

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, June 10, 2013

A Pinto Electric Conversion: Although not very innovative, I always had an interest in alternative power for automobiles. In the 1940s, my father and I hoped for a modern steam car. Since the mid-1920s, when the last Stanleys were built, there never was a time when someone was not experimenting with steam cars. Abner Doble was the most famous, but he built only about 40 cars in the late 1920s. The Williams twins, Calvin and Charles, of Huntingdon Valley, near Philadelphia, built at least two successful steam cars in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Bill Lear of Reno built a few experimental steam cars just after 1970 but gave up after spending a small fortune.

A musician, steel fabricator, and car collector named Ray Lyman from South Norwalk, Connecticut, bought a 1918 Model 735 Stanley, and Weldin Stumpf and I helped him get it running. It turned out Ray had been experimenting with electric cars and had converted VW Beetles and Ford Pintos to make them run on batteries. In 1983, I bought one of his Pinto electrics, and although completely impractical, I had a lot of fun with it. With my new (and first) JAC trailer, we brought it from Connecticut to Auburn Heights.

The 16 six-volt lead-acid batteries filled the trunk and some of the space under the hood, with an additional 12-volt battery to operate the lights. I think the battery charger was a separate unit; it was mounted in the garage and not carried on the car. The electric motor was also under the hood with the original Pinto stick-shift transmission and drive shaft in place. There was still ample room for four passengers inside the car. The gas pedal worked a rheostat to control the speed of the motor, and the driver shifted gears like in a regular stick-shift car of the period.

An adaptation of a potentiometer served as the "gas gauge." When the batteries were fully charged, it registered "full," and when it got below half, a definite loss of power was evidenced. This small car was heavy, weighing probably 1,000 pounds more than a standard Pinto. It was completely quiet but lacked power. The top speed may have been as much as 50 M.P.H., but at that speed the charge in the batteries was draining rapidly.

When I bought the car, the batteries were fairly new, but about 1987, I had to buy new ones. Unfortunately, the ones I bought were of inferior quality, and the earlier range, perhaps 30 miles on flat terrain, was much less than that. I drove the car on a frequent basis to Hockessin and Kennett Square but seldom to Wilmington. When I had to go to the inspection lane on Bancroft Parkway, nine miles one-way from Auburn Heights, I trailered the car to and from Greenville, fearing I could not make 18 miles over the hills.

Despite its shortcomings, I enjoyed my Pinto electric. I sold it back to Ray Lyman in 1989, who sold it to the aging Gardner King. When King, a former "steam car man" from Norwalk, had trouble, Ray would try to bail him out, but the Pinto electric had had its day.