



Special Ks

Enjoying the pioneering design of Cadillac's 1906 Model K runabout

Words and photography by David Traver Adolphus



Any owner of a rare car has to answer questions of correctness and authenticity, when information from the period is hard to come by. You can look at ten different, well-presented examples, and small details will be different and convincing on each one. When it's a brass-era car, it's harder still to get it correct, as things did change on the shop floor. Maybe someone new started pinstriping later in the year; maybe a supplier changed a part's design, maybe they ran out of something and borrowed from another line; maybe there was a miscommunication and someone installed optional cowl lamps on everything for a week before management caught on. It still happens today.

So how do we know that Dick Shappy's 1906 Cadillac Model K runabout looks as close to factory correct as is possible? Because the self-professed "Cadillac Man" has one that is factory correct. Side-by-side with his restored tulip-body roadster, he has an original, running, driving example.



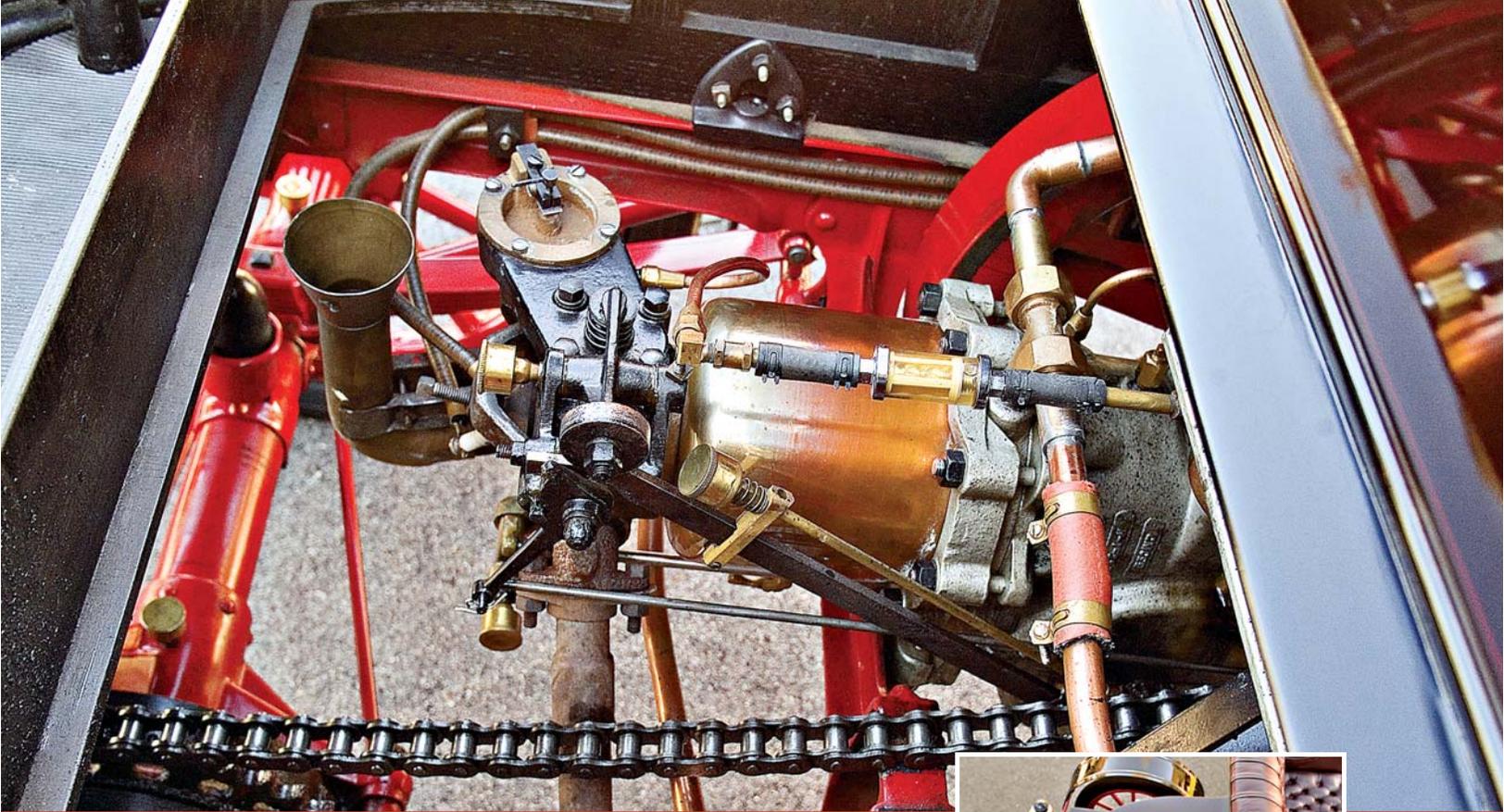
High and comfy, seats with ample room are a rarity in brass cars. Crank with anti-kickback safety starting device visible on the floor



Ten-horsepower single drives two-speed planetary transmission to Brown-Lipe spur differential. Double-acting brakes inboard at rear



Four years after the founding of the company, Cadillac wasn't yet the world-beater it became just a few years down the line, but General Manager Henry M. Leland and company certainly had designs on the throne. Leland was already well established as a machine tool maker in Detroit when in 1901, R.E. Olds awarded the Leland, Faulconer and Norton company the contract to produce his Oldsmobile engines. Leland soon pitched Olds an improved version of this engine, but Oldsmobile, still recovering from a major fire in 1901, couldn't shoulder the additional investment. Leland held onto the prototype engine and was running it in his personal Oldsmobile when representatives of the troubled Henry Ford Company, then without their eponymous leader, approached him. According to Tim Pawl, past president and a director of the Cadillac & La Salle Club Museum: "Henry Ford was long gone when the company backers hired Henry Leland to appraise the assets of that company in August 1902 for liquidation.... Henry instead persuaded them to back his new, more powerful engine...and



Inlet for automatic elastic-stop carburetor on left, copper-jacketed engine with mechanically operated vertical valve hangs between pressed steel channel frame rails

the company was renamed the Cadillac Automobile Company on August 27, 1902."

The single-cylinder market peaked for Cadillac in 1906—the company claimed that 14,000 of the 10hp cars were in use worldwide. Still priced at \$750, a Model M and Model K single were available, and an "H" and "L" represented the fours. While there were varieties of body styles, the new "tulip" style made the light cars a sensation. A lovely, upswept line seems to support the seat, with the edge making a petal design. Four-seat, side-entrance cars, run-arounds and even Henry Leland's personal doctor's-style coupe all sported this style, which on two-seaters was capped off with a flat boattail.

Brass-era Cadillacs are a relatively recent development for Dick Shappy, whose true love has long been the V-16s of 1930-'33. He purchased his restored 1906 Model K a few years ago, 95 percent finished.

"It needed a lot of tweaking," he said. "When I got, it we had to correct things and make it run, and it was missing some brass. We fixed that all up and did a little paint work on it." He was able to make those corrections, thanks to another car that spent the second half of the 20th

century—all of it—in a basement in Chicago. "It was in a guy's basement for 50 years," Dick said. "Rather than take the car apart, they had to take a section of the basement apart, and pull it up the stairs. That's what kept it inside all those years." It still sports its lowa tax disc, suggesting it might have been the 2,319th vehicle registered in the state. After its passenger-carrying days were through, it was used as a farm vehicle. "They would stand on the back of this thing and work on the fence up in the fields," Dick said. "For years!"

When Dick's mechanic, Sean Brayton, cranked it up, we could scarcely believe it held the same engine as the restored car. Where that one was barely broken in, the unrestored original ran as smoothly as any single-cylinder engine we've ever heard. "The other one's very tight," said Sean. "When I was working on this one, I drove it every day." Unfortunately, when he started it in the morning, he also noticed the left rear tire had a huge bulge—one of the 100-year-old bands that clinch on the tires had failed. Through the miracle of duct tape, he gleefully ran it around on the bare rim, at least enough to get it on and off a trailer and position it for our photography session.

The restored car has engine number



Iconic flat boattail rear decklid is held on from below with twin clips



24928 (which says something about just how many single-cylinder engines Cadillac built), and the standard two-speed planetary transmission. When Sean said the engine was tight, he meant it. Dick, who suffered a heart attack five days before, didn't even attempt to crank it over. Sean did, and coaxed it to life shortly before his shoulder failed from the effort. The "Little Hercules" copper-jacketed engine drove



Rough but rarin' to go, this smooth-running 1906 Cadillac Model K was used for field work on an Iowa farm before spending 50 years sealed in a Chicago basement



Badge for Selden patent on internal combustion engine, beneath seats



Jump-spark ignition courtesy of Cleveland's "Hotter than the Devil" K-W Co.

home the fact that it's propelled by a series of explosions in the square 98.2-cu.in. cylinder underneath the seat. The car rocking its wood body forward and back with each stroke, vibrations and bangs twanging up through the steel frame, Sean retarded the spark, engaged the transmission, and listened as the engine bogged down and stalled. His sentiments at that moment

were... not suitable for the pages of a family magazine.

The tulip back lifts off easily, and the two-main-bearing engine sits right before you. In fact, the entire body could be lifted off the chassis with a minimum of disruption, and replaced with a four-passenger rear-entrance tonneau body, if the owner was so inclined.

A couple of pokes to the needle that hangs out of the air intake "U" primed the updraft "carburetor" ("mixer" is a more accurate description) resulting in a nice drip of gas, and it was cranking time again. Part of the difficulty was in a reproduction insert for the crank, which was both worn and (incorrectly) designed so it popped the crank handle off before Sean could complete a proper rotation. There are a handful of reproduction parts available—and Dick is an inveterate Hershey-goer—but the sleeve, as with most items, he had made by a local machinist. Cadillac tolerances may have been good for the era, but there are few parts that can't be duplicated in your hometown machine shop today.

Eventually, Sean did get it running again, and we climbed way up onto it, both from the passenger side because of the gear shifter on the right (driver's) side.

Aside from some confusion in figuring out what to do with the pedal for the planetary two-speed—it engages only low, and the hand lever is for high and reverse—driving is straightforward, albeit with more tweaking of the spark than we're used to, even in a brass car. We suspect the unrestored car would be a lot more forgiving—and dependable. The view is commanding in all directions, if slightly disconcerting, as we have good, clear look at the front left wheel wobbling gently back and forth. A shin-high dashboard holds only the K-W ignition controls, and nothing else. A brake pedal on the floor to the right of the steering column, at least as effective as on other cars of the era, ratchets and engages inboard brakes in the back; a Selden patent adorns the panel underneath the seats.

Cadillac may have been a few years away from their later heights of quality and style, but their engineering sights were set high. Aside from the planetary gear set, the drivetrain is conventional enough, with a single chain to the spur gear differential. But Sean points out the wedge-shaped cam that acts in concert with the throttle to adjust the valve timing on the fly. "They had a different way of doing things, all right," said Dick.

During our drive, "It's got two

speeds," Sean said, echoing Dick's sentiments. "Too slow and way too fast." Low speed is a 3.1:1 ratio, and high is direct, with a tall rearend and tall, 22-inch wheels you can chirp when setting out, if you're not careful. Five minutes away from Dick's house, we stalled again, and this time, no amount of cranking—or pushing—would restart it. Towed back, we discovered the Cadillac's hot radiator was nearly dry, and after 45 minutes of careful cooling and filling, it was back on the road—and rapidly spewing all its water out of at least three locations. A couple of runs later, we called it quits.

One hundred years later, the quality of Leland's engine, little changed from his Oldsmobile prototype in the 1906 Cadillac Model K light runabout, is obvious the moment you hear the unrestored car run. It's obvious in the way that a 21st century restoration needs still more work to equal the quality of one that's been left alone. Clearly, it takes about a century just to break one in properly. "It's early, yet comfortable and practical, very easy to drive, and unbelievably fast for a one-cylinder car," said Dick. "There aren't a ton of them out there. It's just amazing this survived." 🐞

Owner's View

While Dick Shappy is deep into Cadillacs (and other American luxury marques), he actually started out in Jaguars. "If you know anything about Jaguars, you'll know why I got out of them," he said. He still has a 1927 American LaFrance pumper from his fire engine period (he had 15 at one point), and recently, he's become very interested in pre-war motorcycles.

"The 1920 to '26 Cadillac isn't very popular, it's not as sought after as the V-12 and V-16s, but then you get into 1927 Cadillacs, your roadsters, and then in 1928 they really start to pour it on, and 1929-'33—that was the era for them. That was the height of the production of the real nice stuff. So I'm into those years.

"But I expanded into the early stuff, because I just like them, I do have a feel for 1908 through 1910 Cads, but the real sought-after stuff is the 1911s and 1912s—the '12 being your first electric, but the 1911 with the styling of the demitonneau is very sought after.

"I was the V-16 guy, but I got into the brass stuff, too. I saw them, and I said... I'm an opportunist, if something comes my way, if it's something that looks good and the price is right, and it's something that I have an interest in, if it's got all those qualities... bang, I jump on it. I'm a Caddy man, and I figured, 'Let's get into the really bony stuff, because it's so interesting.'

"Cadillac, for many years, they were out there really doing the right thing with these cars."

