

Collectible AUTOMOBILE

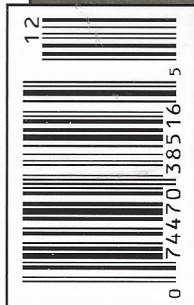
1971-76 Buick: Changing of the Guard

Warrior Spirit: The 1946-68 Dodge Power Wagon Story

1958-60 Rambler American • 1963-70 Lincoln Limos



- Stepping Through Time at the AACA Museum
- Ready For Their Close-ups: '55 DeSoto, '52 Siata



1952 Siata 208S Spyder

1971-76 Buick: Honoring the Past, Shaping the Future

by Gary Witzenburg

Things were looking good for Buick as its plants completed the 1970 model run on July 2 and shut down for the changeover to 1971 models. Even in a somewhat slow U.S. market, Buick sales were strong, and production was up to 666,501 units, the third highest total in division history.

This solid demand was that much more impressive considering that all of the '70 Buicks were facelifted carryovers to one degree or another. The impending model year brought with it the promise of all-new designs in two of the three Buick lines: the Riviera personal-luxury hardtop coupe (CA, August 1990) and the big B- and C-body family cars. Hundreds of thousands of loyal Buick owners couldn't have known that these latter cars would mark a turning point, the last of a kind to which they'd been accustomed for decades. In fact, even before this generation of "standard" Buicks ended in 1976, customers were getting glimpses of the vastly different future in store for big cars.

The Flint, Michigan, main plant began '71-model assemblies as scheduled on August 20, 1970. However, on September 14, the United Auto Workers struck General Motors over a contract dispute, shutting down all production. That soon led to shortages of nearly all GM products.

No one knew how long it would last.

Still, optimism prevailed at Buick when general manager and GM vice president Lee N. Mays introduced his '71 models to the press on September 23. He boldly predicted an upturn in the market that would carry Buick beyond 700,000 sales in 1971. If that came to pass, it would be the second-best year in division history, behind only the 744,861 from back in boom-year 1955 (CA, February 1993).

"We are setting our sights on 8.3 percent of the domestic new-car market," he told the assembled scribes, "and based upon a [total U.S.] forecast of 8,500,000 units, this would mean about 705,000 Buick sales . . . if production can be resumed without too much delay."

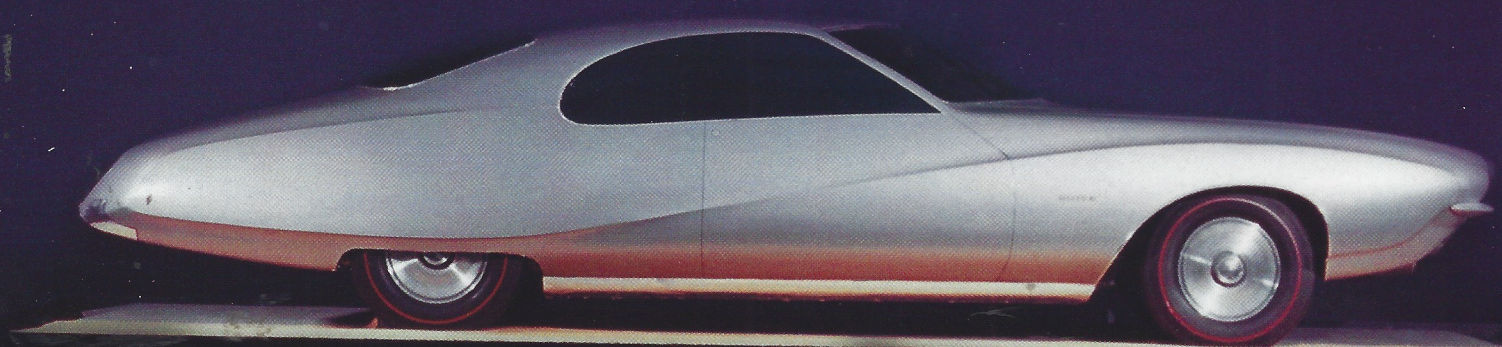
Mays added that the strike would result in Buick dealers having only about 40 percent of the expected number of '71 models on hand when they would be unveiled to the public on October 3, and the most serious shortages would be the new Electra and Riviera. Then he related that the cars had been shown to Buick dealers around the country, and "in 35 years of participating in such meetings, I have never before witnessed anything equal to the enthusiasm [they] have shown for the 1971 product."

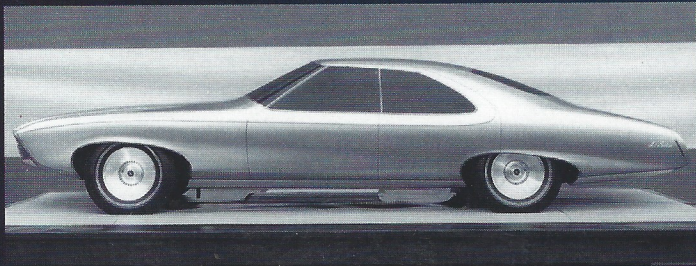
One reporter there was young *Flint*



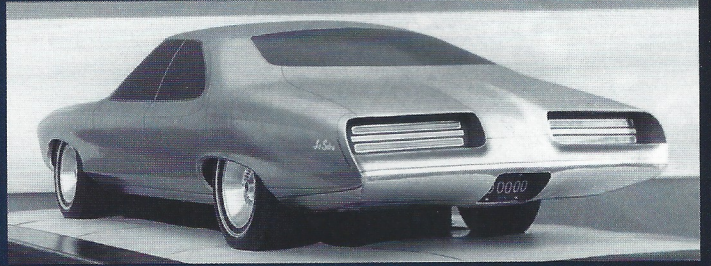
From a dramatic Skylark- and Riviera-inspired concept modeled in the late Sixties (*below*), Buick created the last truly big family cars it would make in the following decade. The 1972 Centurion four-door hardtop exemplified the new look. (Owner: Bob Alberini)

For 1971, Buick rolled out an updated line of large, powerful, and luxurious cars that kept faith with decades of products from the division. Before this generation's six-year run was over, though, the seeds of a product revolution would be sown.

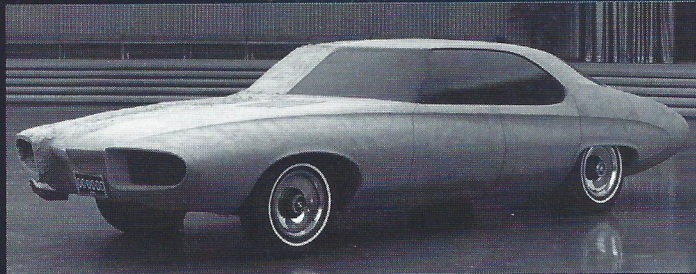




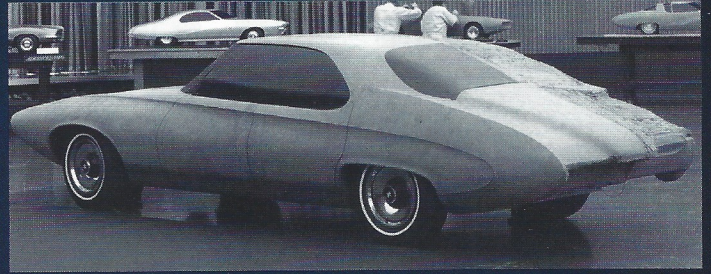
1



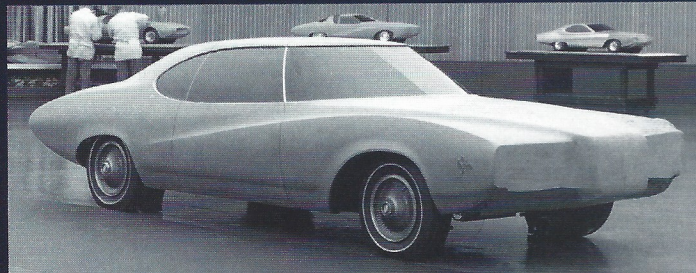
2



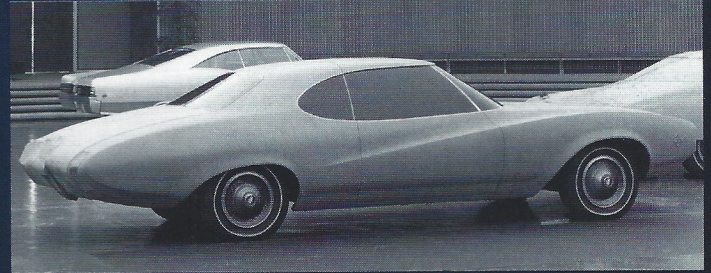
3



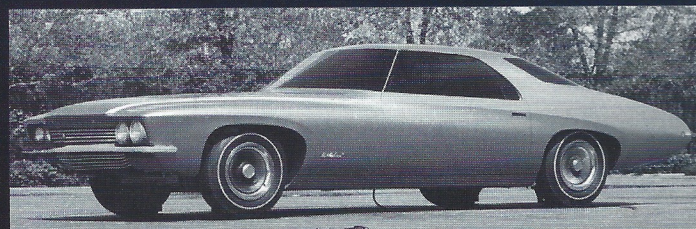
4



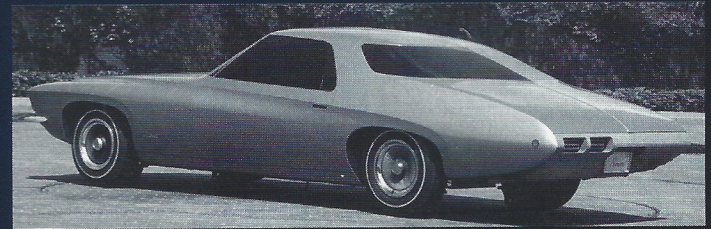
5



6



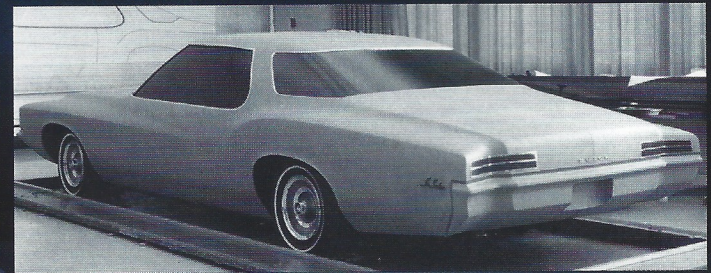
7



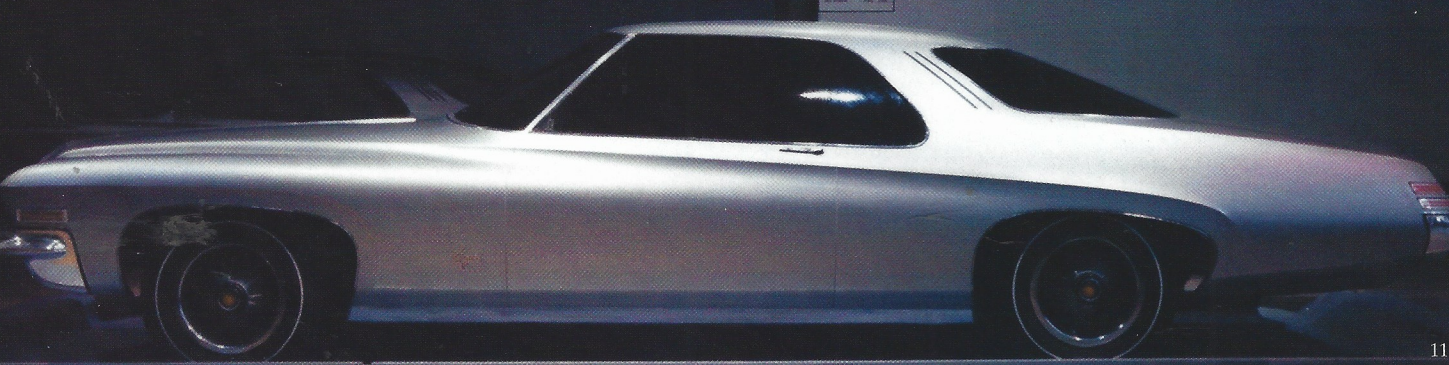
8



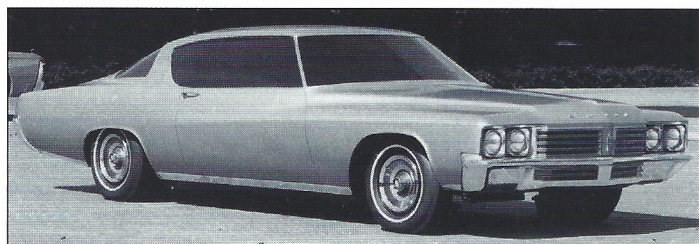
9



10



11



12



13



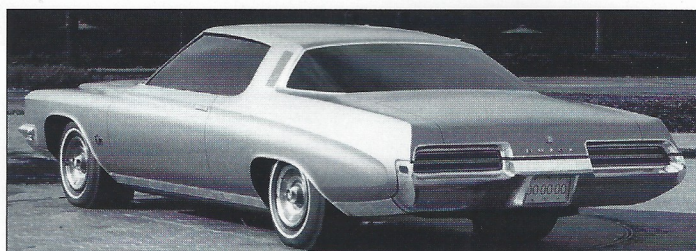
14



15



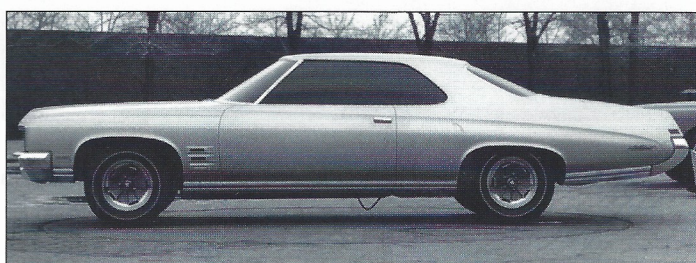
16



17



18



19

1, 2. As early as November 1967, an advanced studio $\frac{3}{8}$ -scale model bore the fuselage body shape and inset taillights that would be found on 1971 LeSabres and Centurions. 3, 4. The following January, a full-size clay showed the body-side sculpting that would appear on the B-body cars. 5, 6. A different model done at the same time appeared to be turning Buick's famous side sweepspear into a shape in the sheetmetal. 7, 8. On May 22, 1968, this coupe with a hint of what would be the mid-Seventies "colonnade" roof was displayed wearing Wildcat badges but a Riviera license plate. 9, 10. Another B-body coupe with even more Riviera influence in the rear quarters from August '68. 11. A further refinement of the design in pictures 7 and 8 from September 12. 12-14. Two rear roof pillar treatments were eyed on this September '68 clay. 15. Parallel sculpting in the front and rear fenders was also still considered. 16-18. By November 18, 1968, the B-body design was rounding into form. 19. A Wildcat mock-up from March 21, 1969.

Journal auto writer Lawrence R. Gustin, who would later work at Buick as a public relations manager and team with Terry B. Dunham to author the definitive book *The Buick: A Complete History*. "All of the regular-sized Buicks," Gustin reported then, "feature new sheet metal with curved window glass that is nearly flush with the outer surface of the body, thin windshield pillars, clean lines and greater body 'turn-under' for easier entrance and exit." He also wrote that a new Centurion series replaced the performance-oriented Wildcat (CA, December 1988) in the slot between the LeSabre and top-line Electra 225.

Jerry Hirshberg, now retired as Nissan's top U.S. designer, was an assistant chief in the full-size Buick studio in the late Sixties and a leading figure in the styling of the '71s. "There was a well-defined image of the role we played in the corporate

lineup," he recalls. "As the entrance to the top luxury lineup, we were mature, stately, solid, and serious. We were clear about that, which really helps in terms of what you want the car to say and what 'form vocabulary' you are going to use."

"In an era of edge and boxiness, I think what we introduced with that car was the beginning of three-dimensionality, and that was unique for a big car. For example, the line that crossed over from the hood, which usually would have intersected the base of the windshield, swept over at the bottom of the A-pillar and became a side line."

On the B-body LeSabres and Centurions, this line sloped down to near the rear bumper, where it faded just as it appeared to be hooking back toward the front of the car. On the C-body Electras, which had long, linear rear-quarter panels, the line ran straight to the top of the



1



2



3

full-width wraparound taillights.

Hirshberg also recalls being a little uncomfortable with the sheer size of the cars. At 220.7 to 226.8 inches long and 79.7 inches wide on 124- and 127-inch wheelbases, and weighing in from about 4100 to 5000 pounds, they were significantly larger and heavier than the '70 models they replaced. They would, in fact, be the biggest Buicks yet built.

Curiously, while LeSabres sported three stylized rectangular "portholes" on each side of their long, sculptured hoods and Estate Wagons and Electras wore four per side, Centurions had none. "There were serious discussions about 'to porthole, or not to porthole,' and how many portholes," Hirshberg says of the characteristically Buick styling touch. "We had downplayed them and were flirting with the idea of dropping them, since Buick had enough of a well-defined image that it probably didn't need them anymore. If anything, they tended to date the design.

"So there was a fight between, 'Do we hold onto that element or drop it and get a fresh image?' And there was concern

1-3. Centurion was the new middle-range full-size Buick for 1971. It shared bodies with the cheaper LeSabre but was equipped with the same standard 455-cid V-8 found in the larger Electra 225. This "youthful" big Buick flouted tradition by going without faux portholes on the hood. The "Formal Coupe" two-door hardtop featured a unique rear-window style. (Owners: Brian and LynnD Laurance) 4-6. A '72 Centurion convertible sports the optional Customline boot cover and rare special-order Flame Orange paint. (Owner: Keith Bleakney) 7. Almost 20,000 Centurion four-door hardtops were made in '72. (Owner: Bob Alberini)

about the aging of Buick's market, so we wanted to address the next generation of buyers. That [Centurion] was the car to clean up and make a dynamic new statement."

Each series got its own grille design. (Estate Wagons borrowed the Electra's august pattern of vertical rectangles.) Wagons and LeSabre four-door sedans had the only bodies with fixed B-pillars. All other closed models featured pillarless hardtop styling shared with GM's other B- and C-body cars, though the Centurion two-door hardtop had a narrower backlight than the LeSabre and a standard vinyl roof covering for a more formal look. (It even was advertised as the "Centurion Formal Coupe.")

LeSabres and Electra 225s both came in a choice of base or Custom trim, the

latter with fancier interior fabrics and detailing. A \$284 Limited option for Electra Customs delivered an even plusher cabin and identifying badges on the roof sail panels.

All the '71 full-sized Buicks featured a redesigned front suspension, standard power front disc brakes with proportioning valves and rotors integral with the wheel hubs, "AccuDrive" variable-ratio power steering in which the steering gear and linkage were moved ahead of the front wheels, a variable-ratio parking brake, heavy-duty rear axles with roller wheel bearings, side-terminal batteries, and side-marker lights that flashed with the turn signals. A new corporate "Full-Flo" pressurized ventilation system drew air through the cabin and exhausted it out louvers cut into trunklids and

wagon tailgates. The redesigned instrument panel featured components that were removable from the front for easier serviceability.

Electra convertibles were discontinued, but LeSabre Custom and Centurion droptops boasted wider rear seats thanks to a new inward-folding convertible top design. All closed models benefited from a new double-panel roof design, and the three-seat versions of the Estate Wagon got a forward-facing third seat and GM's new "Glide-Away" tailgate in which the upper glass slid into the roof while the lower panel disappeared under the floor. Notable options included an electric rear window defroster, AM/FM radio with five presets, four-speaker stereo, eight-track tape player, Buick's signature five-rib chrome wheels, and a key-operated power feature for the wagon tailgate. During the year a new "MaxTrac" computerized traction control system initially available only on the Riviera was added to the full-size options list.

For 1971, all GM engines were redesigned with nickel-plated exhaust valves and lower compression ratios to accommodate low-lead gasoline in advance of the coming of catalytic converters—which would be fouled by lead—and to meet tighter federal emissions standards. Further alterations included faster-reacting automatic chokes and valve-timing changes for California-bound cars to meet that state's more stringent requirements. GM announced a four-percent (\$130) average price increase across its product line, saying it reflected additional standard equipment including enhanced emissions systems.

As a result, GM engines took major hits in rated horsepower and torque, partly due to their lower compression but mostly because of a change from gross to net ratings. The long-used gross numbers were derived from engine dynamometer testing without fans, air cleaners, or exhaust systems and with spark and ignition adjusted to peak power. The much more realistic net "installed" ratings were attained with normal settings and all systems in place.

Four "Wildcat" V-8s were available in full-sized Buicks. Standard in LeSabres was a 350-cid two-barrel-carburetor job that made 155 net/230 gross bhp. Extra-cost upgrades included a four-barrel 350 with 180/260 bhp and a 455-cube engine with 230/315 bhp. All other big Buicks got the four-pot 455 as standard, but the Centurion could be outfitted with



4



5



6



7



1



2



3



4



5



6

1. The '72 Buicks got new grille styling that sat lower between the headlights. 2-5. The plushiest high-line Electra was the four-door Custom with the Limited interior option. 6. Electras rode a 127-inch wheelbase. (Owner: Bob Alberini)

an optional 265-/330-bhp dual-exhaust "High Performance" version. Incredibly, LeSabres, Centurions, and Estate Wagons listed a three-speed manual transmission as standard with three-speed Turbo Hydra-matics optional, though very few were delivered with stickshifts. Only Electras got standard automatics. As for performance, *Motor Trend* hit 60 mph from a standstill in 8.6 seconds in a Centurion four-door hardtop with the standard 455 and Turbo Hydra-matic, while returning overall average fuel economy of 12.7 mpg.

When the union's issues were settled on November 11 in the U.S. and December 16 in Canada, workers finally started heading back to their jobs. Still, full production did not resume until late January, when all assembly plants had ratified

their local agreements. By then, GM had lost more than 1.5 million units of production and many, many millions of dollars. Finding itself with a backlog of more than 70,000 orders, Buick wasted no time catching up. Mays instituted substantial daily and Saturday overtime to get 72,000 cars built in January and more overtime to come in February if necessary.

Nonetheless, the strike did take its toll on production of the 1971 Buicks. Model-year assemblies for the division declined by 17.3 percent from 1970. Orders for the B- and C-body cars were off by about the same percentage, dropping by 69,441 units to 333,303. Total calendar-year output was seemingly unfazed, though: At almost 752,000, domestic production was the second highest in marque history.

Buick's minimally changed 1972 lineup

hit showrooms in late September 1971. For the big cars, appearance tweaks were primarily confined to the grilles and tailights, and porthole groupings were now cast as a single piece instead of individual parts. Also restyled were the front bumpers, which were reinforced to better protect grilles, lamps, and fenders. Narrow rubber impact strips were affixed to the bumpers of all models. A rerouting of the interior ventilation system did away with the need for decklid and tailgate louvers. A new appearance option for convertibles was the Customline top boot cover. The two-piece body-color fiberglass panel was stored in a bag in the trunk when not used to hide the folded top stack.

All engines got further emissions reductions, thanks to an Air Injection Reactor (AIR) system on 455 V-8s and Exhaust

Gas Recirculation (EGR) on California cars. AIR directed air into the engine's exhaust ports to help burn off excess hydrocarbons and carbon monoxide. EGR thinned the incoming fuel-air mixture with exhaust gases to lower peak combustion temperatures, which reduced oxides of nitrogen emissions. Camshaft changes, a faster-responding throttle linkage, and a solenoid-actuated throttle stop smoothed overall engine operation and reduced "dieseling," the annoying tendency of early lean-mixture emissions-controlled engines to "run on" after the ignition was turned off. With these changes came five-bhp cuts in net horsepower from all engines except the Centurion's optional "high-perf" 455, which shed 15 net horsepower (to 250). LeSabres and Centurions finally got standard automatic transmissions.

With no disruptions, model-year production was much stronger than in 1971. The full-sizers experienced a 26.3-percent gain in demand and the Electra series set a new record at 172,212 units. Mays had predicted big things in 1973 for the industry as a whole and for Buick in particular, and his division was well-situated to make that happen. In August 1971, he had announced a major modernization of the Flint assembly plant complex that included potential added capacity. The first phase, including longer assembly lines with more room for better working conditions and more materials storage space, was completed just in time for the start of 1973-model production. The table seemed fully set for a record.

When the 1973 lineup was launched, the division's emphasis was on a totally redesigned—and renamed—range of intermediates. Then, in February, the Buick family grew with the addition of a compact, the Chevrolet Nova-derived Apollo. Meanwhile, the full-size cars got suspension refinements, added noise-absorbing fiberglass insulation under their hoods, and—mostly to comply with new-for-'73 federal bumper standards—revised front and rear appearance. The grille and center of the hood now projected out well in front of the headlights, which were housed in big scoops of bright metal. Out back, taillights for all but Estate Wagons were incorporated into the bumpers. Model offerings were reduced by one with the deletion of the LeSabre Custom convertible. To meet still-more-stringent federal emissions requirements, all Buick engines incorporated the then-exclusive combination of AIR, EGR, time-modulat-



1



2



3

ed choke, and solenoid-actuated throttle stop. New options included a factory sunroof for hardtop coupes and steel-belted radial tires for Electras.

The front bumpers had heavier-gauge steel faceplates, high-strength steel brackets, and full-width steel reinforcements on air-hydraulic energy absorbers designed to soak up low-speed hits. The rear bumper systems used heavy-gauge faceplates and steel reinforcements. Overall, the new bumpers had a massive and, to some eyes, ungainly appearance.

Did Hirshberg anticipate the 1973 bumper laws as this generation of full-sized cars was being designed? "Oh, yeah!" he says. "We knew that was coming and the engineers were very deeply involved. The most difficult areas were the corners

1. Though their base price tended to knock Buicks out of the "lowest-bidder" category favored by fleet buyers, some communities did select them for police duty. This '72 LeSabre was restored in the style of a car that once patrolled Peekskill, New York. (Owner: Frank Goderre)
2, 3. The Centurion series put in its last appearance in 1973, the year that more crashworthy bumpers were installed up front. The series had Buick's lone convertible in '73. (Owner: Carol Spangenberg)

of the car. Suddenly, the profile could not be clean and simple. There was this big step that was three-dimensional because everything had to be protected from an angle hit, and there was so much expensive real estate that had to be protected. That was tough. The cars got very long at



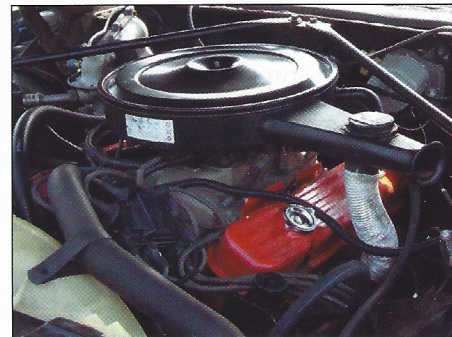
1



3



4



5

the bottom, front, and rear, and the early ones were pretty crude. We called them 'cowcatchers,' like on trains."

True to Mays' predictions, the 18-year-old Buick model-year production record fell when the 738,815th '73 rolled off the line on June 27. To celebrate, 100,000 doughnuts and 50,000 cups of coffee were handed out to employees. When the run ended on August 2, the total came to 821,165 cars, 455,824 of which were full-sized. Every big-car series improved on its 1972 figures. In the case of the Century, this came despite moving down to the four-barrel 350 as the base engine, adopting the same grille design as the LeSabre, and forfeiting the two-door's standard vinyl top and unique rear window treatment.

But big trouble was brewing as gas prices rose substantially and there were spot shortages around the country, mostly due to insufficient refining. A lot of buyers were beginning to move toward smaller cars and improved fuel economy by the time Buick introduced its 1974 models to the media on September 13, 1973. Winding up one record year, General Sales Manager Frank Frost said he was targeting another for '74, projecting

that 410,000 would be the refreshed full-sized and luxury cars.

"I think sometimes we are too quick to relate big cars with low gas mileage," he said, "and really there is more to it than that." As proof, he cited a cross-country economy test that the United States Auto Club (USAC) had conducted for Buick that showed a 455 V-8 Electra getting slightly better mileage at 70 mph than a 350 V-8 LeSabre.

Then, barely more than a month later, came an event that would alter everything forever. On October 19, the mostly Arab Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) decided to use oil as a weapon to punish the West for its support of Israel in the ongoing Arab-Israeli war, enacting an embargo against "unfriendly" nations that targeted the U.S., Western Europe, and Japan. In America, this led to shortages that had motorists lining up for hard-to-find gas and swarming import-car dealerships looking to trade big domestic cars for smaller, more frugal foreign models. Down the road, it led to the almost universally hated and disobeyed 55-mph national speed limit and federal corporate average fuel economy standards that forced automakers

to downsize and develop more efficient technologies.

This was disastrous for Buick, a brand long known for large, luxurious, and powerful automobiles. The resulting sales free fall was not taken lightly. On November 20, new General Manager George Elges released more results of the USAC test, which had involved pairs of Electras, LeSabres, and mid-sized Centuries, plus three compact Apollos. All were driven 2811 miles from San Diego, California, to Washington, D.C., by pro drivers with USAC observers aboard, one each at a steady 70 mph, the others at 50 mph. The objective was to show that Buicks could be efficient at freeway speeds and that drivers could save substantial fuel by slowing down and taking more time to get where they were going.

The results showed an average 23-percent fuel savings at 50 mph vs. 70 and that total fuel consumption (at constant speeds) was not that much greater for a large car with air conditioning than for a compact without. The total trip difference between the Electra and a V-8-powered Apollo at 50 mph was only 17 gallons, less than one tank. That proved, Elges said, "that if we want to get serious



2

1-5. The '73 Estate Wagon used the disappearing "clamshell" tailgate found on all General Motors full-sized wagons at the time. Available in a choice of two- or three-seat models, 35,795 of them were made for the model year. Estate Wagons shared the Electra's wheelbase and standard engine, and, at this point, borrowed its grille and four-porthole trim, too. (Owner: Duffy's Collectible Cars) 6. Heftier rear bumpers were part of the facelift for 1974. The Electra's new Limited subseries included a \$5886 two-door hardtop. (Owner: Rob Bilott)

about conserving fuel, a slower speed will do it."

Based on that experience, in December, Buick went on record in favor of the 55-mph national speed limit then being considered by Congress because Elges and company thought it would help sales. "Maintaining a lower speed, along with using good driving habits, adds up to more miles in the gas tank," said newly appointed General Sales Manager Robert D. Burger, referring to the USAC test.

"Some drivers show as much as a 20 percent improvement at the lower speed. We believe there is a tremendous number of people who are willing to conserve fuel by maintaining the lower speed limit, but they still want comfort, luxury, safety, and performance when they do it—and that's why we see a continued demand for regular-sized cars" he said.

When the lines shut down for the holidays on December 14, 1973, Buick had a calendar-year production record of 826,271 units to go with its best-ever model-year performance. But sales of the '74s were not keeping up and unsold cars were piling up on dealers' lots. On January 17, Buick announced that it would close most operations for a week to help bring inventories back in line; a two-week early February shutdown was announced a week later. Still, Elges said he foresaw "a strong upturn in sales as soon as the energy situation stabilizes." Meanwhile, Burger was traveling the country trying to encourage struggling dealers. "I can't

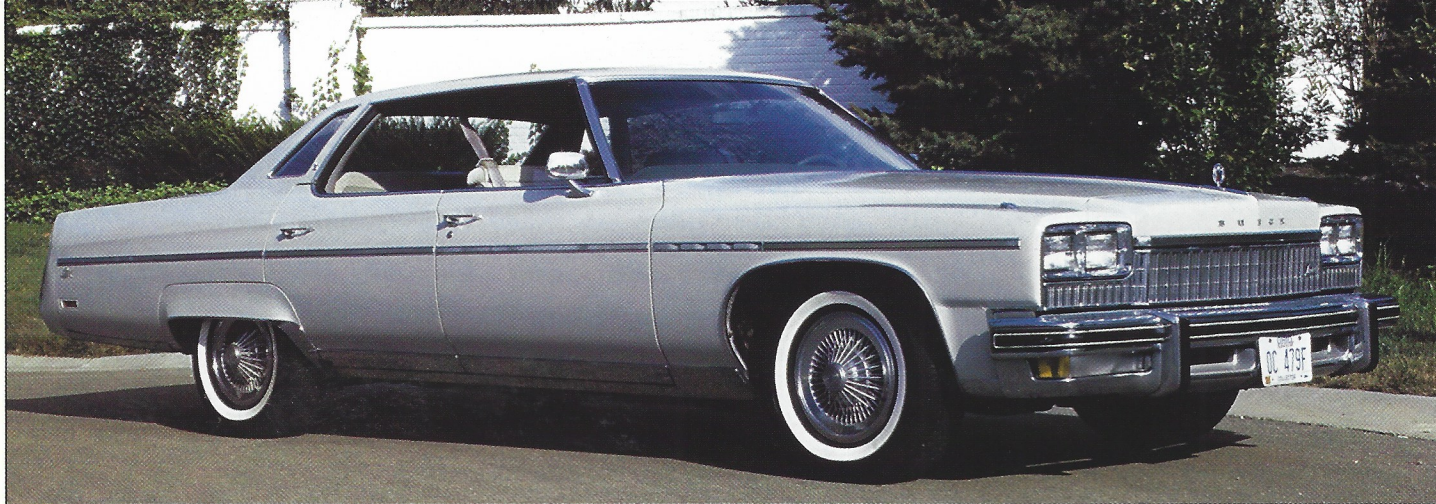
see someone who has been driving a big car for several years willing to settle for a smaller model, particularly if he knows he is going to get sufficient gasoline to take a vacation trip with his family," he told them.

"When things were really bad," Gustin recalls, "I remember running into Bob Breeden, who was general manufacturing manager, at the Flint airport. I . . . asked, 'Why would anybody buy a Buick today?' He said, 'Well, the prices are really great right now.' Then he talked about the distance a Buick could travel on one tank of gas, because they had big gas tanks.

"So they decided to put me in a car and see how far we could drive on one tank of gas. They had a young test engineer, Gary White, in a '74 Electra with a fuel meter. I drove, and Dave Gosler, the PR guy, was in the back seat. We left Flint and drove up I-75, across the Mackinac Bridge into the Upper Peninsula, across into Ontario at Sault Ste. Marie, and along Lake Supe-



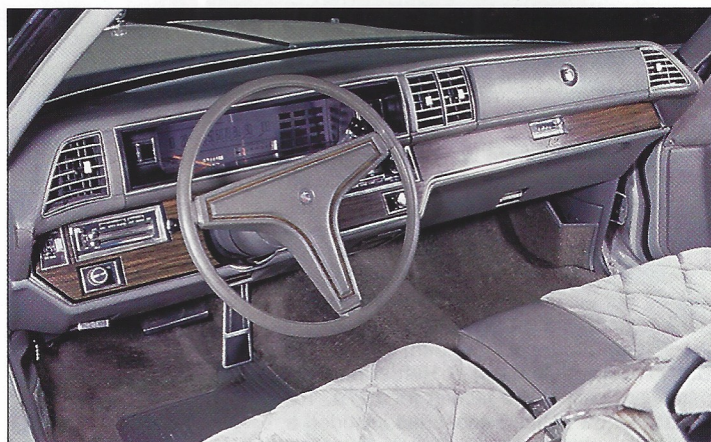
6



1



2



3



4

rior toward Wawa, Ontario. Then the fuel light starting blinking in the middle of nowhere, so we drove back to Sault Ste. Marie. We ended up doing 386 miles at an average speed of about 55 mph. I did a story on it, and they reprinted it and sent it out to the dealers."

The customers who did buy that year's big Buicks took home substantially face-lifted cars from a reshuffled lineup. The Centurion was gone and the LeSabre

Custom was renamed the LeSabre Luxus, which welcomed a convertible back to the LeSabre fold. The Electra roster expanded to six as the Limited option group was turned into the top subseries of that model line.

Stouter spring-back bumpers akin to those already in use in front were added at the rear. As a result, the '74 standards were as much as 5.3 inches longer than the '71s on which they were based and

the weight of comparable models had risen by an average of 240 pounds, which wasn't beneficial to fuel economy. The new bumpers necessitated revised tail-light designs across the board and a new LeSabre decklid. The bodyside highlight line on B-body cars lost its hooked end. Up front on all series was a wraparound grille with two different surface designs. Headlights sat in four individual bezels set flush with the front of the body. Above,

LeSabre two-door hardtops got the new corporate "colonnade" look featuring large trapezoidal fixed-position windows set in the massive sail panels and smaller vertical roll-down rear-quarter glass just aft of the doors. Also, the two-door Electra Limited could be ordered with a Landau option: a padded vinyl half-roof and rear-quarter "opera" windows that, for \$525, essentially turned the hardtop into a pillared coupe—a foretaste of what was to come in car styling.

Another futuristic new option of note

rel 455 that made 175 horsepower (or 195 with dual exhausts). Higher-performance 455 options made 245 bhp in Electras and LeSabres, 255 in wagons.

On March 17, 1974, five months after it began, OPEC ended its embargo, and the oil-consuming world breathed a heavy sigh of relief. But there was no denying the hit that large-car-oriented American manufacturers had taken. At Buick, assemblies of full-sized cars slumped by fully 50 percent for the model year.

Three weeks after the embargo ended,

hit. . . . They were scrambling, trying to do something, and I was trying to find out what they were doing. I called [Buick Chief Engineer] Phil Bowser, and he told me they were working on bringing back the V-6.

"Some engineers had gone to a junkyard, found an old V-6, and put it in a big car, and they were driving it around. [GM President] Ed Cole [CA, June 2007] got wind of it and called Elges. Then Cole had them pick him up in that car, and they drove it down to the Jeep plant in



5

With consumers still feeling the effects of the 1973-74 fuel crisis, orders for 1975 big Buicks fell to 217,871, the low point for the 1971-76 era. 1-4. Well-to-do buyers who could shrug off fuel economy made the most expensive Electra, the

Limited four-door hardtop, the most popular full-size '75 Buick. New for the year were rectangular headlamps and opera windows cut into the rear panels of hardtop sedan roofs. (Owner: Rob Bilott) 5. Buick produced its last full-size convertible in '75. A run of 5300 LeSabre Customs sent the soft top into the sunset. (Owner: Patricia Schelli)

was GM's short-lived experiment with "air cushion restraint systems"—air bags. The first of a planned 16,000 full-sized 1974 Buicks to be so equipped rolled off the line on December 6, 1973, as a trial to see if customers would pony up \$225 to get the device installed in their cars. In general, the answer was "no" and when the option was dropped after 1976, it would be many years before the government would require air bag installation.

Power ratings remained unchanged in the two- and four-barrel-carbureted 350-cube V-8s available for LeSabres. The optional four-barrel 455 standard in Electras and Estate Wagons was damped to 210 bhp. This engine continued to be available for LeSabres, as was a new two-bar-

Buick announced one of the best decisions its leaders ever made: It had bought back from American Motors the rights and production tooling to the 90-degree V-6 engine it designed (CA, December 1995) for use in the midsize Special and Skylark from 1962 to 1967. Buick said it would resume V-6 production in Flint for use in some '75 models. Eventually, this would have an impact on the make's big cars, too.

From a technical standpoint, Elges said that with added displacement, a new carburetor, high-energy ignition, and the catalytic converter necessary to meet 1975 emissions standards, it would be "a considerably improved design" over the original. The buy-back also made sense on the manufacturing level. The foundations for the production equipment were still intact in the plant. "They can be uncovered and cleaned up quickly, so we can start putting the equipment in place very shortly," he said. "This will enable Buick to get into production with a V-6 engine in a few months instead of waiting two years for new machine tools to be built."

"Buick was doing really well, headed for a record, in 1973," Gustin recalls. "Then all of a sudden the oil embargo

Toledo, where the equipment was in storage, and they negotiated the deal to buy it back. And in 100 and some days, Buick was back building V-6 engines."

Buick recalled 1200 laid-off plant employees on June 24 to get the V-6 line up and running and said it would bring back nearly all of its workers when production of the '75s began in August. On August 21, Elges unveiled two new smaller Buicks to the press, a restyled Apollo and a subcompact Skyhawk hatchback coupe, both offered with the revived V-6.

Car shoppers got their first look at the entire 1975 Buick line on September 27. They saw LeSabres, Electras, and Estate Wagons with substantially new front treatments that were blunter than before and had slightly taller grilles. Headlamps were once more paired two to a bezel and Electras were among the first General Motors cars to get the rectangular lamps that would become the industry standard within a few years. Porthole trim was moved from the hood to the front fenders. Though they continued on the 127-inch Electra wheelbase, wagons now wore the LeSabre grille and triple portholes. There were some new roof designs, too. Opera windows were cut into the rear pillars of four-door hardtop roofs



1

and all two-door Electras now came with a fixed B pillar and static rear-quarter glass. Inside, a new dash design dropped the previous curved "driver-oriented" instrument cluster in favor of a flatter style with a horizontal speedometer.

The Custom name supplanted Luxus on the premium LeSabres. Included in the subseries was the last full-size Buick convertible, dropped at the end of the year due to low demand and anticipated federal roll-over protection standards. In the Electra line, the Custom subseries was cut, but a luxurious new Park Avenue option could be added to Limited four-door hardtops. Velour covered the seats, console between the 40/40 front seats, door panels—even the headliner. Plush carpeting and a halo-style vinyl top were included too. The Park Avenue nameplate was destined for a long run at Buick.

The best news was improved fuel economy with introduction of the breakthrough catalytic converter. Under development at GM since 1969, it effectively cleaned up exhaust emissions to the point that engines could be retuned to run more efficiently. The downside was that these miracle smog eaters required unleaded fuel. Engine choices were reined in for the 1975 big Buicks. Standard in LeSabres was a four-barrel 350-cid V-8 with horsepower trimmed to 165. The sole engine in

Electras and Estate Wagons (and optional for LeSabres) was the four-pot 455, now rated at just 205 bhp.

In another tough year for the industry, overall Buick model-year production fell by more than 13,000 units. Most of that decline was absorbed by the full-sized cars, 217,871 of which were made. But the calendar year ended with a sign of hope: Total output was back over 500,000.

For 1976, the V-6 turned up in a most unexpected place—under the hoods of full-sized Buicks. Late in the planning process for the '76s, the division decided to make yet another grab for fuel-economy headlines by making the engine standard in base LeSabres.

Gustin, by then auto editor of *The Flint Journal*, reported that when a group of "bright young engineers" proposed putting the V-6 into the LeSabre, Bowser "almost threw them out of his office," according to Elges. But they kept after him. "Finally Phil agreed to try it," Elges said, "and that was really all it took."

The first Buick of its class with a six since 1930 was not available at the start of production, but at the annual preview, Elges was able to tell newsmen, "The car is getting about 20 to 21 miles per gallon on the highway and 16 in stop-and-go city driving tests. It . . . may be the most fuel-efficient full-size car in the country." The 3.8-liter/231-cid engine (Buick had

begun citing metric displacements in '75) had a two-barrel carb and made 110 bhp. Just 14,820 V-6 LeSabres were built for '76, but when Buick began shrinking its full-sizers in 1977, the engine took on added significance.

"I remember going to an American Motors press conference a few years later," Gustin relates, "where I overheard [AMC CEO] Gerry Meyers telling someone, 'You know, Buick made a silk purse out of a sow's ear with that V-6. When we had it, it was rougher than a cob, but boy, they really smoothed it out.'"

"And once they brought it back, they did many things with it over the next decades: the 3800, the turbocharged and supercharged V-6s. It led to the Grand Nationals, GNXs, Indy cars and other racing engines, and the 1984 and '85 million-car years. . . . And it was interesting to see the kind of independence they had in those days, when all of a sudden Buick could decide for itself to bring back the V-6 engine, and then do it. Today you would have a bunch of marketing guys talking to each other, and nobody would pay any attention to them."

The 350 V-8 was now reserved for the LeSabre Custom. Both the 350- and 455-cube engines—the latter putting in its final appearance—were unchanged in output and availability, though Buick wrung better gas mileage from them due



2



3



4

1-5. With two-door Electras having switched to a pillared coupe style for 1975, true two-door hardtops could be found only in the LeSabre ranks, 25,016 of which came in Custom trim. A Landau option with vinyl covering half of the roof was a trendy sign of the times. Inside was a redesigned instrument panel and lots of imitation-wood trim. The standard powerplant in LeSabres was now a four-barrel-carbureted 350-cid V-8. (Owner: Jerrold Murphy) 6. Few external changes were made to the 1976 models. The Custom Landau option seen on this Electra Limited coupe featured a padded vinyl top. (Owner: Rob Bilott)



5



6



1



2



3

1-3. The most numerous of the last truly big Buicks was the four-door Electra Limited: 51,067 were made, 51 percent more than in 1975. (Owner: Rob Bilott)
4, 5. Like the LeSabre—with which it shared a front since '75—the 1976 Estate Wagon got the rectangular headlights that were turning up on American cars. The sometimes-impractical “Glide-Away” tailgate made its last stand. (Owner: Jimmy Wilfong)



4



5

to spark advance, carburetor, and axle-ratio changes. Similarly, the cars in which those engines went were little changed physically, apart from new grille styles and rectangular headlights for LeSabres.

In a model year in which total Buick production leapt by 53 percent to more than 735,000 cars, demand for LeSabres, Electras, and Estate Wagons improved a bit to 286,372. Among them were the last pillarless hardtops from the marque that introduced the style to the market in 1949

(CA, December 2003).

A distinctive period was nearing its end. No longer would the quest be for "longer, lower, wider" as it had been throughout the postwar era. Neither, for the most part, would mph be more important than mpg. Like others of their General Motors kin, the next cars to bear the LeSabre and Electra names would be dramatically smaller and lighter and they would come in fewer body styles. They would be promptly imitated by others in

Detroit, too. A new chapter in the story of the American auto industry was waiting to be written. **CA**

Club for 1971-76 Buick Enthusiasts

Buick Club of America
P.O. Box 360775
Columbus, OH 43236-0775
Telephone: (614) 472-3939
Fax: (614) 472-3939
Website: www.buickclub.org

1971-76 Buick: Models, Prices, Production

1971	Weight	Price	Prod
------	--------	-------	------

LeSabre (wb 124)

hardtop sedan	4,109	4,119	14,234
hardtop coupe	4,049	4,061	13,385
4d sedan	4,078	3,992	26,348
Custom hardtop sedan	4,147	4,213	41,098
Custom hardtop coupe	4,095	4,149	29,944
Custom convertible cpe	4,086	4,342	1,856
Custom 4d sedan	4,107	4,085	26,970
Total LeSabre			153,835

Centurion (wb 124)

hardtop sedan	4,307	4,564	15,345
hardtop coupe	4,195	4,678	11,892
convertible coupe	4,227	4,678	2,161
Total Centurion			29,398

Electra 225 (wb 127)

hardtop sedan	4,381	4,915	17,589
hardtop coupe	4,345	4,801	8,662
Custom hardtop sedan	4,421	5,093	72,954
Custom hardtop coupe	4,359	4,980	26,831
Total Electra 225			126,036

Estate Wagon (wb 127)

4d wagon, 2S	4,906	4,640	8,699
4d wagon, 3S	4,965	4,786	15,335
Total Estate Wagon			24,034
Total 1971 Buick			333,303

1972

LeSabre (wb 124)

hardtop sedan	4,211	4,079	15,160
hardtop coupe	4,166	4,024	14,011
4d sedan	4,201	3,958	29,505
Custom hardtop sedan	4,226	4,168	50,804
Custom hardtop coupe	4,181	4,107	36,510
Custom convertible cpe	4,235	4,291	2,037
Custom 4d sedan	4,211	4,047	35,295
Total LeSabre			183,322

Centurion (wb 124)

hardtop sedan	4,406	4,508	19,852
hardtop coupe	4,336	4,579	14,187
convertible coupe	4,396	4,616	2,396
Total Centurion			36,435

Electra 225 (wb 127)

hardtop sedan	4,515	4,890	19,433
hardtop coupe	4,445	4,782	9,961
Custom hardtop sedan	4,530	5,060	104,754
Custom hardtop coupe	4,455	4,952	37,974

Total Electra 225			172,122
-------------------	--	--	---------

Estate Wagon (wb 127)

4d wagon, 2S	4,975	4,589	10,175
4d wagon, 3S	5,060	4,728	18,793
Total Estate Wagon			28,968
Total 1972 Buick			420,847

1973

LeSabre (wb 124)

hardtop sedan	4,259	4,125	13,413
hardtop coupe	4,210	4,067	14,061
4d sedan	4,234	3,998	29,649
Custom hardtop sedan	4,284	4,217	55,879
Custom hardtop coupe	4,225	4,154	41,425
Custom 4d sedan	4,264	4,091	42,854
Total LeSabre			197,281

Centurion (wb 124)

hardtop sedan	4,329	4,390	22,354
hardtop coupe	4,260	4,336	16,883
convertible coupe	4,316	4,534	5,739
Total Centurion			44,976

Electra 225 (wb 127)

hardtop sedan	4,581	4,928	17,189
hardtop coupe	4,488	4,815	9,224
Custom hardtop sedan	4,603	5,105	107,031
Custom hardtop coupe	4,505	4,993	44,328
Total Electra 225			177,772

Estate Wagon (wb 127)

4d wagon, 2S	4,952	4,645	12,282
4d wagon, 3S	5,021	4,790	23,513
Total Estate Wagon			35,795
Total 1973 Buick			455,824

1974

LeSabre (wb 124)

hardtop sedan	4,387	4,482	11,879
hardtop coupe	4,297	4,424	12,522
4d sedan	4,337	4,355	18,572
Luxus hardtop sedan	4,397	4,629	23,910
Luxus hardtop coupe	4,307	4,575	27,243
Luxus convertible cpe	4,372	4,696	3,627
Luxus 4d sedan	4,352	4,466	16,039
Total LeSabre			113,792

Electra 225 (wb 127)

hardtop sedan	4,682	5,373	5,750
hardtop coupe	4,607	5,260	3,339
Custom hardtop sedan	4,702	5,550	29,089
Custom hardtop coupe	4,627	5,438	15,099
Limited hardtop sedan	4,732	5,921	30,051
Limited hardtop coupe	4,682	5,886	16,086
Total Electra 225			99,414

Estate Wagon (wb 127)

4d wagon, 2S	5,082	5,019	4,581
4d wagon, 3S	5,182	5,163	9,831
Total Estate Wagon			14,412
Total 1974 Buick			227,618

1975

LeSabre (wb 124)

hardtop sedan	4,411	4,898	9,119
hardtop coupe	4,294	4,840	8,647
4d sedan	4,355	4,771	14,088
Custom hardtop sedan	4,439	5,061	30,005
Custom hardtop coupe	4,316	5,007	25,016
Custom convertible cpe	4,392	5,133	5,300
Custom 4d sedan	4,388	4,934	17,026
Total LeSabre			109,201

Electra 225 (wb 127)

hardtop sedan	4,706	6,201	27,357
hardtop coupe	4,582	6,041	16,145
Limited hardtop sedan	4,762	6,516	33,778
Limited hardtop coupe	4,633	6,352	17,650
Total Electra 225			94,930

Estate Wagon (wb 127)

4d wagon, 2S	5,055	5,447	4,128
4d wagon, 3S	5,135	5,591	9,612
Total Estate Wagon			13,740
Total 1975 Buick			217,871

1976

LeSabre (wb 124)

hardtop sedan	4,059	4,871	2,312
hardtop coupe	4,294	4,840	8,647
4d sedan	4,129	4,815	3,861
Custom hardtop sedan	4,386	5,166	46,109
Custom hardtop coupe	4,275	5,144	45,669
Custom 4d sedan	4,328	5,046	34,841
Total LeSabre			141,439

Electra 225 (wb 127)

hardtop sedan	4,641	6,527	26,655
hardtop coupe	4,502	6,367	18,442
Limited hardtop sedan	4,709	6,852	51,067
Limited hardtop coupe	4,521	6,689	28,395
Total Electra 225			124,559

Estate Wagon (wb 127)

4d wagon, 2S	5,013	5,591	5,990
4d wagon, 3S	5,139	5,731	14,384
Total Estate Wagon			20,374
Total 1976 Buick			286,372

Sources: *Encyclopedia of American Cars*, by the Auto Editors of Consumer Guide®, Publications International, Ltd., 2006; *The Buick: A Complete History*, 2nd ed., by Terry B. Dunham and Lawrence R. Gustin, Princeton Publishing, Inc., 1985.