



CAR LIFE CLASSIC **1927 La Salle** **ROADSTER**

*A High Fashion Plaything
For the Emancipated Woman*

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY WARREN W. FITZGERALD

"In the name of the most high, mighty, invincible and victorious Prince, Louis the Great, by the Grace of God King of France and of Navarre, Fourteenth of that name, this ninth day of April, one thousand six hundred and eighty-two, I, in virtue of the commission of his Majesty which I hold in my hand, now do take, in the name of his Majesty, possession of this country of Louisiana."

THUS Rene Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, proclaimed the act which secured for him a place in history. A fearless explorer and shrewd diplomat in his relations with the North American Indian tribes, he did not live to see his dream of a united empire in the west for France fail in the face of British domination. He was cut down from ambush by two members of his expedition who rankled under his driving leadership. His vision, courage, and indomitable will while facing the rigors of the American wilderness almost three hundred years ago preserved for him an image felt desirable by the executives of the Cadillac Motor Car Co. for association with their new small car in 1927.

Those of us who were teen-age auto enthusiasts in the years just before World War II always will have a warm

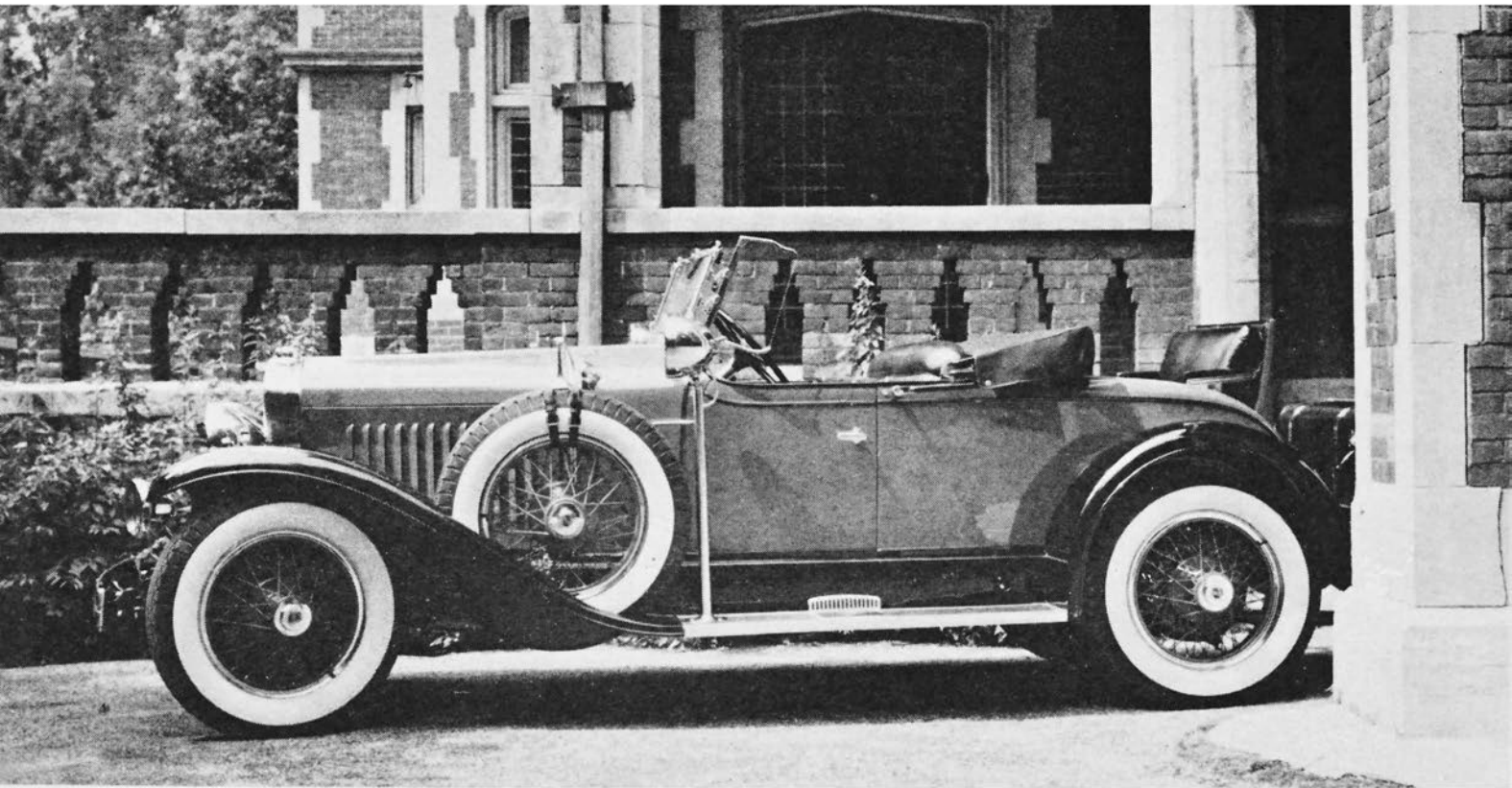
corner of our memories reserved for the La Salle. My own brings up the feel of a lean, tan 1937 coupe rocketing out of a Michigan village, touching an amazing 75 mph in second gear before changing up. Equally cherished is the recollection of the sound of that delicious V-8 exhaust note, possessed then only by Cadillacs and La Salles, which emanated from my uncle's handsome beige coupe, as we waited at a downtown Chicago intersection one icy night in the winter of 1940.

The first La Salle was introduced in March of 1927 and it was a significant car for two reasons. It was the direct outcome of the product policy laid down in 1921 by the GM management which succeeded William C. Durant. General Motors' direction, the origins of which are documented in Alfred P. Sloan's book, *My Years With General Motors*, resulted from that firm's examination of their market position in the post-World War I depression of 1920-21. The philosophy of providing a car for each segment of the market was a contribution of Durant, but it remained for the new management to clearly articulate it and formalize the price brackets encompassed by each car. It required six years to fully implement the policy, for the Pontiac, created to fill the spot between Chev-

rolet and Olds, was introduced for the 1926 model year, and the La Salle, that spring of 1927, was inserted into the gap between Oldsmobile and Cadillac.

The second aspect of importance about the La Salle was that it was the first successful mass produced car to be designed by a "stylist," and probably even more influential was the fact that that stylist was Harley J. Earl. Had the task fallen to another designer, and there were others working in this field when the young Californian came to Detroit early in 1926, it is very likely that the course of GM's automobile design might have taken another direction. And it is certain this would have had an effect upon all American cars.

IN THE EARLY 1920s, particularly on the West Coast, some automobile dealers were finding that products of Detroit could be sold at greater profit if drab colors and undistinguished lines could be dressed up to suit the better educated California tastes. Walter Murphy, who became one of the best custom coachbuilders, was first a Lincoln dealer who found it difficult to merchandise the stodgy products delivered by the Lelands. Harley Earl was designing custom models for Don Lee when his work came to the attention of Lawrence P. Fisher, then General Man-



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ager of Cadillac. Fisher recognized the flair possessed by this young designer who had been trained in the elder Earl's carriage shop. Many of the chassis benefitting from this flair were Cadillacs. L. P. Fisher asked Harley Earl to work with him at Cadillac on the design of a new car. The acceptance of the La Salle was sensational and Alfred P. Sloan Jr. was so impressed with the young man's ability that he invited him to head an "Art and Color Section." With characteristic sagacity Sloan made this operation a staff function, reporting directly to top management, rather than to any division.

Just how much General Motors needed Harley Earl can be revealed by studying the 1927 Cadillac sedan in comparison with our *Car Life* Classic. Admittedly, roadsters are snappier looking than sedans, but consider the Cadillac's dull fender contours, radiator shell, or the whole front end ensemble. It has often been pointed out that there was a strong Hispano-Suiza influence in the detailing of the La Salle. This is no doubt true, and it reflected Harley Earl's knowledge of, and appreciation for, the most advanced European thinking of the day. Sensitivity of line and proportion that he gave to the new cars could not have been derivative and demonstrated the

considerable talent brought to Detroit by the tall young man from California.

Engineering design was started in 1923 and its guiding philosophy was the production of a companion car to the bigger Cadillac. Technically the La Salle reflected all Cadillac features in a smaller, lighter way. The engine was very nearly identical, being essentially a smaller bored version. Inlet and exhaust valves were of the same diameter, and the stroke for both was 4.94 in. Both had high compression heads as optional equipment. The 90° V-8 engine had been adopted by Cadillac in 1914, and refined in 1923 by static and dynamic balancing. Thus, in 1927, the La Salle engine embodied experience gained from approximately a quarter-million V-8s.

The cylinders were cast in blocks of four from gray cast iron, staggered to enable the use of side-by-side connecting rods. The crankcase was cast from aluminum alloyed with copper, and special attention was paid to reducing resonant vibration and subsequent noise. The camshaft was chain driven, and lay in the V between the cylinder blocks, operating the valves by means of roller followers. The engine, being of "L" head layout, had both inlet and exhaust manifolds within the V, and

the exhaust was carried forward where it entered a common manifold and was passed down between the engine and the frame. Carburetion was provided by a single unit, Cadillac designed and built, lying centrally between the manifolds. It carried a large raised "La S" monogram upon its cover.

Ignition was by Delco, and featured a dual point distributor with a centrifugal spark advance, a development which Cadillac claimed rendered the spark adjuster so unnecessary the control was removed from its handy location on the steering wheel and placed on the instrument panel. Cadillac recommended its use only when the engine needed hand cranking, or when anti-knock gasoline was unavailable for use with the high compression engine option.

A CENTRIFUGAL water pump was mounted on the right side of the engine, driven by a silent chain from the sprocket on the crankshaft. Thermostatic cooling, pioneered by Cadillac, was provided by vertical radiator shutters which remained closed until the engine temperature reached the proper point. There is something to be said for this old-fashioned method, for the use of shutters also helped to control underhood temperature. Another interesting feature of the cooling system was the fan, which contained its own gear oil pump and reservoir in the hub for lubrication.

Backing up the engine was a multi-

plate clutch of 7.75 in. diameter. The transmission, a 3-speed, non-synchromesh type, was very similar in design to the Cadillac unit, except that thinner gears were used. Synchromesh, introduced to the automotive world by Cadillac, was incorporated the year after the La Salle's introduction. The driveshaft, 1.56 in. in diameter, was carried in a torque tube bolted to the differential housing at the rear. A single U-joint was employed at the transmission.

The chassis of the La Salle was visually quite similar to that of the Cadillac, except that it was shorter and lighter. It had a very rigid frame with six crossmembers, not nearly so massive as those found on the Cadillac. Suspension was by means of semi-elliptic springs, with assemblies of different

rate being selected for each body style. The front axle was a reversed Elliott-beam axle and steering was the worm and sector type, providing a ratio of 17.5:1. Four-wheel brakes were employed and the La Salle owner's manual cautioned against stopping too fast, as the car following might not be equipped with brakes nearly so effective.

Performance was very good for the day, and on June 20, 1927, the La Salle was demonstrated in a very convincing manner at the 3-year-old General Motors Proving Ground at Milford, Mich. There, Proving Ground driver and ex-dirt track racer Gus Bell, with Bill Rader of the Cadillac experimental group, conducted an epic endurance run. Their stripped roadster, sans fenders, running boards, lamps

and windshield, with a slightly hotter camshaft, high compression head, open exhaust, and a 3.5:1 rear axle ratio, posted a blistering 95.2 mph average for 10 hours. The Indianapolis winner in 1927 averaged 97.5 mph for half the distance. To this day, the GM Proving Ground emblem depicts this stripped roadster at speed on the banking. A dozen stock La Salles, taken directly from the production line, were driven a total of over 300,000 miles during a 4-month period by test personnel. The performance and durability of these new cars far exceeded the expectations of the Cadillac engineering group.

The La Salle line for 1927 offered a total of 11 body styles. Eight on the 125-in. wheelbase chassis included the roadster, phaeton, sport phaeton (dual

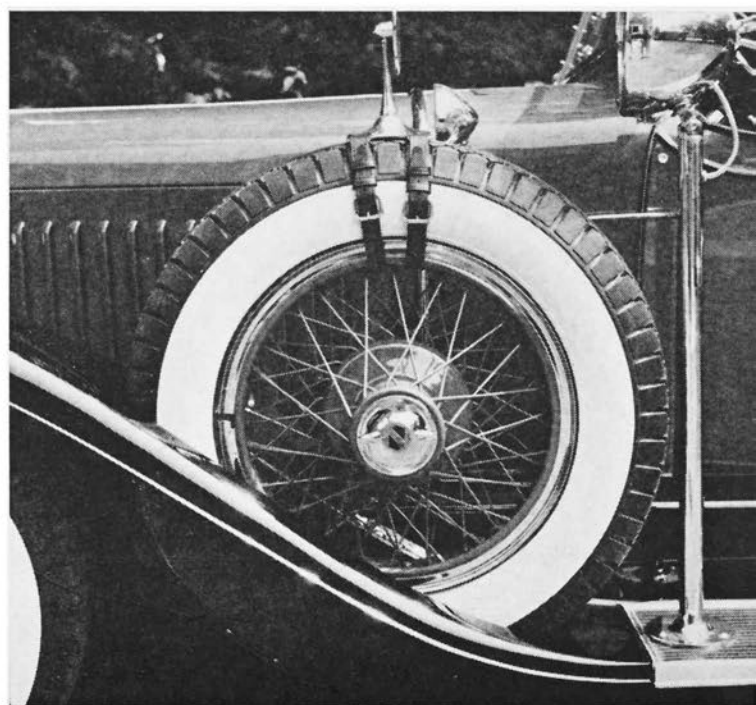
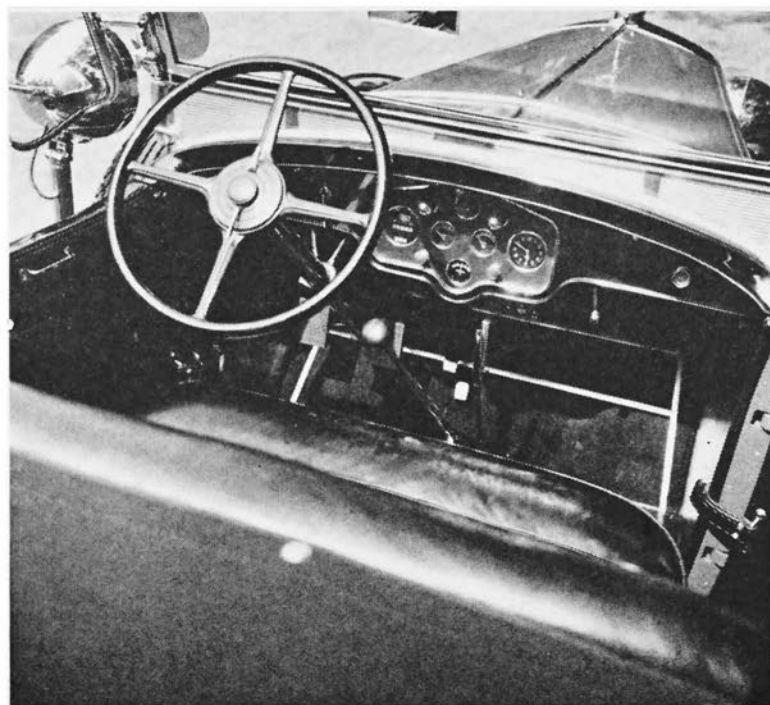
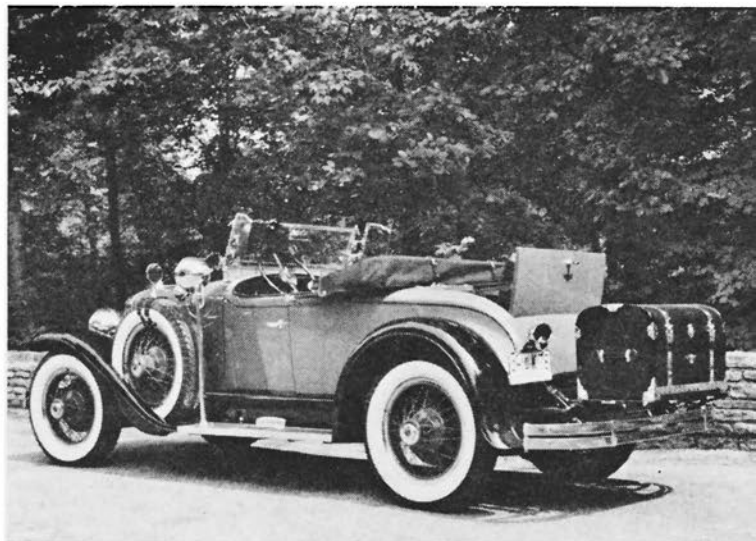
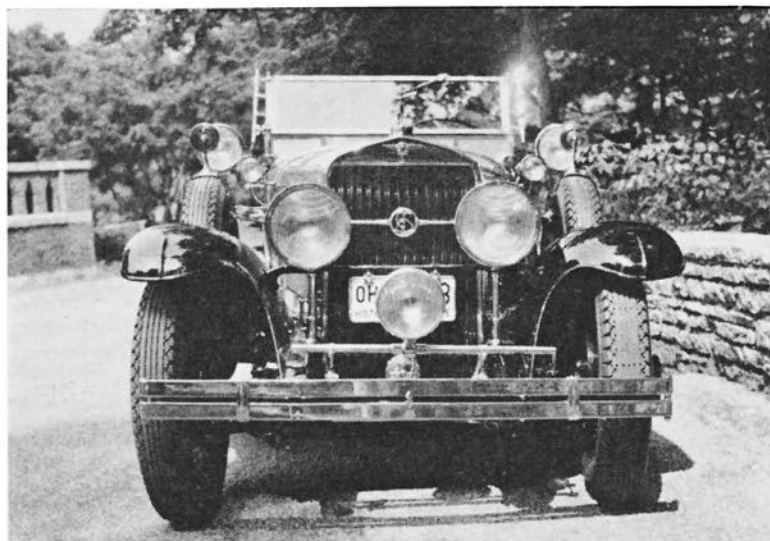
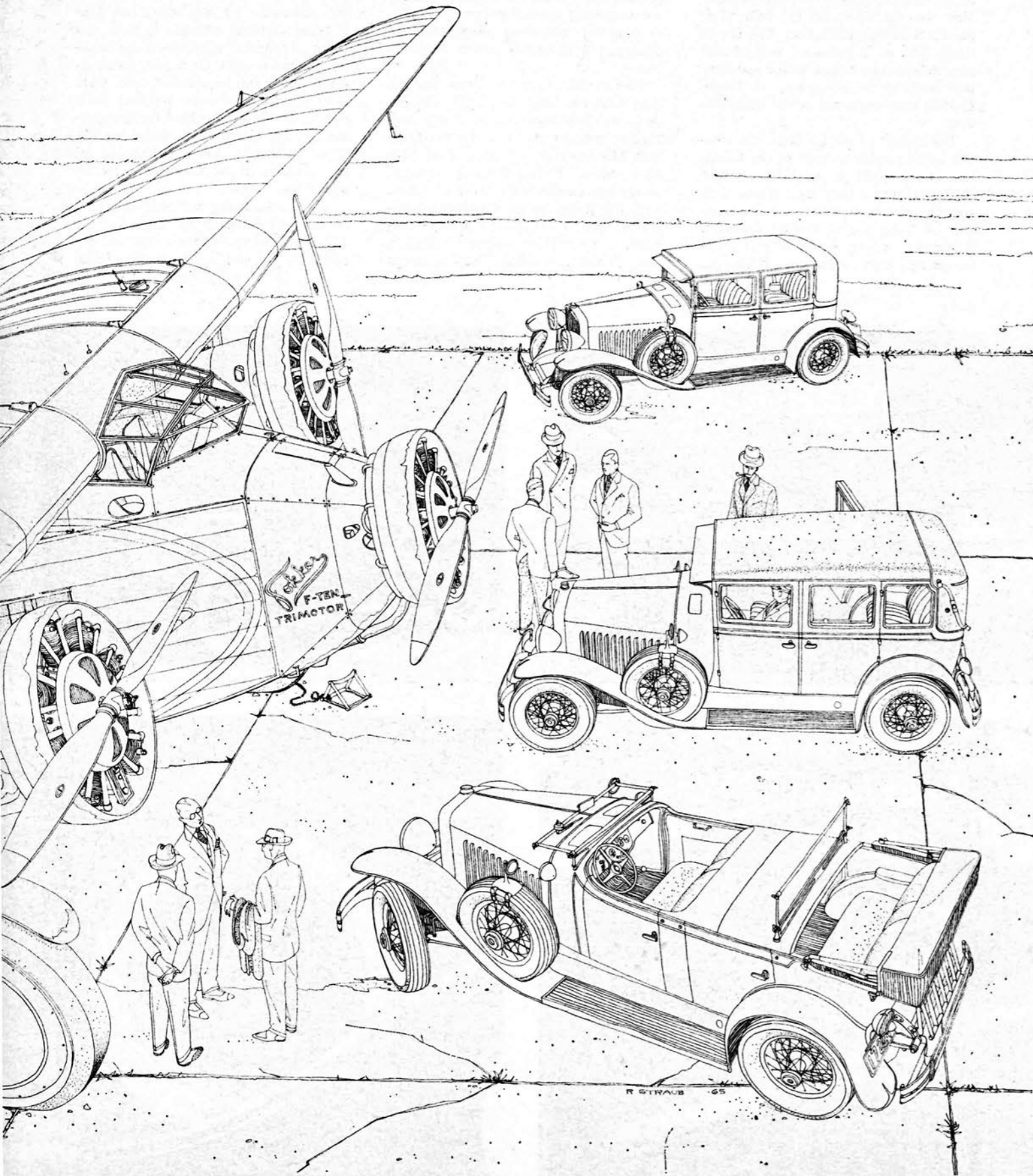


ILLUSTRATION BY ROBERT STRAUB



WHEN GENERAL MOTORS TOOK WING

GENERAL MOTORS' INVOLVEMENT in commercial aviation prior to World War II nearly coincided with the development of the La Salle. Charles Lindbergh's spectacular flight from New York to Paris in 1927, the year of the La Salle's birth, generated a widespread interest in aviation. This did not go unnoticed by GM management and the notion that GM might someday manufacture a "flivver" plane for popular consumption prompted the corporation into taking another look at the field of aviation. It had purchased the Dayton Wright Airplane Co. in 1919 (some of its buildings remain in the factory complex of GM's Inland Division).

In 1929 General Motors purchased a 24% interest in the Bendix Aviation Corp. and a 40% interest in the Fokker Aircraft Corp. of America. In addition, GM acquired the total capital stock of Allison Engineering Co., a maker of aircraft

components. This entry into the field was intended to keep GM abreast of developments in aviation. Realizing that GM's interest in Fokker could have occurred as early as 1927, artist Robert Straub shows GM executives examining a new Fokker F-10 tri-motor on a fanciful field somewhere in the East, with their new La Salles parked on the tarmac.

GM's association with Fokker was short-lived, as there were disagreements over the management of the firm with Anthony H. G. Fokker, designer and founder of the company. Fokker withdrew and returned to Holland. The company evolved into North American Aviation and General Motors' interest in it amounted to 30% of its outstanding stock by 1933. GM's major contribution to both Bendix and North American, before it disposed of its interest in these firms in 1948, lay largely in the areas of business management. ■

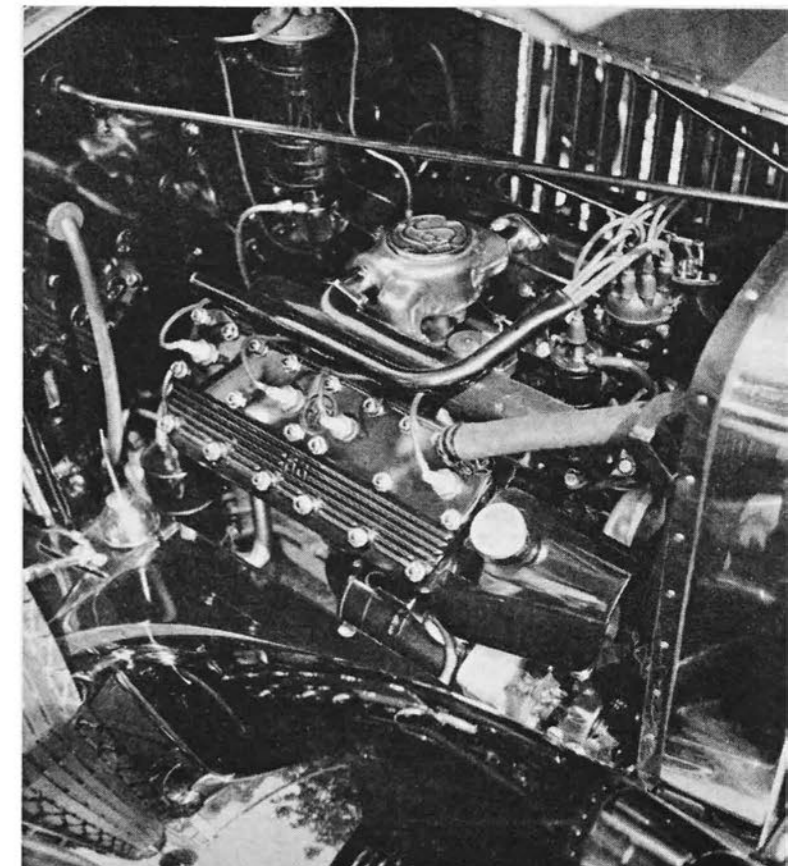
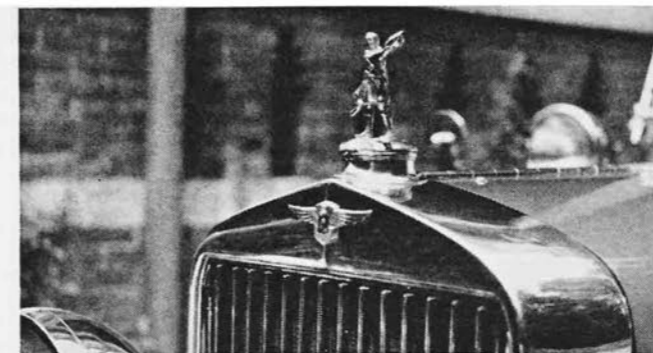
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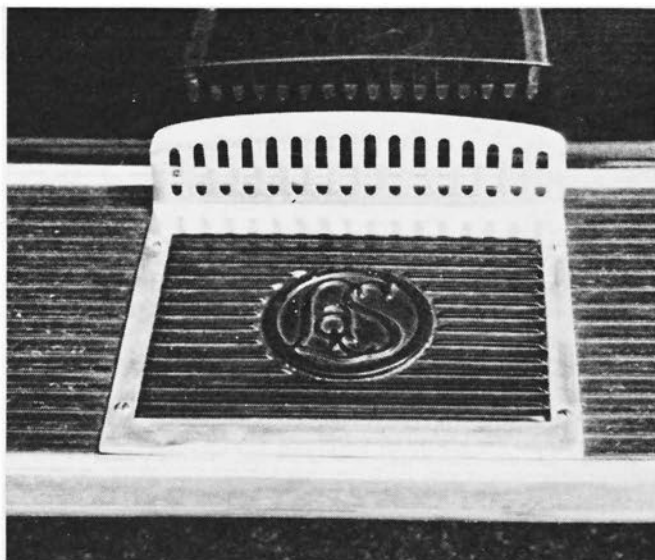
... (cowl), coupe, convertible coupe, victoria, sedan and town sedan. On the 134-in. wheelbase were the 7-passenger sedan, the 7-passenger Imperial sedan, and the 5-passenger Imperial. In the closed cars, mohair velvets were used for upholstery, with walnut paneling applied to door and instrument panel moldings. Interior hardware was very restrained in design, with a Butler fin-

ish. Open cars had folding windshields and twin cowl vents. They were upholstered in heavy hand-buffed leather. The roadster was provided with a small golf bag door on the right side.

The social emancipation of American women contributed to the popularity of the roadster body style during the Twenties and early Thirties. In an article devoted to women drivers,

Vogue magazine for June 8, 1929, pointed out that affluent women with time on their hands had discovered the joys of tooling an agile roadster off to shop or out to the country club. In typical lyric prose, this high fashion magazine painted the scene as follows: "Curving down Boston's North Shore Road from Magnolia to town, slim hands with rings signal at intersections from enormously powerful sports roadsters or impertinent small Fords, painted pale yellow, bright as canary birds." *Vogue* went on to say: "Many of the cars are small, and even the very





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large, very powerful automobiles in favour with the younger generation give a false effect of comparatively moderate size, due to the fact that, although the wheelbase may be one hundred and forty inches, the body is usually a two seater."

OUR *Car Life* Classic, a 1927 La Salle roadster, is owned by Don Cole, of Columbus, Ohio. He purchased the car in the fall of 1961 from a gentleman in Worcester, Mass., who is believed to have been the second owner. The original purchaser had been a salesman for the Cadillac agency in that city. The car had seen rough service, having been used at least for a while, as a snowplow. It had been hit hard enough in the right front to sustain severe frame damage. Cole and his assistants, John Nall and Nick Carter, completely disassembled the La Salle, straightened and sandblasted the frame. Parts for a 1927 La Salle proved difficult to find, and even Jim Pearson, the country's leading Cadillac authority and parts sleuth, had problems locating necessary bits and pieces for Cole. John Woods applied the finish, which is black lacquer and brilliant red acrylic. Today the car is very likely the finest example of an early La Salle in existence.

The Cadillac Motor Car Co. (later to be called Division) manufactured the La Salle as an elegant little sister to the Cadillac through the model year of 1940. During the years 1934, 1935 and 1936 when hard times depressed the market for high medium priced cars, the La Salle was produced inexpensively with off-the-shelf parts from models in greater production in the

General Motors line. An Olds straight-Eight engine was used in these cars. Though these interim La Salle models were unexciting in a technical sense, they were very much style leaders and pioneered the lean, long-nosed, penetrating appearance which characterized General Motors Corp. automobiles in the late Thirties.

La Salle again took up the Cadillac powerplant in 1937 and continued to employ it through its last year. There was a La Salle projected for 1941 and models were built. However, corporation management decided the La Salle should be dropped in favor of the inexpensive Series 61 Cadillac. Thus passed from the scene one of the most exciting

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS	
Engine	La Salle (Cadillac) 3 main bearing
Type	V-8, 90°
Firing order	1L-4R-4L-2L-3R-3L-2R-1R
Bore & stroke	3.25 x 4.94 in.
Displacement	303 cu. in.
Taxable horsepower	31.25 (SAE)
Brake horsepower	77
Carburetor	La Salle single throat
Crankcase capacity	8 qt.
Coolant capacity	21 qt.
Fuel capacity	20 gal.
Fuel consumption	n.a.
Transmission	3 speeds forward, 1 reverse, non-synchronesh
Gear ratios	1st 3:1; 2nd 1.7:1; 3rd 1:1; R. 3.8:1
Front suspension	Semi-elliptics
Rear suspension	Semi-elliptics
Wheelbase	125 and 134 in.
Tread	56 in.
Tires	6.00-32
Battery	Exide, 6 v., 100 amp/hr.

medium priced production cars built in this country before the war. There are many of us who recall the La Salle with no little bit of nostalgia and would like to see it revived some day. ■

