



Vintage Steam Products

Art Hart, Proprietor

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Mr. Jay White
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Dear Jay:

As I mentioned to you in our last telephone conversation, your photograph of your early family in the Stanley steamer has created a good deal of excitement among Stanley historians. The reason is because this particular model, a Stanley BX, which was believed to have been offered by the Stanley company from sometime late in 1904 thru perhaps early 1906 usually came with a tiller rather than a steering wheel.

I have enclosed copies of the 1905 Stanley Motor Carriage Co. announcement for 1905 and the catalog for 1906 which was probably printed in early 1906. The 1905 announcement is so early that the new models are only line drawings and don't show any means of steering. From existing cars we know that most of the model Es came through with steering wheels, although two exist with tillers. In fact one that exists with a tiller is still in the original family that purchased it and they have a letter from the Stanley factory asking the purchaser whether he wanted a steering wheel or a tiller. He obviously chose the tiller. Surviving examples of the other line drawing models all have steering wheels to the best of my knowledge.

Now the question is did your great-grandfather order this car in the photo with a steering wheel or was it retrofit at a later date? We can tell from the steering column details that it is an authentic Stanley unit, and not one from some other car that has been adapted. I should also point out that at this time it was quite common to send your car back to the factory during the winter to have it upgraded with all the latest improvements. This fact is well documented in Richard & Nancy Fraser's book: "A History of Maine Built Automobiles, 1834-1934", 1991 on pages 192, 193 & 195 where they have reprinted a selection of gossip articles about early car activity in the Lewiston-Auburn, Maine area that appeared in the Lewiston Journal newspaper in 1903. There were so few car owners at that time (early 1900s) that the society pages would even note when someone purchased a new car. At any rate in several of the accounts of car activity during the winter months there are notations of each car owner and what he was planning for the coming "season" or what he was doing with his car during the winter months. A number of the cars were tiller steered Stanleys and some of them had been sent back to the factory for the latest "improvements". Now these were people from Maine sending their cars to Watertown, Massachusetts for updating, so it would seem that it would be even easier to send a car from Lynn to Watertown. It should also be noted that your great-grandfather was somewhat of an enthusiast because the car has a number of period accessories that were not available from the factory. The wicker basket behind the driver's seat was a common accessory because there is little room to keep tools or spare parts in these cars. The horn is not the one that would have come with the car if it had a tiller and is probably fancier than what the factory would have supplied with cars with steering wheels at the time. From the arrangement of the valves under the car I would guess it might even have an after-market burner to give it a hotter fire and thus more power. Note also the spare tire strapped under the front. This man was serious about touring!

Some of us who are really into Stanley restoration are intrigued with the picture because the throttle lever on the steering wheel somehow has to be connected to the throttle valve, usually located on top of the boiler, which in this model is directly under the driver's seat. The throttle lever on BX's with a tiller is mounted right where the driver has his right hand. In this photo his hand is on the horn bulb, which could not be mounted there if there was a throttle lever there. Models that normally came with a steering wheel all have the boiler, and consequently the throttle valve, under the hood in front. Since the throttle lever terminates at the bottom of the steering column under the hood it is not too difficult to devise a mechanism to go from there to the throttle valve. After some thinking we have figured two ways it could have been done, but I won't go into that as it is hard to explain without having seen the "normal" Stanley mechanism.

Is there any more info that you would like? If you are not familiar with Stanleys I will add that the engine is located just in front of the rear axle and is connected directly to the rear axle by a spur gear on the crankshaft which mates directly to a spur gear on the differential. There is no clutch or transmission between the two. So when the car moves the engine moves and vice-versa. There is no "neutral". This model ran at 450psi boiler pressure and was quite fast for its time. It used a gallon of water per mile and probably carried between 25 and 30 gallons of water in a tank that surrounded the back half of the boiler. So every 25 or so miles the driver had to suck some water from a stream or a horse trough with the hose coiled up under the car using steam pressure to "syphon" the water. It was actually a steam aspirator that did this. You can see part of the hose in the photo hanging from a hook under the car just behind the right front wheel.

The drop front style of body was popular for only a short time as it was considered dangerous especially as the number of cars on the roads increased and speed limits went above 12mph. Legislation to prohibit their manufacture was suggested, but then abandoned when manufacturers pointed out that no one was contemplating building any more anyway as the style was obsolete.

Jay, I am very grateful to you for sending the negative so I can provide high quality photos to my historian friends. I really love to look at old original photos as they show the cars the way they were not as someone in modern times believes they might have been which is what you get with recent photos of restored cars.

Again thanks so much for sharing this wonderful photo with all of us.

With best regards,



Art Hart