

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, February 9, 2015

The Philadelphia Automobile Show: During the past days, several of our FAHP members have told me they intended to take in the 2015 Philadelphia Auto Show, recently concluded. Today, as always in the past, the latest dream cars as well as current models ready for sale are featured. This reminds me of what my father told me about attending the 1915 Philadelphia Auto Show, just 100 years ago this winter.

Having been a Stanley dealer from the fall of 1910, my dad was obviously interested in the latest offerings of the Stanley Motor Carriage Company. One of the Stanley twins was at the show—my guess is that it was F. O., but my father really didn't know which one it was. He had had the same experience on May 29, 1910, when he encountered one of the twins outside the Stanley factory—that time it was probably F.E. In any event, Mr. Stanley, one or the other, was standing by his brand new prototype Model 720, the very first Stanley condensing model, and was extolling its new features, especially the increase in driving range between water stops. These condensing cars, like all that Stanley built except a very few closed-bodied Mountain Wagons, were built with a 20-horsepower boiler, burner, and engine, even though they weighed over 3,500 pounds with their steel frames and 130-inch-wheelbase.

My father, age 29, asked Mr. Stanley, age 65, why they didn't put a 30-horsepower boiler and burner in this condensing car. The answer was: "You don't need it; this car will run 55 m.p.h. No one should drive faster than that." The speed 55 perhaps, Mr. Stanley, with everything brand new, a level road, the system hot, and pumping a minimal amount of water (which a driver could do for several miles). A more realistic top sustainable speed in varying road conditions would be more like 35 to 40 M.P.H., which was certainly fast enough for most roads of 1915. While most Stanley buyers of new condensing cars accepted the factory version, it is interesting to note that many present-day owners of these models have modified their cars with a 30-horsepower steam generating system.

Despite an answer a 29-year-old was not thrilled with, the advent of the greatly changed 1915 Stanleys ushered in several fine improvements. The all-steel frame, which replaced the earlier wooden frame, was a great safety feature. The condensing models had semi-elliptic springs in front instead of the less-stable full elliptics of the non-condensers of prior years. The pumping system for water, fuel and cylinder oil was greatly improved and silenced by driving all pumps from a gear and crank off the rear axle, instead of from one of the engine's wrist pins. The steering gear was a "worm gear," enclosed in an oil bath at the base of the steering column, much safer than the earlier rack-and-pinion type. An automatic water by-pass meant the operator did not have to control water supply to the boiler by a hand valve on the steering column. And finally, the driver was moved to the left side of the front seat instead of the right, which was becoming the accepted practice in America as traffic increased and it became more important to see the center of the road than it was to see the ditch.

The one great disadvantage of the Stanleys' new 1915 condensing model was pumping water back into the boiler that was actually condensate from the exhausted steam. This exhaust contained a small amount of cylinder oil, necessarily injected into the steam line to lubricate the engine's slide valves and cylinders. The accumulation of this oil in the boiler eventually caused the bottom head next to the burner to overheat, allowing leaks to occur around the vertical boiler tubes. To alleviate this condition, condensing cars were furnished with steel-tubed boilers, with the tubes welded to the bottom head, replacing the earlier boilers that used copper tubes. Nevertheless, boiler life was usually only about two years, as boilers could not be kept free of oil accumulation. This was not known to Mr. Stanley as he proudly showed off his new Model 720 at the Philadelphia Auto Show in 1915.

Within a few months, my father owned a Model 720 and used it quite successfully for nearly two years before he sold it to John Benge Sr., superintendent of the Marshall Brothers paper mill. That 720 was probably scrapped, but in the 1940s, Leroy Benge Sr., John's youngest son who was then manager of the mill, wanted to find a 1915 car just like the one his father had enjoyed. Mervin Allatt found him one, Roy restored it in 1948,

and he and his wife, Emma, enjoyed many tours in their Model 720. This car is now owned by Allen Blazick, and to my knowledge, there is only one other Model 720 that has survived.