MR. GREEN CAR

Electric vehicles the future, even in 1917

BY ALLEN PENTICOFF
COLUMNIST

Sometimes I just never know what I'm going to be writing this column about, and this week's was a similar case. I had my research materials for two stories inconveniently located an hour away – and my Monday deadline fast approaching. Planning to attend the Classics & Chrome car show on Sunday in the Machesney Park mall, my nephew said, "You'll find something there to write about." And indeed I did.

What I found among all the big gas guzzlers of yore and a few fuel sippers like a Crosley pick-up truck and a BMW Isetta bubble car was a 1917 Milburn Electric on display from The Automotive Gallery in Green Bay, Wisconsin. I was allowed a close inspection and conversed with the folks displaying it a bit and comparing it to our Chevy Volt.

A lot of interesting history is connected to this and other electric cars. The first known electric car with dry cell, non-rechargeable batteries was built by Scottish inventor Robert Anderson in 1832. American Thomas Davenport had a fairly practical electric locomotive in 1835. By 1870, electric carriages were more or less practical. Compared to the cantankerous early gasoline engine powered vehicles, electric power seemed a no brainer. Turn on the switch and go.

There is a photo of U.S. President Theodore "Teddy" Roosevelt riding in a 1902 Columbia electric carriage through Hartford, Connecticut in was is called the first presidential motorcade surrounded by "chainless" bicycles and an adoring public. Should you doubt the practicality of electric power, in 1899 an electric car was driven 100 miles on a single charge, while in 1911 Emil Gruenfeldt drove a Baker electric nearly 202 miles on a single charge, albeit both were rather slowly driven to do this. Back then a horse and carriage was not particularly fast or had much range either.

George Milburn was born in England in 1820, but immigrated to Canada, then to Goshen, Indiana in 1935. He went on to become fabulously wealthy and among his enterprises was the Milburn farm wagon, which became the world's largest wagon maker. Eventually this operation was moved to Toledo, Ohio when Mishawaka, Indiana refused to put in a rail line to the wagon factory. In 1914 and already involved in producing parts for electric auto builders, George Milburn decided he could make lighter cheaper electric cars than the competition (and they did) and founded the Milburn Light Electric Company, with production of their first cars in 1915.

A 1917 Milburn electric car was on display at the Classics & Chrome Auto Show this past weekend in Machesney Park. The car featured a battery driven motor, with the power supply housed in its trunk. Photos, Allen Penticoff

The 1915 Milburn Electric came in two models; the roadster for $1,285 and the coupe for $1,485. Both featured four-speeds forward, two-speeds in reverse with 50 mile range and a top speed of 15 mph. These were designed by Karl Probst who would later design the Bantam Jeep. A light truck would join the line along with other models for $995. By 1918 a Milburn Electric could travel 100 miles on a single charge and reach a top speed of 30 miles per hour. Bear in mind most of our roads were still dirt at that time, so speed and vast distances were not that important. Like today, the average daily use was 30 miles or less.

The 1917 Milburn I inspected at the car show had large doors on both sides. A bench seat was at the back of the tall cabin and two rear-facing jump seats were at the front. It was steered with a tiller stick and speed was controlled by a lever (models with a steering wheel were available). Both controls lift out of the way for ready access to seating. Braking was via a pedal on the floor and reverse selected by a foot switch. Being a sailor, I would find this arrangement quite familiar and practical. The batteries have easy access in the rear trunk compartment. It looks like it would be a comfortable quiet ride as long as those front jump seats are not used by adults. It would also be a bit weird looking past your passengers to see where you are going. The 1917 Milburn does not have any significant regenerative braking effect when coasting or slowing down.

President Woodrow Wilson's secret service had used 1918 Milburn electrics and the president himself owned one he drove around the White House grounds. George Milburn saw great possibilities for the electric car. The 1918 models were designed with the six-volt lead acid batteries in a wheeled box that could easily be swapped out for freshly charged batteries at centrally located exchanges. Almost 100 years later Tesla and others would offer this service as well. It could still provide a viable option that would end range anxiety and inconvenience of electric car ownership.

Milburn Light Electric built 4,000 cars over a period of 8 years, ending in 1923 when General Motors bought their facilities for $2 million. Milburn would merge with other industries to be come Dura Corp. who made many automotive parts (window lifts) and many art deco things we take for granted now, they also made convertible tops. When Dura sold out to Magna Corp. the tradition of making convertible tops continues to this day in the Mustang, Viper and Corvette.

During the early days of electric vehicles, there were many manufacturers. Detroit Electric and Baker Electric being two other popular makes. A Baker Electric ad once pleaded, "Ladies be patriotic, avoid use of gasoline, oil and chauffeurs now needed by the government." Electric cars were indeed popular with the liberated ladies of the day.