

TIME MAGAZINE 'MAN OF THE YEAR' 1955

## Harlow H. Curtice Rises From Spark Plugs, Buick Division Head, To Become President Of The First Billion Dollar Profit Company

*Hank Reus, Jr., Director of Buick Owners Of Maryland, (BOOM) and a member of Chesapeake Region A.A.C.A., contributes this interesting and informative account of the happenings at General Motors, primarily Buick Division during the tumultuous depression era of the mid-1930's. During this era many manufacturers were in dire financial condition, especially automobile companies. This article explains how one executive, Harlow H. Curtice pulled Buick Division back from the precipice and returned the marque to prominence.--Bill Wurzell, Editor.*

*By Hank Reus, Jr.*

The Great Depression of the 1930's saw the end of many well known automobile manufacturers. Buick was among those seriously threatened. In 1933, they had been reduced to merely 17% of their manufacturing capacity, producing only 40,621 cars in what many consider the economy's worst year during the depression era. There was serious concern at General Motors for their future.



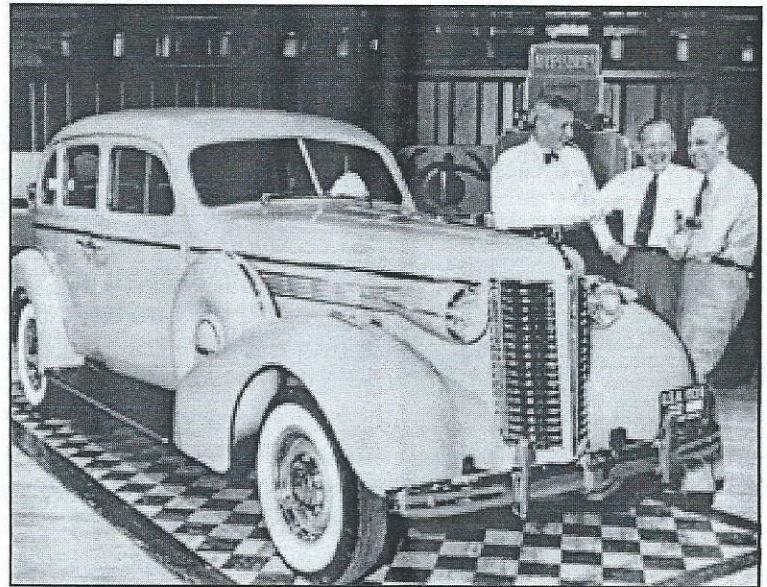
Harlow H. Curtice

In 1934 Buick Division returned under a new and dynamic leader, Harlow H. Curtice. Mr. Curtice's shrewd guidance at General Motors', 'AC' Spark Plug Division realized significant profits in the midst of the poor economy. His leadership marked a turning

point, spurring a golden era many enthusiasts view as Buick's halcyon years.

Refinements were quickly introduced for 1934 but the prime focus was on the introduction of the 40 series line which would be aimed at the low-end market. These cars went on to dominate production in the years that followed encompassing the majority of survivors existing today. Lacking capitol for re-tooling, Curtice negotiated with Chevrolet to manufacture a smaller chassis. His next move was to address marketing issues. Prior to his leadership, GM combined sales of Buick, Oldsmobile and Pontiac in a single organization known as 'B-O-P.' The structure had proven disastrous, watering down sales figures for those lines even further in a struggling economy. Through Curtice's encouragement GM granted their independence, once more generating much needed increased market share.

Quick success realized in 40 series combined with re-structuring the sales organization reinvigorated the line that gave birth to General Motors in 1908. GM was reassured and began to invest further in Curtice's vision as the economy continued to rage. Nineteen thirty six, saw Buick release an entirely new line, setting standards that would be continued to be associated with the marquee for years to come. General Motors granted the division \$8 million dollars for re-tooling with an additional \$4 million for long range planning, their greatest expenditure since 1925. With funding in hand, Curtice was confident in their ability to return to prominence. He would later comment on these years by comparing



Three General Motors executives are all smiles standing with a 1938 Buick Century Sedan with sidemounts. Pictured L-R, William Knudsen, Harlow H. Curtice and Alfred P. Sloan, Jr. Buick Division would soon be number four in sales just behind the 'low price three' and also capture a lion's share 40% of the luxury car market, leaving 60% to Cadillac, Lincoln, Chrysler, Packard and other brands.--Source: GM Heritage Center

Buick to an iceberg concealing most of its mass below surface reflecting the determination toward organization and planning that was engaged to make his vision a reality.

Mr. Curtice visited the head of GM's 'Art and Color' Division, Harley Earl and asked what kind of car he drove. Earl replied that he drove a Cadillac to which Curtice responded, "how about designing a Buick you would like to own yourself?" Harley Earl's styling for the 1936 line-up reflected well on Buick's new approach to the market. It was the dawn of a new and exciting era which is celebrated by auto enthusiasts the world over. Chief engineer F.A. 'Dutch' Bower led the teams effort developing a completely redesigned power plant, drive train and chassis. Marketing went into high gear and Curtice choose Arthur Kudner to assemble an in-house team for the division. Their advertising campaigns reflected close collaboration resulting in literature that's now almost as collectible today as the cars they describe.

First introduced in September of 1935, this car was a dramatic departure from previous offerings. Names were now associated with each series model presented. For the first time Special, Century, Roadmaster and Limited appeared in advertising. On the outside, a new all steel 'turret top' replaced the fabric roof construction of previous models. This allowed for graceful curves with streamlined styling that was beginning to define the decade. The number of body styles offered was reduced from 25 to 14 realizing a significant savings in manufacture. They were making their move back up! Buick automobiles had always featured the more efficient 'over-head' valve design. In 1931 they released their first straight eight engine. By 1935, they offered four different eights, significantly increasing production costs.

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With the 1936 models, there were only two straight eights available. At their debut to dealers, Chief Engineer Dutch Bower stated, 'The heart of Buick performance and dependability is right here in this engine.' The combination of new 'Anolite' aluminum alloy pistons with a shorter stroke reduced block height and weight significantly. Larger piston bore generated more power at higher speeds. The new 40 series utilized a 233 c.i. straight eight rated at 93 HP at 3200 RPM while the 60, 80 and 90 series cars were provided with a 320 c.i. straight eight engine rated at 107 horsepower. These power plant designs remained through 1953 with subtle enhancements. 'Turbulator domed' pistons were added in 1938 noted as 'The Dynaflex' increasing power in the 320 big series line to 120 horsepower. The high water mark came in 1941 prior to the outbreak of World War II with the addition of 'compound carburation' functioning similar to later four barrel design. Tagged as 'Fireball' that year, the 320 c.i. straight eights were rated at 165 HP at 3200 rpm! The massive, heavy flathead V8's from Cadillac and Lincoln were lucky to squeeze out 135 horse.

#### **Better brakes and suspension...**

Boosted performance with enhanced ability, increased speed potential created a need for better stopping and handling in the 1936 line. Hydraulic brakes and independent 'knee action' front suspension brought reliable roadability and performance unlike most production cars of the day. Many of the improvements introduced with this model remained in use on GM cars through the late 1960's. Increased performance ability for travel at higher speeds posed concerns for management long before government regulation took needed action for automobile safety.

The Buick Safety Legion was announced in January of 1936. There was no cost to join. 'The only requirement for membership is that you pledge yourself to drive with care and courtesy.' With submission of an enrollment card, members received a metal license plate topper. Buick Dealers were invited to the factory unveiling of the new lineup.

#### **Dealers jump on performance...**

At the conclusion of their meeting representatives from the Howard Automobile Co., returned from Flint, Michigan to their dealerships in Los Angeles and San Francisco driving 367 cars taken directly off the Flint assembly line. Driven consistently over 60 MPH the drivers stated they had 'never experienced such performance in a automobile,' adding the new Buick 'can handle itself under all road and weather conditions.' Sales staffs had been sold on the car and brought that enthusiasm to their clients. Production climbed to 179,533 for the year. The success was impressive, however, their challenges were not over. In December of 1936 workers at Flint's Fisher body plant organized under the United Auto Workers union, resulting in the first sit down strikes. They settled in February of 1937 with General Motors recognizing the 'United Auto Workers' for the first time. Curtice's influence continued to encourage refinements improving the line in the years ahead. His leadership generated a steady increase in market share from the same division that some feared would disappear in 1933! Buick captured fourth place among American production cars of 1938, producing 173,905 vehicles in yet another recession year. Of those top four American manufacturers

including, Ford, Chevrolet and Plymouth, Buick was the only make with 80 and 90 series cars recognized by The Classic Car Club of America.

In 1940, the rising tensions in Europe led President Roosevelt to select William Knudsen as the Director of his National Defense Advisory Committee. Knudsen had led Chevrolet from 1924 to 1937 until his promotion the helm of General Motors in 1937. By 1941 the Buick line had achieved production of an astounding 377,428 automobiles averaging 8% of the industries' sales volume just prior to the outbreak of World War II. Due to the dramatic performance, Knudsen selected Buick to produce aircraft engines designed by Pratt & Whitney.

#### **Challenges accepted...**

Harlow Curtice and his team quickly re-tooled for manufacture of war materials with their first aircraft engine being accepted by the government ahead of schedule in January, 1942. Buick ultimately delivered 74,797 powerful Pratt & Whitney engines by the end of WWII.

Buick Division undertook approximately thirty other war jobs including development and production of the M18 'Hellcat' Tank Destroyer. The division delivered over \$1 billion worth of equipment in contribution to the war effort in defeating the Axis Powers. Curtice's dedication to excellence employed at Buick during the Great Depression and in the turbulent days prior to World War II did much to nurture the boom years which followed after World War II.

With the success Harlow Curtice enjoyed, he went on to become the president of General Motors. Under his leadership GM would become the single largest corporation in the world and the first company to realize a billion dollars in profit in a single year during the 1950's. Mr. Curtice was selected as Time Magazine's 'Man of the Year' and appeared on the Cover in 1955.

