

# Buick

MADE A TRUCK?



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**C**ENTURY, ROADMASTER, LIMITED, RIVIERA, SKYLARK—these evocative model names that suggest speed, luxury, exotic locales, and youthful vigor were all used by Buick Motor Co. Many other model names of that marque are carved into automotive history, but Buick’s commercial cars and trucks are barely remembered today. Even the hallowed, expensive “Three Ps” (Packard, Peerless, and Pierce-Arrow) fielded commercial cars, joining the dozens of commercial car manufacturers before the Great War.

The company that became Buick was founded in 1900 by David Dunbar Buick (1854–1929), a Scottish-born American inventor living in Detroit who achieved great success in the plumbing business. He is perhaps best known for developing the process of permanently coating cast-iron tubs and sinks with vitreous enamel, a process that made him a small fortune and is still in use to this day. An inveterate tinkerer, Buick built his first gasoline engine in 1895, sold the plumbing business for almost \$100,000, and established a company to build stationary and marine internal combustion engines.

Stephen Benson’s 1916 Buick D-4 Express is a real Flint rarity!

*Story by Tom Gibson • Photos by Brad Bowling*



# Buick



The block letters "BUICK" are stamped on the screw-on hubcaps, which were shared with the passenger car line.



Liberty headlight lenses by the Macbeth-Evans Glass Co. of Charleroi, Pennsylvania, are often seen when OEM lenses were broken and replaced. A whopping 17 candlepower was provided by 6-volt Mazda lamps (GE's bulb brand, no relation to the Japanese automaker).

One of two known to exist, this 1916 Buick D-4 Express is among the 1,152 built for the domestic market in Buick's penultimate year of truck production. The D-4 Express rode on a 122-wheel-base. Bodies were painted red with black fenders, chassis, and hood, and this example wears an optional folding top. The base price was \$1,225, and a permanently mounted shaft for the detachable crank starter was provided for when manpower was required.



The Buick script is also seen on these strong cast step plates mounted to the front of each running board. They are both decorative and handy for scraping boots and shoes before entering the open cab.



Appearing on all four corners are 35x5-inch, wooden, 12-spoke, artillery wheels with demountable Baker rims and pneumatic tires. Semi-elliptic springs are used in front, with full-elliptic springs at the rear.

Better at inventing than business, Buick and his nascent company struggled in its first few years with a number of different investors. His first wagon-like automobile was built during 1899–1901. The company's early history is murky, but Walter Marr is credited with designing the first Buick. Marr was an engineer who worked on and off for the company and would later become its chief engineer. In 1903, the company was sold to a consortium of carriage makers in Flint, Michigan, and production moved there from Detroit.

Legendary automotive businessman William C. "Billy" Durant bought Buick's firm in late 1904. Durant increased capacity and capitalization, producing 37 Model B, valve-in-head, 2-cylinder Buicks. In 1905, production grew to 750 of the 2-cylinder Buick Model C vehicles and nearly doubled the following year to 1,400

2-cylinder Model F and G cars. The year 1906 also saw the introduction in May of the first Buick 4-cylinder motorcar, the Model D. Sales for 1907 totaled 4,641, and Buick produced its first light-commercial car, the Model 2-A, in limited numbers. The Model 2-A was based on a 2-cylinder passenger car chassis. Those sales propelled Buick to the number-two position in the industry, eclipsed only by Ford's 14,887 sales.

Durant incorporated the General Motors Co. of New Jersey on Sept. 16, 1908. Strong sales of 8,820 cars and light trucks in 1908 pushed Buick to first place in the industry. (Some sources claim Ford produced 6,015 cars; others indicate that 10,202 Fords were made for the calendar year.) General Motors bought the Buick Motor Co. in late September, and Durant bought out David Dunbar Buick's interest in the company.

In November 1908, the Olds Motor Works was brought into the General Motors fold in an acquisition spree that soon included the Oakland Motor Car Co., Cadillac Motor Car Co., and the Champion Ignition Co. (later AC Spark Plug). Within 18 months, more than two dozen car, truck, and component manufacturers were operating under the General Motors umbrella of companies.

In 1909, Buick sales increased to 14,606 cars and trucks, good enough for a number-two industry slot. In 1910, calendar year production of eight car models and Model 2-A trucks ballooned to 30,525, which kept Buick close behind first-place Ford in sales. Durant was forced out of General Motors by its board of directors because of his reckless spending in the rapid expansion of the company. Buick made a serious push into the commercial car market, and its 1910

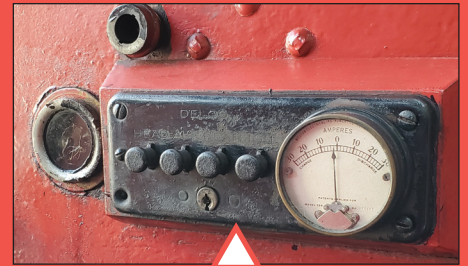




The Buick's foot board features pedals that control the clutch, brakes, electric starter, and accelerator. The standard electric horn is activated by a button on the tall steering column. Floor shift for the three forward gears and one reverse gear is center-mounted, as is the emergency brake handle. The D-4 has a thick, wooden, 17-inch steering wheel with throttle control and spark advance.



The D-4 Express was repainted just once in its factory-spec red, with the Buick script and model year added at some point, perhaps for parade duty. The folding top was optional, and it appears to wear a later foldable windshield.



The Delco electric controls are housed in one simple dashboard unit that includes headlight, auxiliary, rear light, and ignition switches, plus an ammeter for the 6-volt battery. The auxiliary switch activated the standard trouble lamp with extension.

Model 2-A trucks, offered in a variety of body styles, reached sales of 1,098.

The 1911 Buick commercial car brochure shows 92- and 110-inch-wheelbase models with Wagonette, Express, Open Express, Canopy, Panel, Platform with Stake, and even an Old English Motor Bus body. The basic trucks resembled little more than buckboard wagons, with a valve-in-head, 22hp, 2-cylinder, opposed engine located under the front seat, and a radiator at the wagon's front. Following General Motors' financial crisis with Durant's 1910 departure, Buick's 1911 car and truck sales fell to 13,389, dropping the company to the number five position. Included in those sales were 902 Model 2-A trucks.

Twin-chain drives supplied the power to the rear wheels, which were shod with 32x4-inch pneumatic or solid rubber tires (34x4-inch solid tires were optional), and two internal expanding brakes providing

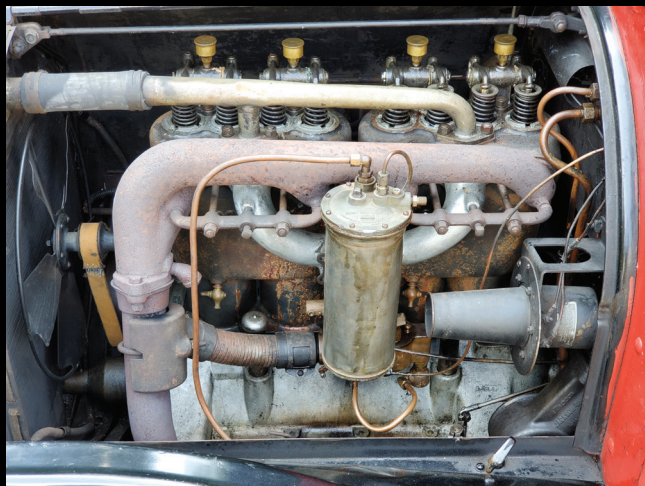
stopping power for each of the drive wheels. The planetary transmission featured two speeds forward and one reverse. Chassis weight for the 1911 Buick A-92 (\$965) was 2,190 pounds and 2,230 for the larger A-110 (\$980). Normal carrying capacity was 1,500 pounds up to a maximum of 2,000 pounds. Standard equipment included two-sided, oil-burning headlights; taillights; horn; tools; jack; and a tire repair kit with air pump.

Buick production increased by nearly one-third in 1912 to 19,812 and rose to 26,666 for 1913. That year saw the replacement of the antiquated Model 2-A trucks with larger, more powerful Models 3 and 4, both with 37hp, 4-cylinder, valve-in-head engines; a modern, front-engine configuration; and steering wheels on the left. The half-ton Model 3, base-priced at \$1,100 had a 100-inch wheelbase, while the 3/4-ton Model 4 (\$1,300) rode on a 122-inch

wheelbase. Only 199 Model 3 trucks were produced, and the Model 4 added another 461 units to the bottom line.

Although sales could hardly be considered stellar, the 1914 commercial car brochure noted: "The Buick Motor Truck has made good. It has proven its ability to earn its place on the profit side of the transportation ledger." The brochure reprinted testimonial letters from satisfied owners with compelling titles such as, "Takes Place of Two Wagons," "5,000 Miles—No Adjustments," "Stranger to the Repair Shop," and "Does Work of Six Horses." The smaller Model 3, based at \$1,075, made its last appearance with sales of 101 units, plus 738 of the Model 4 selling for \$1,225 in base form. Pneumatic tires were standard, and solid tires could be ordered if the carrying capacity was expected to be more than 1 ton, but the big news was the introduction of Delco





Rated at one-ton, the D-4 Express has three speeds forward and one reverse, and a shallow bed with wing boards and fold-down tailgate. A spare demountable rim was standard, but you had to pay extra for the tire. Contracting service brakes were provided on the two rear wheels, which also contained the expanding emergency brakes.



Textured, waterproof, multi-layer tops in different grains were offered by a number of companies and brands, such as DuPont Fabrikoid's Rayntite, Carr's Neverleek, and Pantasote. Flexible Eisenglass was used for rear windows and side curtains, and modern materials are available that mimic the originals.



The hardened nickel-steel gear case contains rear axle bevel gears driven by an enclosed propeller shaft. Service and emergency mechanical brake armatures for each of the rear wheels and the battery box are in plain view, easily accessed.

A large Stewart vacuum tank feeds fuel to the carburetor from a gravity-fed, 12-gallon tank under the seat. The Klaxon horn is electric, operated by a button mounted on the steering column. Four vertical cylinders mounted in pairs have the valve-in-head configuration, first patented in 1902 by machinist Eugene Richard for the Buick Mfg. Co. The large housing with the coil on top is the Delco starter and motor generator. After ignition, the starter disengages, and the motor generator's shaft drives the distributor, water pump, and fan. A handy oil can is provided on the firewall for quick lubrication fixes.

self-starting, ignition, and electric lighting on both models. Total Buick sales for 1914 were 32,889, including 1,783 export units.

Buick reported 1915 U.S. sales of 43,946, adding 1,012 in Canada and 1,865 for export. An improved truck, the Model C-4 with a 221ci 4-cylinder engine, was the lone domestic model offered. It had a base price of \$1,225, and 645 sold. The company also shipped 748 Model C-4-X export models, many bound for war work overseas.

The year 1916 was a banner one for the American automobile industry, with 1,525,578 passenger car sales recorded—the first year that domestic production surpassed the one-million mark. The industry produced 92,130 motor trucks and buses, with Buick contributing 1,152 Model D-4 trucks for the domestic market and 1,347 Model D-X-4 units for export. The combined value of these

vehicle sales was \$1,082,378,000—another industry benchmark!

Our featured Buick Model D-4 Express is one produced in that watershed year. It marks the final appearance of the 221ci, 4-cylinder, 122-inch-wheelbase Buick truck, now a one-ton model priced at \$1,225. Its maximum hauling capacity was rated at 2,000 pounds, and tires were 35x5-inch pneumatics. After sitting out the truck market in 1917, Buick made one last commercial car, the 1918 Model E-4 Light Delivery Truck. Buick recorded 2,410 sales before Chevrolet and GMC Truck took over GM's commercial vehicle production.

Bought at auction in 2018, the D-4 Express seen on these pages is believed to be one of just two examples remaining and is in mostly original condition, although it wears a decades-old repaint. Acquired new by Schmeuser Buick in Hammond,

Indiana, and used in the dealer's service and parts department, it is said the D-4 was retired to the back of the facility around 1930 and stored there until 1951. Lightly reconditioned for Hammond's 1951 Centennial Parade, the D-4 went to its first private owner around 1965.

The late Stephen Benson (1939–2020) purchased the D-4 Express at the 2018 RM/Sotheby's auction in Hershey, Pennsylvania, adding it to his eclectic collection of vintage cars, trucks, motorcycles, wooden boats, and fire engines in Charlotte, North Carolina. The Buick came with a vast amount of documentation covering its history from the beginning.

One of Benson's main interests was International Harvester Co. trucks, having begun his career with IH before moving up through the company's ranks in the United States and Canada. At age 30, he became the firm's youngest





plant manager and was later transferred to Durban, South Africa, where he ran an aging IH plant and was tasked with supervising the construction of a new factory. His last post was with IH Europe in Paris, where he coordinated with the company's French, English, and German manufacturing divisions. Leaving IH in 1974, he returned to the U.S. to pursue other business interests.

Sons David and Matthew, both auto enthusiasts, have many fond memories of their lives abroad and continue to enjoy the family car collection. After buying the Buick at auction, Stephen Benson titled it in his grandson Billy's name, making Billy only the third owner of the 105-year-old truck. It is fitting that the rare Buick is in the possession of a new generation of auto aficionados, where it remains a testament to their father and grandfather's world vision of transportation. 🚚

The famous script logo of Buick, the pride of Flint, Michigan, appears on this brass plaque affixed to the front of the passenger side of the truck's bed.



The wagon-like, wooden bed of the D-4 Express is 98 inches long and 43 inches wide, with a fold-down tailgate surrounded by angle iron for additional strength. The single rear taillight is rated at 3 candlepower.