

**SPOTLIGHT ON 'RICK & KAREN BERGER'**

# 'Labor Of Love' Turns Into A Fifty-Year Odyssey

By Rick Berger

Twenty thirteen was the 110th Anniversary of Buick Motor Division of GM, the 50th anniversary of the beautiful 1963 Buick Riviera. Twenty fourteen, a banner year for fans of the ever popular Ford Mustang, as it marks 50 years. On a personal note, my wife Karen and I are also celebrating a 50th anniversary. It was fifty years ago March 18, we purchased our 1953 Buick Skylark Convertible. The car was eleven years old.



*Our Skylark on the rotisserie*

The first time I saw this Reef Blue beauty was when it arrived fresh from the factory and was sitting in a one-car showroom at Homestead Buick, in Homestead Pennsylvania, near Pittsburgh. The time was June of 1953 and I was in the third grade. My Uncle Bob Nuss, was a salesman at Homestead Buick, he called my dad and ask him to come down to the showroom to see the latest arrival. Uncle Bob didn't let on what vehicle he was summoning my father to see. Apparently, the gentleman that purchased the new Skylark had agreed to allow the car to remain on the showroom floor for a week to draw in customers, it worked. If one can fall in love with an automobile this was love at first sight for me; even at the tender age of eight-years-old! Over the next eleven years, I would see the car from time to time at the



*Rick and Karen Berger and their award winning 1953 Buick Skylark*

dealer being serviced. I noticed the owner added a continental spare and installed two chrome air horns on the right front fender. The feeling I had as an eight-year-old never faded. Every time I saw her, I knew she was something extraordinary.

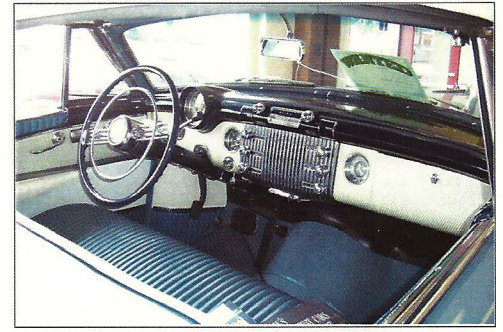
Fast forward to March of 1964 when Uncle Bob, who still worked at Homestead Buick called and told me the owner of the

'53 Skylark had traded it in on a new 'razor edge' style, 1963 Buick Riviera and the '53 was sitting in the basement of the dealership. Uncle Bob also said the owner of the dealership, Bob Herzberg, was seriously considering keeping the Skylark and giving it to his twelve-year-old son, Lee, when he was old enough to fix it up. However, after realizing what an inconvenience storing the

car would be as space was tight at his small dealership, he reluctantly decided to sell the Skylark. Uncle Bob thought it could be purchased for \$700.

WOW! Here's my big opportunity, my dream come true. But then reality set in. I was nineteen at the time and because my father had recently passed away, I was putting myself through college and finances were tight. My mode of transportation at the time was a 1955 Ford convertible which I was putting on over 100 miles a day driving back and forth to college. I had a part-time job but barely made enough to cover gas and other expenses. Where was I going to get \$700?

Well, if things are meant to be, somehow, they will work out. At the time my girlfriend, Karen, didn't have her driver's license but said she would loan me \$250 and in return, I could teach her to drive the Buick. Additionally, I was able to sell the Ford convertible for \$450. I now had the \$700 needed for the Skylark, so off we went to the basement of the dealership to rescue this beauty. As with any car, the years had dulled her paint but the interior still had a fresh leather smell and the first ever Buick 322 c.i.d., 'nailhead' V8 purred like a kitten



*Interior View*



*Hagerstown, Md A.A.C.A. event, shortly after completed restoration*

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The first thing I did was teach Karen to drive. She was a natural and I was glad I decided to leave the air horns mounted on the right fender so she could use them as a guide. I removed the continental spare tire which made the car feel somewhat shorter and easier to park.

The Skylark was my daily driver for over two years and she never let me down, getting me through those horrific Pennsylvania snow storms. During this time, I put another 22,000 miles on the car and by August of 1966, she was beginning to show her thirteen years. The Pittsburgh winters stole her luster and the hydraulic power windows and seat were becoming a little stubborn.

We had decided to move to Maryland to accept a job opportunity, this meant leaving the Skylark in storage in Pennsylvania. I knew I had to hold off until a day when I would have the time and wherewithal to make her shine as new!

#### **Trailer South...**

After completing my garage in 1975, the day finally arrived to trailer the Skylark to Maryland. After doing all the required safety checks, she was finally headed south to her new home. I found myself frequently checking the rear-view mirror to make sure all was well. I couldn't help notice a late model Buick Skylark following behind for quite a few miles. Once outside the suburbs and about to hit the open road, I pulled over for a final safety check.

The late model Skylark did the same. I couldn't imagine why this car had been following me for such a distance and was now sitting on the shoulder of the road behind me. Ironically, it was Lee Herzberg, son of the owner of the Buick Dealer where I purchased the Skylark in March of 1964. After an introduction, we talked about how this car was 'almost' his when he was twelve years old. Lee was now twenty-three and mentioned how he had wished his father, Bob, could have kept the car for him. Lee was thrilled to see the car again after all these years and seemed sincerely happy I intended to restore her to her original magnificence.

I drove away with a lump in my throat as I kind of felt like 'the guy who won the girl at the big dance.' I made sure to drive very carefully the rest of the way home and parked the car in a safe corner of my garage, realizing just how lucky I was that she was mine and the adventure that awaited us both.

#### **The time has arrived!**

The Skylark sat in the garage until the time was finally right for my son Doug and I to do a long-anticipated nut and bolt rotisserie restoration. The hours spent together during this process were priceless; the restoration was a journey and experience for both of us and an opportunity to

#### **SIDEBAR**

### **Richard Berger And I Lived In A Parallel Universe, Not Far Removed**

While Rick Berger was going through the throes of eight-year-old angst over an automobile, I was suffering along with him only a few miles away, *over the same car*. I too, was enamored with the 1953 Buick Skylark. My grandparents were 'Buick People.' They purchased a 1949 Super sedan brand new from Ferris Buick. Their youngest son, my mother's younger brother had also purchased a 1949 Roadmaster Riviera Two-Door hardtop. 'Uncle Jim' did this to 'one up' his parents. He had received his commission in the United States Army in 1950, after graduating college and a very distinguished career as an enlisted soldier in World War II, I digress.

Buick automobiles had long been my favorite. When 1953 rolled around my buddies and I made our annual trek around to all the car dealers in Jeannette, Pennsylvania to check out the new models.

Nineteen-fifty-three was Buick Motor Division's 50th Anniversary. The company decided they needed to bring out a new model worthy of celebrating fifty years of automobile manufacturing; *did they ever!*

I actually saw the brochure for the new Skylark, before I saw the car. The brochure was enough to set my ten-year-old heart 'a flutter.' Plenty of girls would do the same thing, only much worse but that was down the road a little.

When I did finally see the car, it was everything I thought it would be and more. As a 'personal luxury', low production

become closer than ever.

We've put over 8,000 miles on the Skylark since the restoration but the biggest thrill was winning the National Antique Automobile Club of America 'Best Post War' automobile award and receiving the coveted, 'Crystal Trophy', all due to the labor of love that went into the restoration of our beloved Buick Skylark.

Fairy tales usually have happy endings and this one is no exception. I sold the continental kit for \$700 in the late 70's so the car was cost free. Most importantly, Karen and I've been married nearly forty-eight years and she hasn't asked for interest on the loan I never repaid!

model; Buick Division only tooled up for approximately 1700 units and a percentage for replacement parts. Many Buick Dealers purchased a '53 Skylark for their own collections.

As most everyone knows, the Skylark was on the 1953 Roadmaster platform and it came with every possible option available, except air-conditioning. The reason: the A/C evaporator was located in the trunk and there wasn't enough room for also storing the lowered convertible top.

Equipped with power steering, brakes, windows, seat, antenna, 'Autronic Eye' headlight dimmer, 'WonderBar' radio with floor mounted switch to change stations, power top, full, two-tone leather interior and Kelsey-Hayes chrome wire wheels; it was an impressive package...at \$5,000 apiece! A boatload of money in 1953.

The Roadmaster chassis was lowered, channeled and three inches lopped off the windshield. The front fenders were sans 'ventports' and the arching, nearly flat, stainless steel sweepspear trim and full rear wheel cutouts, added to the understated elegance. Something Oldsmobile (Fiesta) and Cadillac (Eldorado) did not quite achieve with '53 versions they brought out to keep Buick Division from once again 'running the table' on them.

The iconic 1953 Buick Skylark is a truly unique automobile and it remains today with many enthusiasts as the 'holy grail' of 1950's automobiles.--Bill Wurzell