

## **One-of-a-kind car is Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum's newest treasure**

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FAIRBANKS — Solid wood dashboards, leather interiors and immaculately polished bodies are just the beginning of the pre-World War II automobiles that now belong to Tim Cerny of the Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum.

A closer look under the hood at the shiny copper and chrome-plated engines with an array of gears and cylinders is an adventure in physics and auto mechanics that leaves the admirer respecting how innovative and bold car manufacturing was in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

“You won’t find any plastic in here,” said chief mechanic and museum manager Willy Vinton.

The Fountainhead Collection includes more than 67 historically significant American automobiles, about 50 of which are on display at one time. Each vehicle illustrates important developments in early American automotive history, Cerny and Vinton said.

Highlights of the collection include early steam, electric and hybrid cars; one-of-a-kind and sole-surviving vehicles, a cyclecar modeled after two bicycles, the United States’ first V16-powered automobile, midget racers and the first American production car with front-wheel drive.

“You won’t find a living collection like this anywhere else in the country,” Vinton said.

The newest shiny toys arrived just in time for the holiday season and include a 1934 American Austin, a 1904 Stevens-Duryea and several antique bicycles. The most impressive and newest edition to the collection is an 1898 Hay & Hotchkiss — the only of its kind manufactured.

“This is as rare as a car can get,” Vinton said as he gently opened the rear of the car to display the copper engine.

Aside from its stunning combination of deep burgundy paint and polished copper, the vehicle’s engine was referred to as the “Hay frictionless gasoline motor.” The vehicle has an eight-cycle, horizontally opposed four-cylinder engine. The car was advertised as having an air-cooled engine, meaning it doesn’t need water or oil to run. It is the oldest-known surviving four-cylinder American-made vehicle and could go about four or five miles per hour.

“It wasn’t a successful design, like most of the cars built early on, but it was innovative in design,” Cerny said.

The vehicle took about two years and 15-20 engineers to build in 1898, and it took about 1,000 hours of labor to restore more than 100 years later.

“A vehicle like this speaks volumes about the commitment and volumes of energy it took to design these engines,” Cerny said. “The beauty of these engines is that they’re really ingenious but not very complicated.”

The stories behind the automobiles and their drivers are fascinating. Cerny and Vinton have worked closely with local historian Nancy DeWitt to seek patents and engineering drafts of the vehicles and histories of the various owners and their connection to Alaska. The three have made an effort to bring the automobiles to life with the help of local pioneers who can talk about the various drivers in historic photographs.

“The stories behind many of these vehicles and the photo collection we have are only a generation or two away,” Cerny said. “But we have to work quickly.”

The museum brings the early 20th century to life and tells a story of the industrial revolution — a time of innovation and risk-taking that led to some of the modern world’s most practical and successful inventions and some of the biggest failures of early auto engineers.

“So many failed,” Cerny said. “The evolution of the automobile is based on a succession of failures.”

In the early 20th century, there were more than 2,500 auto manufacturers in the United States. All of them failed by the time Henry Ford’s Model T hit the market.

For more information about the Antique Auto Museum, visit [www.fountainheadhotels.com/auto](http://www.fountainheadhotels.com/auto). The museum also has a site on Twitter and offers a regularly updated blog filled with pictures.

During winter, the museum is open from noon to 6 p.m. Sundays only. Admission prices vary.

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