

flywheels



Franklin TREKKERS

How a car club dedicated to vehicles that went out of production over 90 years ago appeals to a new generation.





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In an era where TikTok trends and viral sensations change by the day, how can a car club dedicated to vehicles that went out of production over 90 years ago capture the interest of Gen Z, especially when the average age of its members is 70? It is a challenge that the H.H. Franklin Club seems to navigate with ease. Its success in attracting much younger members is partly due to the financial generosity of its members and the warm, inclusive atmosphere that greets newcomers when they attend a Franklin Trek.

“New Trekkers are easy to spot,”

said Susan Roberts, Franklin Trek registrar. “They all wear red nametags. Our members know it’s their first time and make sure they get the best experience. Most first-time Trekkers are driving a Franklin by the end of the first day.”

This year, 23 new students, returning students, and others from McPherson College attended the 70th Franklin Trek at Union College in Schenectady, NY, from July 27 through August 2. In fact, the Trek recorded nearly 20% of its participants this year were under 25 years old.

While multi-generational family members comprise some of the under-25 crowd, many participants come to the Trek through the Franklin Club’s Student Experience Program. The program offers multiple avenues of financial assistance for students to attend the Annual Franklin Trek, and since its inception, has raised \$150,000 through member donations to fund the program.

Students can apply for a first-time scholarship to attend the Trek that covers expenses, and the club recently approved funding for 10 scholarships per year.

Students can also apply for the Sinclair Powell Scholarships designed for students who return to two or more club events, making them eligible for up to \$2,000 in tuition funding. The Arnie Fund helps supplement the cost to students returning to future Treks while they are still in school or under 25.

The Arnie Fund is named in memory of Roberts’ father, Arnie Christiansen, who participated in the Franklin Trek for over 40 years. The family has lifelong ties to the Franklin automobile, having at least one in the family since 1904. Roberts’ father was driven home from the hospital in Franklin after he was born, and so was her son, who is a fourth-generation club member.

“My father was 88 years old when he attended his last Trek,” Roberts said. “While he was there, three or four students sat and visited with him for

hours, and he was so surprised they would want to talk with him. They were so engaged, and it made me think that it’s great we help bring the students here for the first time, but we needed to do something to get them to come back. That was the idea for the Arnie Fund.”

First-time attendees are also given a three-year membership to the H.H. Franklin Club. However, what seems even more important than getting students to return to Franklin events is trying to help students own a Franklin automobile.



Twenty three representatives of McPherson College at the 2024 Franklin Trek.

“We realized about 15 years ago that we needed to do something,” said Mark Chaplin, treasurer. “It’s not unusual for our average member to have been in the club for 50 years. Finding new owners of Franklins; the chances are they are around 50 years old. That’s not a recipe for the vibrancy of a club.”

Chaplin said the club wanted to impart Franklin automobiles to the next generation and have been successful at helping interested students become owners of them. He can list the names of many students and alumni who have purchased or been given cars by Franklin Club members. The club is looking at making it an official process by exploring the idea of a revolving loan program that would offer students interest-free loans if they agree to get a car drivable and bring it to the Franklin Trek.



Photo: Thomas Tencer


A McPherson College senior, Edwin Buitter, attended his first Franklin Trek three years ago. He hadn't heard of a Franklin before attending the Trek, but as a Corvair owner, the Franklin's air-cooled engine and unique engineering was intriguing. After his first Trek, Edwin was hooked, and club members helped him obtain a 1929 135 Victoria Brougham.

The car had been sitting for 20 years and required some mechanical work. The paint, chassis, and engine were all at a perfect starting point, and he has gone through all the mechanical systems and is starting work on the interior. In a relatively short time, he got the car in driving condition and has been enjoying it ever since.

"It's really nice to be welcomed into a community like the Franklin Club," Buitter said. "It's as much about the people as it is about the cars. It's like a big family. They set a great example of what a small club can do to attract new members, and I want to pass it along to other students. I'm always giving students rides in my car and letting them drive. Last weekend, I put over 100 miles on it."

Another student, Hunter Powell, a sophomore, attended the Franklin Trek for the first time this year and was offered a 1922 Demi Sedan.

"I'm looking forward to working on it," he said. "There is so much I am learning in my classes that I can apply to the restoration. I hope I can take it back to the Trek someday. The Franklin Club is so friendly. I wasn't sure what I was getting into, but there was so much positive energy, and everyone wanted to talk to you and let you experience their cars."

Buitter agrees and hopes to drive his car to the Trek next summer. Participating in the Franklin Club is something he sees himself doing for many years. He will start a full-time job with The NB Center in Allentown, PA, after he graduates in May. He isn't worried about feeling far away from family because he knows there's Franklin Club members who live just 20 minutes away. 

Curt Goodwin, engines professor, was the first McPherson College professor to attend the Franklin Trek this year. He said, "Now I understand why the students come back with such an appreciation of this car club. Our students are a good fit with the club because they appreciate the unique engineering of the cars and the extensive knowledge that the members are so willing to share with them by letting them experience their cars."



"It's an opportunity for our students to see, drive, and learn about a unique marque, and when students like Edwin bring Franklins to campus, it's a great learning experience for all the students. Beyond the beautiful examples of Franklins, it's the people that make this such an outstanding experience for our students."



Photos: Thomas Tencer



H.H. Franklin Club Member

Matt Goist '17

Matt Goist, a 2017 McPherson College Automotive Restoration program graduate, says his love of Franklins is a direct byproduct of the H.H. Franklin Club. His revolving collection of Franklins is currently at six.

Goist attended his first Franklin Trek as a recipient of the funding through the Student Experience Program. He returned as a McPherson College student, bringing a few friends with him, and has attended the Franklin Trek every year since. He's served two terms on the club's board of directors and leads the Student Experience Program.

"At seventeen, I didn't know about the cars," said Goist. "I fell in love with the club, and the cars came later."

He met Franklin Club members at a Concours in Ohio who told him about the program and encouraged him to apply for the funds. They also introduced him to a McPherson College graduate, Adam Hammer '09.

"It sealed the deal for me," he said. "I don't plan on ever missing a Franklin Trek. I've seen the club grow over the years through the involvement of younger members. It gets easier each year to bring students to the Trek. Students go back to McPherson and tell their friends about their experience."

According to Goist, the rate of retention has been a success, especially during a transformative time in students' lives.

"It says a lot about the how the members embrace the students," he said. "I attribute it to a really welcoming environment; their generosity is mind-boggling."