

The Antique Cars of New York's Past

by Ed Welsh, General Manager, Central Region, AAA New York

When you drive down Norwich's tree-lined Main Street, observing many of the town's quaint and historic homes, you get a sense of days gone by. Added to this, tucked away on a side street, is a jewel of a museum worth a weekend drive: the Northeast Classic Car Museum, home to more than 100 vintage classic cars and trucks, including many New York-made automobiles.

The museum would not be possible without its founder, George E. Staley, an entrepreneur who served in World War II as a fuel system specialist for Bendix Aviation. Staley's expertise gave him an opportunity to tune up the famous B29 Enola Gay before it left the Pacific Ocean island of Tinian to drop the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. After the war, Staley employed nearly 250 people on Long Island, refurbishing aircraft components, before retiring in 1994 to his family farm in Lincklaen Center, N.Y.

Staley began his collection of almost 90 cars, which included the world's largest collection of Franklin automobiles. A local commodity, Franklins were manufactured in nearby Syracuse from 1902 to 1934. (Period costumes, displayed in the museum courtesy of the Chenango Historical Society, recall the types of "motoring" clothes worn during that period.) Franklin automobiles had a dedicated following due to their superior quality and the pioneering use of light and very strong materials such as aluminum engines and body components. Notably, Franklins were a favorite of aviators—Charles Lindbergh was a loyal customer. This connection inspired the company's "Airmen" series cars that sported a spinning propeller hood ornament.

Staley took the high standards he applied to his business and his restoration shop to the museum, which remains clean, neat and orderly. Many cars on display feature pictorial albums denoting the history of their restoration. Visitors can read through the albums and comparing "before and after" pictures. One of my favorite displays is a partly assembled 1929 Franklin Model 137 seven-passenger sedan, as, looking at it, you can really appreciate the craftsmanship of its laminated wood frame.

The museum has four exhibit halls. On the west wall of the main reception area is a huge painted New York State map chronicling the 116 different makes of cars produced in the Empire State since 1894. From Buckmobiles, made in Utica from 1903 to 1905, to the famous Pierce-Arrow brand made in Buffalo, New York was a hotbed of automobile manufacturing in the early 20th century.

The first of three large exhibit halls contains the Franklin vehicles and many other fine cars. One of my favorites in this hall is a two-tone green 1918 Cadillac V-8 seven-passenger suburban with unusual striped upholstery and a swing-away steering wheel.

The second hall contains an assortment of Packards, Auburns, Duesenbergs and Cords, as well as a few unrestored vehicles. My favorite here is the 1922 Ford TT series truck upon which are the words, "Blow your horn and the road is yours—We'll get there 2," on the tailgate.

Given Staley's background, he also amassed a great number of vintage aviation engines. This includes massive engines from B17, B29 and B52 bombers as well as a 28-cylinder, 3800 horsepower R - 4360 engine that powered the B36 and Howard Hughes's famous Spruce Goose airplanes.

The final hall contains 1950's vintage cars. These are my personal favorites. From a 1957, two-door Nomad wagon to a Nash Metropolitan, many 1950's favorites are on display in all their glory, with period music playing softly in the background.

The museum is part of the Tourism Trail in Southern New York, which includes noteworthy attractions such as the National Baseball Hall of Fame, the Corning Museum of Glass, Howe Caverns and many other family-oriented places. Considering the high cost of gas, packing some sandwiches and taking family day trips along the tourism trail is a great way to enjoy yourself without breaking the bank. Reminds me of what my family did in the 1960's. It's funny how good things get recycled.

Travel Tips: It takes about two or three hours to fully enjoy the Northeast Classic Car Museum at 24 Rexford St. (one block east of downtown Norwich on N.Y. Route 23). It is open daily from 9 a.m.-5 p.m., but is closed on Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years Day. Admission is \$9 for adults and \$4 for students and children ages 6 to 18. Children under 5 are free. For more information, visit www.classiccarmuseum.org.

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