

Electric cars sparked local interest long before Rivian

By Bill Kemp, museum librarian

The startling success of electric automaker Rivian has shined an international spotlight on Bloomington-Normal. The company's ever-sprawling plant on Normal's west side also heralds the coming transportation revolution, as electric batteries replace the fossil-fuel burning, greenhouse gas-belching internal combustion engine.

Yet it is worth noting that during the automobile industry's formative years, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, electric cars enjoyed a level of acceptance and popularity not seen since, oh, right about now.

"The electric vehicle always has been popular in Bloomington, the Baker, Waverly and other makes being sold here and driven by owners who want a light car for getting about town," noted *The Pantagraph* in the spring of 1909. At the time, there were around 100 automobile owners in all of Bloomington. It is not known how many of them drove battery-powered "runabouts," but two years later, in 1911, there were an estimated 30 electrics zipping up and down city streets.

Back then, there was no shortage of Bloomington dealers selling electric autos. Keiser-Van Leer Co., for instance, sold the Baker Brougham, a "luxurious electric limousine," while T.K. Hayes offered the Detroit Electric, a "speedy, powerful, thoroughly modern, electric-powered automobile."

Selling electric autos is one thing; designing and assembling them is a "whole 'nother thing" altogether—just ask Rivian founder and CEO RJ Scaringe! Even so—and though strange it may seem—Rivian is not the Twin City's first foray into electric car manufacturing. Yes, before the space age R1T electric truck, there was the Henney Kilowatt, a battery-powered car engineered and assembled at the Eureka Williams Corp. plant in Bloomington.

What's that? You've never heard of the Henney Kilowatt? Well, that is understandable, as only 200 or fewer were ever made. That said, it is a fascinating story of a "car of tomorrow" that proved to be decades ahead of its time.

A four-door subcompact, the Henney Kilowatt featured a repurposed Renault Dauphine car body—which gave the experimental car an even more idiosyncratic imprint. There were but two model years—1959 and 1960. The brainchild behind the Henney Kilowatt was C. Russell Feldmann, president of National Union Electric Co., a conglomerate that included the Henney Motor Co., Emerson Radio and Eureka Williams of Bloomington.

Bloomington-based Eureka Williams got its start as Williams Oil-O-Matic, an early manufacturer of oil-burning home heaters. Its workforce quickly earned a reputation for its engineering acumen and precision machine work. In 1945, Williams Oil-O-Matic merged with Eureka Vacuum Cleaner Co. of Detroit, with all operations consolidating in Bloomington.

National Union Electric, Eureka Williams' parent company, viewed electric utilities as a ready market for its Henney Kilowatt prototype, as it was thought battery-powered vehicles were a perfect fit for the stop-and-go work of meter reading, bill collecting and the like. In addition, electric utilities were eager to promote (and often directly sold) electric appliances—from hair dryers to ranges. Electric cars dovetailed with this dream of an all-electric future and its captive citizen-consumers at the mercy of the local utility's energy monopoly.

Eureka Williams is credited with designing and building the car's electric propulsion system, in consultation with early electric car pioneer Victor Wouk of the California Institute of Technology.

The inaugural 1959 model was spectacularly underpowered by standards both then and now. Eighteen two-volt batteries and a seven-horsepower electric motor provided a top speed of 40 mph and a range of 40 miles. The 1960 model offered several improvements, with its twelve six-volt batteries boosting speeds and range to 60 mph and 60 miles respectively. Charging required an ordinary electric cord and household outlet, with a full charge taking eight to ten hours. Both model years were available in black, red and gray.

In addition to electric utilities, the Henney Kilowatt was marketed to the general public as a family's second car, good for shopping trips and in-town use. Yet even if one was willing to overlook its speed and range limitations, the steep \$3,500 sticker price (or nearly \$33,000 in today's dollars) doomed the Henney Kilowatt's market prospects.

At any rate, Eureka Williams could not produce the cars cheap enough or fast enough to sell at the target price of \$3,500. Utilities ended up purchasing most of the 46 or 47 Henney Kilowatts that were sold. Buyers included Atlantic City (N.J.) Electric Co.; Louisiana Power & Light Co. of New Orleans; and Commonwealth Edison Co., Chicago.

In the end, the 1960s were destined to be the decade not of the Henney Kilowatt and its successors, but rather the Ford Mustang, the Lincoln Continental, the Buick Riviera and their many hulking, gas-guzzling kin.

For a decade and a half after the last Henney Kilowatt rolled off the Bloomington assembly line, unsold inventory—70 or so cars—"gathered dust" in a warehouse on South Center Street. That lot was then hauled away in the summer of 1975 to Tiffany Motor Corp. in Opa-locka, Fla.

Today, there are some—but not many!— surviving Henney Kilowatts scattered across the country.

The Swedish home appliance manufacturer AB Electrolux purchased National Union Electric and Eureka Williams in 1974, and the Eureka Co. remained a leading local employer for two more decades.

In 2011, when Electrolux was closing its last offices in the Twin Cities, company officials invited the McLean County Museum of History to review—for potential donation—boxes of promotional material, scrapbooks, employee newsletters, newspaper clippings, correspondence and photographs. For several days museum staff sorted through the material before boxing much of it up and hauling it back to the museum archives. Included in this treasure trove were papers relating to the development and marketing of the Henney Kilowatt.

Once at the museum, the boxes of donated items were further organized, inventoried, cataloged and placed in the climate-control archives. Today, the Eureka Williams and Henney Kilowatt collections are available to students, community residents, researchers, or anyone else with an interest in learning more.

And speaking of learning more, McLean County Museum of History Librarian Bill Kemp is giving the illustrated program, "Before Rivian: The Henney Kilowatt—Bloomington's Battery-powered Car of Tomorrow," on Saturday, March 26. This talk, which the museum hopes will be both in-person and online, will include dozens of rare or never-before-seen illustrations, promotional items, photographs, and more—all from the museum archives. To register, visit the museum's website. Bill promises an electrifying, edifying time for all!