

The car that ran on water

“ Staff Writer

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After more than 20 years of research and tinkering, it was time to celebrate.

Stanley Allen Meyer, his brother and two Belgian investors raised glasses in the Grove City Cracker Barrel on March 20, 1998.

Meyer said his invention could do what physicists say is impossible -- turn water into hydrogen fuel efficiently enough to drive his dune buggy cross-country on 20 gallons straight from the tap.

He took a sip of cranberry juice. Then he grabbed his neck, bolted out the door, dropped to his knees and vomited violently.

"I ran outside and asked him, 'What's wrong?' " his brother, Stephen Meyer, recalled. "He said, 'They poisoned me.' That was his dying declaration."

'Cloak and dagger'

Stanley Meyer's bizarre death at age 57 ended work that, if proved valid, could have ended reliance on fossil fuels.

People who knew him say his work drew worldwide attention: mysterious visitors from overseas, government spying and lucrative buyout offers.

His death sparked a three-month investigation that consumed and fascinated Grove City police. "Meyer's death was laced with all sorts of stories of conspiracy, cloak-and-dagger stories," said Grove City Police Lt. Steve Robinette, lead detective on the case.

If Stephen Meyer was shocked at his twin brother's collapse and death, he was equally amazed at the Belgians' response the next day.

"I told them that Stan had died and they never said a word," he recalled, "absolutely nothing, no condolences, no questions.

"I never, ever had a trust of those two men ever again."

Today, Stanley Meyer is featured on numerous Internet sites. A significant portion of the 1995 documentary *It Runs on Water*, narrated by science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke and aired on the BBC, focuses on his "water fuel cell" invention.

James Robey wants a permanent place for Meyer in his Kentucky Water Fuel Museum.

"He was ignored, called a fraud and died without his small hometown even remembering him with so much as a plaque," Robey wrote in his self-published book *Water Car*.

Meyer had euphoric highs and humiliating defeats. He was kind and generous yet paranoid and suspicious. He would be hailed as a visionary and a genius. He also would be sued and declared a fraud.

As many of his more than 20 patents expire this year, and gasoline prices hover around \$3 per gallon, there is growing interest in his inventions. But it remains unclear how much was true science and how much was science fiction.

'Always building'

Meyer was born and lived on Columbus' East Side before moving to Grandview Heights, where he finished high school.

He briefly attended Ohio State University and joined the military.

"We were always building something," Stephen Meyer recalled of their youth. "We went out and created our toys."

At 6 feet 3 and with a booming voice, Stanley Meyer was charismatic and persuasive, equally conversant with physicists and bricklayers.

He was also eccentric. His favorite phrase was "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition," friends said.

He once called Grove City police to his home and laboratory on Broadway to report a suspicious package. The Columbus bomb squad detonated the parcel, only to discover it was equipment that he had ordered.

His focus on water as a fuel began in earnest in 1975, a year after the end of the Arab oil embargo, which had triggered high gas prices, gas-pump lines and anxiety.

"It became imperative that we must try to bring in an alternative fuel source and do it very quickly," Meyer says in the documentary.

'Something for nothing'

The basis for Meyer's research, electrolysis, is taught in middle-school science labs.

Electricity flows through water, cracking the molecules and filling test tubes with oxygen and hydrogen bubbles. A match is lighted. The volatile gases explode to prove that water has separated into its components.

Meyer said his invention did so using much less electricity than physicists say is possible. Videos show his contraptions turning water into a frothy mix within seconds.

"It takes so much energy to separate the H₂ from the O," said Ohio State University professor emeritus Neville Reay, a physicist for more than 41 years. "That energy has pretty much not changed with time. It's a fixed amount, and nothing changes that."

Meyer's work defies the Law of Conservation of Energy, which states that energy cannot be created or destroyed.

"Basically, it says you can't get something for nothing," Reay said.

"He may have had a nice way to store the hydrogen and use it to make a very effective motor, but there is no way to do something fancy and separate hydrogen with less energy."

'I was a sucker'

Nevertheless, Meyer attracted believers, investors and, eventually, legal trouble.

"I was a sucker for some of this stuff at the time," William E. Brooks said from his home in Anchorage, Alaska.

Brooks invested more than \$300,000 in Meyer's technology. He hoped to find applications for his aviation business.

Today, he and his wife, Lorraine, laugh about the ordeal, made easier because their money was returned in a 1994 settlement in Franklin County Common Pleas Court.

Two years later, a Fayette County judge found "gross and egregious fraud" in Meyer's contract negotiation with two businessmen. Their money was returned.

Roger L. Hurley, a retired Darke County judge, defended Meyer and still believes in him.

"I would not represent someone who I would consider to be a shyster or a bum," said Hurley. "He was a nice guy."

'The Lord sent me'

Meyer's creativity seemed to peak after he met Charles and Valorie Hughes, truck drivers who lived in Jackson Township.

Julia Hughes, the youngest of their seven children, was 5 years old when Meyer rang the doorbell of her home on Marlane Drive.

"His first few words were, 'The Lord sent me here to this home; I'd like to use your home as an experiment,' " she said.

Maybe it was the two-story garage-shop or the privacy of towering oak and sycamore trees; Julia isn't sure what Meyer saw there. But she knew her parents didn't have room for a struggling inventor.

Yet after visiting with the family for several hours, Meyer stayed the night, and then the next few years in the late 1970s.

In return, Meyer built the family a solar silo, designed to both heat and cool the home. The structure required thousands of clear resin "light guides," a crude form of fiber optics, which Meyer baked and molded in the family kitchen. Julia Hughes recalled the chemical stench.

The system was supposed to channel the sun's rays into the tower's base to heat water and generate electricity for an air conditioner. Despite extensive efforts that included re-plumbing the house, the invention never worked.

That didn't bother Charles Hughes, Julia's father, who is retired in Jackson, Ohio.

He would see Meyer power his tractor for 15 minutes on well water, he said. He would put his nose to the exhaust.

"There was no fumes whatsoever," he recalled. "It was just clean, hot air.

"He was just very trustworthy, very religious. I just had the feeling that he would not take anything from me, and he never did," Mr. Hughes said.

'Sell out or sit on it'

Belief in Meyer continues today. So does suspicion about plots to silence him.

Stephen Meyer recalled a phone call to his brother's home in the 1980s.

"He turned to me and said, 'They just offered me \$800 million. Should I take it?'

"I said, 'Hell yes. How much money do you want?'

"He got very quiet. When he got into that thinking process, I just let him alone," Stephen recalled.

Charlie Hughes, now 36, vividly recalls the strangers who visited his parents' home in the late 1970s.

He had been playing outside when the driveway suddenly filled with limousines. Men in turbans stepped out. In "stern, thick accents," they asked for Meyer. "I remember, because I was not allowed in my own house that day."

They left briskly. Charlie was about to go inside when the driveway filled again, this time with military vehicles. "Army brass," he recalled.

At dinner that night, Meyer told them: "The Arabs wanted to offer me \$250 million to stop today. You and this lovely family can live in peace and prosperity the rest of your days."

The Army officials, meanwhile, had questioned Meyer about what the foreigners wanted, thinking that a deal might have been struck, Charlie recalled Meyer telling the family.

Meyer discusses the offers in the Clarke documentary.

"Many times over the last decade, I have been offered enormous amounts of money simply to sell out or sit on it ... The Arabs have offered me a total of a billion dollars total pay simply to sit on it and do nothing with it."

Coroner's report

The Grove City police investigation of Meyer's death included taped interviews of more than a dozen witnesses.

Absent, however, were audiotapes of the two Belgians, Phillippe Vandemoortele and Marc Vancraeynest.

The men had agreed to purchase 56 acres along Seeds Road in Grove City. The city had approved a research campus there two months before Meyer's death.

Lt. Steve Robinette said it's possible the men's interviews were not taped.

Calls and e-mails to Vandemoortele and Vancraeynest for this story were not returned.

The Franklin County coroner ruled that Meyer, who had high blood pressure, died of a brain aneurysm. Absent any proof of foul play, the police went with the coroner's report.

The only detectable drugs were the pain reliever lidocaine and phenytoin, which is used to treat seizures.

And what became of the dune buggy that captivated a community for at least a few years?

A longtime friend of Meyer's, who doesn't want to be named because he fears that people will bother him about the invention, led a reporter to the basement of a property south of Columbus recently.

"I really shouldn't be showing you this," he said.

After passing through several darkened rooms scattered with computers and electrical equipment, he opened a door. In the far corner of a garage sat the buggy, its leather seats cracked, its engine partially covered with a cloth.

A decal on the bright red paint declares: "Jesus Christ is Lord."

Then the man quickly led the way out. Lights went dark. Doors clicked shut.

In his front yard, he sat on a lawn chair and sipped fruit punch. He watched the cars and trucks drive by on the road, burning gasoline.

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who was 5 when Meyer moved in with her family and later built an experimental solar silo

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