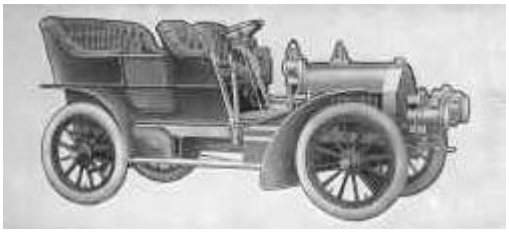
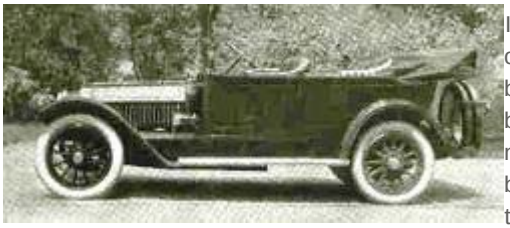
The History of The Best Built Car in America



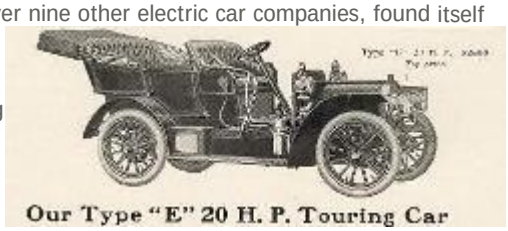
Locomobile, an automobile that became known as the “Best Built Car in America”, was also one of the most expensive and elegant automobiles manufactured in the United States. By 1911, the six-cylinder Model 48 weighed 3 tons and was built of magnesium bronze, aluminum and steel, cost $7,900 and was owned by the who’s who of upper East Coast aristocracy - Melon, Gould, Vanderbilt, Wanamaker, Governor Cox of Massachusetts, Wm. Wrigley to name a few. In the West, Locomobile 48’s were owned by names such as Charlie Chaplin, Tom Mix and Cecil B. DeMille.

Two people would bring the company to its fruition as the successful builder of the best built car in America: Andrew Riker, a talented and brilliant engineer, and Samuel Davis as financial manager and treasurer. Locomobile had it’s beginnings in Watertown, Massachusetts in 1898, when a man named John Brisben Walker, an entrepreneur and owner of Cosmopolitan Magazine became fascinated with the automobile. Having witnessed an impressive demonstration in 1899 of the Stanley brother’s prototype model of their steam buggy in a hill climb competition, Walker placed himself on the Stanley bicycle shop front steps in Watertown, Massachusetts a few mornings later and when the Stanley’s arrived for work, offered to buy a fifty percent interest in their steam car company. Dumbfounded by such an offer the brothers refused. Walker left but returned 2 months later and this time offered to buy the whole company. Again the brothers refused. Walker persisted. The Stanleys retreated to a corner and after a brief discussion returned to Walker and offered the steam car company and its patents at a price so high they assumed they would hear the last of him: $250,000 in cash, an incredible sum in 1899. They were more than astounded when Walker agreed to their price. The brothers sold, agreeing to stay on for one year as consultants. With a $10,000 deposit to hold the deal for ten days Walker left to raise the necessary cash. Calling in all the chips and associates he had Walker was unable to find any investors. At the 11th hour he approached his next door neighbor, Amzi Lorenzo Barber, a self made millionaire in the asphalt business, and told him of an opportunity to buy a half interest in the Stanley’s steam car business. Barber put up the money, the two agreed upon the name Locomobile - primarily due to the likeness the machine had with the railroad locomotive with it’s two pistons and connecting rods located in the rear axle, and the Locomobile Company of America was formed. In reality however, they would be building Stanley Steamers with the name Locomobile on the car, with the Stanley brothers staying on to supervise and make improvements. Within a matter of months, the two partners had a falling out. Both wanted their relatives to come in to run the new company and there was not room for that. Finally agreeing to split the company in half, Walker moved his half to a new plant in Tarrytown N.Y. to be close to his publishing business, and dropped Loco from the name, calling his version of the Stanley Steamer the Mobile. Walker's Mobile plant begins producing the Stanley Steamer under the Mobile name in 1900. But by 1902 with total sales of only 600 units, Walker closed the doors and the Mobile moved into oblivion. Barber, who now realized that he had paid $250,000 for a half interest when his partner had bought the whole company for that amount, retained the Locomobile name, the Watertown plant and brought in his son in law, Samuel Todd Davis as treasurer. With a small plant already tooled up, the Locomobile was put into production almost immediately, and by 1902, had sold 5,200 units, making Locomobile, at that time, the largest producer of automobiles in America. A 40 acre parcel was purchased in Bridgeport, Massachusetts on the river and a new plant was built. Steam car technology in 1902 had its limits and Davis, aware of such limitations, began talking with his father in law about making plans for a gas powered motor car. The market for the Locomobile steam car dwindled. (During 1904 it sold only 200 steam cars. Davis ended production and sold the remainder of the steam car business and all the Stanley patents back to the Stanley brothers for $20,000.)



In 1902, Barber also suffered financial reverses and bowed out of Locomobile. With the Locomobile Company of America almost bankrupt due to falling steam car sales, Barber appealed to his brother in law, J.J. Albright of Buffalo, N.Y. citing Locomobile's new thrust into the gas powered motor car market. Albright became enthused and capitalized the floundering company as the major stock holder and joined the board. Davis, at the age of 29 succeeded his father in law as president. For a number of years, Davis served on the board of directors of the National Association of Automobile Manufacturers. A young engineer by the name of Andrew Lawrence Riker, had by 1902, made a name for himself in automotive circles and was also on the board during the time that Davis was its president. The two became friends. Riker was also elected the first president of the Society of Automotive Engineers, position he held for three terms. The SAE, was a prestigious body that standardized machine screws to setting horsepower ratings for the industry. A.L. Riker, as he was known, was to become instrumental in the future success of the Locomobile motor car.

At the age of 16, in 1884, Riker had built an electric car utilizing two electric motors. In 1886, at the age of 18, Riker received a patent for a two-cylinder gas powered engine. Still working with electric cars, Riker formed his own company, the Riker Electric Motor Company in Brooklyn, N.Y. in 1888. At the age of 20, Riker developed the slotted-armature motor of his own invention - a type still in use in automobiles today. The company also produced the Riker Electric Truck. In 1900, Riker built and entered an electric car in America's first road race on the Merrick Road on Long Island. He won the race against 9 competitors at a speed of 25 miles per hour with two passengers - quite speedy for those days on dirt roads. In 1900 he sold out to the Electric Vehicle Company, makers of the Colombia Electric car, for a reported 1.7 million dollars, most of which was in shares of stock, staying on as vice-president of development. There in 1901, under Riker patents, he produced a 2 and 4 cylinder car with front mounted, vertical cylinder engines, an advanced design for its day. In 1902 the Electric Vehicle Company, now a conglomerate and having purchased over nine other electric car companies, found itself undercapitalized and the electric car market declining. Riker left along with his depreciating stock. Davis offered Riker a position with Locomobile as vice-president in charge of engineering along with 100,000 shares of stock, to develop a gas powered motor car under the Locomobile name. With the astute guidance of Davis at the financial helm and Riker's designs and engineering genius, the beginnings of the Best Built Car in American was born. Within eleven months, on November 2, 1902, the first four cylinder Locomobile, a Model C, 12 horsepower gas powered motor car, was delivered to its first customer in New York City, and reportedly driven from Bridgeport by Riker himself. Its price tag was $4,000.



See Production List section for a list of gasoline powered Locomobiles produced beginning in 1902. (1901 8-H.P. Model A and the 12 H.P. Model B were Riker Motors built at the Electric Vehicle plant) The earliest known surviving example of these early cars is a 1904 4-cylinder 12-H.P. Model C, production and serial number #249. The next is a 1906 #707, the famous #16 race car (note 1), and then #789, a Model H, 30 H.P. 7-passenger touring. To date there are only 25 known survivors for this period.

In 1908, Riker designed a 120 H.P. 1,032 cubic inch displacement, overhead valve engine at a cost of $18,000 to compete in the prestigious Vanderbilt Cup race in Long Island, N.Y. Racing against Fiats, Isottas and Mercedes; it won and took the trophy for the Americans for the first time. The Vanderbilt Cup races were world events and Locomobile's reputation soared. (1)

There is some conflicting information regarding production numbers versus production dates. We know the factory began producing cars in late 1902 and sold one as early as November 2, 1902, probably without a serial number. Locomobile, in 1917, published a list of production numbers and the production dates. This list is reproduced herein under the Production List section. This list shows the production of vehicle #1 through #77 as being a mixture of Model D's and Model C's beginning in the year 1903. In a hand typed list of Andrew Riker, donated to the Society by Eleanor Riker, A. L.'s daughter in law, Riker lists the 1902 Model C as being the only model produced in 1902 and 1903, with the Model D not in production until 1904. The 1917 Locomobile list shows 47 Model D's produced in 1903. Both lists agree that 49 Model C's and 152 Model D's were produced in 1904. Riker's notes also show an increase in horsepower in the Model C between 1902 and 1904, from 9 H.P. to 12 H.P. In 1904, the first year of the Model D, horsepower increased during the year from 16 to 22 H.P. In 1906 through 1913, the end of production of the 4-cylinder cars, horsepower settled on 30 H.P. and 40 H.P. The cars all had chain drives until the Model L appeared in 1909. By 1912 all had shaft drives. All models had right hand drive until Henry Ford forced the market place to shift to his left hand drive in 1915. Locomobile produced some left hand drives in 1913 beginning with serial number 6808, and switched completely by 1915, although some were ordered with right hand steering through 1917 according to Riker's notes.

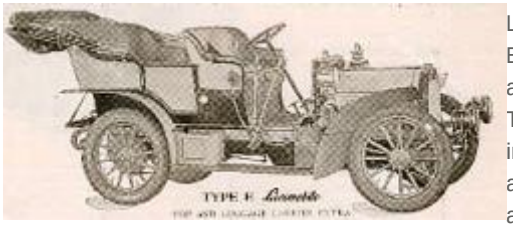
In 1909, Davis saw the automobile marketplace make some astounding changes, not only in mechanical improvements, but in the number of sales. Between 1900 and 1909 there were more than 1,000 different manufacturers. There were over 120 automobiles just beginning with the letter "A", and the list went through "Z". Some only produced 3 cars and went out of business. Henry Ford and his Model T, for example, produced thousands a month. Americans wanted to have a motorcar and by 1909 there were 305,950 registered automobiles on the road (by 1911 there were 618,727). Obviously not all were quality machines such as the Locomobile. Locomobile's primary competition were the 3 "P's" - Pierce- Arrow, Peerless, and Packard. All were prominent but Locomobile was the most expensive.

Not being capitalized like the 3 "P's" meant that Locomobile would have to compete in a different manner. First Davis and Riker agreed that Riker would design a completely new car, one that would stand up to the slogan "Best Built Car in America". Then Davis devised a new policy and placed ads to the effect in all the popular magazines of the day: Locomobile would build for quality rather than quantity and would limit its production to only 4 cars a day. Although not entirely unique, Locomobile created molds and forged their own parts out of cast steel, bronze and aluminum in the Bridgeport factory. When a car was ordered from a Locomobile dealership, a team of six highly qualified mechanics went though the factory and gathered the parts and pieces they required and then built the car to order. It became a sense of pride that the lead mechanic would stamp his initials in the main bearing caps as he assembled the engine. After the running chassis was thoroughly tested and driven it would be sent down the road to either Bridgeport Body Works or Blue Ribbon Body to have the ordered type of body built and installed. Locomobile never built their own bodies, although they encouraged their dealerships to allude to the fact that they did to the customer. The body builder would rivet a small number plaque on the threshold of the driver's door indicating their production number - they were not allowed to imprint their (note 1) see section under heading "Old Number 16" name on the plaque however. Many of these body number plaques remain today but there are no known records indicating the body builder's origin.

Riker's new car was the Model M, introduced in 1911, with an inline six cylinder, 475 cubic inch displacement T head engine cast in pairs with 9 main bearings, developing 48 H.P. The car had a 142 inch wheelbase, weighed 3 tons and was made of only

the finest materials: an all bronze crankcase, and aluminum, brass and the finest steel used throughout. It was well received and sales to the well to do became Locomobile's goals and marketplace. Although the advertising industry began advertising new models with each year, many automobile manufacturers only made changes when a new improvement was incorporated and implemented them when it was appropriate. These changes were denoted as "Series" and may come out at any time of a particular year. For example the first new Model M was built and delivered in 1911. It's serial number was 4617, or the four thousand, six hundred seventeenth automobile manufactured by Locomobile. It was a Model M and as the first of it's kind, a Series 1. Hence it is a 1911, Model M-48-1. There were only 3 Series 1 cars built. Locomobile continued with production of its older 4-cylinder Model I during this period accounting for many numbers. In 1912 the next Model M-48 with new changes became Series 2, (M-48-2) and was serial number 4931. A total of 504 Series 2 were built and in the middle of 1913, new changes to the Model M were incorporated and the Series 3 came out with number 5940, enlarging the engine to 525.5 cubic inches, and so on. Although still called the Model M-48, it's horsepower rating increased to 82 H.P.

Following the lead by it's rival, Pierce-Arrow, Locomobile came out with a smaller version of the Model M-48 designated as the Model R-38. With a smaller hood, radiator and an almost identical but smaller engine rated at 38 H.P. These were produced beginning in 1912 with serial number 5684. These serial numbers were intersperesed with the Model M serial numbers. Production of the Model R-38 was discontinued with number 12810 in late 1917.



Luxurious it was. Many were bodied as limousines by Holbrook, Binder and others, requiring chauffeurs. The interiors were appointed with English broad cloths, velours and tapestries, with Tiffany lamps. The roster of owners of Locomobile limousines included names such as Carnegie, Roebling, Vanderbilt, Wrigley and Armour. Davis implemented a custom body department and after attending the 1914 Paris auto show, persuaded a well known designer by the name of J. Frank de Causse, at the time assistant manager of Kellne et ses Fils, a French coach builder, to come to America and head up the new custom body department. In addition to de Causse, Davis hired an equally well known actress and interior designer, Elsie deWolf, of New York, to fill out the new department. Together de Causse and deWolf designed the interiors of magnificent open and closed Locomobiles for Locomobile's socially prominent customers (de Causse is most known for designing the first known dual-cowl phaeton on a 1916 M-48 chassis for department store magnate Rodman Wanamaker). In addition to growing sales of its Model M automobiles, Locomobile also produced the Riker truck which was becoming a large part of its business. In 1914 and 1915 more Locomobile trucks were sold to England for the coming war effort than any other make. Davis decided to use the name Riker on its truck line rather than Locomobile so as to not impinge on the highly prestigious Locomobile name.

Tragedy struck Locomobile on August 31, 1915, when Samuel Davis suffered a massive stroke and died the next morning. He was 42. Locomobile was at the pinnacle of its success and Davis was the mind managing the success of Locomobile. He would be hard to replace. R. K. Albright took over as general manager. A. L. Riker continued producing the finest machines and kept his focus on production and improvements (he later told his daughter in law, Eleanor Riker, that he wished he had spent more time in the office working with Albright - he felt he could have probably saved the company). The war in Europe created a booming business and Locomobile was profitable. In early 1919, after America had entered the war, Locomobile advertised that if would cease automobile production and concentrate on producing Riker trucks for the war effort as soon as the remaining orders were filled. The remaining orders were for 329 Model 48's and by the time they were getting completed the war ended and so Locomobile's automobile

production continued. Now came the mistake repeated in board rooms throughout history. Rather than test the market and economy after the end of high war production of an industrial nation, Albright placed large orders for material and supplies way beyond Locomobile's experience, anticipating a booming economy and increased sales, plunging the company into heavy debt. With a recession looming, truck orders were cancelled outright rather than increased, and a cautious public held off from ordering new cars. Locomobile, with a 1919 profit of 1.9 million in its coffers could not meet the expenses it had committed to. Rather than go into bankruptcy, Albright decided to sell out. At the time Mercer Automobile held a substantial number of shares in Locomobile. Mercer had just been purchased by a Wall Street syndicate. Mercer, under the helm of Emlen Hare, formally of Packard, then purchased Simplex, another auto maker in financial woes. At the same time Mercer exercised its option to purchase 100,000 shares of Locomobile, effectively buying the company. Locomobile Company of America was dissolved and the Locomobile Company took its place. The controlling syndicate was in fact Hare's Motors of New York and they would become the managing partners and oversee operations. In 1920, A.L. Riker was moved to Hare's New York offices as Vice President and its consulting engineer over Simplex, Locomobile and Kelley-Springfield trucks. Unfortunately Hare's did not have the sound base and financial assets to sustain its goals.

Locomobile finally was able to separate itself from Hare in 1921 after a new board of directors took control. As an independent company once again Locomobile tried to reinstate itself in the premier auto market. The Model 48 was being assembled in the Bridgeport plant using the overstocked parts and Riker made many mechanical improvements. Later in 1921, Riker, who was very disheartened by what had happened to the wonderful Locomobile company, left for good. Frank de Causse left also to form his own design studio and later was responsible for the body design of the Franklin. Many similarities to the cowl and hood design between Locomobile and Franklin can be seen. Locomobile continued in production into 1922 and also went into receivership the same year. In 1922, William Crappo Durant, once again ousted from the board of General Motors, formed a new company with a group of investors, called Durant Motors, and bought Locomobile with one million in cash and bonds. The Series 8, Model 48 was advertised and production continued with its Sportif listed at $9,500 and the limousine at $11,750. Durant hired LeBaron and Dietrich to smooth out the outdated lines of the Model 48, but the basic design of the car even with many mechanical improvements, was an outdated design. Sales of a basically unchanged Model 48 continued through 1923 and 1924, still using 1919 parts. In late 1924, a new Model 48 was introduced, the 19,000 Series, but it was pretty much the same car, but sold for $2,000 less. In late 1925, the Model 48 was officially discontinued and a new luxury car called the Model 90 was to take it's place. Unlike the Junior 8, the Model 90 was indeed a true Locomobile. The mono-block 6-cylinder engine developed 86 H.P. and was built entirely in the Locomobile Bridgeport plant with the same high quality materials and painstaking craftsmanship. These were priced between $5,000 and 7,500. Bodies were by Locke and LeBaron. Only a few were sold. Three exist today. A Model 50L with a 150 H.P. L-head engine was on the drawing boards but never made it into production.

Durant's idea was to use the Locomobile name to sell a more modest and economic car, called the Junior 8 and compete with the Chrysler and Chevrolet. In fact it ended up competing with his Flint. At the 1925 National Auto Show in New York, Durant unveiled the Junior 8. It had a straight-8 Continental engine developed along the lines of Harry Miller's racing engines, and sold for around $2,000. Auto bodies were contracted out to Auto Body Co of Lansing, Michigan, and resembled the Chrysler in many ways. The Junior 8 was replaced by the 8-66 in 1926, and in 1927 the 8-80, priced at $2,850, then the 8-70. Only a total of about 2,000 cars were sold by Locomobile in 1927, and 1928, less. In 1929 the 8-88 was introduced, offered at $2,650. Without any substantial underwriting, the stock market crash resulting in a disappearing market, Locomobile, along with many others, failed in 1929 and closed its doors forever. No known example of the 8-88 is known to exist. There are only 21, 8-cylinder Locomobiles known to exist today. There are approximately 167 Model 48's registered with the Society and two 90's. With the exception of a few unknowns, there are probably not many more. Together with the scrape drives of WWI and II, which resulted in the melting down of thousands of old cars, there was the usual attrition due to wrecks and parts salvage. Today it is highly unlikely that any of the existing Locomobiles will be lost or scraped. All of them are recognized as historic examples of a by-gone era; rare, valuable and highly collectible. Many are located in museums and sit proudly at

rest, but many, with rebuilt engines and drive lines, are used regularly on group tours. They are magnificent to be seen and heard, reminiscent of a world no longer. These cars are owned by the caretakers of today, owned by their original owners years ago, and will continue to be cared for by owners (caretakers) of generations to come. The Locomobile Society of America exists to maintain a roster of these surviving automobiles, identified by serial number, where they are, and their condition. The goal is to post photographs of each of the survivors in order of their serial number and manufacture date, and if possible build a history of each car. There would be wonderful stories if only they could talk.

If you are a Locomobile owner, you could contribute greatly to the Society's efforts by contacting the Society with the information concerning your Locomobile. In return the Society will provide serial number rosters and help in authenticating and disseminating information that may be of help to you as a Locomobile owner.

Contact us by using our contact page

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