

Photo courtesy Steam Automobile Club of America.

IN SEARCH OF

## The Keen Steamliner

by Jim Benjaminson

At the turn of the century when the automobile industry was in it's infancy there were countless makes of automobiles offered--and it was truly anybody's guess as to which form of motive power would propel the new industry. The gasoline powered internal combustion engines were noisy and smelly but, by and large, reliable. Electric cars were silent but had limited travel ranges before their batteries had to be recharged and that problem literally killed their use. It's a problem that still plagues those that advocate the use of electric power today. And then there was steam. Steam was silent, smooth and reliable but most people shyed away from it as they neither understood the principles of steam power, nor did they want to be bothered with the preparations required to get the boiler fired up to convert water into steam. And water froze in cold weather which limited the use of steam in the northern climates of the country.

Both steam and electricity for automobile power died ignoble deaths. Well--they really didn't DIE--they just more or less faded into oblivion.

F. E. and F. O. Stanley, twin brothers from Newton, Massachusetts, marketed perhaps the most famous steam car in their Stanley Steamer which was built from 1897 to 1927. The man who perhaps advanced steam power the furthest was Abner Doble of San Francisco. Doble's steam car was not nearly so well

known as the Stanley's and Doble's cars were super expensive. Doble was also such a perfectionist that few cars were built. After the Stanley's and Doble went out of business there were no commercial offerings made of steam powered cars again, a fact which prompted men like Charles Keen of Madison, Wisconsin, to build his own steam car. And when Keen did build his own steam car at least part of the car was built around a Plymouth!

I first became aware of the Keen Steamliner in January, 1979 when I received a letter from Arthur Phillips of Long Beach, California. Mr. Phillips' letter read, "Perhaps I could be admitted as a member (to the Plymouth Club) by submitting a picture of a Plymouth I own which has been modified to steam power by Mr. Charles Keen of Madison, Wisconsin under the able direction of the famous steam car builder Abner Doble. I don't know the year of the Plymouth body and chassis but I would appreciate it very much if you could positively identify the model year of this unusual one of a kind automobile.

The car is known as the Keen Steamliner. The body is a standard coupe in excellent condition except it needs repainting and most of the trim is rusty but rechromable. I don't think the top is original--it is a soft top over a noncollapsible frame and it does not have

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a rumble seat. It has been described as a 1950 Plymouth in our steam automobile club magazine but I am sure this is not correct. One steam magazine states 'the first mention of this car was in a letter by Mr. Keen which was published in October, 1947, referring to the construction of this car which is known as Keen Steamliner No. 1, starting in 1943 and indicating development was nearing completion at that time'. This (letter) may possibly be referring to the steam equipment and not to the complete car but I rather think it was referring to the complete car. At any rate it seems quite obvious it is not a 1950 Plymouth!"

In subsequent letters Mr. Phillips sent a Xerox copy of a "brochure" photo of the Keen Steamliner which was taken from the book "Smogless Days" written by Stanley Ellis, published by Howell North Books, 1050 Parker Street, Berkeley, California. Mr. Phillips again wrote about the car: "It has a Stanley Steamer engine connected directly to the differential by spur gears. The car has a monotube coiled boiler and top fired burner that raises steam in one minute. Of course the engine is incased and runs in oil. The steam pressure and temperature are automatically controlled."

Mr. Phillips claimed that Stanley Ellis, when he owned the car, drove the Steamliner "every day for ten years". After acquiring the car himself Mr. Phillips worked on it for some time and "had the car running after about a years work but the automatic heat control was not set properly, which was adjusted, but then a pin hole blew in the steam generator (boiler)."

Referring to Mr. Ellis' book "Smogless Days", Ellis wrote that he visited Mr. Keen and took a ride in another Keen Steamliner which made him "yearn for a 'modern' steamer". Ellis states in the book "Mr. Keen had built an earlier model about 1950 and it was still in existence in other hands. I contacted the owner and it (Steamliner No. 1) was shipped to me from Lincoln, Nebraska, in 1960."

Ellis made further references to the car, stating that the car had a Stanley 20 horse power engine although the rest of the car was "pure Keen--beautifully made." Ellis stated that in talking to Charles Keen he made reference to the fact that Abner Doble had helped him with some features of the car before Doble's death.

Stanley Ellis drove the Keen Steamliner No. 1 on a regular basis through the first winter he owned the car. Although the steam apparatus worked fairly well he was not at all satisfied with the body of the car. Quoting from his book Ellis wrote: "The only undesirable feature was the body and chassis which came from a Plymouth coupe of 1950 This meant room for only three passengers including driver and there was insufficient ventilation from the smallish windows. In hot weather this became intolerable. Fifty to sixty miles per hour was about its nicest cruising speed . . . but the limiting factor was not the powerplant at all, but the old Plymouth chassis. It was stiff and bouncy and far from comfortable at high speed."

Following some minor problems with the car, in the automatic steam controls and not in the steam engine itself, Mr. Ellis sold the car back to its builder, Charles Keen, and Keen towed the car from Ellis' Cape

Cod home back to Wisconsin. How the Steamliner made its way into Mr. Phillips' hands following the death of Mr. Keen is unknown.

The question now arises--just how much of the Keen Steamliner is a Plymouth? And what year Plymouth? There is no doubt that the front sheetmetal of the Steamliner is from a pre-war Plymouth--in all probability a 1942 model. It would only stand to reason that if Keen were working on the car as early as 1943 that he would have to be using parts from earlier model cars. However, several items in the overall picture of the Steamliner just do not fit into place.

Bill Leonhardt of Lincoln, Nebraska located a copy of Stanley Ellis' book "Smogless Days" which provided better photographs of the car but unfortunately they could not be reproduced with this article because of copyright infringements. The photos did reveal several items which simply are "not kosher" with a Plymouth body.

The first apparent change in the car was that if it were indeed built on a Plymouth chassis that the wheelbase had been shortened considerably. (Plymouth's had a 117" wb from 1940 through 1948). That in itself would explain the harsh, bouncy ride, Mr. Ellis had referred to in his book. Early Plymouth's had anything BUT a harsh ride!

Even more puzzling was the front door of the coupe, which had a VERTICAL rear door post, while all Plymouth coupes since 1936 had a forward SLANTING rear post. And the door handle was located BENEATH the chrome belt line mouldings rather than mounted flush ON the moulding as was Plymouth's practice for many years. What really stood out, however, was the exposed lower door hinge as well as the pedestal mounted windshield wipers. At rest the wipers pointed outward rather than pointing inward.

In reseraching the Steamliner further I contacted the Steam Automobile Club of America at their Pleasant Garden, North Carolina address. In talking with Sharon Yow, secretary to club president R. A. Gibbs, she offered to send me a copy of their club magazine which contained a photograph of several Keen Steamliners. The photo with this article is reprocded from that issue. In talking with Ms. Yow she stated she was under the impression that the Steamliner was based on a Chevrolet body--and not that of a Plymouth!

This lead to researching George Dammen's book "Sixty Years of Chevrolet" which soon revealed that the '39 Chevrolet had the door handles mounted beneath the belt line mouldings, pedestal mounted windshield wipers and, as the clincher, the lower door hinge was exposed, just as were those items on the Keen car.

Following these revelations attempts are now being made to contact the current owner of the Steamliner in hope that perhaps he can shed further light on the car. Is the chassis that of a 1942 Plymouth or is it that of a 1939 Chevrolet? Is the body Chevrolet or were pieces of a Chevrolet mated to a Plymouth body?

There is no doubt in this writers mind that the body is at least partially that of a '39 Chevrolet but there is also no doubt that at least the front fenders and hood are from a 1942 Plymouth. The front grill bars have been modified somewhat to hide the cars identity but the "blackout" style short front fender trim and the stamping crease beneath the headlamps are pure 1942 Plymouth. The hood is also that of a '42 Plymouth although it has been modified to open "Buick style" from the sides rather than "alligator" style from the rear as did the original. Close examination also reveals that the hood trim mouldings do not have the same contours of the belt line mouldings on the car. The hubcaps are definately Plymouth and the wheels also appear to be, hinting that the front suspension may be Plymouth as well, as Plymouth wheels used a 5 bolt lug pattern which would not fit a Chevrolet as they used a 6 bolt lug pattern during that time. It is indeed unfortunate that Charles Keen passed away some years ago and cannot answer any of our questions about the car.

Bill Leonhardt, the club's resident '42 Plymouth detective and himself a native of Lincoln, Nebraska, where the Steamliner spent several years, contacted several people in the Lincoln area seeking further information about the car. Of three local steam enthusiasts two remembered the Steamliner and one had ridden in the car on various occasions. This fellow gave Bill a lead as to where to find the widow of the car's Lincoln owner. In talking with her briefly she thought she may still have some photographs of the car. Hopefully her photo albums will reveal more information about the Steamliner in the future.

In talking with the man in Lincoln who was familiar with the Steamliner, Leonhardt was told it was this mans understanding that "the fellow that originally built the car was good at metal forming and had done an excellent job of the body modifications."

Without a doubt Charles Keen created a unique motor car. Where else on the face of this earth are you going to find a car that is part Stanley Steamer, part Chevrolet and part Plymouth?



(Editor's Note: These photographs and a brief note arrived shortly before press time from the Keen Steamliner's current owner, Loren Burch of Cantil, California.)

Side view of Steamliner shows short chassis, obvious mating of various bodies. Is the hood missing or just not pictured?

Sorry for the delay in getting the pictures but the roll of film got misplaced for awhile. These are probably too late for your article but I think you will find this car is not as interesting as you thought as I believe the body is mounted on a Willys Chassis! The chassis is not Plymouth. The front and rear body I believe is Plymouth but from two different cars. There

is no name or I.D. plate anywhere on the car that I can find relating to Plymouth or any other car except Willy's hub caps and the "Keen Steamliner" name plate.

The pictures don't show it but the splice is concealed by the top, which is constructed of fabricated steel tubing.



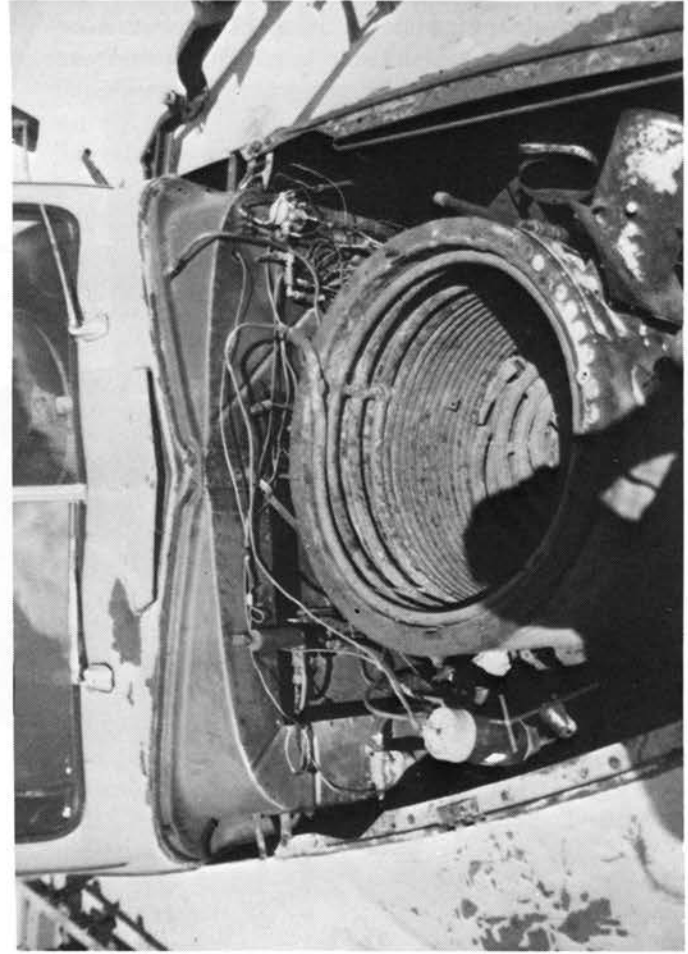
Deck lid license holder and trunk lid handle look like '40 Plymouth items. Is rear half of car another Plymouth?



Instrument panel is highly modified but still shows its '39 Chevrolet heritage.



Front view shows its Plymouth heritage. Note Keen Steamliner name badge on right fender.



Steam generator (boiler) appears to have seen better days. Rust spots may indicate hood is missing entirely.