For the Love of Steam

Maine's Stanley Museum celebrates two renaissance Yankees

Visitors can get an up-close look at the museum's vehicles.

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID LaCHANCE

The more you learn about the Stanley twins, F.E. and F.O., the less surprising it becomes that they were responsible for designing the two-story clapboard building in their hometown of Kingfield, Maine, that now houses the museum that preserves their work for new generations. The Stanleys were true renaissance Yankees, and their talents extended far beyond creating the steam-powered automobiles we associate with them.

Theirs would have been remarkably full lives even if Francis Edgar hadn't become fascinated with steam propulsion in the late 1890s. Inspired and encouraged by their grandfather Liberty Stanley, the twins busied themselves with a series of inventions, starting with Freelan Oscar's design for a reasonably priced set of mechanical drawing tools for students, and F.E.'s creation of an atomizer for creating portraits—the first airbrush. By 1884, the brothers were working together in photography, their Stanley Dry Plate Company reaping sales of over $1 million a year. One of their best-known creations was the grand Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colorado, built by F.O. as he sought a cure for his tuberculosis in the Rocky Mountain air.

The Stanley Museum tells all these stories, and more, in satisfying detail, with the help of many original artifacts. But it's the steam-powered automobiles that take center stage in the museum's two main display areas.

A little history may be in order. Metropolitan Boston, where the brothers had relocated their dry-plate factory in 1890, was a hotbed of horseless carriage experimentation in the late 1890s, and it was F.E. who first caught the fever. Influenced by an early steam car demonstration (thought to be a French De Dion) at the nearby Brockton Fair, he built his first steam car in 1897, and made another for his brother the following year. Invited to bring a car to Boston's first automotive show at Charles River Park in 1898, F.E. covered a mile in 2 minutes and 11 seconds, an unofficial world record, and was the only entrant to make it to the top of the artificial hill climb in one go. Within two weeks, more than 100 potential buyers had emerged.

The twins set up shop at a former bicycle factory in Watertown, Massachusetts. They were soon approached by John B. Walker, the publisher of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, who wanted to buy them out. Uninterested in selling, the brothers set a ridiculously high price tag of $250,000 on the business—and were amazed when Walker agreed. Walker and his financial partner, A.L. Barber, soon parted ways, with Barber using the Stanley patents to create the Locomobile.

In 1902, the Stanley twins returned to car manufacturing, with a modified design to avoid patent issues. By the beginning of 1904,

In 1915, Stanley added a front-mounted condenser to its cars, which increased their range by allowing a portion of the steam they exhausted to be returned to the boiler as water. This example was produced in 1916, and like all the museum's cars, is fully functional.

This 1910 Stanley Model 70 five-passenger touring car features a steam engine rated at 20 horsepower, and cost $1,500 when new, or $100 more than a 29-hp Buick Model 19 tourer.

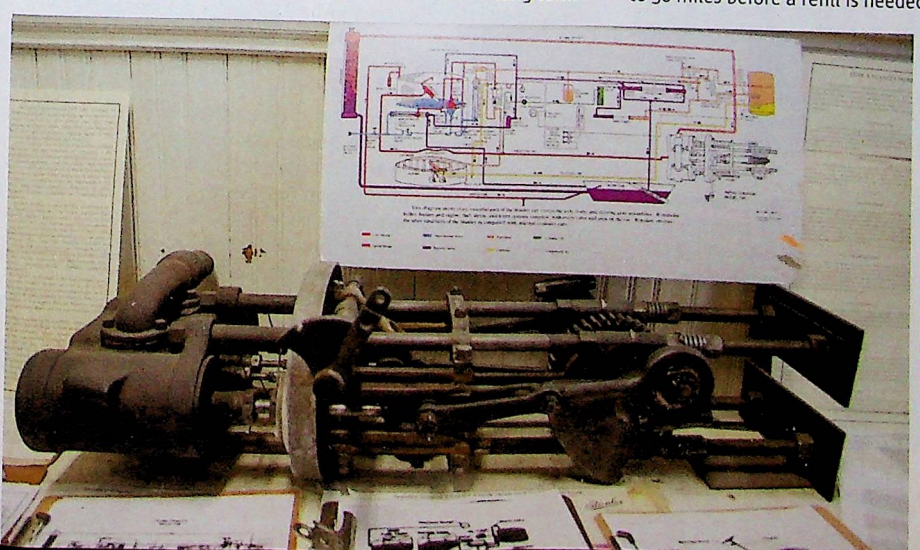
they had sold the Stanley Dry Plate Company to George Eastman, the founder of Kodak, and turned their focus solely to the car business. The company's reputation grew through competition, with Fred Marriott setting a record 127.66-mph pass on Florida's Ormond Beach—now Daytona Beach—in 1906.

The Stanley Motor Carriage Co. had its best year in 1907, with 775 vehicles sold. From there, a number of factors conspired against the steamers. Marriott's attempt to break his own record in 1907 resulted in a crash; though the driver recovered, the brothers agreed that attempting world records posed too great a risk, which put a damper on further steam technology research and development. Steam cars began to be excluded from racing events, while the steamer's natural disadvantages against the gasoline car—including a 45-minute start-up time from cold—dragged it down in the market. The widespread adoption of the self-starter was the knock-out blow.

F.E. and F.O. refinanced the company in 1917 and put its management in the hands of their sons-in-law and a nephew. The company was reorganized again in 1924 and moved to Allentown, Pennsylvania, where it struggled along for another two years. F.E. wasn't around to see the end; in 1918, he was killed in a car crash north of Boston, where he had been headed for a business meeting.

At the museum, you'll find four Stanleys on display, three that are part of the permanent collection and one that's on long-term loan. When we visited, there was also an early Locomobile steam car in mid-restoration, as well as the wooden chassis of another Stanley showing construction techniques.

If you're curious about what makes a Stanley go, there are displays that make it all clear, including a steam engine and a boiler and burner unit that's been disassembled and mounted to offer a 3-D exploded view. Displays answer commonly-asked questions—for instance, it takes about 30 to 45 minutes to build up enough steam pressure from cold to drive; a Stanley can travel one mile per gallon of water (or 20 to 30 miles before a refill is needed), and eight to 10 miles on a gallon



The dashboard of a Stanley is filled with an assortment of gauges and knobs, nearly all related to the operation of the boiler.

A complete Stanley steam engine is on display, accompanied by diagrams that explain the car's operation.

This is an example of the "Whitney-type" steam car engine that inspired the Stanleys. It was taken from an 1899 Locomobile steam carriage.

A steam boiler rests atop this display frame, with its burner below. The wedge-shaped piece to the left of the burner is a section of the boiler, showing the tubes incorporated in its construction.

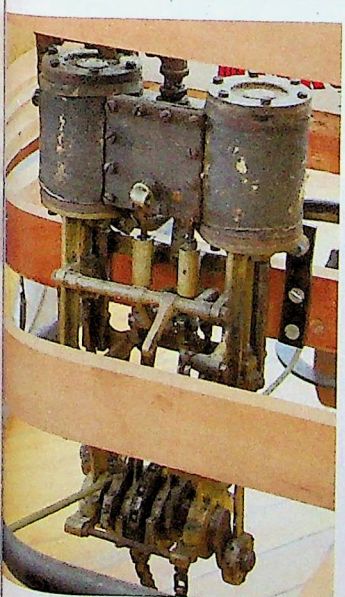
of kerosene; top speed varies from 25 to 75 mph, depending on the model; comfortable cruising speeds range from 25 to 50 mph.

Somewhere between 10,000 and 11,000 Stanleys were produced between 1897 and 1924, and Debbie Smith, executive director of the museum, estimates that 500 to 600 are still in existence, many as static displays in museums. At the Stanley Museum, the cars are kept in running condition by the "steam team," and get driven out to participate in parades, tours, and other events where the public can appreciate them.

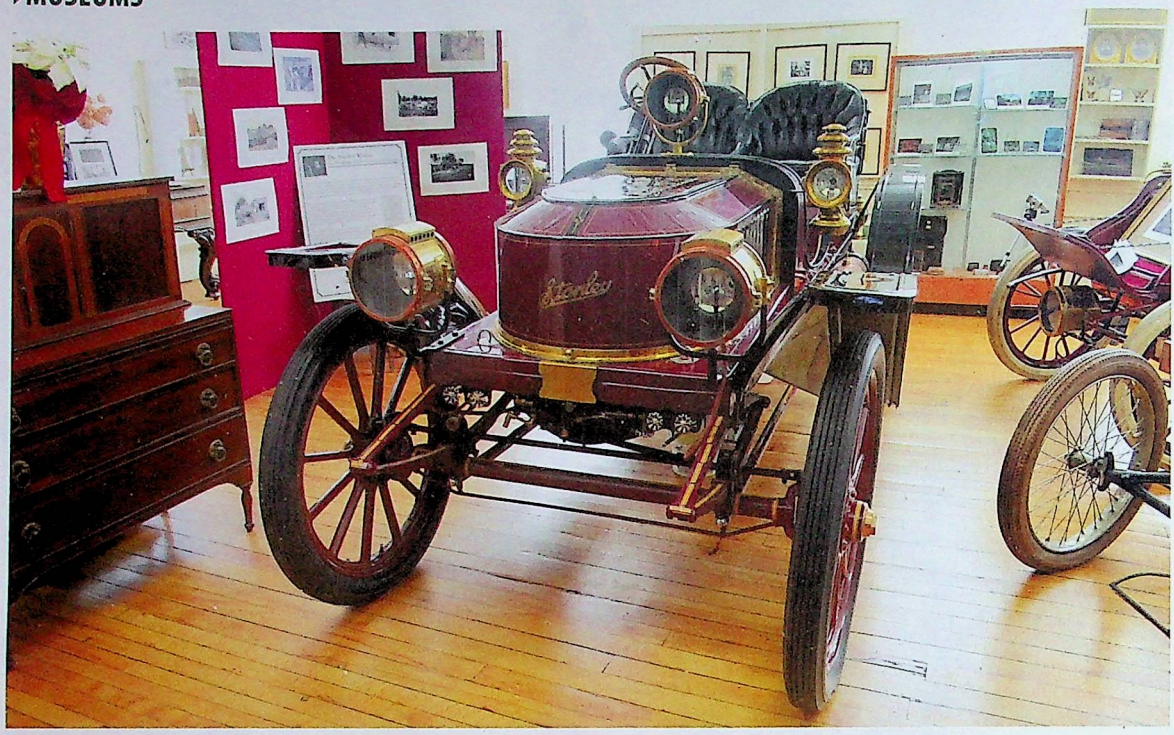
The building that houses all this history is a Stanley creation, too. In honor of their father Solomon, the town's former schoolmaster, the brothers designed the exterior of the new school, and when funds ran short, they donated the money needed for its completion in 1903. Closed as a school in 1979, the building was going to be torn down for additional parking for the adjacent town hall until a group of Stanley enthusiasts persuaded town leaders to lease the building to them for $1 a year. The museum opened its doors to the public in 1981.

The museum is seasonal, closing at the end of December and reopening on April 1. (Before planning a visit, be sure to check the museum's website for the current schedule.) Debbie says that 600 to 800 people visit each year, with September and October being the most popular months, thanks to the brilliant foliage that brings visitors to the Sugarloaf Mountain region. "We're really off the beaten path, unless you're going to Sugarloaf," she says. "It almost has to be a destination."

In the museum's "family" room, the Stanley twins' many other accomplishments are on display. Chansonetta, the only sister of F.E. and F.O., was an accomplished photographer, and about 20 of her works can be seen here.



A Locomobile steam car is being assembled by one of the museum's "steam team" members.



This is a highly accurate replica of a 1909 Stanley Model R four-passenger roadster. According to the museum, this car was Jay Leno's introduction to Stanleys, after which he became a member and a steam-car enthusiast.

Mannequins dressed as F.E. and F.O. are posed in a 1905 Stanley Model CX. This would be the last year of production for tiller-steered cars, and the first year of the "coffin-nosed" models. Its 8-horsepower rating was based on its 16-inch-high boiler.

A collection of antique Maine license plates has recently been added.

The boiler of the 1909 Stanley takes up nearly all of the room under the hood.

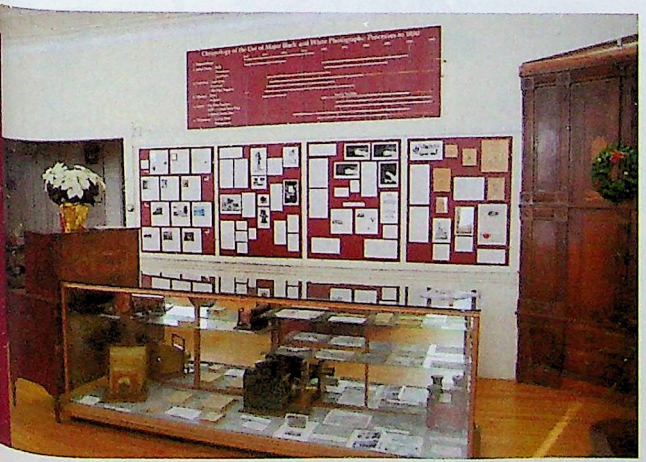
"What I tell people is that they can plan on probably an hour tour. It can be more, it can be less," Debbie says. "You have to read your visitors to figure out what their interests are. We've had people that will be here at 11 o'clock and stay until 4, and sometimes come back the next day. We have other people that will go through in 15 or 20 minutes — they're only interested in a few things. But one of the most common comments, when they get in here and hear the stories, is that it's a gem that they didn't know about — there's so much more to the Stanley story than just the cars."

When you do visit, keep in mind that steam car enthusiasm can be highly contagious. Debbie and her husband, Mark, fell under the spell of steam cars several years ago, after Mark saw a Stanley on display at the annual fair in nearby Farmington, and announced to Debbie that they needed to sell the 1935 Ford they had restored in order to buy one of their own. "The first steam car we bought for $35,000. That was in 1998, 1999. I was a teacher, and my husband worked at a garage. That was so much money! It was crazy. But they've increased in value since then," Debbie says.

"People will ask, 'What is a Stanley worth?'," she adds. "And I say it's in the eye of the beholder."

For more information visit stanleymuseum.org.

In his later years, F.O. was a maker of violins.



A good amount of space is dedicated to the Stanleys' interest in photography, and their production of dry plates.

Some of Chansonetta's hand-colored lantern slides are on display, along with modern prints made from the slides.