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## The Cars of 1954: Warm-up Act

1941-42 Studebaker President and Commander  
1968-70 Dodge Coronet R/T • 1947-55 Chevrolet Trucks



- '36 Singer Le Mans 2-seater Sports
- '58 Ford Del Rio Ranch Wagon



1969 Dodge Coronet R/T Hardtop Coupe



# Buick's 100th Anniversary Celebration: Hundredfold History

by Gary Witzenburg



Vintage Buicks, and the people who love them, swarmed over Flint, Michigan, to celebrate the marque's centennial.

The year 2003 was a grand one for automotive history, witnessing the 100th anniversaries of the founding of both the Ford Motor Company and Buick. Hard on the heels of Ford's centennial bash in June (*CA*, December 2003), homage was paid to Buick's century-long heritage over four late-July days in the marque's ancestral hometown of Flint, Michigan. The General Motors division teamed up with the Buick Club of America to make the 2003 edition of the BCA's annual national meet into a memorable salute to a milestone.

Approaching the Buick centennial show at Flint's Cultural Center on the bright Saturday morning of July 26, I was directed through the barricades and straight to the show field. It must

have been because I was driving a historic Buick, which was assumed to be an entry.

OK, it was my own '91 Reatta ragtop—hardly old but certainly rare, one of 305 built and 238 sold that year, according to Terry Dunham's and Larry Gustin's wonderful sixth edition of *The Buick, A Complete History*. I had dragged the wine-red Reatta out of storage, spiffed it up, and registered and reinsured it for this auspicious occasion—which turned out to be a fine idea.

The BCA's Reatta Division folks had space for more than 100 examples of Buick's nice but short-lived two-seat coupe and convertible, and they allowed me to add mine to their display. That saved hiking from a remote public lot

and made me feel like part of the party.

First stop was a preview showing of Gustin's DVD, *The Legend of Buick*, at the theater across the courtyard. It was introduced by Sinclair Powell, past president of the Society of Automotive Historians. "Hundreds of marques have been created," he said. "Most have lasted days, weeks, months, or a few years. A very small number have seen continuous production for 100 years." Gustin called the project a work in progress. "This video has more pioneers of the industry than any I've ever seen," he said. "How did those early leaders look and move? How did those early engines sound? We are working on clearances and hope to be able to sell it one day."

"The Buick," as employees often called

it, was incorporated in Detroit by plumbing inventor David Dunbar Buick on May 19, 1903. The next year, following a move to Flint, the first cars for public sale were made. Four years later, it was the largest U.S. automaker with 8820 cars out the door, and it provided the foundation for Billy Durant's General Motors Corporation. The 1 millionth Buick was built in 1923, and the marque peaked at more than a million cars produced in 1985.

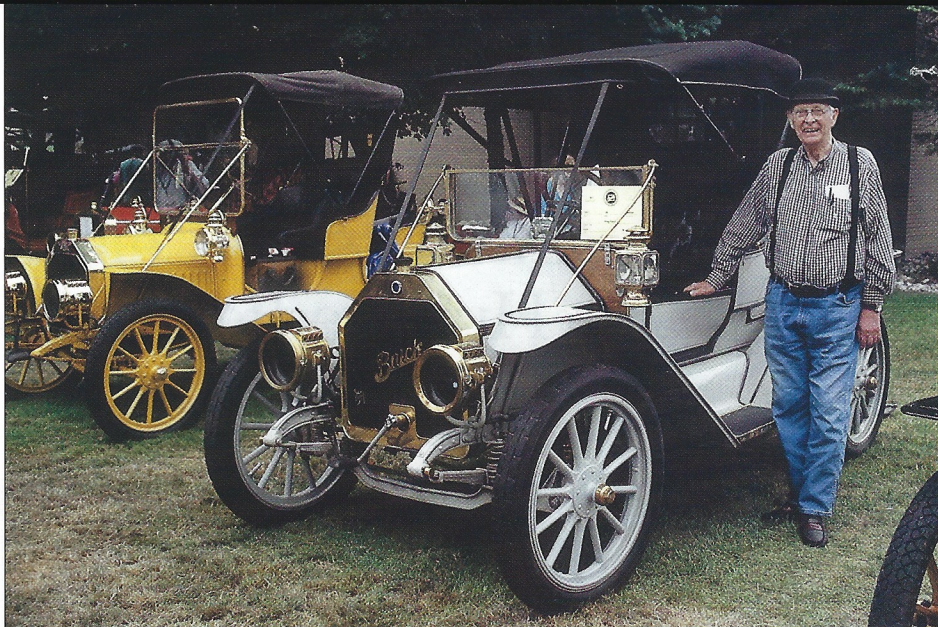
Back in the sunlight, I began to drink in the show. The spectacular display of more than 1800 historic Buicks was spread across the Cultural Center's 30-acre campus, which also contains the Alfred P. Sloan Museum, the Buick Gallery and Research Center, and a host of other attractions. Never before have so many fascinating and beautiful Buicks of all years and types, representing nearly every production year from 1904 to 1991, been assembled in one place at one time. Most looked as if they had just rolled out of time-capsule showrooms.

More than 1700 were entered by owners and BCA members from across the U.S. and Canada. Nearly 100 more, including a host of concepts and show cars, were displayed by Buick and the Sloan Museum. International jeweler and lifelong Buick enthusiast Nicola Bulgari not only brought 10 of his 70 historic Buicks, he donated one of them—a 1938 Special—to the museum.

Outside the hospitality tent, I found Bob Coletta, who served as Buick general manager in 1997-98, and asked what the event meant to him. "It brings really good, warm feelings," said Coletta, who spent his entire 43-year GM career at Buick. "It means that Buick's alive and well."

Event director Dennis Meyer sized things up: "This is by far the largest BCA meet ever by two-and-a-half times," he said. "It is a once-in-a-lifetime event that means everything to the BCA and Buick Motor Division. . . . Assuming an average value of about \$20,000, we have \$360 million worth of vehicles here, not counting the concepts and Mr. Bulgari's cars."

Inside, I chatted with Bill and Ethel Shea of Rochester, New York, who have owned a number of Buicks beginning with the 1950 Super convertible in which they honeymooned. A retired Kodak engineer and program manager, Bill said he applied at Buick fresh out of college, but a classmate got the job instead. "Then I found out we could buy cars from Buick engineers, so we bought the '50 Super



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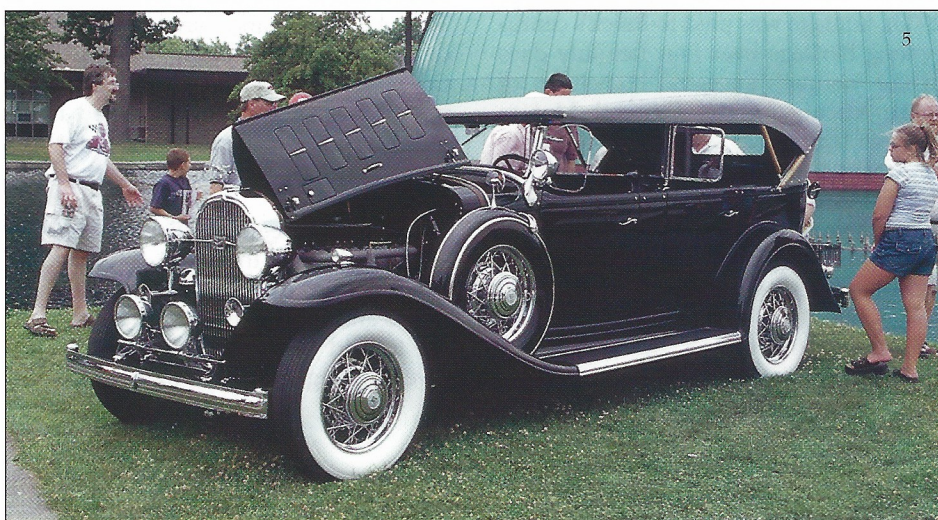
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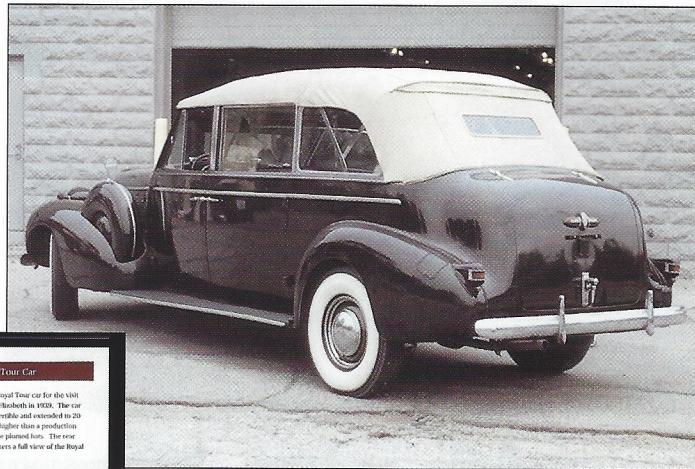
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#### 1939 McLaughlin Buick Royal Tour Car

McLaughlin Buick of Canada built this Royal Tour car for the visit of Britain's King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in 1939. The car is a 90 series sedan, modified to a convertible and extended to 20 feet in length. The top is seven inches higher than a production vehicle to accommodate the King's large pointed ears. The rear windows are extended to afford onlookers a full view of the Royal entourage.

Fielded in a special shade of Royal Maroon (the match Buick cars used in Britain), the car features a sterling silver vanity, room for newspapers, and ashtrays and cigar lighters. Satin hand bar lap robes provided comfort on cold days.

Courtesy of Canada Science and Technology Museum

Flint

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1, 2. A number of brass-era cars from Buick's first decade were in evidence at the centennial show, which served as the Buick Club of America's national meet for 2003. 3. Well before the age of factory-built station wagons, aftermarket body manufacturers were filling the need in 1923. 4. The popularity of closed cars had not yet taken hold throughout the industry in '23, when touring cars like this seven-passenger model still held sway. 5. The situation had changed considerably by the time this 1932 phaeton hit the market. 6-8. The Canada Science and Technology Museum lent this McLaughlin-bodied Series 90 that was modified to serve England's King George VI and Queen Elizabeth when they visited Canada in 1939. 9. A row of Buicks spanning the 1930-40 period. 10. Buick Division and the Sloan Museum in Flint also participated, which is why dream cars like the 1951 Le Sabre (left) and 1938 Y-Job were on display.



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from him, drove it home through Canada in a snowstorm, went off the road, and had a farmer pull us out with his tractor. Since then, Buick has been my thing."

Gustin and Dunham were signing books in the Sloan Museum lobby for a line of Buick buffs that stretched out well into the courtyard. "The history and heritage here this week is not only in the automobiles but also in the people . . . the things you see, the stories you hear," Dunham said. "I've been going to meets like this for over 35 years, and I've never seen anything like this. It's an incredible show that can only happen once every hundred years, and it just did."

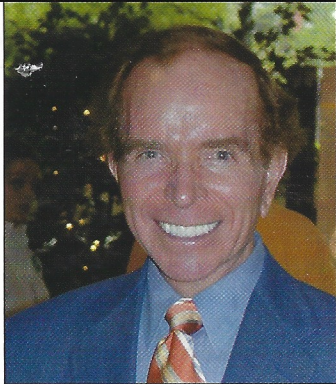
Waiting in line were Vincent and Sandy Lawrence, of Lafayette, Colorado, who own a '51 and an '88. "We love

Buicks," Sandy said. "We have for some time," Vincent added. "Actually, I grew up fairly poor, always liked Buicks but could never afford one. My grandfather had the only Buick in the family, a '48, which I thought it was the greatest car. So when I saw the '51 one day [in 1986], I decided to buy it. Then, at the Buick Nationals in Boston, they gave away '88 Regal scale models. I got one, set it on the shelf, looked at it, and decided that it was a very nice, dignified, and extremely good-looking car, so we decided to buy one."

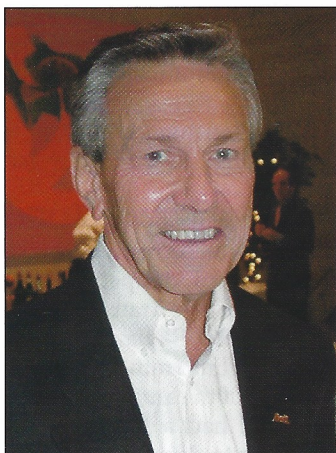
The event proved a bit nostalgic for me, too. When I was a fledgling car nut, my father worked his way through several slightly used Buicks, capped by a white-over-midnight blue '51 four-holer

Roadmaster. Many years later, I toiled at "The Buick" from 1987 to '91.

Admiring the impressive contents of the Institute of Arts, which played host to the evening reception, was Nance Crow, from Albuquerque, New Mexico. She and husband Bill Sullivan drove their 1927 Buick Master Six 1900 miles "on all the back roads through the heartland" to get make the show. "Cars are a part of what we are as Americans," she said, "and it was important to come to Flint because it's kind of a metaphor for the country. We have this wonderful Twenties Buick chat group on the Internet. We wanted to meet all the people, and we've been having a ball. As far as I'm concerned, Buicks have always been beautiful cars, some of the prettiest ever made."



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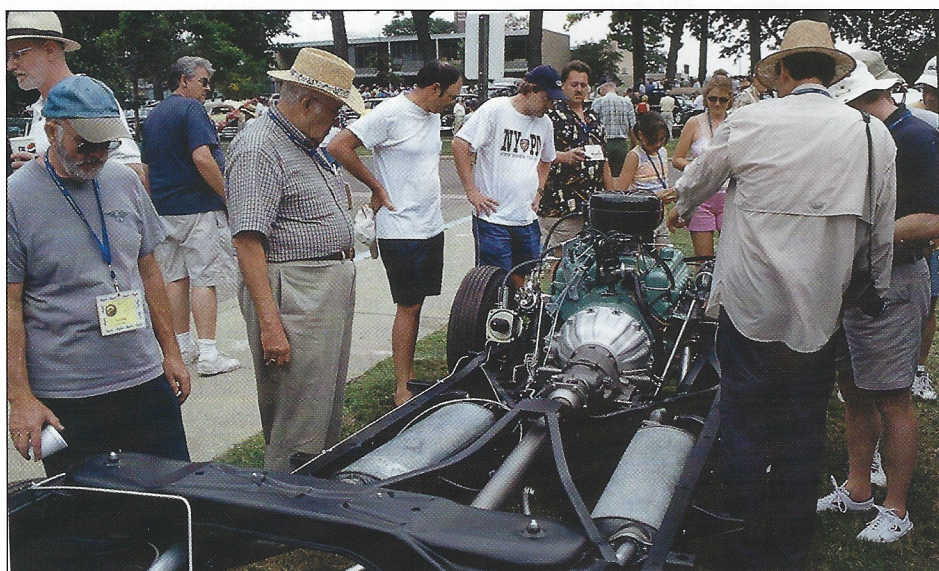
1. A replica of the 1939 Indianapolis 500 pace car and a 1936 convertible sedan that had participated in the cross-country Great Race. 2. A Buick pickup truck? This was one enthusiast's idea of how it might have looked in 1942. 3. Still life with portholes and pedal car. 4. Production models like the 1962 Skylark convertible mixed with specialty models like a 1958 ambulance conversion. 5. The color palette of the imposing '58s. 6, 7. Finny 1959s and '60s, front to back. 8, 9. Centennial events brought out former Buick executives such as past general managers Ed Mertz (8) and Lloyd Reuss (9). 10. The Society of Automotive Historians honored Buick historians Larry Gustin (middle) and Terry Dunham (right) for their contributions. Society past president LeRoy Cole made the presentations. 11. A rare 1961 Electra hardtop coupe. 12. First-generation Rivieras from the Sixties. 13. "Boattail" Rivs of the Seventies. 14. A clear view of a "nailhead" V-8 and Dynaflo transmission.



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At the reception, I visited with former division general managers Lloyd Reuss and Ed Mertz. Reuss, who was Buick's chief engineer from 1975 to 1978, headed the division from 1980 to '84, and ultimately rose to GM president, opined that Buick's history and heritage transcend those of General Motors. "When you look at what's happened over these years, you've got to be very proud of an organization that's been together for 100 years . . . an organization that I still feel very close to."

Mertz, who served as general manager from 1986 to 1997, described the occasion "a dream come true to come back and see the vast array of cars out there, from the very earliest through many that we worked on. And a lot of people I haven't



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1. Buick was in the thick of the muscle car market with its midsize GS. For 1970, it upped the ante with the GSX. Ohioans Brad and Jodie Conley displayed this prototype that made the rounds of the auto shows that year. 2. The range of Buick history on display at the July 2003 meet came right up to the recent past. 3. Among the latest cars shown were the two-seat Reattas made from 1988 to '91. One Buick Club of America chapter is devoted to them. 5. Vendors were on hand to serve Buick enthusiasts' needs for parts, literature, and—just maybe—back issues of *Collectible Automobile*®.



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seen for a lot of years. The combination of great cars and great people is hard to beat."

Also on hand was GM's always-enthusiastic industry-dealer affairs vice president, Darwin Clark, who spent 33 years at Buick, rising from the drafting room to general marketing manager before departing for a stint at GM Europe. "This is unbelievably exciting," he said. "Look at all these cars. What a statement of what Buick is about! The design, the style, the beauty, and the 'premiumness' of Buick is a thread running through the whole 100 years. It's a benchmark that puts Buick on track for another exciting 100 years."

Doug Boes—a great grandson of David Dunbar Buick, and a former mechanic and land-speed record competitor who is now a motion-picture transportation driver—drove his 1962 Skylark convertible 2800 miles to Flint from California. Why? "It's the 100th anniversary of Buick," he said. "I had a Buick, and it was a good excuse to drive it across the country."

Finally, famed Italian jeweler Nicola Bulgari described his passion for Buicks as one "that has been brewing with me since early in life," he said. "It's easy to understand [people's interest in] Bugatti, Ferrari, and [other exotics]. But I have seen too much of those. For me, the '34 Buick was something unique, and the '35, '36, '37, and the '38. I was always fascinated by these beautiful Buicks, and postwar as well, through the early Fifties. I think Buick was designed by General Motors to be very representative of a certain American style. I just hope that the marque will continue to develop. I have seen future projects that are quite fine, very exciting."

In fact, Buick will maintain and grow its critically important role within General Motors. As Cadillac refines its dramatic new look and climbs further upscale to challenge BMW and Mercedes-Benz, Buick will follow close behind with an impressive new style of its own. Boasting sensuously sculpted exteriors, and richly detailed and crafted interiors rivaling the industry's best, its assignment is to thoroughly fill the gap between Cadillac and GM's more youthful and performance-oriented Pontiac line.

Buick didn't resurrect the image of Harley Earl just to hawk today's solid but dated-looking products. Stay tuned: Its future will be bright. **CA**