyer."

Books

- **Radio Flyer: 100 Years of America's Little Red Wagon (2018):** This is the company's own commemorative history, published by HarperCollins for the brand's centennial. Co-authored by CEO Robert Pasin (grandson of founder Antonio Pasin) and writer Carlye Adler, it runs 160 pages with 250 archival photos and illustrations, plus reminiscences collected from fans nationwide.
- **My Wagon Will Take Me Anywhere (2002):** A licensed children's picture book by Elizabeth Cody Kimmel about a toddler whose little red wagon becomes a vehicle for imagination, transforming an ordinary family walk into adventures like jungle safaris, desert treks, Arctic expeditions, and even space travel.

Parks

- **Riverfront Park, branded as Riverfront Spokane:** A public urban park in downtown Spokane, Washington. In the park is The Red Wagon, officially named The Childhood Express. Created by local sculptor, Ken Spiering, the feature stands 12 feet high, spans 27 feet long, weighs 26 tons, and features a children's slide.



The Childhood Express

Monument

Outside the 65,000-square-foot headquarters of Radio Flyer at 6515 W. Grand Avenue in Chicago on the West Side near the location of Antonio's original workshop, sits a gigantic 15,000 pound working wagon with 8-foot-high wheels. It holds the Guinness Book of World Records title for World's Largest Toy Wagon



World's Largest Toy Wagon

Today

Today, after over 100 years of operation, through multiple generations of the Pasin family, Radio Flyer remains a Chicago-based family company led by Antonio's grandson and Chief Wagon Officer, Robert Pasin. The company has changed with the times and has created more than 100 award-winning products available in 25 countries. This legacy was recognized when Antonio was inducted into the Toy Industry Hall of Fame in 2003.



Current Town & County Wagon, \$200 from Radio Flyer

In an industry where many toys become obsolete within a few years, the Radio Flyer wagon has remained recognizable precisely because its fundamental concept has changed so little: a child pulls it; the wagon rolls; and imagination supplies the destination. A Radio Flyer wagon does not need batteries, a screen, or an elaborate control system. Its possibilities come from the person sitting inside or pulling it.

Salemtowne's Flyers

For Salemtowne residents, the wagons are not only useful tools, they also bring back memories each time they see them. Those memories often include the problems driving the little red gremlins; they are easy to load, pull, and unload, but they are difficult to get through apartment doors, difficult to turn around, and it's nearly impossible to back them into their parking spots.

[- Echoes of Time Article List -](#)

Sources

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Editorial Note

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