

# History on Wheels

*Antique Auto Museum — a first-class Fairbanks attraction*

**By Kris Capps**

Cars are the stars at the Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum in Fairbanks.

Here you'll find the first automobile ever built in Alaska, the first real "Green" car, and a line-up of vehicles that tells the history of transportation in Alaska and throughout the nation.

They date from 1898 to 1938.

Amazingly, almost every car is still driveable.

"All but three get driven," said Willy Vinton, who keeps the vehicles in pristine condition. "We exercise the cars every summer."

That means a group of hand-picked driver volunteers get to sit behind the wheel – or the stick – of the historical vehicles. All the drivers are volunteers

at the museum and some of them own antique cars of their own.

This small group of dedicated antique car volunteers help keep the vehicles in working order. Vinton chooses a few to drive.

"You can't just put anyone in these cars," he said.

Every Wednesday during the summer months, some of the antique autos go for a little drive through town, showing off for the tourists.

The drivers are part of the talented and experienced volunteers, or docents, who spend considerable time at the museum.

Regular volunteers provide tours in the museum and answer questions from visitors.

The pit crew volunteers move the cars when necessary, set up for events and keep the cars clean and in working order.

The road crew volunteers train to drive the cars. Their first trip is usually the mile and a half of roads that make up Wedgewood Resort. From there, the cars travel to various locations in and around Fairbanks.

In true Alaska fashion, the museum began as a dream and quickly became reality.

Tim Cerny had the dream, but not the cars. He began by hand selecting the vehicles for this museum, starting with purchase of the J. Parker Wickham automobile collection in 2007. The burgeoning collection then began to grow, from auctions, estate sales and private sellers.

Each vehicle represented either a significant or unusual development in American automotive technology or design, or was an extremely rare model. Some held special Alaskan significance.

Developers of the museum did their homework, and visited other car museums around the country.

Based on that research, they arranged the antique cars so visitors can actually walk all around the vehicles on display.

"Some museums just line them up and they can only be viewed head on," said historian Nancy DeWitt.

At the 30,000 square foot Fountainhead museum, the cars can be seen from all angles.

Notice that one auto boasts a special compartment for storing golf clubs. Notice that another has a wall-mounted vase, for fresh flowers.

Open in 2009, more than 30,000 visitors now enjoy this unique display and visitor comments rate the museum as



**Willy Vinton stands beside one of the antique autos, a 1919 McFarlan, that he maintains at the Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum in Fairbanks.**

one of the finest nationwide.

Historical photographs help tell the story of the autos' place in history.

In the recent past, a visitor included the granddaughter of the inventor of the 1898 Hay Motor Vehicle, the oldest four-cylinder internal combustion American automobile known to exist.

"She brought her whole family," DeWitt recalled.

And she donated the inventor's hat. It's a bit tattered and worn, but it is now on display with the car.

Historian DeWitt and her colleagues developing the museum did their homework and they listened to what others had to say.

"Car club ladies suggested we include period fashion," said DeWitt.

So now, more than 100 dresses of the various historical periods, are on display, along with their respective automobiles. Some of the attire is on loan from Pioneers of Alaska, Womens Igloo #8.

Barbara Cerny curates the textile collection, which includes formal wear, every day fashion, and motoring clothes and accessories.

Clothing dates back to the 1700s.

Archival films were so popular, that the museum now sells CDs of the footage.

The 78 vehicles now on display include

lots of "firsts."

Eight of the 10 first cars in Fairbanks are on display here, including the 1907 White Steamer.

"We spent years looking for it," said DeWitt.

This steamer was the third car in Fairbanks. It arrived by sternwheeler in 1908.

The 1917 Ford Model T Snow Flyer gave kids rides in Fairbanks recently during the Tired Iron Vintage Snowmobile rally. This antique auto has skis on the front and tractor treads on the back, to navigate on snow.

The first Dodge in Fairbanks was also the first vehicle to drive across the new Veterans Bridge.

The museum is open every day during the summer: Sunday-Friday, 11 a.m. -10 p.m.; Saturday 11 a.m.-6 p.m. In winter, Sundays only 12-6 p.m.

"We had 170 people last Sunday," said Vinton. "So you never know." ■

Read more about it at [www.fountainheadmuseum.com](http://www.fountainheadmuseum.com)



**Riding in early automobiles required a change in fashion for ladies of the day. Period fashion on display at the museum includes these motoring clothes.**



## Alaska's First Car

Alaska's first automobile was created by a 22-year-old man, who had never seen a car, but wanted to impress a lady.

In 1905, Skagway resident Robert "Bobby" Sheldon thought having an automobile would impress a lady whose other suitor only had a horse and buggy.

Using magazine pictures as a guide, he built a wooden frame, attached four industrial cart wheels, salvaged a two-cycle marine engine from a sunken boat, added gears and built a chain drive. The tiller? Sections of gas pipe.

The seat? Bar stools.

Top speed? 15 mph.

He took the lady for many rides.

"No," he replied, when asked if he ever married her. "But three other fellows have, since then."

That Runabout is on display at the Fountainhead Antique Auto Museum, on loan from the University of Alaska Museum of the North.