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White Steam Cars, 1901-1910: Since several of our FAHP members are experts on Whites, which I am not, I have hesitated to write on this subject. However, the steam cars built by the White Sewing Machine Company in Cleveland are an important chapter in automotive history, and cannot be ignored. Whites and Stanleys, the two most prominent makes of steam cars, had very little in common, other than they were both powered by steam. In some ways, they competed head-to-head, but in other ways they did not compete at all. The philosophies of manufacture and of marketing were completely different.

In general, White cars were “high-end” and were expected to be driven by specially-trained chauffeurs. Unlike the Stanleys, they were widely advertised, and White steamers excelled on several of the early Glidden Tours. Also unlike Stanleys, the mechanical system was not a direct carry-over from tried and true steam boiler and engine principles adapted to the automobile, but rather a revolutionary flash boiler concept and a compound engine. White racing drivers did well on flat tracks, but the cars were not well adapted to hill climbs where Stanleys excelled.

8,000 Whites were built and sold in the ten years of production, and less than 6,000 Stanleys were manufactured in the same time period. In the 1906-1910 period, the small 20-H.P. Whites sold for \$2,000, and the big cars, 30 and 40 H.P., sold for \$4,000. There was a range of pricing on Stanleys, too, but the average cost of a new Stanley in this time frame was \$1,200. The very first White steamers in 1901 and 1902 were quite similar to other small steam cars of that period, and there were many makes, most of which were no longer building steamers by 1905. But in 1903, a new design appeared on Whites with a tubular condenser at the front, a compound engine under the hood, a flash boiler and its burner under the front seat, and a pressurized fuel tank for gasoline on the rear. Many five-passenger touring cars had a door in the rear to enter the back seat. Unlike Stanleys where the engine was coupled directly to the rear axle, Whites had a drive shaft with two speeds forward, one reverse, and a neutral so the engine could be warmed up before the car moved. The only things on Whites and Stanleys that remotely resembled each other were the burners, as both were vaporizing with pilot lights.

The advantage of a “flash” boiler was that it held very little water and therefore could be fired up in about 5 minutes, vs. 20 to 30 minutes for a Stanley. To over-simplify, water was pumped into a coil of steel tubing at the bottom, and steam was taken off the top. The disadvantage was that it had no reserve, and it was necessary to make steam as fast as you were using it in all situations, up hill and down. On a White, steam pressure would vary all over the place, ranging from 250# to 800# in normal operation. Pressure was not important, however. The temperature of the steam was the important thing, and through manual controls and mechanical “automatics”, the objective was to hold the temperature constant by pumping the right amount of water into the boiler coil to compensate for the steam required in varying road situations.

The White family, notably Rollin and Walter, were very active in the manufacture and promotion of White steamers. Before building automobiles, they had successfully operated the second largest sewing machine company, behind only Singer. Political connections showed President Teddy Roosevelt riding in the back seat of a big Model G White of 1907, and the U.S. Government bought an equally-large Model M of 1909 for President William Howard Taft. However, seeing the handwriting on the wall for steam cars, the last White steamers were built in 1910, and in that same year the company also offered a 4-cylinder “gas car”. Building 4 and 6-cylinder cars, some of them large and expensive, for the next seven years, the White Company turned its attention toward heavy trucks about 1917. In an informal deal with Packard, no Packard trucks were built after that date, and no White pleasure cars. Packard dealers, like Frank Diver and my father in Wilmington, often sold White trucks.

My father owned several Whites in the first years of our collecting, and two were still here when he died in 1969. He drove only one of them, a Model H of 1907, and that one only a few miles. Most passed through his ownership unrestored, but there were some great cars by today’s standards. Wherry Long, a mail carrier in Selbyville, DE, used two White steamers in delivering mail, a 1905 Model E (rear entrance) and a 1910 Model OO. From the roof of the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia, through erstwhile collector Frank V. duPont, came a huge Model G touring car of 1907 (now in the estate of the late Louis Biondi), and another “G” racer with bucket seats was also at Auburn Heights before being traded to James Melton. Wherry Long’s cars went to the late John P. Miller, with the 1905 Model E being restored by Carl Amsley, Weldin Stumpf, and myself in 1983 when owned by Ted Jamison. The “Steinmetz” car, a 1909 Model O restored by Murray Brown, was sold by me to Stanley Tarnapol in 1970, and the 1907 Model H finally left the collection (in running condition) for Australia in 1980. I’ve made many mistakes in my life, one of which was to let all the Whites get away.

We hope all of you are enjoying the holidays, and we’ll look forward to seeing many of you at our first work session of 2009 on Tuesday, January 6. Happy New Year! Tom