

Never Has Steam Been So Cool

Michigan tinkerer powers up with steam engines

By

A.J. BAIME

Dec. 1, 2015 11:25 a.m. ET

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Tom Kimmel, 70, a retired nursery owner from Berrien Springs, Mich., on his steam powered sports car, as told to A.J. Baime.

Most people, when they think of steam power, they think of rusty farm tractors from 150 years ago. But there's such a thing as modern steam power. Steam is the most direct way to get power out of heat. You can't build an internal combustion engine in your garage. But you can build a steam engine, and the interesting thing is, it can run on anything that will burn, even sawdust.

At my farm, I have about 100 steam engines, many of them homemade, plus a library of technical papers, patents, and books on steam technology. I have Volkswagen engines converted to steam, outboard boat engines, etc. I collect and preserve this stuff. I get a lot of it from old widows whose deceased husbands were tinkerers; these women are

so happy to get rid of it. Some of the engines are well built, others not, but you can learn as much from a bad example as a good one.

The most impressive iteration I have right now is my Victress—a fiberglass kit car from the 1950s that was converted to run on steam by a Wisconsin man around 1960. In the front of the car, there's a kerosene tank and a boiler, with 300-feet of black iron tubing in it. Then there's a water tank and a high-pressure water pump.

This all feeds steam into an engine in back that functions much like a normal car engine, but instead of gas and oxygen exploding inside cylinders to produce power, steam gets pumped into the cylinders, causing the same kind of motion. When I run out of fuel, I just pump 20 gallons of kerosene into the tank.

In theory, the car will do 80 mph, but I've only had it up to 55. There's essentially no sound, and the exhaust is invisible. While the engine doesn't put out as much power as a gasoline engine of the same size can, it's cleaner burning.

The car is legal to drive (the local police inspected it), and I've spent a great deal of time working the bugs out. I drive it into town, and I haven't had to walk home yet.

[Contact A.J. Baime at Facebook.com/ajbaime.](https://www.facebook.com/ajbaime)









'I've spent a great deal of time working the bugs out,' says Mr. Kimmel. 'I drive it into town, and I haven't had to walk home yet.' *BRIAN KELLY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

Tom Kimmel, 70, a retired nursery owner, on his farm in Berrien Springs, Mich., with his steam powered sports car. Mr. Kimmel collects and preserves steam engines and machinery, with about 100 of them on his property. *BRIAN KELLY FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*





