

Stearns Knight History

When the F.B. Stearns Co took on the sleeve valve Knight engine they were on a winner! In the first year of Knight engine vehicles, sales were double those of 1911 and they were able to announce a 24% dividend. This return leapt to an incredible 81% in 1913. Dividends over the next few years weren't so good due to a huge capital investment program to expand manufacturing facilities but presumably shareholders were happy with this as their share prices would have increased. In addition to their high quality cars, trucks up to 5 ton capacity were built in the 1911 - 1914 period. The second world war put a stop to the trucks because Rolls Royce needed help in building aircraft engines. The F.B. Stearns Co was chosen to help build these engines because of their demonstrated abilities in the areas of precision and close tolerance machining demanded in building Knight engine cars and trucks.

Even though the F.B. Stearns Co engineering abilities were world renowned, it still came as a surprise when they introduced the first sleeve valve V8 to the public in Aug 1915. Sure, other manufacturers were offering V8's at around that time but this was a sleeve valve V8. J.N. Willys must have been green with envy as it took till Aug 1917 for him to come up with his V8 sleeve valve equivalent, the Willys Knight 8-88.

The F.B. Stearns Co seemed unstoppable but in 1917 Frank Stearns had to retire due to ill health. Now under the leadership of George Booker, a former Stearns Knight dealer and banker, the company came under close financial scrutiny. It was decided to drop the expensive V8 and instead concentrate on the cheaper 4 cylinder model. Most of the senior managers were replaced. The Chief Engineer responsible for the V8, James Gilman (Pete) Sterling, resigned in April 1920 taking many engineers and production staff with him to build his own car - the [Sterling Knight](#).

For a time the strategy to concentrate on the L4 model seemed to work. In fact production figures were at record levels of 3,849 and 3,046 for 1920 and 1921 respectively, but these were boom years for many manufacturers. Suddenly the market changed to a buyers market and only 693 were made for 1922. The one model (Light 4) policy wasn't working and the market wanted something new. A six cylinder S model was brought out along with a B (Big 4) and another six cylinder C model. However all this investment in new models cost money and in Dec 1925, J.N. Willys and his backers were able to acquire 150,000 shares for \$2.5 million. This was the second takeover since F.B. Stearns had left. Once again, a new management team was announced.

In spite of the announcement that the F.B. Stearns Co would retain its identity as a separate corporation with its own manufacturing facilities, it seems as though some joint cooperation between Willys Knight and Stearns Knight engineers was going on. This was the 6 cylinder sleeve valve engine with 3 3/8 x 4 3/4 bore and stroke. Although built at Willys Knight plants it was used in the Stearns Knight Models M & N along with the Willys Knight 66A.

The F.B. Stearns Co seemed to be getting back on it's feet when along came the 1929 stock market crash. J.N. Willys had sold his stock in Stearns in the summer, just months before, in preparation for his position as ambassador to Poland. The end was short and swift. On Dec 20 assembly lines had stopped and by Dec 30, 1929 all operations had ceased.

J.N. Willys returned at the request of President Hoover to salvage what he could of Willys Overland, but unfortunately it was too late to save the F.B. Stearns Co, which although just a small company, had produced some of the finest automobiles of the pre-depression period. Total Stearns Knight production was 31,907.

Interested readers should also refer to [W.O.K.R. STARTER](#) number 134 (Jan - Mar 1996) & number 135 (Apr - Jun 1996) for more detailed accounts of Frank Stearns and his company. Also check [W.O.K.R. LIBRARY](#) for information.

Stearns Knight models can get a bit confusing, but the following information extracted from the W.O.K.R. Roster (with permission) can help with identification;

Stearns Knight Models & Serial Numbers

Year	Model	Series	Serial No's	Introduction Date	Cyl	Bore x Stroke	Wheelbase
1912	"Four" 40 28-9	SK-4	5000-5875	Jul 1911	4	4 1/4 x 5 1/2	116, 121, 127
1913	"Four" 40 28-9	SK-4	6000-6412	Jul 1912	4	4 1/4 x 5 1/2	116, 121, 127
1913	"Six" 42-8	SK-6	8000-8327	Aug 1912	6	4 1/4 x 5 3/4	134, 140
1914	"Four" 40 28-9	SK-4	6500-6800		4	4 1/4 x 5 1/2	116, 121, 127
1914	"Six" 42-8	SK-6	8328-8727		6	4 1/4 x 5 3/4	134, 140
1915	"Four" 40 28-9	SK-4	7000-7039		4	4 1/8 x 4 1/2	116, 121, 127
1915	Light 4 32	L-4	L1-L702		4	3 3/4 x 5 5/8	119
1915	"Six" 42-8	SK-6	9000-9109		6	4 1/4 x 5 3/4	134, 140
1916	Light 4 32	L-4	L703-L2799		4	3 3/4 x 5 5/8	119
1916	"Eight" 33	SK-8	10001-10900	Aug 1915	V 8	3 1/4 x 5	123
1917	Light 4 32	L-4	L2800-L4720		4	3 3/4 x 5 5/8	119
1917	"Eight" 33	SK-8	10901-12078		V 8	3 1/4 x 5	123
1918	Light 4 32	L-4	L4721-L5992		4	3 3/4 x 5 5/8	119, 125
1918	"Eight" 33	SK-8	12079-12404		V 8	3 1/4 x 5	123
1919	Light 4 32	L-4	L5993-L7433		4	3 3/4 x 5 5/8	125
1920	Light 4 32	L-4	L7434-L10467		4	3 3/4 x 5 5/8	125
1921	Light 4 32	L-4	L10468-L13197		4	3 3/4 x 5 5/8	125
1922	Light 4 32	L-4	L13198-L14693		4	3 3/4 x 5 5/8	125
1923	Light 4 32	L-4	L14694-L14932		4	3 3/4 x 5 5/8	125
1923	S	S-6	S1-S1753	Mid 1922	6	3 3/8 x 5	130
1924	Light 4 32	L-4	L14933-L15003		4	3 3/4 x 5 5/8	125
1924	B (Big 4)	B-4	B1-B1213		4	3 3/4 x 5 5/8	119
1924	S	S-6	S1754-S2692		6	3 3/8 x 5	130

1925	B (Big 4)	B-4	B1214-B1315		4	3 3/4 x 5 5/8	119
1925	C	6-75	C1-C1249	Oct 1924	6	3 1/4 x 5	121
1925	S	6-95	S2693-S2905		6	3 3/8 x 5	130
1925	S	6-95	S2906-S3399		6	3 1/2 x 5	130
1926	B (Big 4)	B-4	B1316-B1393		6	3 3/4 x 5 5/8	119
1926	C	6-75	C1250-C1808		6	3 1/4 x 5	121
1926	S	6-95	S3400-S4460		6	3 1/2 x 5	130
1926	D	6-85	D1-D433	Sep 1926	6	3 1/2 x 5	137
1927	F	6-85	F602-F1089		6	3 1/2 x 5	137
1927	G	8-85	G1-G338	Jan 1927	8	3 1/2 x 5	137
1928	F	6-85	F1090-F1541	Oct 1928	6	3 1/2 x 5	137
1928	G	8-85	G339-G641		8	3 1/2 x 5	137
1928	H (Deluxe)	8-90	H15650- H15695	Jan 1928	8	3 1/2 x 5	137
1928	J (Deluxe)	8-90	J11650-J11772	Jan 1928	8	3 1/2 x 5	145
1928	M	6-80	M21550- M21571	Apr 1928	6	3 3/8 X 4 3/4	126
1928	N	6-80	N51550- N51594	Apr 1928	6	3 3/8 X 4 3/4	134
1929	H (Deluxe)	8-90	H15696- H15976		8	3 1/2 x 5	137
1929	J (Deluxe)	8-90	J11773-J12037		8	3 1/2 x 5	145
1929	M	6-80	M21572- M22610		6	3 3/8 X 4 3/4	126
1929	N	6-80	N51595- N52127		6	3 3/8 X 4 3/4	134

Notes: J models have H motor numbers
N models have M motor numbers