

S T E A R N S K N I G H T

In 1904 the noisy valve gear in the Knox he was driving so irritated Charles Yale Knight that he was moved to invent an engine in which sleeves did the work of valves. A printer and publisher by profession, Knight was hard pressed to find anyone in the U.S. interested in his idea at first but after traveling to Europe and selling licenses to a variety of manufacturers there—among them, Minerva of Belgium—he returned home to a considerably more receptive audience.

First to sign on for a Knight sleeve-valve license was the F. B. Stearns Company, producer of luxury cars in

Cleveland. Earlier Frank Stearns had applied for a patent to protect his car's most distinctive feature—the "white line radiator"—and now he looked forward to the distinctiveness of producing America's only sleeve valve. Alas, Stearns wasn't the only manufacturer enamored of the quiet, smooth performance of Charles Knight's engine. Undeterred as well by the increased expense of its construction over poppet-valve engines and the copious quantities of oil it required was John North Willys of Toledo. Others would jump on Knight's bandwagon, though their efforts would be short-lived. Only

Willys would continue vociferously to champion sleeve valves in America into the Classic Era—with his own Willys-Knights and Stearns-Knights too.

Citing ill health Frank Stearns had retired from active participation in his company during World War I. In December of 1925 Stearns' company belonged to John North Willys. Willys made it clear that he had no intention of integrating the firm into his Willys-Overland empire. His purchase of Stearns was to acquire a Knight-engined luxury car as companion to his medium-range Willys.

Stearns-Knights were big cars, produced in both six- and eight-cylinder models, with wheelbases stretching to as much as 145 inches and prices stretching up to \$5,800. The three examples shown here have six-cylinder engines.

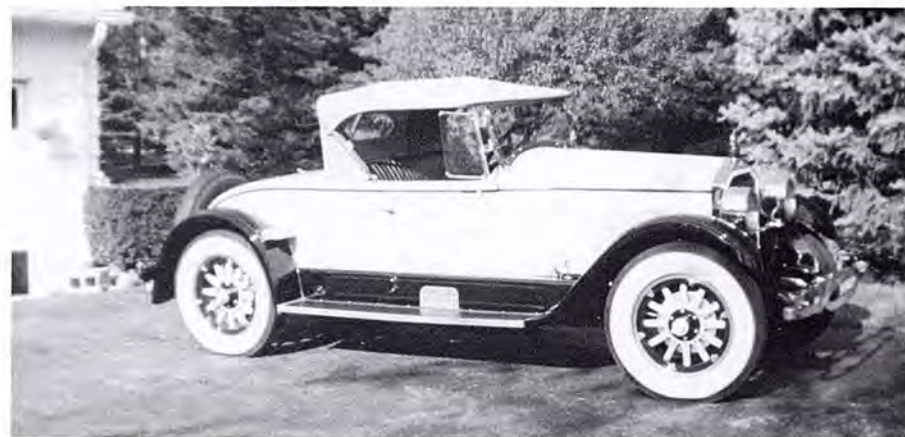
Frank Stearns himself was the first owner of Al Ferrara's 1926 S-95 Roadster: "The Stearns factory in Cleveland is still standing, and the Stearns-Knight cars were tested on the same road on which I live in Gates Mills. I know Frank Stearns' granddaughter, Ann Barnes. The sleek body style, power-assist brakes and quietly smooth engine make the Stearns-Knight a fine Classic, in addition to an unusual one."

The 1926 S-95 Seven-Passenger Touring has been in the Minden Automotive Museum for over two decades. Comments Milton Bacon: "The original owner was Don C. Foote of Billings, Montana. Total mileage is 21,260. The originality is remarkable. Years ago this Stearns-Knight was saved from total destruction by being pushed out of a flaming hay barn by the blacksmith whose sparks from the forge started the blaze. The car still bears the paint-singe scars."

The Classic Car Club of America Museum's 1927 F-6-85 Four-Passenger Coupe was donated to the collection by Phil Kersh in 1985. The figures in the designation seemingly should represent cylinders and horsepower, but the latter is illusory. The six developed 70 hp in 1926, 82 in 1927. However, Stearns-Knight purchasers weren't attracted to the car for its performance—the eight's 100 hp offered just 75 mph—but to its silken smooth luxury. Unfortunately, after 1929, there would be no Stearns-Knights to be attracted to. The company had not been healthy when John North Willys bought it and began losing money heavily in 1926. Shortly after the Wall Street crash in October of '29, Stearns stockholders voted for dissolution.



*1926 Stearns-Knight Series S-95 Seven-Passenger Touring
Owner: Minden Automotive Museum, Minden, Nevada*



*1926 Stearns-Knight Series S-95 Roadster
Owner: Alfred Ferrara of Gates Mills, Ohio*



1927 Stearns-Knight Series F-6-85 Four-Passenger Coupe

Owner: Classic Car Club of America Museum, Hickory Corners, Michigan

