

Cars: A retired engineer in Exeter finds and restores rare Franklins

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Robert Harrison of Exeter, above, is a collector and restorer of Franklin cars. He has a 1932 Series 16A Club Sedan, and a '32 16A Rumble Seat Coupe. He is also restoring a 1932 Series 16A Convertible Coupe in his shop, left.

The Providence Journal / Steve Szydlowski

EXETER A sad thing happened to most of the cars produced by the H.H. Franklin Manufacturing Co. between 1902 and 1934: they were destroyed in the 1940s for their aluminum bodies.

“From 1920 to 1929, Franklin was the largest consumer of aluminum in the world,” said Robert Harrison, who owns three 1932 Franklins. “So during the war (the cars) were scavenged.”

“(About) 150,000 Franklins were built between 1902 and 1934 but only 3,500 are known to have survived,” added the retired mechanic and engineer who has owned and restored antique cars all his life.

Franklin cars were technologically advanced for their time. In addition to aluminum bodies, the company pioneered six-cylinder and air-cooled engine design.

Harrison’s love of Franklins goes back to his first car.

He said he used to hang around the East Providence garage of neighbor and car buff Ed McCool, who is now in his 80s and still a close friend.

When he turned 15, he said McCool told him it was “time to find you an old car.”

So they spend a number of weekends looking for a car until one day they saw “a 1927 Franklin Touring Car glinting under a barn in Rehoboth.”

McCool found out the car belonged to a Dr. Utter who had “bought it the day his son was born and his son had run it all through (his time) at Brown University.”

Indeed, Franklins were known as “The Doctor’s Car” because their air-cooled engines were dependable in cold weather at a time when there was little in the way of commercial antifreeze.

The car was not for sale but Harrison said a family friend “put in a good word for me.”

“(Utter) asked me how much money I had, and I said \$35,” Harrison said. “He said, ‘If you can earn \$100 by the end of the summer, it’s yours. But ’ you can’t borrow the money.’

He said he worked all sorts of jobs that summer to come up with the money.

“The long and short of it is that \$100 has funded everything you see in front of you,” he said.

Harrison’s 5,800-square-foot garage, set in the trees behind his house, houses his metal shop, memorabilia and three 1932 Franklins.

Upstairs is his woodworking shop, more tools and memorabilia as well as a number of sewing machines. He said he has a side interest and business servicing antique Singer Featherweight sewing machines made between 1933 and 1961.

Two of the Franklins — a green 1932 Series 16A Club Sedan and a brown 1932 Series 16A Rumble Seat Coupe — are restored and running. But it will be five years or so before the other, a 1932 Series 16A Convertible Coupe that he recently acquired in Albuquerque, N.M., will take to the road.

Indeed, it is barely recognizable from its rusty frame. The wooden underbody sat near the frame while its fenders, running boards and other key pieces hung from the ceiling like slabs of meat.

Harrison said the car is one of only five 1932 Franklin convertibles known to exist.

“We thought there were only four,” he said.

The restored Franklins have a commanding presence. He said the coupe, which he acquired in Seattle, Wash., had been restored in California in the mid-1960s. However, he said he restored the sedan, which he acquired in Savannah, Ga.

“Inside all the wood was rotted out,” he said, adding that he rebuilt the engine.

Both are drivers and quite capable of cruising comfortably at 70 mph. “Not too many people pass me if I don’t want them to.” he said.

Harrison is on the board of the H.H. Franklin Club and said he always takes one of his Franklins to the club’s annual meeting at Cazenovia College, near Syracuse.

“The Franklin has been the kindest thing in the world to me,” Harrison said, adding that he sold his original Franklin in the mid-1970s for \$5,000 and invested the money in a Model T Ford.

“I restored several (Model Ts) and sold them out again,” he said, noting that he did the entire restoration, including the paint. His wife, Patricia, a renowned quilter who was recently named the state’s first quilt judge by the National Quilting Association, restores the upholstery.

He and Patricia have four children and two grandchildren in addition to two chipper West Highland terriers, Bailey and Chloe.

Harrison said he would typically buy a 1920s Model T for about \$2,500, restore it and sell it for \$12,500.

“I kept doing this for years,” he said. “Bought cars, worked on them and sold them.”

He said he has owned and restored five Franklins over the years — a 1927 and a 1928 in addition to the three 1932s currently in his garage.

At the same time, Harrison said restoring cars was always a hobby. He trained as an aircraft engine mechanic and engineer at the Wentworth Institute of Technology in Boston and worked for more than 20 years in Warwick for Leesona Corp., one of the world’s largest textile machinery manufacturers now based in North Carolina.

He subsequently worked as an engineering manager at Stanley-Bostitch in East Greenwich before retiring in 2004.

One of the hallmarks of Franklin cars was lightness.

“From the beginning, it was my aim, in which (chief engineer) John Wilkinson concurred, to retain lightness and simplicity of design,” Frank Early quoted H.H. “Bert” Franklin as saying in a biography published by the H.H. Franklin Club in 1956, the year of his death.

Franklin got his start in business by buying into an invention called hydrostatic molding, which he renamed metal die-casting. He moved into automobile manufacturing in the

early 1900s after engineer Wilkinson joined his company. The company was based in Syracuse, N.Y.

Demand was kindled after a 4-cylinder Franklin was driven from New York to San Francisco in 33 days. A design change in the mid-1920s — early designs had an old-fashioned, Renault-style hood — rejuvenated the car's look.

However, Harrison said the company came to grief in the Great Depression through the production of too many cars. Indeed, Harrison said 1929 was Franklin's biggest year in terms of production. That led to cash flow problems when they did not sell.

Subsequent models proved too large and the company declared bankruptcy in 1934.

However, a group of former Franklin employees acquired its assets, formed Air-Cooled Motors of Syracuse and continued to produce air-cooled engines for aircraft. After several additional reincarnations, it relocated to Poland in 1975.

In addition to serving on the board of the H.H. Franklin Club, Harrison is chairman and a director of the Franklin Automobile Collection at Hickory Corners, which is part of the Gilmore Auto Museum in Hickory Corners, Mich.

He recently returned from a groundbreaking ceremony for the museum, which will be modeled on Ralph Hamlen's Franklin dealership in Los Angeles in the 1920s.

Harrison said Franklin devotee Bob Kern donated \$1.25 million and 12 Franklins, including a 1911 racer, to the museum.

It will also house some 20,000 blueprints of Franklin cars that miraculously survived and were donated to the club by the late Thomas H. Hubbard, a leading authority on Franklins who separately established The Franklin Museum in Tucson, Ariz.

The Franklin Automobile Collection at Hickory Corners is slated to open next May.

For more information, go to:

www.franklincar.org

www.franklinmuseum.org

www.gilmorecarmuseum.org