

A VENT WINDOW VIEW – Steamy Dreams

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In his book *Steam Cars* (copyright 1953), John Bentley quoted the periodical *US Motor* (the July 1926 issue) that stated “it is reasonably certain that if even a fraction of the many millions spent in the development of the gasoline car had been spent on steam car development, there would be several steam cars on the market today. A few lines later Bentley suggests that the magazine’s “understatement had been tempered for commercial reasons and should have read “... there would not be a *single* gasoline car on the market today.” The article went on to point out that **“the thermal efficiency of the gasoline engine may reach 35 per cent, whereas the steam engine tops 90 per cent. As to everyday motoring needs, be it in terms of pickup, speed, flexibility, reliability, running economy, silence or low upkeep, a modern steam car could make a monkey out of the conventional internal combustion auto under any conditions. Further, it could be built and sold for about half the price of cars presently on the market.”**

Bentley admitted there was one possible drawback to the steam car; to raise a full head of steam from dead cold, even with a “flash” boiler, would take two full minutes. But, as he pointed out, “in much of the country, two minutes is the time needed for a gasoline powered car to warm up and run smoothly.” He also suggested that if the “Flash Boiler,” operated by an electric-powered ignition key had been invented before the electric ‘starter,’ the steamer would have won out.” However, “when Cadillac’s electric starter appeared in 1912, steamers still needed five plus minutes to get warmed up enough to go.” Bentley also pointed out that a steam engine is much simpler than the internal combustion engine powered by gasoline because most of the power in gasoline is “converted into useless heat that requires a complicated system to get rid of it. At best, the thermal efficiency of an internal combustion engine may reach 35 percent whereas that of the steam engine tops 90 percent.” Just as impressive to me was his assertion that “a two cylinder, double action steam engine with less than 40 moving parts, provides as many power impulses per crankshaft revolution as an eight cylinder “explosion” engine cluttered-up with a mass of bewildering gadgets;” further, “it requires neither clutch nor torque converter of any kind. You can gear it directly to the axle of your car.”

While it is clear that there are many reasons to endorse gasoline engines over steamers at present, there certainly are possibilities that this might change. The author of the book from which this information was derived thought that we might someday use atomic energy to heat water for steam cars much as is done to power some of our submarines. That seems like pretty advanced thinking for 1953.

What Mr. Bentley overlooked was the sound factor that accompanies the less efficient gasoline engine. Sound is the essence that pours adrenaline into a hot-rodder’s bloodstream when he fires up his gas-burning V-8 and rumbles off for an evening snack of milkshakes and French fries at the local watering hole. I suspect that *sound* is what brings the crowds out to watch race cars circle the tracks at Daytona and Talladega; attendance at those events would fall off the cliff if those vehicles had mufflers. The same goes for drag races; it’s my opinion that people should be required to show that they have earplugs before being allowed entry to either of those venues.

Incidentally, in case anyone doubts that a steam car might ever be fast enough to race on a track, Fred Marriott’s 1906 Stanley Racer set a new world’s record of 127.66 mph. Yup! *It was the quietest car on the track and it was powered by steam!*