

Old Skagway car finds new home at Fairbanks Auto Museum

By Molly Dischner, Skagway News

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FAIRBANKS – Skagway’s role in gold rush history is widely celebrated, but few people know about the town’s other claim to historical fame. Skagway is the birthplace of Alaska’s oldest car and the building site for the only car on-record as constructed in Alaska.

In 1905, 18-year-old Robert Sheldon built his car in Skagway. According to car lore, he was in hot pursuit of a young lady whose other suitor had a fancy carriage. He didn’t get the girl, but Ripley’s Believe-It-or-Not recognized his achievement because he built it solely from pictures and diagrams. He had never seen a car in person.

After driving the car around town for many years, Sheldon donated it to the University of Alaska in 1934. In 2011, a working replica may return to Skagway’s streets.

Willy Vinton, the manager at Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum where the car was recently moved, plans to build the replica by taking pictures and measuring and documenting the old car, and then piecing the new one together. That’ll take at least a year.

“My goal is to have [the replica] spend the rest of eternity basically in Skagway,” he said. This will be Vinton’s first exact-replica, but not his first effort at restoring an old car. “It’s very do-able,” he said.

The most difficult part might be the seats. The grey chairs originally came from a bar. Finding replicas a century after the originals were repurposed for Sheldon’s car might be difficult.

Vinton has access to the car because the University of Alaska Museum of the North loaned the car to the auto museum for five years with the possibility of extending the loan after the original period ends said Angela Linn. Linn is the ethnology and history collections manager at the museum of the north.

Moving the car about five miles from one museum to another was more complicated than just turning a key to start the ignition. Vinton and several volunteers from the auto museum built stands beforehand to load the car onto so that the move wouldn’t put pressure on the wheels, which are old buggy spokes, Linn said. The car-with-stands contraption was loaded onto dollies, and the dollies were loaded into a heated Lynden truck, she said.

The move left a hole in the museum’s southeast gallery, but Linn was enthusiastic about the change.

The museum hopes to renovate the Gallery of Alaska in the not-so-distant future, and she was glad it would now be part of a display focused on automotive history.

“A whole new group of people...are going to see it over there,” Linn said.

Vinton shared her excitement over the move. “We really enjoy having the car here,” he said. “It tells a great story.” The car is just one of dozens at the auto museum. But it’s the only one built in Alaska.

And nearby photos, part of a pictorial history of Alaska automobiles, show the car in Skagway.

The Skagway Museum is also part of the car’s new history. Vinton is working with them to track down the original engine, which was a 2-cycle marine engine. Linn said the part belongs to the Rapuzzi collection.

The move wasn’t the car’s first. Former UA President Charles Bunnell worked with Sheldon to move the vehicle to Fairbanks in 1934.

Linn didn’t know where the car spent the next few decades, but in 1972 it went on display at the museum in Signer’s Hall. When the museum moved in 1980, the car was transported and displayed at the new museum, Linn said.