DAVID BUICK BATHTUB GENIUS

Plumber, Inventor, Visionary, Manufacturer— He Tinkered Away The Company Which Bore His Name

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THE SQUAT, cantankerous motor car —with right-hand steering, a pair of kerosene lanterns for headlamps and solid rubber tires mounted on wooden spoke wheels—chugged out of the wagon factory to be sold for $850.

It was late September, 1903. The buyer was Dr. Herbert H. Hills, then superintendent of the Oak Grove Sanitarium outside Flint, Mich. His purchase was a 1903 Buick, the new factory's very first production model.

Dr. Hills soon was to abandon the medical profession in favor of the fledgling automobile industry and eventually became general sales manager of the Packard Motor Car Co.

Buick, of course, was to become one of the classic names among American automobiles and the company which produced that 1903 model paved the way for the growth of both an important industry and one of the world's largest corporations, General Motors.

But this is not, except indirectly, a story of a machine, a company or an industry. It is the story of David Dunbar Buick—visionary, tinkerer, dreamer and sometime successful manufacturer whose name was to be carried into every part of the world by nearly 2.5 million vehicles before his death.

David Buick was a slender man, usually neatly groomed in stylish, but rather sedate clothes. His physical appearance, however, belied his temperament. While his mind was probably nearly average about most things, it approached genius in engineering. More important, he was impulsive and impractical—and unable to sit still for any time at all unless his thoughts and his hands were both concentrated on some mechanical problem that had happened to catch his attention.

Buick was both ingenious and restless. It was the first of these qualities that brought him fame, but his restlessness, once described by a friend as "dynamic," prevented him from ever deriving any lasting personal profit, though in at least four different periods in his career he certainly was in the "wealthy man" category.

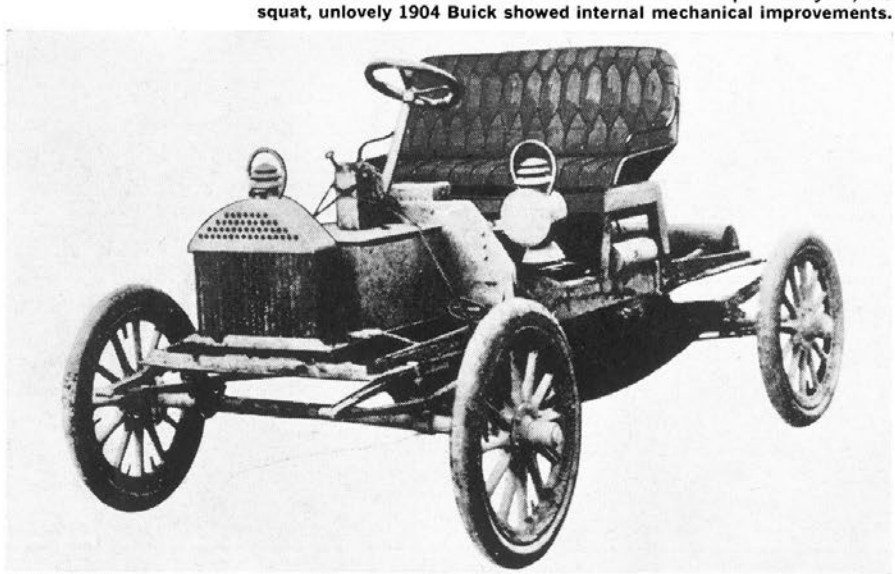
Little is known about Buick's early life. If it lacked color and excitement, which it probably did, judging from the times and his very average background, there were certainly enough of both in his later years to make up for the earlier deficiencies. Born in Detroit in 1855, his parents enrolled him 13 years later in a trade school and soon afterward he earned his first pocket money peddling *The Detroit Free Press* on street corners.

After completing school, Buick entered the plumbing business, the trade for which he had been trained, and in the middle 1880s formed a partnership in a plumbing fixture ar d supply concern with a former schoolmate, Charles Sherwood. The Sherwood-Buick Plumb- ▶

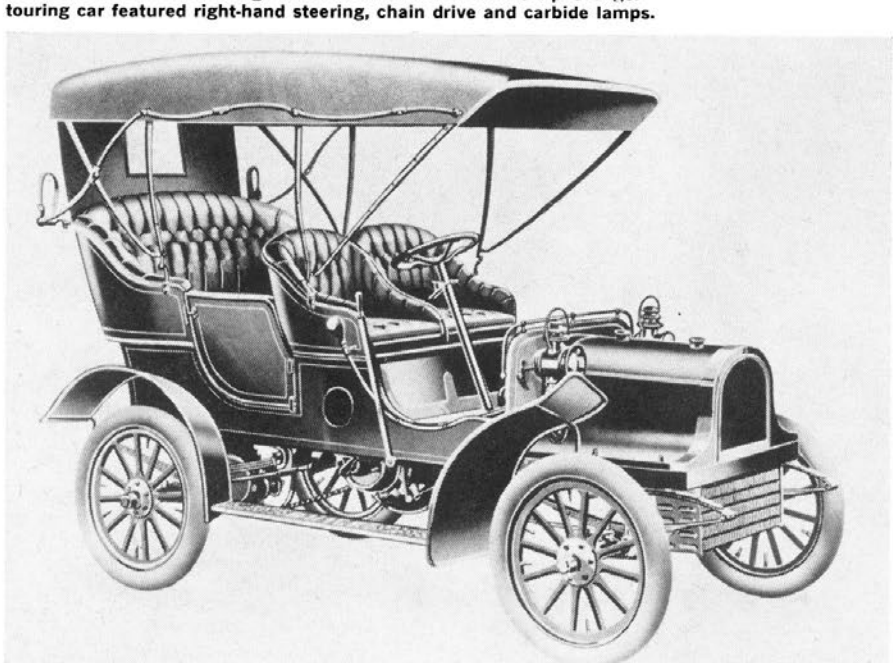
DAVID BUICK

WALTER MARR, at the wheel of a 1903 Buick, helped David Buick put his famous valve-in-head engine into production—despite frequent arguments.

OUTWARDLY IDENTICAL to a handful of cars made the previous year, the squat, unlovely 1904 Buick showed internal mechanical improvements.



BUICK'S FIRST model change was introduced in 1905. The 4-passenger touring car featured right-hand steering, chain drive and carbide lamps.



ing and Supply Co. prospered and David Buick was happy. But it wasn't business success that made him that way. Now, for the first time, he had a shop in which he could work and his penchant for mechanics and engineering quickly became a way of life.

At first, his tinkering was confined to problems related to plumbing and this paid off. In the early 1890s, Buick discovered and patented a unique method for applying enamel to cast metal—mainly cast-iron bathtubs. No one had been able to accomplish this before and suddenly Buick was a big success. He had proved his worth in the plumbing business.

But it wasn't plumbing that really held Buick's interest. Detroit's busy waterways daily demonstrated the need for better and more powerful internal combustion engines and already in Detroit there were other inventors who were toying with the idea of wagons and carriages powered by engines rather than horses. This was a challenge and Buick started pouring his talents and his recently gained profits into an internal combustion engine.

Buick may not have been a very practical man and no doubt was oblivious of many of the daily happenings around him, but he did have a great talent for engineering and was willing to push himself hard. By 1901, having solved many of the problems that were confounding some of his contemporaries, he had nearly perfected the first of the several types of engines with which he was eventually to work and decided to concentrate in that direction. He left the plumbing business, selling his share to Sherwood, and organized the Buick Auto Vim and Power Co.

HIS ORIGINAL intention seems to have been the manufacture of marine engines, but his restlessness played a hand and before long he nearly abandoned that idea in favor of automobile engines. (By this time Henry Ford, as chief engineer of the Detroit Automobile Co., later to become Cadillac, already had a small motor car in limited production.)

Buick pushed his business and its product as hard as he pushed himself. Consequently Buick Auto Vim and Power enjoyed some success in the then limited automotive field, selling engines to a variety of inventive people in Detroit who were experimenting with motor cars.

But Buick wasn't satisfied with the "L-head" engine his firm was producing. It was heavy, bulky and its power output was low. Buick was sure it could be improved. In addition, he was thinking of expansion. If he could manufacture and sell engines for motor cars, why couldn't he manufacture and sell the whole motor car?

BY THIS time, however, Buick had managed to run through nearly all the profits derived from his patent rights on the bathtub enameling process and the sale of his share in the plumbing concern. Though he was realizing a profit on his engines, it was hardly enough to finance the research and development work he knew lay ahead. So, he sought and finally obtained some additional financial backing with which he formed the Buick Manufacturing Co., absorbing into it the Buick Auto Vim and Power Co.

The new engine came first in Buick's mind and he went to work on a completely new design. About the engine, however, there is considerable confusion and disagreement. Some say Buick actually did most of the design and development work on the "valve-in-head" engine himself. There is one story which says an inventor friend of Buick's owed him money, could not pay and cancelled the debt by giving Buick the plans for a new kind of engine. The most likely of several stories is that while Buick dreamed up the basic concept of the valve-in-head engine design, it was developed by a French engineer, Eugene C. Richard. Soon after forming the Buick Manufacturing Co., Buick had hired Richard and had given him the title of "designer, inventor and head of the drafting department." Though it was later assigned to the company, the first patent on the new engine was issued in Richard's name.

The engine itself probably was refined and brought into production by another friend of Buick's, Walter L. Marr. A native of Michigan, Marr had gone to Cincinnati to open a bicycle shop, compete in 6-day bicycle races and work on his own invention, a perpetual motion machine. Marr had devised the carburetor used by Buick on his previous engine and returned to Detroit to help his friend when the Buick Manufacturing Co. was organized.

With the valve-in-head design moving toward completion, Buick turned to his second thought, the production of a complete motor car. However, probably because of the amount of money devoted to the development of the engine, only one prototype vehicle was produced before the company again ran into financial difficulty. There is no doubt that Buick's occasional distractions with some highly impractical devices which he thought might someday enhance the product did little to aid his money problems during this period. Again Buick was forced to seek additional backing.

This time he found it in the Briscoe brothers, Benjamin and Frank, who operated a successful sheet metal firm in Detroit. The Briscoes later were to join forces with Jonathan Maxwell to manufacture the automobile remembered today mainly through the medium of Jack Benny's carefully staged comic stinginess.

At first, the Briscoes contributed only badly needed tools and materials, but gradually they increased their financial holdings until, by the fall of 1902, they owned nearly 100% of the Buick Manufacturing Co. Buick, himself, was little concerned with the fact that the company that bore his name no longer was his. A dream was coming true and though there had been some setbacks in preceding months he felt sure great progress was being made. It was at about this time that the name of the manufacturing firm was changed to Buick Motor Company.

Despite Buick's optimism and the financial soundness of the company under Briscoe guardianship, no automobiles were produced. Somehow, there always was just one more thing that Buick wanted to experiment with and try out. Also, Buick was something of a perfectionist and desired his automobile to be the best and he continued to insist that more research and development would have to be carried out before the motor car could go into production. It was probably this attitude that caused the Briscoes to lose interest. They were happy with just the engine business and, possibly, they were getting tired of the expensive tinkering being done by Buick.

WHATEVER THE reasons, as 1902 came to an end, the Briscoes started searching for a buyer for the Buick Motor Co. In the spring of the next year, during a visit to Flint, Frank Briscoe was introduced to James H. Whiting, president of the Flint Wagon Works. Whiting's firm was one of several in the thriving town north of Detroit that had helped make Flint the carriage, cart and wagon capital of the world. Even before the turn of the century Flint had become the "vehicle city" and proclaimed itself as such on a wrought iron arch over Saginaw St., the main thoroughfare of the metropolis.

Whiting had followed closely the success in the preceding two years of Alexander B. C. Hardy, another Flint wagonmaker who had manufactured and sold 52 sporty Hardy-Flint Roadsters before being driven out of business by the owners of the Selden patents. He was interested primarily in the engine business because he thought it would be a natural for his firm to produce stationary farm engines that could be sold through his wagon distributors. But he was interested in the motor car, too, and negotiations were initiated which led to the transfer of the Buick Manufacturing Co. to Flint. Financial arrangements between Buick, the Briscoe brothers and Whiting resulted in creation of the Buick Motor Car Co. with David Buick as president. The new firm was to operate as a subsidiary of Whiting's Flint Wagon Works.

TO SET up shop in Flint, David Buick sent some of his most trusted employees up from Detroit in advance. Among the first to arrive were Arthur Mason and William Beacraft. Mason, who later was to form the Mason Motor Co. which produced engines for both the Little and Chevrolet cars, took charge of the installation of machinery in the Flint Wagon Works factory. Beacraft, Buick's superintendent of production, also was a Major in the Salvation Army and he initiated the practice, which eventually spread to nearly every plant in Flint, of holding prayer meetings in the factories during lunch hours.

There are arguments about the exact date, but the few records in existence indicate actual production of the Buick motor car began late in September, 1903, and depending on whose figures one accepts there were either 6, 13 or 17 Buicks produced that year.

Finally, Buick had what he desired. His company possessed solid financial backing from Whiting's Flint Wagon Works; a motor car bearing his name was in production; the car was being bought; and he was president.

But Buick's satisfaction didn't last long. Within a matter of months he was back in the factory, poking his nose into every mechanical phase of the construction of his cars, designing and redesigning, inventing and modifying and, in Whiting's eyes at least, spending far too much money on unnecessary things.

In 1904, Whiting, like the Briscoes, had had enough of David Buick's restlessness and inability to manage the business properly. Hence Buick turned to still another Flint wagon manufacturer who, above all, had a genius for managing people and money.

William C. Durant had had a varied career. While still in his teens he had left his job in a family-owned general store to become a successful insurance agent. Later, he served a brief term as Flint's first water commissioner. Finally, in 1886, he had formed a partnership with hardware salesman J. Dallas Dort, and founded the famous Durant-Dort Carriage Co. It was Durant who later used the Buick Motor Car Co. as the cornerstone in organizing General Motors Corp., then lost control of the corporation, regained it again by organizing and manipulating the stock of the Chevrolet Motor Co., lost it again, formed still another company to produce automobiles with his own name on them and finally died a pauper.

Durant liked Whiting's proposition and in the late spring of 1904 took an active part in management of the Buick Motor Car Co.

Durant's first step, probably planned in advance by himself and Whiting, was a major recapitalization of the firm. There are indications that this financial rearrangement was well along before

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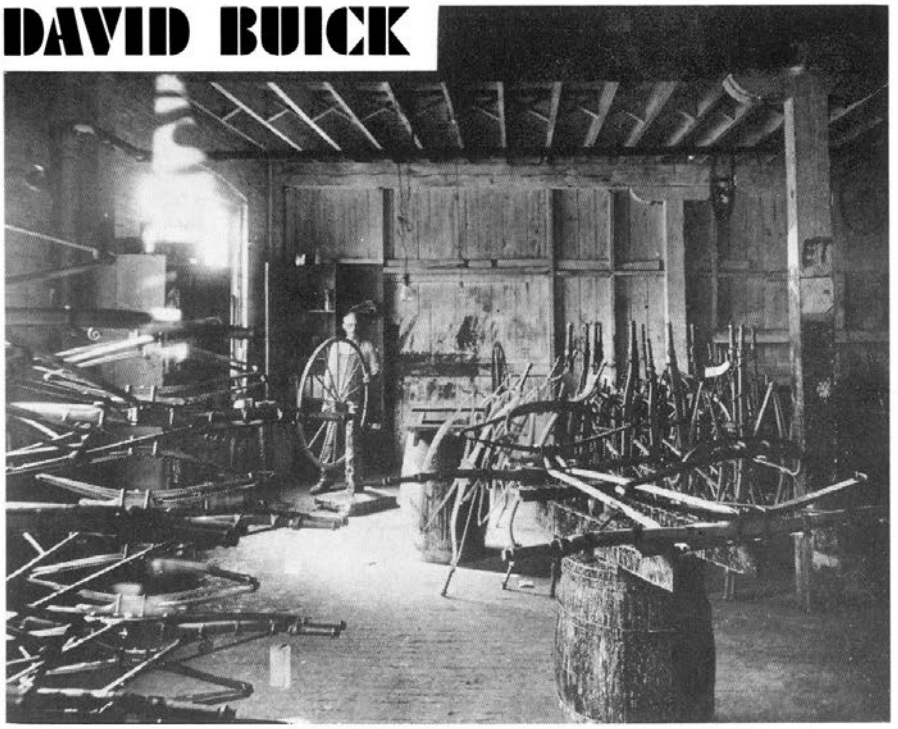
DAVID BUICK



FLINT WAGON works such as this became automobile manufacturing plants soon after 1900. Above is the W. A. Patterson Co. axle and spring shop.

FABULOUS William C. Durant erected GM from the Buick cornerstone.

INITIAL Buicks were built in James Whiting's Flint factory.

Buick became aware of the situation. Even then, he probably didn't care, for he didn't understand such things very well and he was happy to be back in the shop.

When the recapitalization was complete, however, Buick no longer was in control. Durant was chairman of the board and Charles M. Begole, son of a former Michigan governor, was president. Buick soon found that not only was he no longer boss of the firm that bore his name, his efforts in the engineering department were unappreciated and there was no money for his pet projects. Buick was quietly relegated to an insignificant job in the sales department.

The Buick Motor Co. (the name had been changed again by the new management) expanded rapidly and the Buick automobile became a success. New factories were built, production jumped to 750 units in 1905 and to 1400 in 1906, the product was improved and David Buick sat and was allowed to do nothing.

Considering his temperament and the pace he had set in preceding years, it is amazing that Buick stayed on as long as he did. By 1908, however, he had had enough. He was receiving an excellent salary and, because he wasn't permitted to revert to his expensive tinkering of earlier times, which had always taken his personal money as well as the company's, Buick was accumulating considerable personal wealth. But Buick wanted out and in the summer of 1908 resigned from the company.

Possibly embittered, or merely looking for something new, for the first time in a decade David Buick left the automobile business behind and headed for California. There he invested most of his savings in the new oil and gas fields . . . and lost.

NEARLY BROKE again, Buick returned to Michigan and the automobile, this time to Jackson where he organized a small company to manufacture carburetors. Ironically, the Buick Motor Co., by then a part of General Motors, and the Little Motor Car Co., a Durant-backed enterprise which was the forerunner of Chevrolet, were two of his first large customers.

It proved to be a lucrative business, but the profits, as always, seemed to burn a hole in David Buick's pocket. Thus another disastrous investment followed. Buick went from riches to nearly rags in the ill-fated Florida land boom.

It would be unfair to Buick to say he finally was whipped and threw in the towel. It is probably more kindly, as well as accurate, to say that he lost his lust for inventing, possibly became a bit more of a realist and decided to complete his confused life in a calm manner. Thus, in 1927, at the age of 72, David Buick returned to his home town, Detroit, and for the last two years of his life taught mechanical engineering and drawing in a small trade school very much like the one in which he had first learned how to dream about such things as bathtubs and motor cars.

Since that first Buick chuffed to life in 1903, the Buick Division of General Motors has maintained a position that can only be described as solid as a cast-iron bathtub. Buick success lent invaluable support to GM in early, financially bumpy days. Buick engineering later provided leadership among American manufacturers. Landmarks in Buick design are 4-wheel brakes (1924), a true torque converter (1948), power steering (1952 with Oldsmobile and Cadillac), power brakes (1953 with Olds), a 4-door hardtop (1955 with Olds) and America's first V-6 engine (1962).

Were that perfectionist-tinkerer among the living today, he would no doubt be astounded that in 1965 more than 600,000 automobiles were manufactured under the marque, "Buick."

In all probability, were David Dunbar Buick still alive, management permitting, he would be in a cluttered shop, adjusting, fiddling, trying to make the Buick better. ■