

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, February 21, 2011

Chrysler's Turbine Car, ca. 1966: In the mid-1960s, the Chrysler Corporation put out trial balloons concerning a gas-turbine car. In fact, they built 10 prototypes, all just alike, with Italian plastic sports car bodies. To test these cars beyond the tests done at the factory, they had some sort of contest, the winners gaining the use of one of these cars for a six-month period. It was thought that the program would go on for about two years, with each of the 10 cars having four temporary "owners" during this period. They expected the cars to be tested in practical conditions for roughly 25,000 to 30,000 miles each.

A man in Claymont was one of the winners, and to celebrate his taking possession of the car, the Chrysler publicity department went to work in the Wilmington area, with a special event planned in midday at our Holiday Inn near Newark. Company officials and many members of the press were on hand, and two of these gas-turbine cars were there so everyone could get a ride within a reasonable time. Actually, they were quite stylish, looking something like a European sports car of the period.

The publicity people heard that I (actually my father) had a collection of Stanley steamers, and they got the notion that comparison between an old-time steamer and a modern turbine car would be of some interest. Upon request, I took our 1908 Model H-5 to the event, and I think I gave rides, although interest in the latter seemed limited.

Before long, the Chrysler people asked if I would like to drive the turbine car, which I was very happy to do. I drove it for two miles or more. It was very smooth and quiet but did not excel in acceleration or power. Although I never owned a Buick with a Dyna-Flow transmission, the turbine car reminded me of one: a smooth transmission with a lot of slippage. The car I drove, as well as the other one, showed about 10,000 miles on their odometers, yet the tires were bald. This really surprised me; if these cars were really hard on tires, and I don't know why they should have been, I would have thought Chrysler would have put on new rubber frequently for the benefit of reporters and the general public. I never learned how the Claymont man liked his six-month loan of the turbine car, but very little was heard of the project again. I think the company gave up on the idea before the full two-year trial period was over, but it was fun!