

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, August 22, 2016

Earle S. Eckel Sr. (1891–1978): Earle Eckel became a Stanley dealer in his home town of Washington, New Jersey, about 1918. He was also an early auto-gyro pilot who had a contract to fly U.S. Air Mail from an airport at Allentown, Pennsylvania, some 35 miles from his home. While selling several new Stanley condensing cars, about 1919 he took in trade a 1914 Model 712, 20-horsepower non-condensing roadster. Over the next 40 years, he drove this roadster 150,000 miles, first using it as a tow car, then as an advertising vehicle for his garage and auto-gyro business, and finally as an antique.

In the 1920s and 1930s, it was important to make an old car run as well as possible, often using newer parts as the original supply sources dried up. Earle, who was a perfectionist at making things run well, greatly modified his roadster. The original tires were 34 x 4-1/2, mounted on demountable rims with an inflated spare carried on the rear. Earle replaced these with 20" "balloon" tires and lowered the fenders so there was proper distance between tire and fender. Also, he lowered the windshield and sloped it back. He installed a Cruban burner, popular in the '20s and '30s as an after-market replacement for a standard Stanley burner. Cruban or "Empire" burners were well made but heavy, requiring several castings to make the burner complete vs. the Stanley, which had lightweight castings only for the burner and pilot grates. Eckel had his burner fine-tuned to the point that he could rub his white handkerchief across the bottom of the bonnet flap, and it was still white! He carried three pounds pressure on his pilot (the usual is about 25#). On a trip, he was very careful in his purchase of kerosene and would hold a small amount in a glass jar up to the light. If it was not water-white, he wouldn't buy it.

In the early 1930s, Earle Eckel heard of the Philadelphia Old Car Derby that was held annually, and he began driving his Stanley roadster to attend. From this event, the Antique Automobile Club of America was founded in 1935, and he became a charter member. His Stanley had all sorts of advertising painted over the body and hood, but when AACA developed rules regarding such things, he was asked to remove it, which he did. My father met Earle Eckel early in World War II, possibly in Drexel Hill near Philadelphia, where many early gatherings of AACA were held at the Folwell estate. Hyde Ballard had married Mary Folwell, and the Ballards lived with her parents. By 1946, Eckel was calling frequently at Auburn Heights, traveling in his Stanley with his wife Harriet and their younger daughter, fully grown. Somehow, the three of them fit in the single seat of the roadster, with their luggage, tools, parts and pilot fuel being stowed on the deck behind and on the running boards.

I was always fascinated with long-distance travel in a Stanley, culminating in my four "Trans-Con" tours from 1972 to 1989. Many years before, however, in 1949 Earle drove his roadster to Minneapolis and return, and I implored him to furnish details of his trip. He kept a log and eventually gave me a copy. Great stuff! Like my father, he almost never had trouble. However, we hosted a small steam car tour at the Yorklyn Gun Club about 1950, and we played car games. One such game was to shut off your fire at 500 pounds and drive around an oval track as many times as possible (with no fire) as long as the car would move. Earle probably won the game, but in firing up afterward, he slightly scorched his boiler. Making it to Auburn Heights, he lay on his back expanding tubes in our carriage house before driving the 100 miles back to his home in his famous Stanley. He said the boiler had about 125,000 miles on it at that time, but he soon replaced it.

In July 1951, Bob Ostwald, Elwood Wilkins and I, traveling in my 1914 Model 607, met Earle and Harriet Eckel near Pine Brook, New Jersey, about 40 miles east of their home, and we traveled together to the Boston area to attend the third-ever Steam Car Tour held at the Wellesley Inn. We thought nothing of crossing the George Washington Bridge and then followed the Merritt and Wilbur Cross Parkways to the Charter Oak Bridge south of Hartford. Here we were joined by other antique cars from the Connecticut Valley, all of which were going to a small Saturday meet at the newly restored Sturbridge Village. Three of the Boston-area steamers joined us there, and we traveled together on to Wellesley. The "tour" itself lasted through Saturday evening and all day Sunday, hosted by Stanley Ellis, Frank Gardner, and Ed Pamphilon. George Woodbury of

Bedford, New Hampshire, author of “The Story of a Stanley Steamer” drove down in his Model 730 to join us for Sunday’s events. On Monday, the Eckels and my contingent started for home, visiting en route Al Garganigo’s early car collection at Princeton, Massachusetts, and James Melton’s short-lived museum near Norwalk, Connecticut. It was a fun trip.

The Eckels, with the Stanley roadster, had never missed a Glidden Tour Revival, the first of which was in 1946. In 1954, however, the Veteran Motor Car Club of America, sponsors of the tour that year, decreed that only cars made in 1913 and earlier were eligible. It was unfair, but the Eckels could not go. They did participate in a weekend tour that I ran in 1955 for the Historical Car Club of Pennsylvania from Wilmington, Delaware, to Easton, Maryland, and return. Many people thought Earle’s roadster would not run over 40 m.p.h., as his usual road speed was 37-38. I had my father’s Model 87, quite a fast car in those days with its original wooden frame. On many miles of level road, I kept the big Stanley at about 50 and was sure I would leave the Eckel roadster far behind. After a good many such miles, however, I looked behind, and he was still on my tail. The famous roadster was fast when it needed to be.

In the 1950s, Eckel made his roadster look more original by putting back its original wheels, raising the fenders, and straightening the windshield. He drove it on the Glidden Tour to Cleveland, Columbus, and Detroit in 1953, and to a Steam Car Tour at Kent, Ohio in 1957. In the mid ‘50s, however, he completed a first-class restoration of his 1903 Model C Stanley, and the same quality restoration of Bob Lyon’s 1908 Model F. The Model C won numerous prizes, and at the Apple Blossom Festival in Winchester, Virginia, about 1964, he carried Lucy Baines Johnson, the younger daughter of President Lyndon Johnson.

Harriet Eckel died about 1955. Earle married her lifelong best friend Agnes, who accompanied him on his later trips and to AACA functions around Philadelphia. Agnes was very popular in the antique car community, and I had them as passengers on two steam car tours in 1969 and 1970, first in the Model 87 and then in the 725. Earle Eckel, who no longer enjoyed driving, still accepted a ride in a steamer whenever it was possible, and I was honored to have him as a passenger. He was interested in and very supportive of the Wilmington & Western Railroad in its early years. I last saw him in 1976, when I stayed overnight in his son Revell’s trailer, en route home from Lakeville, Connecticut, in our Model 87.

Earle sold his famous roadster to a museum in Toms River, New Jersey, along with at least two other cars. More than 10 years later, it passed through Carl Amsley’s hands, being owned “between times” by Bill Shekooley of Edmonton, Alberta, and Alex Joyce of Nashville, Tennessee. Finally about 1990 it was bought by Eric Haartz of Lincoln, Massachusetts, who drove it on a 12-day tour of northern New England in 1991. To my knowledge, it is still owned by Haartz, but he doesn’t use it. Donald Eckel, son of Revell and grandson of Earle and a member of FAHP, still owns and operates the 1903 Model C and Lyon’s 1908 Model F. Don has two sons, both interested in the cars, and the family still has a small museum that Earle started. They do restoration work for others on Stanley cars. I’m sure they can correct some of the information in this article.