

North to the Past

An Alaska museum celebrates some four-wheeled pioneers

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It seems entirely appropriate that the first gasoline-powered car to appear in Alaska, that land of pioneers, was a runabout designed and built by a young man whose only previous exposure to automobiles and had been through magazine photos. Bobby Sheldon was 22 when he assembled a two-cycle marine engine, buggy wheels, wood and tin into a functioning car, intending to win the heart of a young woman who was being courted by a rival who owned a fancy horse and carriage.

Sheldon's runabout, built in 1905, today is one of 72 vehicles in the collection of the Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum in Fairbanks, Alaska. The brainchild of local hotelier and construction company owner Timothy Cerny, the 30,000-square-foot museum became the northernmost automobile museum in America when it opened on June 1, 2010.

The transportation history of our 49th state is generally associated with dog-sleds and paddlewheelers, but the automobile plays an ever more-important role in post-Gold Rush Alaska, too, one that's celebrated at the Fountainhead museum. "Alaska has an extremely rich and entertaining motoring history, so we decided to emphasize that throughout the museum," Cerny said. Four automobiles that are original to Fairbanks are on display: In addition to Sheldon's roadster, there are the first Dodge to be shipped to Fairbanks, a 1910 Chalmers-Detroit and a 1926 Fordson Snow Motor. To provide an idea of the kinds of conditions that early motorists had to overcome, enlargements of more than 70 historic photographs decorate the museum walls. Photos depict horses pulling cars from frozen streams, primitive road conditions and the rigors of extreme cold-weather motoring.

The automobile collection is focused on pre-1936 American cars that represent important or interesting technology or design, or are examples of seldom-seen marques. Four vehicles – an 1898 Hay & Hotchkiss Stanhope Phaeton, a 1903 Toledo Rear-Entrance Touring gasoline car, a 1906 Compound Model 71/2 Light Touring and a racy 1920 Argonne Model D two-passenger Roadster, the pride of the Jersey City, New Jersey – are the only known surviving examples of their kind. Cerny and his assistant, Derik Price, began acquiring cars for the collection in early 2007, and their choices include not only gas, electric and steam cars from the late 1800s through the 1930s, but bicycles, race cars, a primitive motorcycle, and even a huge Fairbanks-Morse stationary engine that once powered Alaska's first telegraph system.

Most of the vehicles in the collection have been restored to as-new condition, and all but the most breakable are kept in running condition. Each evening during the summer, a museum staff member takes at least one car for a spin around the neighboring Wedgewood Resort. "To be able to see these rare cars in the museum is great, but to see, hear and even smell them operate is priceless," said museum manager Willy Vinton.

The museum is open seven days a week during the summer, and only on Sundays during the summer, and only on Sundays during the winter. Check the museum's website at www.fountainheadhotels.com/auto/ for hours. Admission is \$8 for adults, \$5 for children ages 3-12, and free for those 2 and younger. If you go, be sure to see the exhibit on the colorful life of Bobby Sheldon, considered Alaska's foremost automotive pioneer.