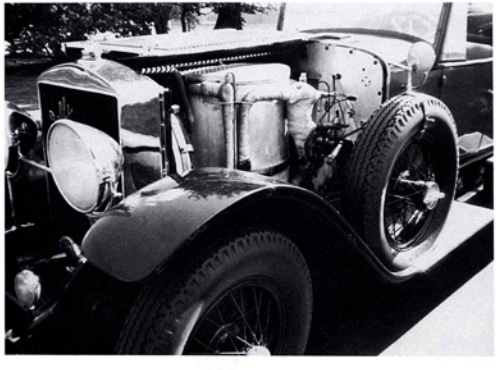
DOBLE

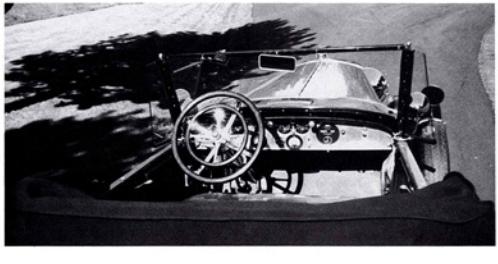
Though the Doble was an engineering masterpiece not improved upon by the few steam cars that were built after it, a commercial success it was not. If, despite its advantages, the steam car was destined for oblivion, it is fitting that the Doble of the Classic Era should retain best-ever honors. It was an incredible car.

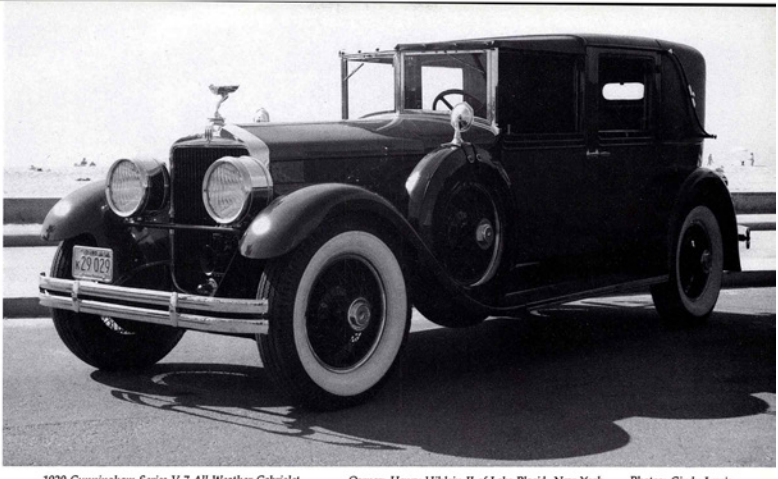
An MIT-trained engineer, Abner Doble had begun outsteaming the Stanleys prior to the First World War. The Series E, introduced at the San Francisco Automobile Show in 1923, was his apogee. Most of the car's components were produced in Doble's Emeryville, California factory. Coachwork was designed by W. Everett Miller and built by the Walter M. Murphy Company of Pasadena. The Series E was a huge car, stretching 150 inches between the axles and weighing about three tons. The speedometer read to 100 mph, which was not merely optimism. There wasn't a luxury car anywhere that could better a Doble in performance. Audaciously, Doble guaranteed "100,000 luxurious, silent and trouble-free miles."

J. Martin Anderson explains how his Doble works: "The engine is a four-cylinder cross-compound geared directly to the rear drive with a ratio of two to three. Developing about 65 hp, it turns 900 rpm at touring speed, and at 100 mph only 1500 rpm. Maximum torque is at 0 rpm. Fuel can be anything, gasoline to #2 furnace oil or any mixture with no changes or adjustments. Fuel mileage is about 10 mpg. There are no gears to shift. The throttle is a small wheel in the center of the steering wheel which turns about 45 degrees closed to open. The boiler is monotube, about 640 feet of tubing in pancake coils. From cold, steam is raised to 1000 p.s.i. in fifty seconds. In less than a minute, the car is underway. And quickly." Indeed, one contemporary road test report on the Series E advised caution to the first-time Doble driver because of the car's "exceptional acceleration."

Possibly the most enthusiastic Doble owner of the Classic Era was Howard Hughes. The Anderson car was originally his, built as a runabout and later converted to a roadster by Hughes. Doble's problem with his Series E was making a profit; he couldn't manage it even with a $10,000 price tag. Finally a shady stock manipulation scheme (of which Doble wasn't aware until too late) and the stock market crash combined to take the steam out of Doble Steam Motors by 1931. Few more than forty of these magnificent cars had been built.







1929 Cunningham Series V-7 All Weather Cabriolet. *Owner: Henry Uihlein II of Lake Placid, New York.* *Photos: Cindy Lewis*