

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, January 17, 2011

Sprague Electric Co. and Its Principals: Frank J. Sprague, born about 1860, was graduated from one of the prestigious eastern universities with a degree in Electrical Engineering (if such a degree was offered in the early 1880s). His first job after graduation was with Thomas A. Edison at Menlo Park, New Jersey, when great changes were occurring in the electrical field (the incandescent lightbulb in 1879, city plants to generate electricity in the early 1880s). Young Sprague did not get along well with the Edison people; it seemed to him that someone with a college education was less than welcome. He soon launched out on his own.

In 1884, Frank Sprague founded the Sprague Electric Railway Company and is generally credited with inventing the first successful electric trolley car. For the next 25 years, the expansion of electric trolley lines, first in the cities and then through the countryside as inter-urbans, made the young inventor a millionaire many times over. Another one of his companies was the Sprague Elevator Company, competing against Otis for the lion's share of the market. One of his sons, Robert C. Sprague, reared in the electrical industry, founded the Sprague Electric Company at North Adams, Massachusetts, which survived into the 21st century. Manufacturer of many electrical fixtures and automatic devices, this company was famous for its capacitors and more recently for components used in the exploration of space. I met Robert Sprague near his home in Williamstown, Massachusetts, in 1973, when he was a widower in his early 80s. He loved fast sport cars, which worried younger members of his family.

By 1970, Robert C. Sprague Jr. had several fine antique automobiles, including two Stanleys. He lived in a fine home next to his father's on a ridge overlooking Williamstown (5 miles from Sprague Electric Company at North Adams) and the campus of Williams College. In his earlier years, he was a commercial airline pilot before joining his father's company. He had a grown son by his first wife who was also an airline pilot. His second wife, Geraldine (Gerry), was an airline stewardess, formerly from the south, and they had two young sons. I met them first at the Brass and Gas Tour in Woodstock, Vermont, in 1973, and they invited Harry Bracken and me to stop to see them on our way home in our Model 76, which we did. They were very much into steam cars at that time and attended the small steam car tour we hosted at the New Garden Airfield (thanks to Lex du Pont) in September that year.

The Eastern Invitational Steam Car Tour was hosted by the Spragues at Williamstown in June 1974. Willard Robinson accompanied me as we drove to and from in our Model 78 roadster. Because of Willard's preaching obligations each Sunday, we missed the first and last days but enjoyed Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday very much. We left for the drive home on Friday morning and missed the final banquet that evening. At the large garage where Bob Sprague kept his antique cars, he had a wall-mounted tank for pilot fuel, from which a Stanley pilot tank could be filled by gravity. Several tour cars were there Saturday morning, filling up in preparation for their drives home. Somehow, the fuel caught fire, and his garage was destroyed, including about half of his cars. No one was hurt, but the Spragues' interest in driving their Stanleys seemed to wane. Although Bob entered his late 1911 Model 70 with aluminum-skinned body on the Finger Lakes Glidden Tour in 1975, they did not attend future steam car tours.

Bob Sprague's interest in steamers was not finished, however. He undertook the monumental task of assembling and publishing a roster of Stanley cars in which he attempted to find and describe the history of all Stanleys known to exist in the late 1970s. Careful to copyright this work in his name, the project was almost complete when he was killed in his private plane while flying alone from Boston to his home at Williamstown. In the 1990s, Mark Herman and the Stanley Museum improved and expanded the Sprague register. During the past five years FAHP member Kelly Williams has taken up this work and with exhaustive research has produced the most complete roster yet. Kelly welcomes information from all sources.