

# Buick Celebrates 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of first car sold in August of 1904

By Les Jackson

Following World War II some of the automobile pundits dubbed some Nash and Packard models as “bath tubs”. We never heard that term applied to Buicks.

However, the first Buick company got its start as a result of the porcelain bathtub. The process had been developed by David Dunbar Buick. He sold the bathtub company in 1899 and started focusing on the gasoline engine.

Buick Manufacturing Co. was reorganized in 1902 where the valve-in-head engine was developed, but probably not by Mr. Buick himself. After several fits and starts of production the company sold its first car in August of 1904. Later that year William Crapo Durant took over running the company.

David Buick left the company four years later. In the early 1920's he formed the David Dunbar Buick Corp. and produced one Dunbar car. He could no longer use the Buick name for his car. No more Dunbars were made. He died in 1929 at 74 years of age. He was said to be impoverished.

In the meantime, Durant used the highly successful Buick company to create General Motors.

Series 90 Buicks from 1931 through 1942 qualify as Full Classics<sup>®</sup>. From 1936 through 1942 they also carried the label of “Limited”. In one year, 1940, Buick also produced a Series 80 Limited and a few years ago it was added to the list of Full Classics<sup>®</sup>.

The latest CCCA directory

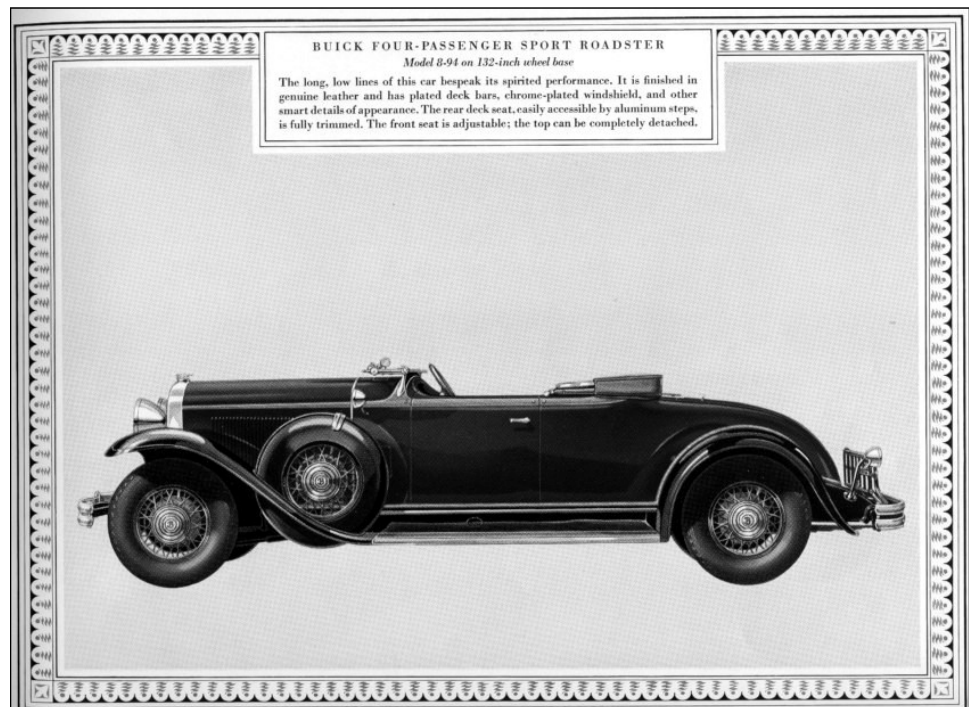
indicates there are 129 Full Classic<sup>®</sup> Buicks among the membership.

We skip to the first year of a Full Classic<sup>®</sup> made by Buick: 1931. In 1931 the Series 90 offered a choice of 8 different bodies, more than in any other series Buick offered that year.

Prices were from \$1610 for the sport roadster to \$2035 for the 7 passenger limousine and all of the cars weighed more than 4,000 pounds. Total production of Series 90 models was 25,503.

Models were 7 passenger sedan, 7 passenger limousine, 4 door 5 passenger sedan, 2 door 4 passenger sport roadster, 7 passenger 4 door phaeton, 2 door 5 passenger coupe, 2 door 4 passenger convertible coupe, and 2 door 4 passenger country club coupe.

The 1932 models of the Series 90 dropped the sport roadster and added a 2 door 5 passenger phaeton. This was the only year of this design,



The 1931 4 passenger sport roadster included a rumble seat for 2. It rode on a 132" wheelbase. Upholstery was leather. Engine was a 77 horsepower straight 8 with 220.7 cubic inches displacement.

which was also available in the Series 50 and Series 60 for 1932.

(See the article on page 28 of *The Classic Car* for Spring 2004 about *this* car.)

The Depression had reached what turned out to be its lowest point. Buick only offered 5 models in the 1933 Series 90: a 4 door 7 passenger, a 7 passenger

bar to combat side sway. There was also a vacuum booster to assist the mechanical brakes.

The 1935's were very similar to those of the prior year as were the models offered. The automatic choke was included in 1935 models.

It was in 1936 that the various series number designations were augmented with names and the Series 90 added the Limited name. However, the model choices shrunk to two eight passenger sedans and two 6 passenger sedans. Hydraulic brakes were used for the first time in Buicks. A number of other makes had been using them for years.

In 1937 the Limited still had wood and steel bodies, as did the Roadmaster Series 80 (nc) even though most other GM cars had the all steel "turret top" since 1935. Models offered were the same as the prior year. The radio antenna was hidden under the running boards.

In 1938 there were only 3 models: 6 passenger 4 door sedan, 8 passenger sedan and

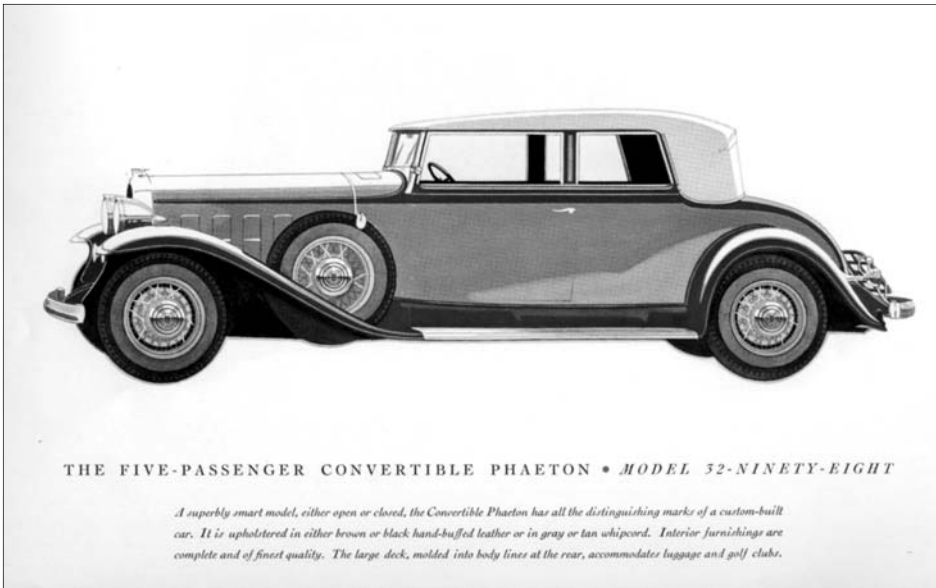
8 passenger limo. Wheelbase was up to 140". All four corners of the car had coil springs.

The three models were also offered in 1939. This is the year Buick introduced direction lights in the rear of the car.

The next year, 1940 was one of the most fascinating for Buick Full Classics®. The Series 90 Limiteds were the same three as the prior year.

What was new this year was the Series 80 Limited. The prior year the Series 80 was a Roadmaster, but in 1940 the Roadmaster became a Series 70.

The new Series 80 Limited, which



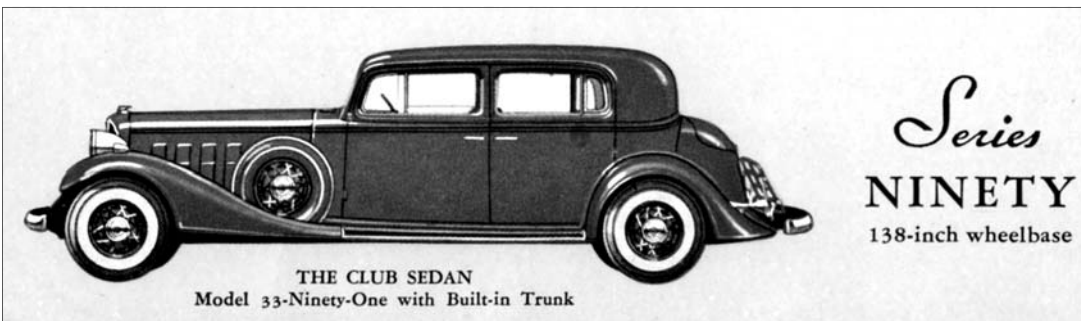
THE FIVE-PASSENGER CONVERTIBLE PHAETON • MODEL 52-NINETY-EIGHT

*A superbly smart model, either open or closed, the Convertible Phaeton has all the distinguishing marks of a custom-built car. It is upholstered in either brown or black hand-buffed leather or in gray or tan whipcord. Interior furnishings are complete and of finest quality. The large deck, molded into body lines at the rear, accommodates luggage and golf clubs.*

The 5 passenger 2 door convertible was only offered by Buick in 1932 among the General Motors cars. This is the Series 90 Full Classic®. A similar design was available from Chrysler and DeSoto among other non-GM makes and in smaller Buick series.

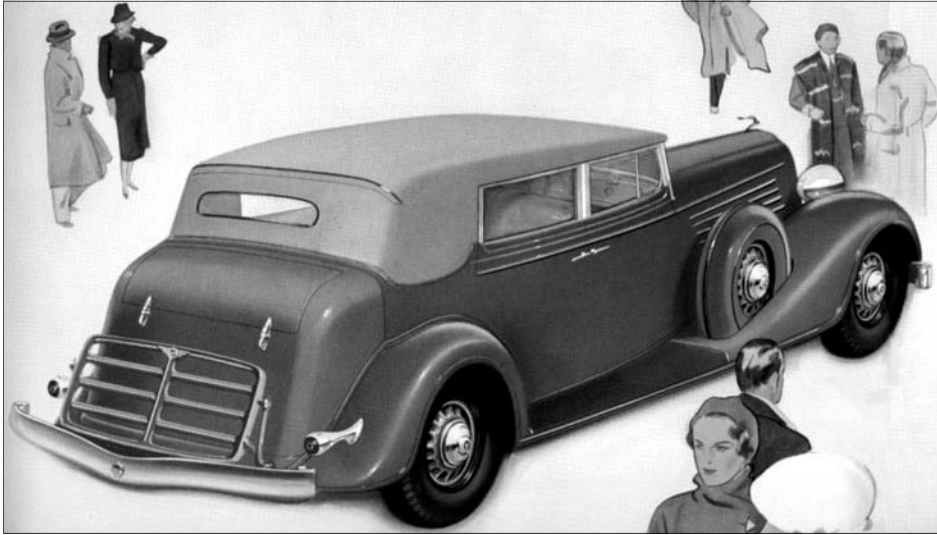
limo, a 4 door 5 passenger club sedan, a 4 door 5 passenger sedan and a 2 door 5 passenger Victoria coupe. The syncromesh transmission was introduced. Wheelbases were up to 138".

In 1934 three models were added to the Series 90 line: the convertible coupe, sport coupe and convertible 4 door phaeton. Buick advertised "knee action" independent front suspension with stabilizer



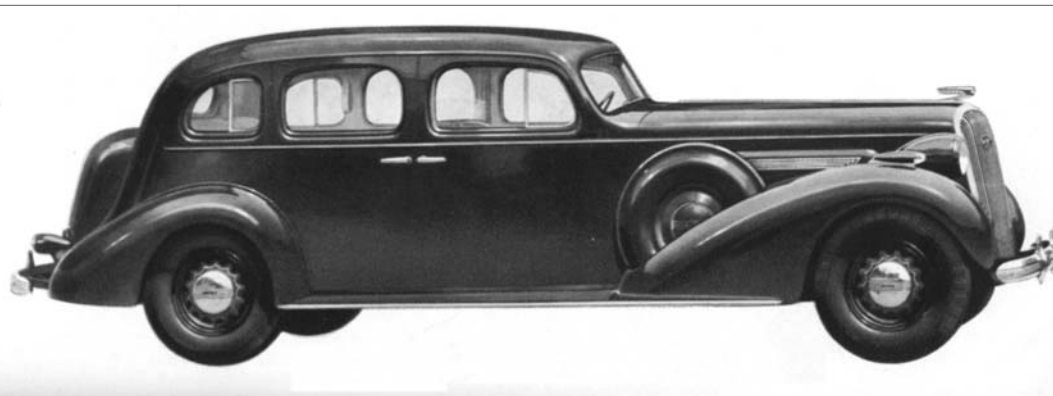
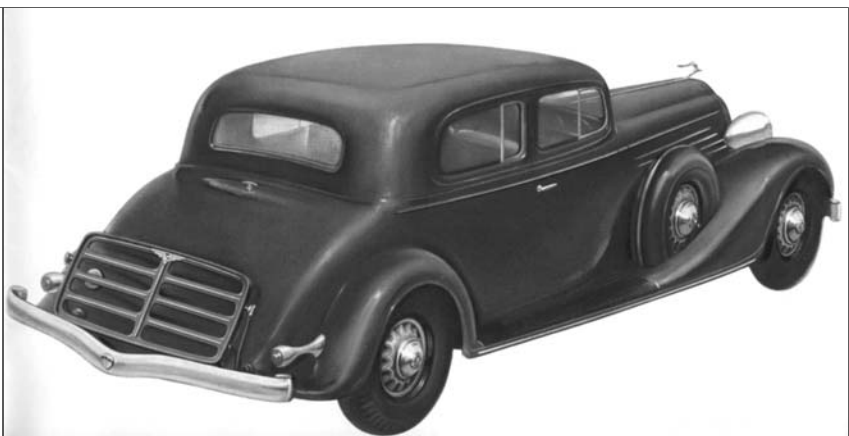
THE CLUB SEDAN  
Model 33-Ninety-One with Built-in Trunk

The 1933 Club Sedan was the most popular Series 90 for the year with 1,639 sales. The engine was 113 horsepower straight eight.



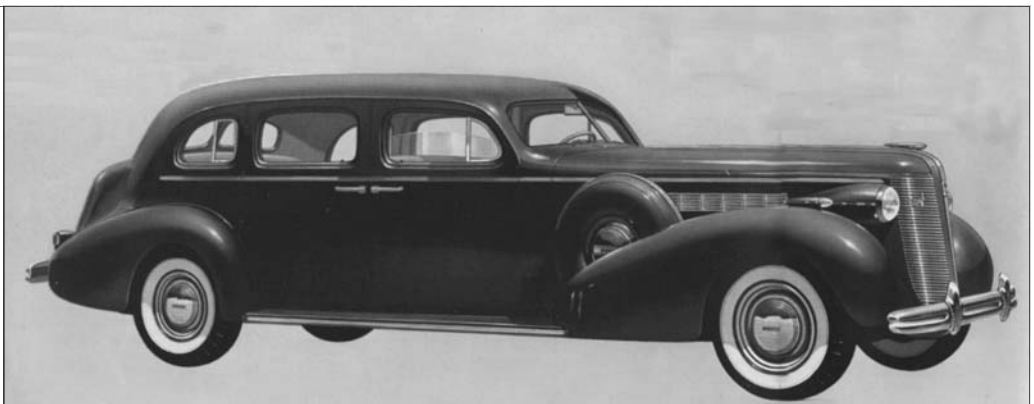
Back in the lineup for 1934 Series 90 was the convertible phaeton. It came with a built-in trunk and with dual side mounts. Only 138 of these beauties were built. The 1935 series 90 Buicks were almost identical to the 1934 cars.

The 1935 Victoria Coupe Series 90 sold only 32 models. The body of the (nc) Series 60 was virtually the same as that of the 1935 Cadillac Series 10 Full Classic<sup>®</sup> both with 128" wheelbases. The Series 90 Buick body on a 136" wheelbase was about the same as the Cadillac Series 20 Full Classic<sup>®</sup>.



The 1936 newly named Limiteds were a choice of three big 4 doors. This is the 8 passenger Sedan Limousine on the 138" wheelbase. The engine developed 120 horsepower.

The primary difference in the 1937 Limited Formal Sedan for 6 passengers (right) and the Limousine is that the limo accommodated 8 passengers. Wheelbase was the same as 1936, but horsepower was increased to 130.

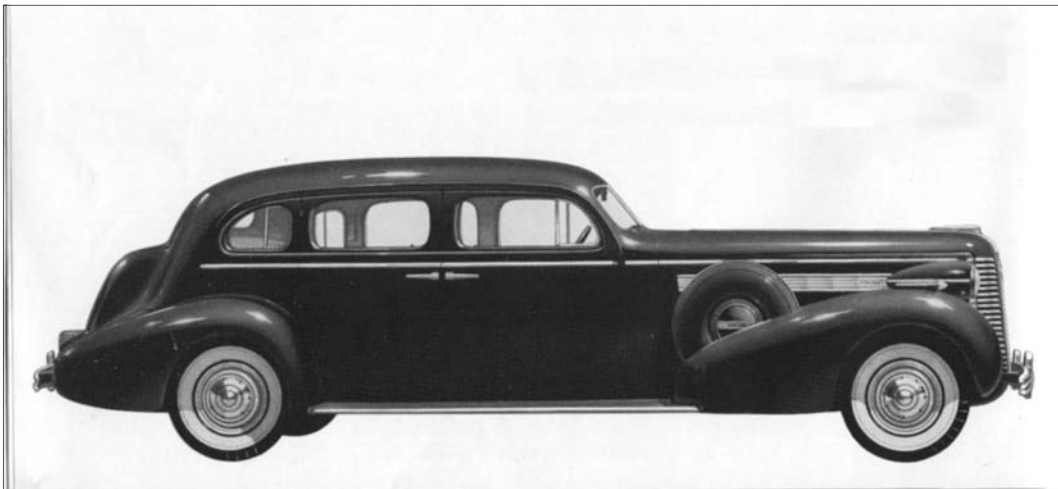


lasted only the one year, offered 6 body styles, including 3 fastbacks. The fastbacks were the phaeton, sedan and the formal sedan. Those three bodies were also offered in the traditional notch-back design. The Series 80 Limited was not designated as a Full Classic® until the mid 1990's although the Series 90's had been recognized by CCCA for many years.

In April 1940 Buick advertised in *The National Geographic* a "Townmaster" sedan with an open chauffeur section for \$3895. It was "Custom Built for Custom Service," and available for special order with body by Brunn on a Roadmaster chassis. If such a car still exists, and if it was ever built, it would surely qualify as a Full Classic®.

It was in 1940 that Buick also advertised that a famed English car builder bought a new Limited each year, disassembled it and checked for product improvement ideas. It was widely thought this referred to Rolls-Royce. In 1940 direction lights were added to the front of the car.

It was in 1941 that Buick really invaded Cadillac territory by offering four custom models with bodies by Brunn. The story is that the Cadillac management prevailed on GM top brass



The 1938 Limited 8 passenger 4 door touring sedan with trunk back (above) . This was the most popular model in Series 90 as 644 were produced. (Below) A "roomy compartment" was built into the back of the front seat to store small suitcases and other items in this 6 passenger 4 door touring Sedan in the 1939 Buick Limited Series 90.



*Custom Built* FOR CUSTOM SERVICE

Available only on special order is the custom-built Buick pictured here, the 1940 Buick Townmaster Sedan.

With body work by Brunn, the chassis is the standard ROADMASTER chassis with all 1940 Buick features, including the 141-horsepower straight-eight engine, electrically balanced after assembly, coil springs

on all four wheels, and the steady-ing torque-tube drive and heavy Buick frame.

Interior trim and appointments are subject to your taste through a wide variety of upholstery options. Standard equipment includes removable top for the chauffeur's compartment, swiveling phone, center arm-rest in the three-passenger rear seat, sliding window behind the driver, and built-in heater.

At \$3895\*, delivered at Flint, complete except for transportation (based on rail rates, state and local taxes if any), the Townmaster is a real value on its quality and fine finish.

*\*Price subject to change without notice.*

*Best buys* **Buick!**  
EXEMPLE OF GENERAL MOTOR VALUE

The ad from the April, 1940 *National Geographic Magazine* for the special order Townmaster. The Roadmaster chassis had a 141 horsepower engine.

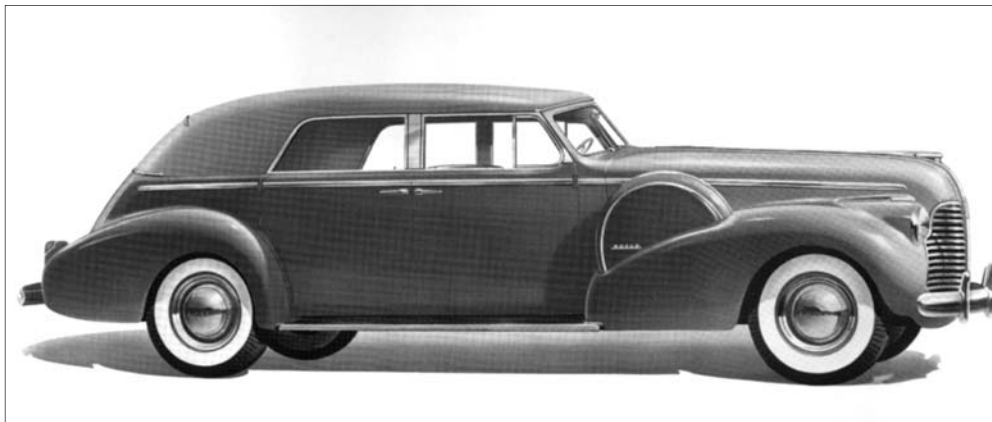
to stop Buick from continuing these custom models. The models were Town Car (with open chauffeur compartment), the 4 door phaeton, the Custom Landau and the Brougham.

The Brougham is described in some of the Buick literature as having a "full-folding rear top," however, in the main Limited catalog it describes the top as "solid...finished...with leather and chrome plated

irons, giving it the appearance of a convertible model." It appears that production and sales promotion departments were not communicating in late 1940 about the new 1941 models.

Buick advertised the Limited as "a car not so much exclusively for the wealthy as for those who have learned the wisdom of investing in the best the times can produce." It added: "built to out run, out style, out perform, and out value the finest automobiles America has previously offered."

The Limited at \$2360 cost, 165 horsepower and 4680 pounds was direct competition for the Cadillac 67 series \$2735, with 150 horsepower and weighing 4678 pounds.



One of the rarest 1940 Series 80 Limiteds is this Sport Convertible Phaeton with plain back. Only 7 were produced. In contrast the convertible with trunk back counted 250 cars. The Series 80 Limited rode on 133" wheelbase compared to 140" for the Series 90. Both had the same 140 horsepower straight eight engine.

The Buick Limiteds for 1942 reverted to the four big four doors with 6 and 8 passenger touring sedans, the 6 passenger formal sedan and the 8 passenger limousine. The story goes that GM offered Cadillac the choice of front fenders that ended in a tear drop shape or the front fenders that extended to the rear fenders. Cadillac chose the tear drop shape which they used in 1942 and several years after WW II. Buick happily selected the Cadillac reject. In 1942 the front fenders of the 2 door cars in Roadmaster Series 70 (nc) and the 2 door cars in the Super Series 50 (nc) extended to the rear fenders. The other Buick Series use front fenders not



unlike those of the 1941 Cadillac Sixty Special except for the chrome trim.

Have you ever seen one of these? Was it actually produced? From the 1941 Buick catalog is this Limited Custom Landau, body by Brunn. It was described as "A car of unusual adaptability...with a full-folding rear top." It was one of 4 Brunn-bodied customs cataloged.

**Sources:**

Third Edition *Standard Catalog of American Cars 1805-1942* by Beverly Rae Kimes and Henry Austin Clark, Jr., 1996 Krause Publications, Inc.; *The Specification Book for U.S. Cars 1930-1969* by G. Marshall Naul, Motorbooks International, 1980; *The Production Figure Book for U.S. Cars*, by Jerry Heasley, Motorbooks International, 1977. *Old Cars Weekly*, Krause Publications, Inc.; *The National Geographic Magazine*, April 1940, National Geographic Society.



Production of 1942 models ended in February of that year due to World War II. This is the 1942 Limited limousine for 8 passengers, of which 250 were produced. Wheelbase was 139". The engine was the straight eight 165 horsepower power plant which was also used in the non classic Series 60 Century and Series 70 Roadmaster models.