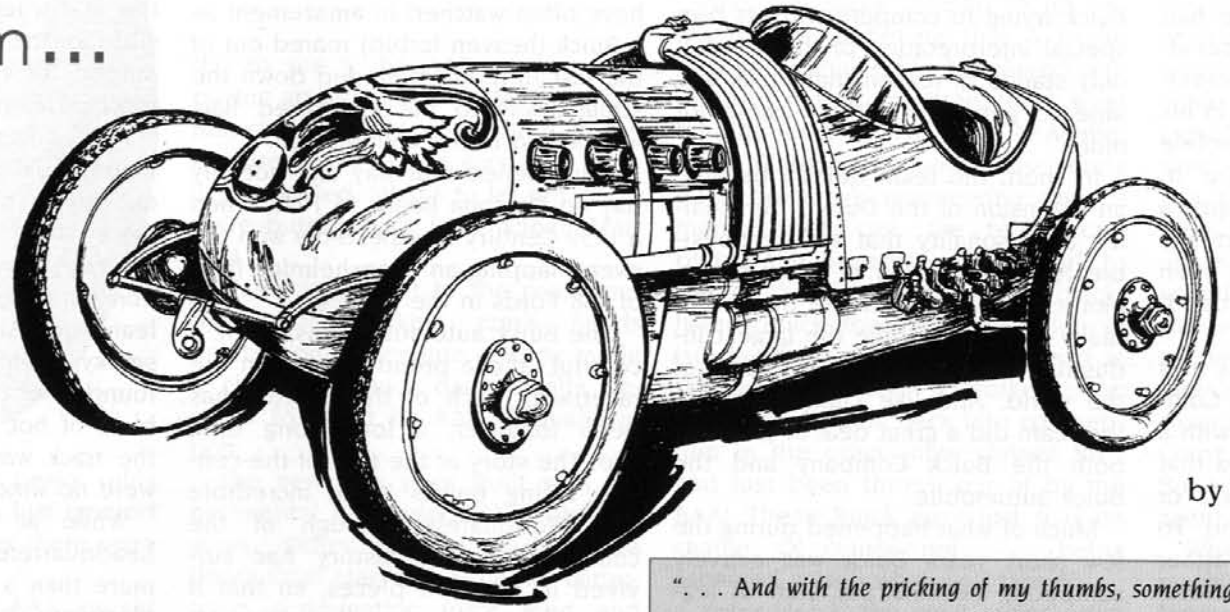
ANTIQUE AUTOMOBILE

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE ANTIQUE AUTOMOBILE CLUB OF AMERICA, INC.

SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER 2002 VOL. 66, NO. 5

Something Wicked this Way Comes...

The Buick Race Cars from...



by Terry B. Dunham

". . . And with the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes."
"Macbeth," SHAKESPEARE

The first horseless carriages began to appear on America's streets in the closing years of the 19th century, and men of great vision and talent began to notice them. There was good reason. Fortunes were waiting for those astute enough to successfully design and market a car capable of attracting the public eye. Few understood how the new machines worked, and fewer yet knew how to successfully build and sell one, although thousands tried. Most who tried their hand at the new enterprise failed. Many lost everything, including their dignity in the process.

It took a lot to succeed in the car business back then. Much more than just a horseless carriage that could be cranked, started, and driven down the road without failing. It took something special. It took a feature, price, confidence in the company that had produced the contraption, something that would make the machine stand above the ashes of the failures that littered the industry at the time. In the case of the Buick and General Motors, it took a better engine. A patented overhead valve engine that Buick would come to advertise for the next 6 decades as the "valve-in-head."

It also took a Buick race team—a team driving cars powered by that same ohv design to quickly get the word out to the American public that something special, something really powerful, lay under the hood of a Buick automobile. Buick won a lot of races in its formative years, and in the process, men at Buick learned a lot about the fine art of the press release. Using a series of numbered publicity releases the Company called "Racing Bulletins," Buick saved thousands of advertising dollars every time a Buick won at the track. William C. (Billy) Durant, who was then heading up the Buick Motor Company, would eventually utilize those dollars in 1908, when he formed General Motors.

At the same time Buick was blowing the competition into the weeds, the American public was reading a lot of good things about the Buick automobile in the morning newspapers, and a lot of new Buicks got sold

as a result. Durant had things pretty well figured out.

Durant was an industrial giant, one of the greatest businessmen this country has ever produced. He had an extremely positive sales personality and a talent for business organization that was second to none in his time. His approach to the automobile business and his driven desire to succeed were closely aligned with a personal desire to win at virtually any cost. To Durant and the men around him, if winning meant bending the rules, then so be it.

When Durant realized that his new enterprise, the Buick Motor Company, could best be promoted with a successful racing team, the idea that he might field a bunch of losers or also-rans never entered his mind. To Durant's way of thinking you either won or you didn't, you were either the best there was or you weren't. Durant's willingness to do whatever it took to win was soon communicated to everyone that had anything to do with his race team.

By the time the team had fired up its engines for the last time, the drivers had played fast and loose with the AAA rulebook and had shamelessly copied ideas from the competition. They had also used "experimental technology" in the stock production classes and had become famous for using every imaginable trick to gain an advantage over the competition. In fact, the team played so free and loose with the AAA rules that it is almost impossible today to figure out what they got away with! About the only thing the surviving documents clearly detail is the mischief the team got caught at. And since the AAA was forever catching Buick trying to compete with its own special interpretation of the rules, it only stands to reason that Buick was able to get away with a whole lot more!

In short, the team quickly became an extension of the Durant personality, a personality that was responsible for the creation of the General Motors empire, an empire that eventually grew to become the largest industrial corporation in the history of the world. And like Durant himself, the team did a great deal to promote both the Buick Company and the Buick automobile.

Much of what happened during the few short years Buick was actively competing became the stuff of legend. The records and heritage forged by the team eventually evolved into a tradition rooted deep within Buick itself. It began in the engineering department and was clearly supported by company management. It evolved into an expectation of power, performance, and excellence in the Buick car, and caused the Buick to become something of a "sleeper" when it came to competitive motor sport. It also made one of the most vivid advertising statements of all time highly believable . . . "When Better Automobiles Are Built, Buick Will Build Them."

Just about the time Buick had been out of the racing business for a decade or so, someone would rediscover that the company was building a pretty fast car, and when properly set up, a Buick could deliver on the race track. Over the years, spectators have often watched in amazement as a Buick (heaven forbid) roared out of the last turn and pounded down the straightaway to the checkered flag, well ahead of the competition.

It happened that way one hot July day on Daytona Beach in 1940, when a 1939 Century unexpectedly won the event, lapping an overwhelming field of V-8 Fords in the process.

The Buick automobile has a rich, a colorful, and a proud history on the racetrack. Much of that history has been forgotten a long, long time ago. The story of the turn-of-the-century racing Buicks is an incredible tale. Fortunately, enough of the company's racing history has survived in bits and pieces, so that it can still be told more than 90 years later.

Pulling to the Line

From 1908–1911, while the industry was still in its infancy, Buick fielded a factory racing team. The team's drivers and riding mechanics laid life and limb on the line every time they climbed aboard one of their primitive machines and headed for the starting line. For protection against wrecks, they wore an inadequate thin leather helmet, goggles without safety glass, gloves, padded clothing, and high-laced boots.

At racing speeds there were no seatbelts, only an early version of a harsh bucket seat to hold the men in place; tires looked to be little more than rubber bands stretched around wooden spoke buggy wheels. In fact, tire and wheel failures were responsible for the maiming and killing of a number of the early drivers, riding mechanics, and spectators.

Pistons in many of the Buick racing Fours looked like they were large enough to fill a small wash bucket. Once the riding mechanic had cranked it over, the explosive racket from an idling Buick race motor was fearsome. At full throttle, a stinky, smoky, deafening roar would surround the car. During a race, the blast of hot air and grit blowing off the track was formidable, and there were no windshields to deflect it.

While at the track, Buick often headquartered in what was little more than a cold dark barn with no electricity. Designated as the "Buick Camp," work benches were often set up out-of-doors, covered with dust, to take advantage of the sunlight. This racing brotherhood was clearly not for the faint of heart.

"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away." "Walden," THOREAU, 1854

The members of the Buick team were a fearless, colorful, swashbuckling lot, and along the way to winning a lot of races and setting a lot of records, they had something of a cavalier attitude toward the rulebook.

Walter Marr, Buick's chief engineer 1904–14, got some practical experience on the racetrack on August 27, 1904, at Grosse Point, Michigan, the first recorded entry of a Buick in competition. (Courtesy of Buick Motor Division)

Sometimes when those pesky rules got in the way, the team just ignored them . . . and sometimes there were consequences.

In May of 1910 the AAA caught Buick trying to run in the stock production classes at Indianapolis with a series of hybrid hand-built race cars camouflaged with "Buick Roadster" identifications hung on the radiators! Three Buick racing models, the 16A, 16B, and 100, were disqualified on the spot.

Not to worry. On the train ride back to Flint, the Buick bad boys designed two new revolutionary single-seat race cars, and then built them from scratch in the engineering department in just two weeks. The team put the finishing touches on its new red racing machines by painting a large ram's head on the hood of each car. With a fast glance over his shoulder to see if the AAA people were paying attention, Walter Marr, Buick's first chief engineer, was quick to tell the press why as the cars were publicly unveiled; "that's to let em' know we're butting back into racing!" Marr said.

Marr's statement to the press and the mean looking ram's heads painted on the engine cowling made it clear that Buick had actually decided to flaunt its AAA disqualification!

The new cars were built with experimental 4-cylinder 622 ci ohv engines. Other features included a Bosch Dual Magneto, Schebler carburetor, combination force feed and splash lubrication, leather faced cone clutch, and 3-speed selective transmission. Based on the rough lope of the massive engines at idle, it appears the cars were also built with long duration camshafts.

A 594 ci ohv 4 cylinder, stealthily rated at a modest 100 HP, was the strongest engine in use by the team up until that time. Buick, ever cautious about truthfully admitting to the factual horsepower in its racing engines, decided to tweak the rules once again. The new cars were registered with the AAA as "Buick 60 Specials." The "60" designed 60 horsepower . . . an impossibly low figure!

History later came to know these two big thumpers as the Buick Bugs. The Bugs turned out to be awesome machines and promptly set several records in straightaway competitions.

And still Buick refused to let the matter die. Believing that a trump card still remained to be played with the AAA rules committee, Buick went hunting for its copy of the AAA rulebook. Finding it, in what must surely have been the engineering department's trash can, the team completed the necessary paper work to change the classification of its blacklisted "Buick Roadster" race cars, registering them with the AAA instead as "Marquette-Buicks." It worked! The team got the cars back into competition in the exact same classes they had just been thrown out of by the AAA! These Buick guys just had no shame. Of course not . . . being ashamed wasn't what won races!

Peter Helck, the great racing artist and historian, once called the Buick team drivers "that group of hellions." Peter Helck knew what he was talking about. Durant and the men of Team Buick did far more than just march to the beat of a different drummer. Taking into consideration how the team operated and what it was able to accomplish, history would surely say they were racing down the road ahead of the whole band!

Catching A Green Flag

Buick's winning reputation on the racetrack started in 1904, almost coincidently with the introduction of the Model B, Buick's first production car. On August 27th of that year, Walter Marr entered a Buick in a Grosse Point, Michigan, 5-mile AAA-sanctioned event and finished third. It was the first recorded entry of a Buick in competition. It wasn't a particularly auspicious beginning but it gave Marr some practical racetrack experience, experience he would draw on many times during Buick's formative years.

A photograph taken November 3, 1904, shows eight Model B's all lined up on Main Street in Flint. Two of the vehicles appear as a stripped chassis with no body. While there is nothing to document it, the machines look tantalizingly like the Buick stripped chassis that were raced on the East Coast from 1904 through 1906 by Buick's New York and New Jersey agent, H.J. Koehler.

Wherever Koehler obtained his machine, later that same month, on November 23rd, Koehler drove a Buick 2-cylinder stripped chassis up Eagle Rock near Newark, setting a record for the class at 2 minutes 18-2/5 seconds. By the end of 1904, Koehler had sold two new Buicks with their powerful new ohv engine.

The following July the Glidden Tour® ended with a climb to the top of Mount Washington. Koehler once again showed up with a stripped chassis, this time entered in the 2-cylinder class with A. H. Wiser driving. Wiser won with a time of 36 minutes, 24-4/5 seconds. Due in large part to the exposure his race cars were getting, Koehler sold 75 new Buicks during 1905.

Koehler was back again on Oct. 27,

Charles S. Howard, the Buick agent in San Francisco, receives congratulations after finishing an early San Francisco Bay area reliability run with a perfect score. Howard and his mechanic, Frank Murray, were formidable competitors.

1906, in a 100-mile race for stripped touring cars at the Empire Track in Yonkers, N.Y. The Buick won, and it won again later that same day in a 3-mile race for stock cars selling under $1500.

From Thanksgiving Day of 1904 through Christmas 1906, Koehler accumulated no fewer than 36 racing cups and medals. And Koehler's new Buick sales were climbing right along with his racetrack success. On October 1st, 1906, Koehler ordered 500 Buicks, an order that amounted to a whopping 10% of Buick's 1906 production.

Buick's early racing success was not confined to the East Coast. At the same time Koehler was running so successfully, former Buick employee Charles S. Howard, named the Buick agent in San Francisco in 1905, and his mechanic, Frank Murray, were actively involved. Howard was frequently quoted in San Francisco Bay Area newspapers as an "authority" on the benefits of racing and the resulting improvement that could be expected in stock production cars. Howard and Murray were formidable competitors and were responsible for a significant number of early Buick track victories.

On October 26, 1906, Howard entered a stripped Buick in a 10-mile handicap race sponsored by the Sonoma County Driving Club at Santa Rosa. A big Studebaker, which sold for nearly twice as much as the Howard Buick, was heavily favored to win. However, the Studebaker suffered ignition problems, allowing Howard to capture the first place silver cup. Newspaper articles covering the event were highly complimentary of the little Buick 2-cylinder.

Durant knew what was getting printed in the newspapers when his Buicks got into competition and he liked all the free publicity. Never one to hesitate, Durant quickly took the necessary steps that allowed Buick to capitalize on its accomplishments. Sales catalogs, press releases, and newspaper advertisements all pushed Buick's success at the track.

The Buick Team—1908–1911

In early June of 1908, Durant approached Buick employee Bob Burman, offered to pay him $50.00 a week plus travel expenses (a handsome sum in those days), and asked him to form a company racing team. Burman agreed. It was a job he was suited for and much to Burman's delight the contract he was asked to sign stated that the job would last "until I am notified to the contrary by you."

Buick Team Captain Bob Burman.

In another part of Burman's contract, Durant also agreed to pay for "any and all physicians, surgeons, and medical and hospital bills, incurred as the result of any accident I may sustain while in the discharge of my duties, which may accrue within 60 days of the time of such accident."

Buick Team member Louis Chevrolet.

Before Burman's career tragically ended in a Peugeot on a California racetrack in 1916, he would become one of America's premier racing drivers. Some would say he was better than the great Barney Oldfield.

Robert Burman. Burman was born on a farm in Imlay City, Michigan, low in the Michigan thumb, in 1884. He was one of Buick's first employees and is credited with having test driven the first Buick built in Jackson, Michigan, in 1905, while the Company was briefly producing automobiles there. Burman had earlier

Charles Easter (left) *and Frank Thompson, Easter's riding mechanic, worked all night getting their Model "10" stock Buick ready for the 1908 Motor Parkway Sweepstakes.*

Easter and Thompson at speed in the 1908 Motor Parkway Sweepstakes. They led every lap.

made a racing name for himself and had gained valuable competition experience while working for the local Jackson Automobile Company.

While testing cars for Buick, Burman tried something he had seen bicycle racers do to improve their speed. He machined a special gear for the cars he was testing. The change, which produced a lower numeric gear ratio in the drivetrain than the one installed in production, enabled Burman to run much faster on the test track. Durant was quick to notice what he had done.

Burman went to work immediately. Eventually he would bring together the Chevrolet brothers (Louis, Arthur, and Gaston), Lewis Strang (a proven racing veteran with wins at Savannah, Briarcliff, and Lowell), C.E. Easter, George Dewitt, Louis Nikerent, and many others who would successfully run under the Buick banner.

Burman's racing strategy seemed simple enough—his car either held together running wide open and Burman won or the car broke and Burman lost! There never seemed to be any middle ground for Burman, and as a result there never seemed to be any middle ground for the rest of the team either. During its entire existence, the Buick team too often suffered from a lack of a cohesive racing strategy and discipline in the pits. The team thrashed its racing machinery unmercifully, and while the Buick drivers won far more than their share of races, it cost them dearly. Living life on the edge became a part of the racing rules the team wrote for itself.

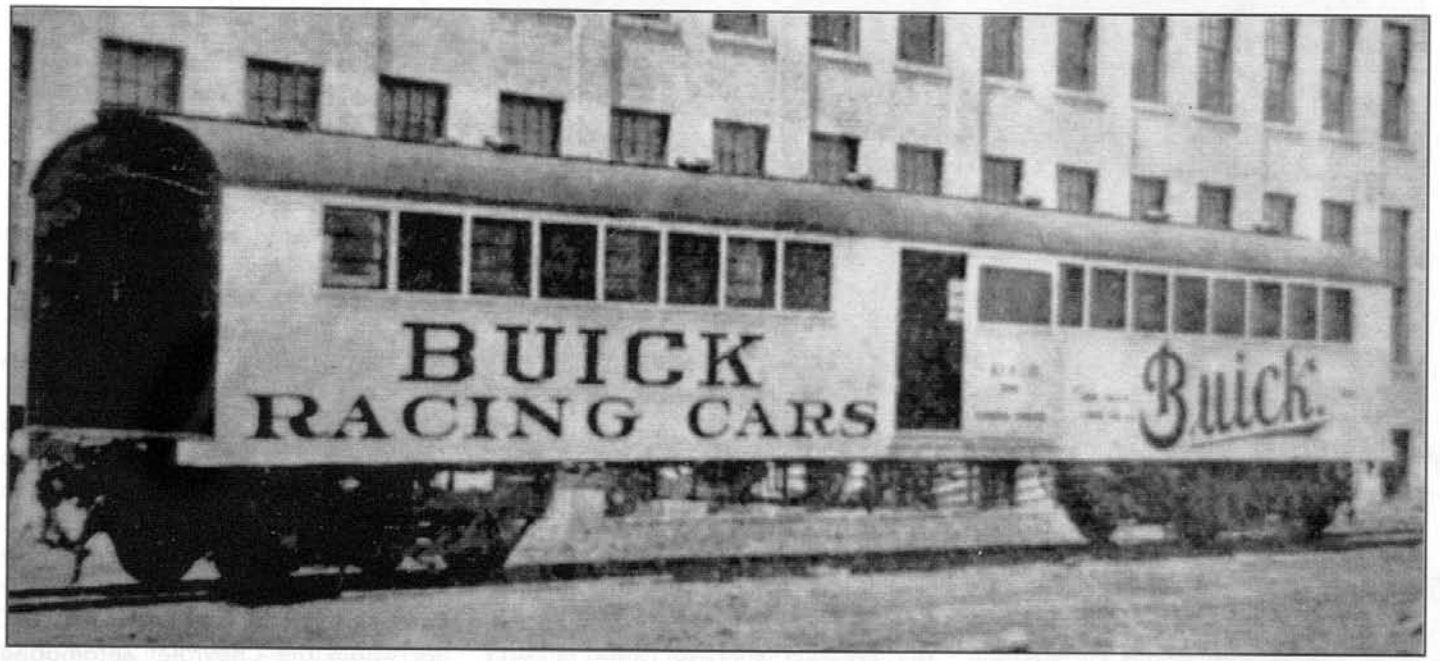
Burman was a fearless competitor. His greatest success came in 1911 when he drove the Blitzen Benz, a car formerly campaigned by Barney Oldfield, over a one-mile course at 142 mph. It was a speed greater than any ever attained by Oldfield.

Burman was killed when he was 32 years old on April 8th, 1916, while driving a Peugeot in the Corona, California, road race.

Running in the 97th lap on the backside of the track, a tire blew, flipping his car into the crowd. Burman, his riding mechanic, and a track guard were instantly killed. Five spectators were injured, several seriously. The accident and the resulting mayhem stunned the racing community and was eventually responsible for a number of racing safety improvements.

Louis Chevrolet. Louis Chevrolet (for whom the Chevrolet automobile is named) was a strong and powerfully built man. His strength became something of a legend in its own right. On one occasion, while hand cranking the engine in a team car, the engine backfired. Instead of injuring himself, Chevrolet held on and bent the crank in his hands!

Born in Switzerland on Christmas day 1878, Chevrolet was educated in France and got his first racing and engineering experience there. He immigrated to America in 1900 and 5 years later he was racing for Fiat in New York. On March 6th, 1909, he joined the Buick team and, along with Burman and Marr, was responsible for the design and construction of a number of the cars raced by the team. Chevrolet was not the "wild" driver Burman was. In a head-to-head



Buick Team railroad boxcar that moved the team from race to race. (Courtesy of Norb Burwell)

race, Burman usually came out the winner. However, Chevrolet died of natural causes in 1941.

Chevrolet's first race in a Buick occurred in Detroit in 1906. At that time Chevrolet was running as an independent and was not affiliated with a factory team. Burman asked Chevrolet if he would like to try his Buick, Chevrolet replied that he would, and he won the race.

Charles Ewing Easter. Charles Ewing Easter was a little guy. He stood just 5-feet 2-inches tall and weighed only 115 pounds. But what he lacked in physical stature he more than made up for in determination on the race track.

Easter had been nicknamed "Hugh" by his friends and he DID · · NOT · · LIKE · · IT! Every chance he got, he would correct newspaper journalists, or anyone else for that matter, who used the shortened version of his name, reminding them it was "Charlie" or "C. E." Easter.

Easter was born in 1881 and was first associated with automobiles in 1899. He raced with the F.B. Stearns team from 1905–1907. Beginning with the formation of the Buick team in 1908, and continuing until the team was disbanded in the early months of 1911, Easter competed with the smaller team cars based on the Model 10 chassis. Easter was a good driver and was proud enough of his association with the team to have kept a scrapbook. That scrapbook survives to this day. The documents, photographs, medals, and newspaper articles preserved by Easter provide a fascinating insight into how the Buick team operated and preserves events that would otherwise have been lost to racing history.

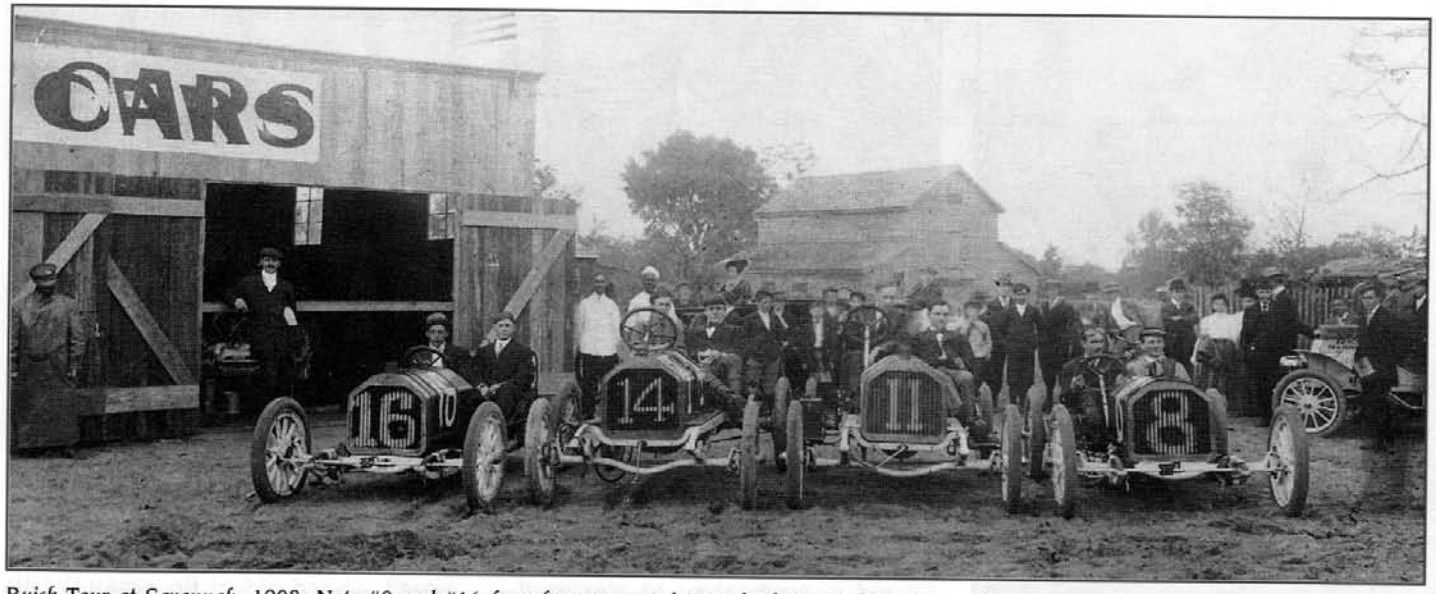
Easter's biggest win with a Buick (he led every lap of the race) came on October 10, 1908, in the Motor Parkway Sweepstakes. The event opened the Long Island Motor Parkway and immediately preceded the 1908 Vanderbilt.

Easter loved the car business. After retiring from his Buick racing career he spent the next four decades working as a highly successful Buick retail salesman. In 1911 he went to work for a New York dealer at the corner of Broadway and 55th Streets, and never left. In the decades that followed, Easter made a good living selling the same automobile he had earlier helped to improve through his efforts on the race track.

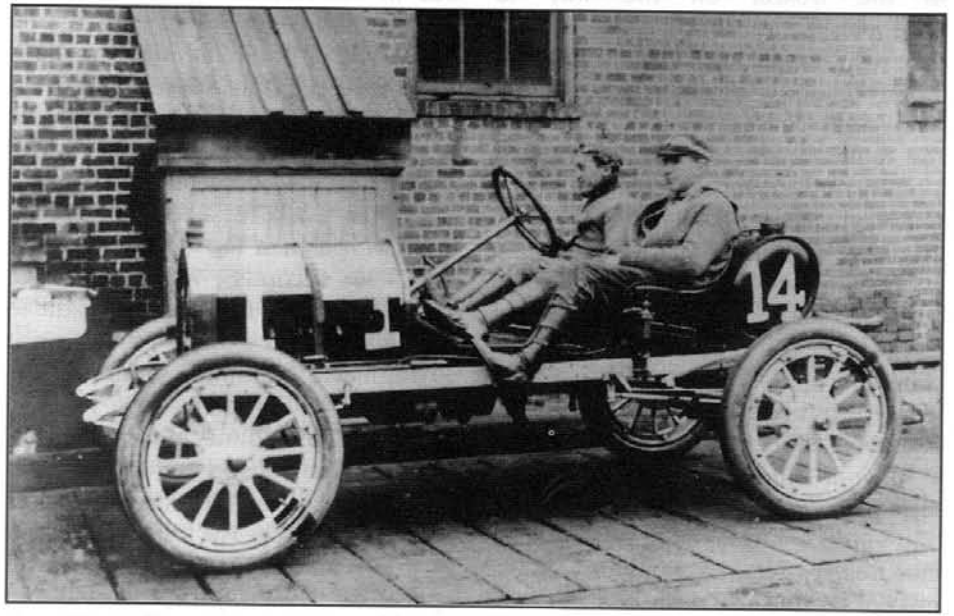
The team traveled from race to race in a railroad boxcar, specially identified and outfitted with everything needed to keep the cars ready for the track. The boxcar also carried a tow car to move the racecars from the railroad station to the track and was outfitted with a machine shop and a blacksmith's forge.

In the mid 1970s Loren Hodge, a team mechanic and the last known surviving member of the team, was interviewed by the writer for the Automobile Quarterly book *The Buick: A Complete History*, co-authored with Lawrence R. Gustin. Hodge remembered that the team members were "close to each other like members of a large family. It was long work and hard hours but in the end success came. It was the team's job to make the Buick a better vehicle through trial and error."

On September 7th, 1908, Burman and his 40-hp Model 5 stock chassis were in Lowell, Massachusetts, for a 250-mile road race. While running a poor second to Strang, then driving an Isotta, Burman crashed. Pulling off the track and into his camp area, Burman's crew performed some quick surgery trying to get him back into competition. When the car pulled



Buick Tour at Savannah, 1908. Note #8 and #16 have been converted to underslungs in boxcar en route.



Easter at wheel of Buick #14, a 4-cyl. 20-HP stripped Model 10. Taken at Savannah, Georgia, 1908. (Courtesy of Charles L. Betts, Jr.)

back on the track a few minutes later, AAA officials spotted a new radiator and a new front axle. Using "new parts" during the race to repair a car in competition was strictly against the rules, and Burman was disqualified.

Durant, who was at the track, wired Buick's sales manager with the bad news: "Model 5 and Burman behaved beautifully yesterday. No fault of either that we did not get second place. Three laps ahead of nearest competitor for that position on twenty-first round. Our disqualification perfectly just, due to our repair force not understanding the rules." Well, maybe. On the other hand "not understanding the rules" was something of a continuing problem with Durant's team!

The Buick team did well in its 1908 competitions, although its early successes could hardly be called stellar. That all changed shortly after the team showed up to race in the Grand Prize events, held November 25th and 26th, 1908, in Savannah, Georgia.

Savannah Bound

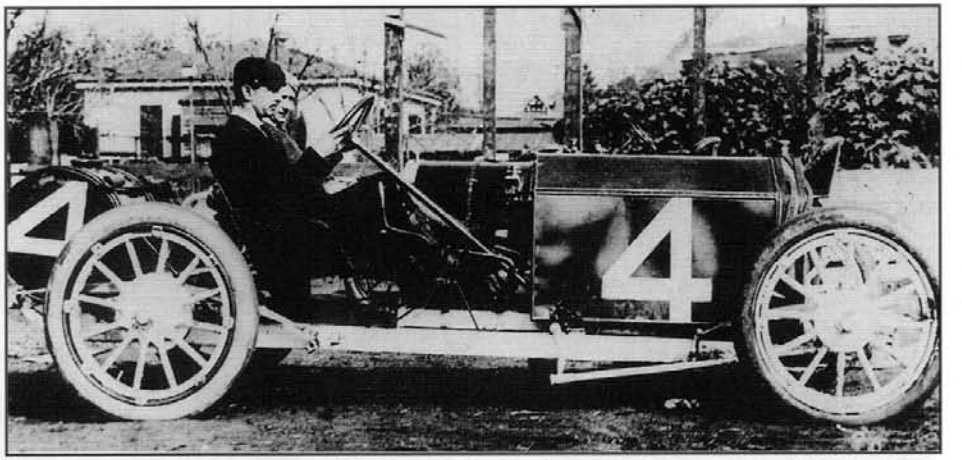
On a cold Michigan day in mid-November, the Buick team loaded up the boxcar in Flint and headed to Savannah for the first Grand Prize. Buick's participation in the event has been well documented with photographs and newspaper articles, all carefully preserved in both Easter's scrapbook and by the Marr family. History must have been smiling on the work the track photographers did during those days at Savannah, because their images amount to nothing less than the recording of watershed events in the history of the Buick company. It was an event that would become an important, although an unlikely part of the Buick racing legend.

Four Buick race cars based on the smaller Model 10 chassis were loaded into the boxcar at Flint that day, #8, #11, #14 and #16, along with car #4, a larger Grand Prize racer, built for Bob Burman. When the door to the boxcar was closed in Flint, all the cars had stock front and rear suspensions. When they were off-loaded in Savannah, cars #8 and #16, and Burman's big #4, had been modified and were underslungs!

The team, looking for any advan-

Easter and Thompson wreck at Savannah, 1908. Note right rear wheel is missing.

1908 Savannah Grand Prize. Bob Burman (left) and riding mechanic survey the damage after car lost its right rear wheel during the race.



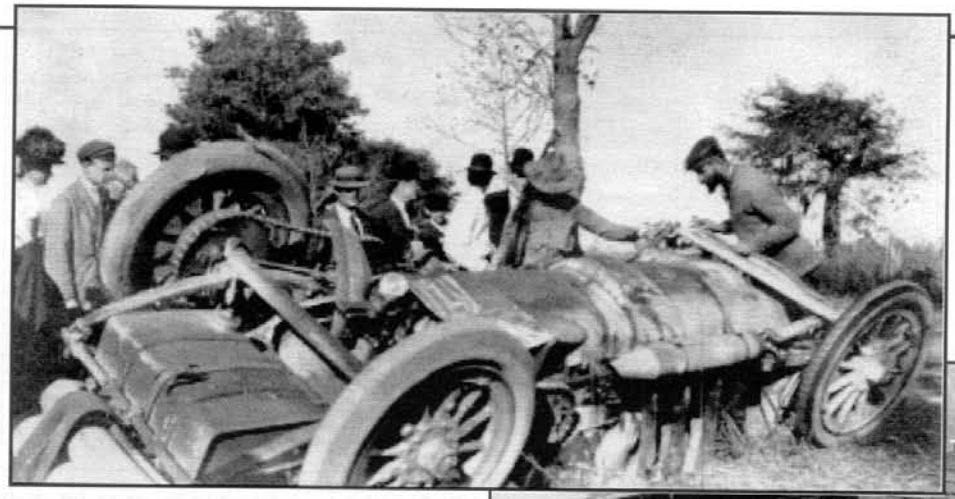
Bob Burman's #4 Buick, a 40-HB underslung. (Courtesy of Charles L. Betts, Jr.)

tage it could gain at the track, had secretly modified the cars to an underslung configuration while traveling in the boxcar on the way to Savannah! The underslungs were much lower to the ground than a stock Model 10 and consequently had lower centers of gravity. It was the team's hope that the cars would corner better while in competition, thus giving Buick a significant "racers edge."

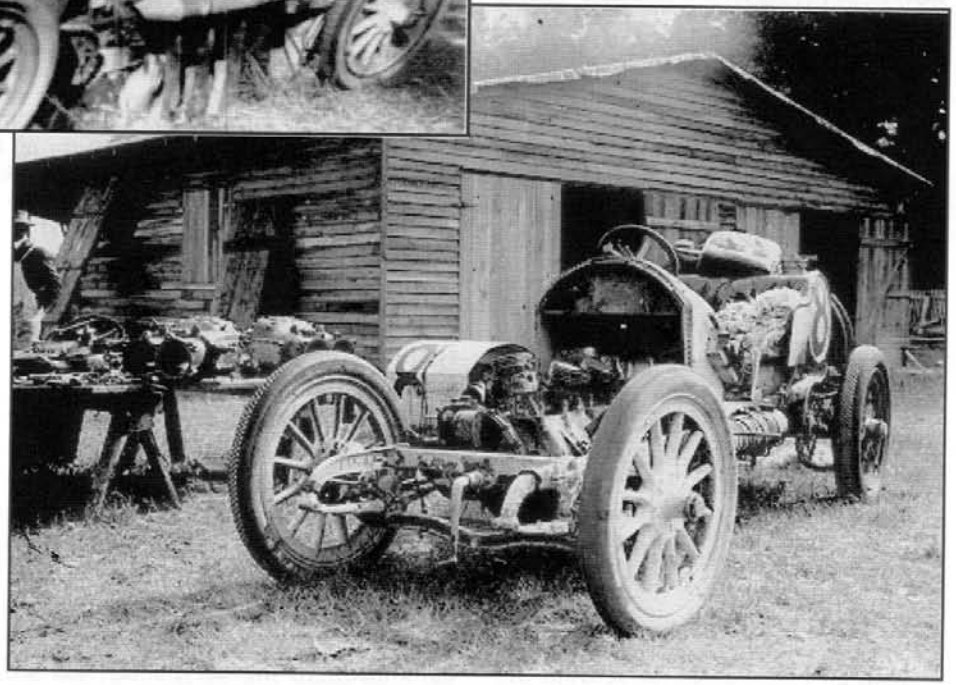
The underslungs were indeed a surprise when they arrived at the track. However, they were also something of a disappointment as they were not the dominant competition machines the team had hoped for.

All four Model 10s had 4-cylinder "square" engines with a 3-3/4" bore and stroke, Remy ignitions, cone clutches, two-speed planetary transmissions, and 88" wheelbases; all weighed 1560 pounds, all were rated by Buick on the entry forms at 18 HP, and all were entered in the light car road race run on Wednesday the 25th. Jeffers was in car #6, Burman was in #8, Hearne was in #11, and Easter was in #14. Jeffers and Hearne were not professional drivers. Both were local Flint residents and held driving positions on the team until Burman could recruit a full complement of professional pilots.

Burman was the fastest car on the track with a best lap time of 10 minutes, 30 seconds. When the race started, Burman moved from sixth to third place on the first lap, running at 53 mph. He continued a steady 53-mph pace and led the race for several laps. But two mechanical failures, one of which caused some 8 minutes to be lost in the pits, probably cost Burman the race. He finished second in the 196-mile run with an average speed of 51.44 mph. Jeffers in the other underslung bent a steering knuckle and was out at 29.4 miles.



Buick "stealth" photo at 1908 Savannah Grand Prize. Walter Marr—peering over front end of wrecked Benz—learns how Benz designed the suspension in its highly successful ohv race cars.



Buick "stealth" photo at 1908 Savannah of disassembled Benz ohv engine. Photo was taken at Walter Marr's direction, obviously without Benz permission.

Hearne finished fourth with an average speed of 49.6 mph.

Easter and his riding mechanic, Frank Thompson, had an incredible ride during the race and were lucky to escape with their lives. At 127 miles, while running 9th on the 13th lap, Easter powered into a banked turn at Walers Road and Estill Avenue. As he entered the corner a rear axle cracked, allowing the right rear wheel assembly to come off the car. The resulting wreck was spectacular. The car somersaulted through the air, nearly hit a corner worker while airborne, and landed in a ditch. Easter, desperate to regain control, twisted the steering wheel so hard that it came off in his hands. Easter was thrown clear as the car rolled, and when he finally stopped bouncing along the ground, he was still holding onto the steering wheel. Easter escaped with some bad bruises. Thompson was thrown 50 feet through the air, rolled hard along the ground, and was knocked unconscious. There were early reports that Thompson had been killed. Fortunately, he escaped with some bad injuries that required hospitalization. The accident was so spectacular that it made headlines the next day in the "Savannah Morning News."

Easter and Thompson had both been put under contract to drive for Buick on November 14, 1908, just before the team departed from Flint. Easter's agreement called for him to be paid $150.00 for driving in the race; Thompson was paid the princely sum of $30.00 a week to race with him as the riding mechanic and to work on the car. Fortunately both men had the 60-day medical payment clause in their contracts!

Burman's #4 underslung, a big 50-hp 5-inch bore and stroke machine, was entered in the Grand Prize run on Thursday, a race restricted to engines with no more than a 6.10" bore. Burman ran 18th for two laps, suffered a suspension failure, and dropped out on the third lap.

The Buick team was disappointed with its showing in the Savannah events, and made no secret of it. Better things were ahead.

The real polish on the Buick racing legend at Savannah came at the expense of the Benz team. On the 11th circuit of the Grand Prize, one of the Benz cars, a 760 ci overhead valve monster driven by Fritz Erle, lost a tire tread. An eyewitness account from one of the corner workers at the scene reported that the tread "flew from the tire like a wounded snake." The corner worker also reported that a spectator who had rushed onto the track trying to pick up the tread for a souvenir "was burned on the hand by the steel studs imbedded in the pneumatic Michelin."

The flying tread struck Erle in the back of the head, knocking him unconscious and causing him to lose control, roll over, and wreck—wreck, as good luck would have it, near where the Buick team was encamped. The overturned Benz suddenly presented Buick with an opportunity that was almost too good to be true.

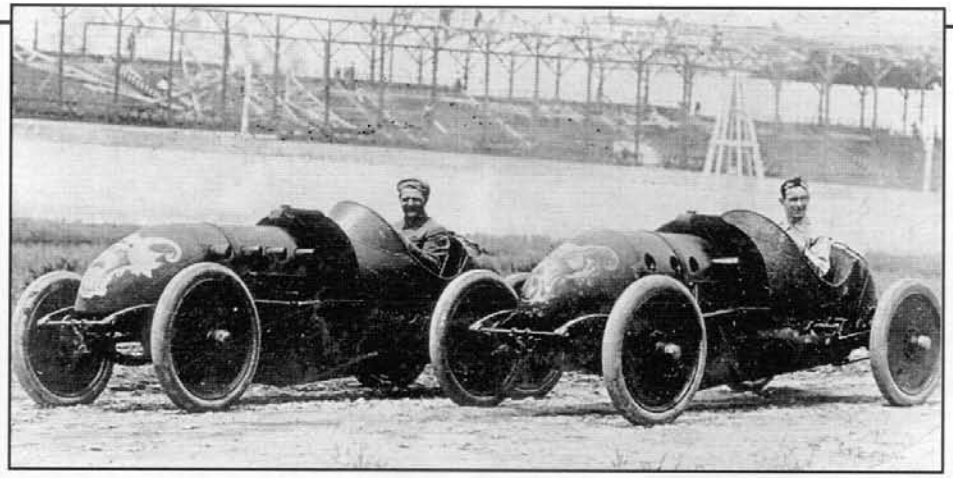
The Buick team had experienced several suspension failures on its smaller cars while running in the light car race the previous day. Coin-

cidently, while running in the Grand Prize, Burman's big #4 had lost its right rear wheel, a failure eerily similar to the one that had caused Easter's spectacular wreck.

Add to all Buick's suspension problems the fact that Burman was running almost last when he dropped out, and it becomes clear that Walter Marr knew that some pretty big changes had to be made if Buick's race cars were going to be competitive. But at that point, Marr had no idea what those changes should be. Benz, one of the most feared and respected names in the racing world, was about to tell him. Only Benz didn't know it!

Erle had run as high as second in the Grand Prize and was positioned in 4th when he crashed. Another Benz driven by Victor Hemery, using an engine identical to the one Erle had in his car, finished the race in second. Marr knew there was a lot to be learned from the design of the Benz machines, but he had no way of getting the information. When Erle's Benz wrecked, that all changed.

With an enthusiasm he seldom displayed, Marr quickly inspected the suspension in the overturned Benz. Later that same night, before the Benz team could remove its wrecked car from along side the track where it had crashed, the Buick team got busy. Locating enough kerosene lanterns so they could see what they were doing, Walter Marr, along with several members of the team to help, quietly moved from the Buick camp to the upside down Benz. By the time their inspection was finished, the Benz had given up its design secrets. Later, with no one around to say "no," Marr also had a Buick photographer take several pictures of a disassembled Benz engine as it lay all torn down on workbenches inside the Benz camp.



Buick Bugs, originally called "Buick 60 (for 60 HP) Specials." Louis Chevrolet in car on left. Note that Burman's car is missing three exhaust stacks. Photo was taken at Bugs' first outing, which was at Indianapolis. Both cars were timed at over 105 mph. Burman rolled his car, damaging the exhaust.

With the details of the world-class Benz ohv power plant in front of him, and with the finer points of the wrecked Benz's racing suspension committed to memory, Marr learned a lot about why the Benz machines were so fast. And he had pictures.

The photographs taken that long ago day at the track still survive, carefully preserved by the Marr family.

Marquette Motor Co. and The Model "16" Cars

Among the many firms Durant had purchased while forming General Motors in 1908 was a car builder in Saginaw, Michigan, called the Marquette Motor Company. The firm had earlier made a name for itself building the Rainer automobile and a highly competitive racing car. When he got back to Flint, Marr used what he had learned during his Benz inspections at Savannah and built three large ohv 4-cylinder racing engines. He then got three chassis built by the Marquette Motor Company and mated them. The results were spectacular.

Buick registered the smallest of its new cars with the AAA as the "Buick 30's" for 30 horsepower. What a joke! The cars were not Buicks at all! They were hand-built hybrid race cars and they had a whole lot more than 30 horsepower.

History also has it that "private conversations" were soon circulating rumors in the engineering department, which further questioned the legality of the cars. The rumors had it on good authority that the cars had all been built with "special" (read "special" as illegal) experimental transmissions! Later, just to thicken the smoke screen a bit, Buick listed the cars with the AAA as "Buick Roadsters." And for a time, it worked.

Eventually these fast new "Buicks" came to be known as the Model 16A with a wheelbase of 112-1/2," a 56" tread, and a 299 ci engine; the Model 16B, also with a 112-1/2" wheelbase and a 56" tread, but with a slightly larger 318 ci engine; and the Model 100 with a smaller 110" wheelbase, a 56" tread, and a 594 ci engine. Since Buick was also building a stock Model 16 production roadster in 1909 and 1910, the use of the number "16" as a designator for two of the new race cars was another clear attempt at factory stealth!

The new engines were constructed with the then current AAA racing rules taken into consideration. It was, after all, a little hard to hide the displacement of an engine during a AAA teardown. But sneaking by with an illegal chassis was another matter entirely! Billy Durant, Walter Marr, and the Buick Company were clearly out for blood.

The 318 ci engine used in the Model 16B shared the same displacement with a standard Buick production engine of the period. However, the many modifications and optional power equipment installed before the engine ever got to the track made it a far stronger power plant than its assembly line counterpart.

The Models 16A and 16B used a frame supplied by the Marquette Motor Company that was within half an inch of the 112-inch frame used on Buick's Model 16 stock production cars. That made it relatively easy for Buick to quietly sneak its modified cars into the stock production classes!

Like its counterparts the Models 16A and 16B, the Model 100 used a frame supplied by the Marquette Motor Company. The Model 100s (100 for 100 HP) were the most competitive cars raced by the team. Although not the single seat, aerodynamic, state-of-the-art machines the Bugs were intended to be, the Model 100s combined a proven chassis technology with a powerful engine. As a result, they cornered and handled much better in competition than the Bugs did and rightfully earned reputations as fearsome racing machines.

The Buick Bugs

The Buick Bugs had a much shorter 102-1/2 inch wheelbase and a narrower 48-1/2 inch tread. The special chassis and racing body used by the Bugs were both specially built in the Buick engineering department.

The Bugs had two independent braking systems and both were inadequate. The driver's brake pedal activated an externally contracting band on a drum attached to the transmission. A hand lever located to the right of the driver applied expanding brakes located at both rear wheels. Since neither system did much to slow the car down, it is safe to assume that the driver also relied heavily on engine breaking.

The cars used a pressurized system to deliver gas and oil to the engine from storage tanks mounted behind the driver. The fuel tank was roughly twice as large as the oil tank. A small hand pump located on the left side of the cowl built pressure in both tanks. A gauge mounted on the dash informed the driver when the fuel pressure had dropped and a separate oil level site gauge let the driver know when the oil in the crankcase was running low.

When the engine oil needed replenishing, the driver would reach down under his right leg and open a valve, much like a water spigot, allowing oil under pressure to run into the crankcase. When oil started blowing out the engine breathers, it was a signal to shut the spigot off.

Four short chrome exhaust stacks protruded out from the left side of the engine cowling, effectively directing the exhaust noise from the massive engine almost into the driver's face. When the driver backed off the throttle to slow for a corner, long blue flames would erupt from all four stacks.

The first outing Burman and Chevrolet made with the Bugs was on July 1, 1910, at Indianapolis. Chevrolet made a half-mile in 17.54 seconds with his car. Burman ran a quarter mile in 8.51 seconds with his. Both cars were timed at just over 105 mph, with Burman being slightly faster. Burman rolled his car over during one of his several record attempts, and although he was not injured, he banged up the car and broke three exhaust stacks.

The steering system used on the Bugs was very responsive, about two turns, lock to lock. However the cars were very hard to steer and it took a strong driver just to handle the steering wheel. The drag link between the steering box and the wheels was made of wood. If the wooden drag link had ever snapped in a race, all steering control would have immediately been lost.

The Bugs used Firestone demountable rims. It is interesting to note that even though the cars appear to have been built with steel wheels, they were actually wooden spoke artillery wheels covered with a sheetmetal disc.

The single-seat design used in the construction of the Bugs made them among the first race cars built in this country with no provision for a riding mechanic.

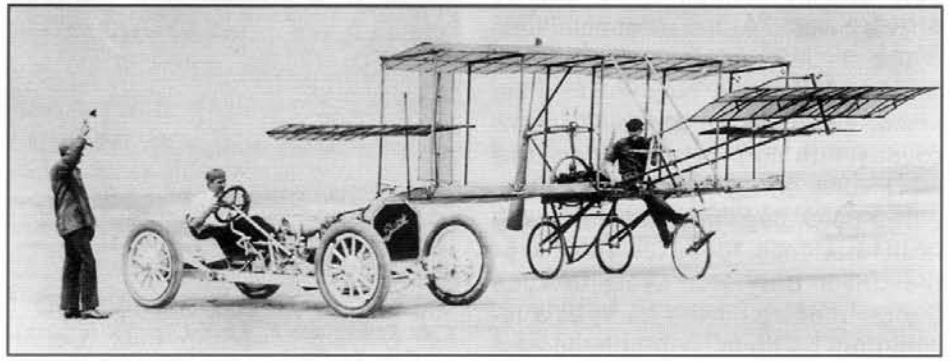
The Buick Bugs were extremely difficult machines to drive. They kept the driver busy just trying to keep the car running on the track; as a result, they had relatively little success in closed-circuit track and road racing competition. Burman, however, took his machine to Jacksonville Beach, Florida, where it set several records in straightaway competition.

1909 Season

By the spring of 1909 Walter Marr's new Marquette-Buick hot rods were ready for the team and the year brought spectacular victories. On February 21st Burman entered his 1908 Savannah Grand Prize Buick in the Mardi Gras 100-mile Speed Contest in New Orleans and won in 102 minutes 39-3/5 seconds, finishing some 9 miles ahead of the second-place car. Burman set a new world's record in the process.

Cobe Trophy won by Louis Chevrolet in famous Cobe Trophy Race in Crown Point, Indiana.

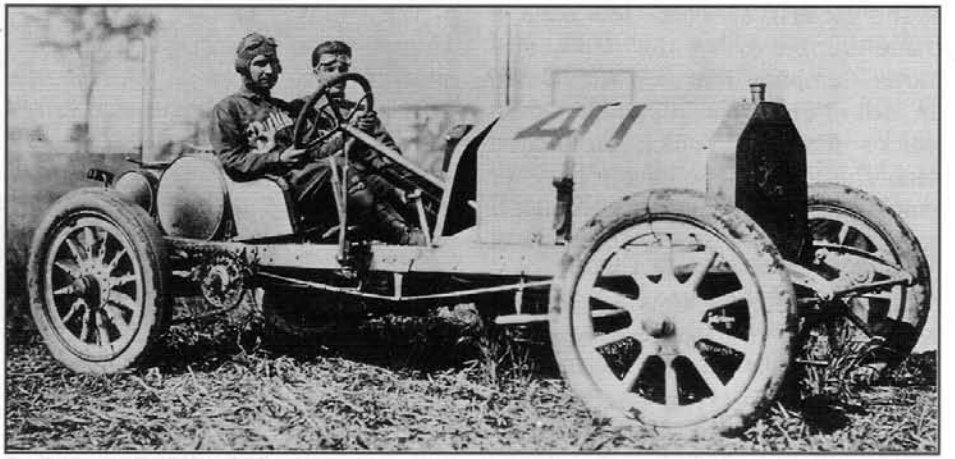
Louis Chevrolet at wheel of Buick Model 10 racer in 1910. Passenger looks somewhat apprehensive. (Courtesy of Buick Motor Division)



Burman mailed this picture to Walter Marr, writing "Just thought you would like to see a picture of the first automobile vs. airplane race." Burman posed for this photo at a Daytona Beach Speed Festival in 1910. (Courtesy of Buick Motor Division)

Strang and Dewitt won their respective classes in a 100-mile event at Daytona on March 23. The team left for Atlanta before the Daytona meet was over, and on March 27, the team was there and ready for the Atlanta Hill Climb. Things went well. The team took a first and a second in Class One, a first with a new record in Class Four, and won Classes Five and Six.

Buick continued to hammer the competition through the rest of March, April, and May.



Bob Burman at the wheel of a Marquette-Buick in 1910. Photo is rare in that "Buick" script is shown on the radiator. The word "Roadster" appears under the "Buick" script. This was a part of Buick's attempt to hide the fact that the cars were not stock. (Courtesy of Greg Fauth)

On April 22nd Strang, deWitt, and Louis Chevrolet were at Lookout Mountain, Tennessee, for a series of hill climbing events. Strang won three events, deWitt won one, and Chevrolet ran a special exhibition trial against time.

On April 27, Burman picked up two trophies in the Jamaica Speed Trials with a 30 HP 4-cylinder, in all probability a Marquette-Buick.

On June 18 the team was in Crown Point to compete in the 232-mile Indiana Trophy Race. Burman, Chevrolet, and Strang all had cars entered and Buick was heavily favored. Bad luck. Strang stripped a gear in his rear axle and went out on the 2nd lap. Chevrolet developed engine trouble and dropped out on the 4th.

Burman was leading the race until he broke a valve on the 4th lap. He limped around the track, spotted Strang's car off to the side of the course, and cannibalized a replacement part; he was caught and was immediately disqualified. That darn rule book again. . . .

The next day the race was held that Buick really wanted to win at Crown Point, the highly prestigious Cobe Trophy. The Cobe was a 395.6-mile run over a quadrangular course with a 525-ci engine limit. Twelve cars were entered. Burman and Chevrolet were there to represent Buick with their Marquette-Buicks. The cars were officially entered in the Cobe as "Buick 30s," and Buick got away with it.

The race began at 8 AM with the cars starting down the course at one-minute intervals. Using his normal racing style, Burman rammed into the lead on the first lap. On lap 3 he lost control and went off the

course. By the lap 5 he was done for the day.

Chevrolet in the other "Model 30" passed a Knox that had gone into the lead after Burman dropped out. Unfortunately, Chevrolet's engine broke a valve and he was forced into the pits. His mechanics were able to get him back into the race, but only on three cylinders.

Chevrolet was now running third behind the Knox and was more than 20 minutes behind Robertson's first-place Locomobile. Good luck for Buick—Robertson suddenly developed ignition problems and had to pit. By the time a bad magneto had been found and repaired, the Locomobile had lost 33 minutes. Chevrolet managed to pass just as Robertson was re-entering the track. Somehow, and Chevrolet was never completely certain exactly how he was able to do it, Chevrolet moved past the Knox in the standings and won the race by 65 seconds! The win wasn't pretty and it was completely unexpected by the racing community. However, history would judge the victory to be the most prestigious and the most significant accomplishment enjoyed by the Buick team.

In an interesting historical footnote, Buick is said to have taken advantage of a telegraph station set up at the track to get a live commentary of the race wired to an operator in the engineering department at Flint. As the race unfolded and it appeared that Chevrolet had a chance of winning, in spite of running with a handicapped engine, the tension in the room is said to have been unbearable. One can well imagine.

History also has it that David Dunbar Buick himself was in the room at Buick that day, nervously chewing his cigar, pacing back and forth, as reports from the track came in over the wire. If true, it would have been among Buick's last days with the company as he is thought to have left for good shortly thereafter.

On July 6, 1909, Easter traveled to New Jersey and won his class at Plainfield in an 18 HP team car. On November 25, Easter entered the Edgewater Fort Lee Hill Climb and again finished first.

During 1909, Buick racked up 166 victories, winning more than 90% of the events entered by the team.

1910 Season

By the time 1910 rolled around, the Buick racing record was unsurpassed.

Durant sent Burman and Strang to Daytona Beach where they were individually photographed lined up ready to race against an early bi-wing airplane. There has been much discussion over the years as to whether or not an actual race between car and plane ever took place. The propeller on the airplane is stationary in the photographs taken that afternoon, leaving one to wonder.

However, filed away for decades in Walter Marr's personal papers, and only recently discovered by the Marr family, are picture postcards Burman and Strang both mailed to Walter Marr that same afternoon. On the back of the card Strang sent he writes, "Just thought you would like to see a picture of the first automobile vs. an airplane race."

Louis Chevrolet's motor being built for the 1910 Vanderbilt Cup Race. Chevrolet wrecked during the race and his riding mechanic, Charlie Miller, was killed. (**L** *to* **R**) *Louie Larcener, Arthur Chevrolet, Louis Chevrolet, Charlie Miller, and Pete MacGregor.*

On May 27, 1910, Buick showed up for a series of races held at Indianapolis. Instead of continuing its stellar record as expected, the Buick team got a rude awakening. The AAA contest board had finally figured out what the team was doing with its Marr hot rods.

At 10 AM on the first day of the races, the announcement was made that since Buick had not built the "required 35 units," the cars were not considered to be "stock production" vehicles, and the team would not be allowed to compete with them. The team did have some "for real" stock production Buicks at the track and entered those cars in some of the lesser events.

Durant, who had traveled with the team to the track, was very upset. A heated argument between he and S. M. Butler of the AAA contest board is said to have taken place after the disqualification was announced. However, the team refused to stay mad for long; instead, as chronicled here earlier, the team went back to Flint and got even!

"Getting even" took some highly creative thinking on Durant's part. In addition to renaming the team's cars Marquette-Buicks, Durant also changed the name of the team. Instead of calling his group of roving marauders the "Buick Racing Team" he renamed it the "General Motors Racing Team." Since the Marquette

Motor Company was building the chassis used on his race cars, and since both the Marquette Company and Buick were now a part of General Motors, Durant managed to convince the AAA that the changes he had made really and truly made the cars legal. Additionally, sponsorship of the team was now moved from Buick to the Marquette Motor Company, and driver contracts to race were now signed with the Marquette people instead of with Buick.

Durant then went on to tell the world that, without changing so much as a bolt on any of the Buick competition cars, the team was now driving Marquette-Buicks! Durant was indeed the master promoter history has said that he was.

The AAA disqualification had repercussions for the Buick team at Worchester and New Haven. At Worchester two Buicks were disqualified, one of them a Model 100, and at New Haven, Buick withdrew two cars from competition prior to the race.

On Sunday June 26, 1910, Buick ran a full-page advertisement in the "San Francisco Chronicle" that pretty well summed up why Buick was into racing: Under the headline "What the Buick Racing Record Means to You," Buick pulled out all the stops.

> The Buick believes in racing. It believes the car that can beat the Buick fairly and squarely, in its own class, is a better car for you to buy.
>
> But one victory or two or a dozen will not do. The car that is best must prove it is best by winning again and again and again.
>
> Racetrack and roadway—these, the Buick believes, are the true testing grounds. There, the brain of the builder triumphs, and the prowess of his product is proven.
>
> The making and the breaking of records—this too, is vital to you. Every time the Buick sets a new mark it means a new mark in engineering progress—a step nearer the perfect motor car.
>
> The car that wins must be simple; the car that wins must be strong. It must show the grit that you'll ask of it in the race that's twelve months long.
>
> Nearly two hundred triumphs on road and track and an array of records unapproached by any other car in the world shows "the way the Buick is built."

Buick then listed a long line of the more notable wins and records set by the team. Now really, AAA disqualification or no AAA disqualification, after a sales pitch like this, how could you not help but buy a Buick!

On October 1, 1910, Buick headed for the Vanderbilt Cup. The team's mechanics had readied Chevrolet's big 4-cylinder 6″ bore and stroke Marquette-Buick 100 engine by doing a complete rebuild. A photograph was taken in the shop one afternoon as the engine was being built up. One of the mechanics in the photograph is shown holding up a huge 6″ piston with holes drilled in the skirt, in an attempt to lighten the assembly. The piston gives a good indication as to why the Marquette-Buick 100s were so powerful.

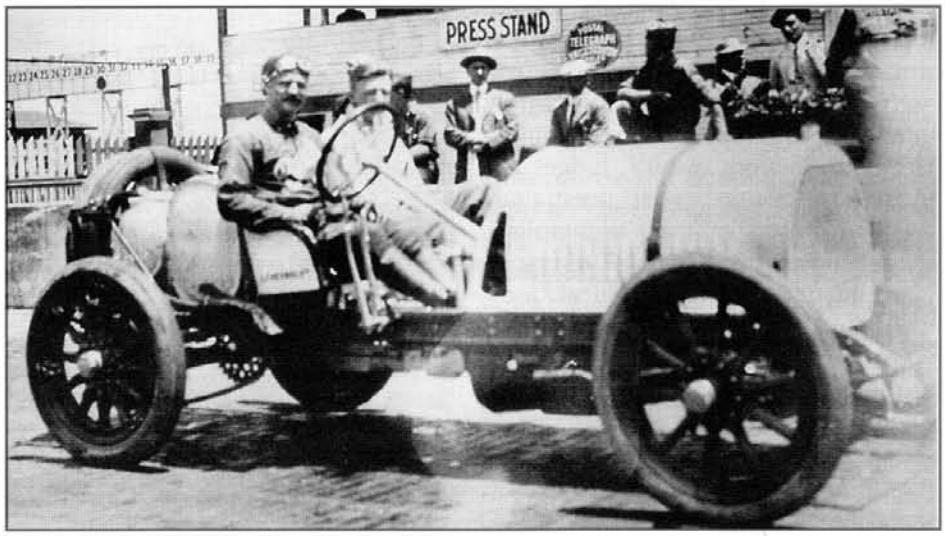
Chevrolet led the Vanderbilt for several laps. But shortly after two of his teammates went out with mechanical problems, he blew a tire and went into a vicious slide. Chevrolet tried with all his great strength to regain control but the pitman arm broke, causing the car to careen off the track. The sliding car struck a spectator's EMF touring car and a small tree, killing Charlie Miller, Chevrolet's riding mechanic, and seriously injuring Chevrolet. The accident was the end of a very bad day at the track for Buick.

On November 12th, with Louis Chevrolet still recovering from his accident in the Vanderbilt, Burman and Arthur Chevrolet were back in Savannah for the 1910 Grand Prize, a race now unrestricted as to bore and stroke. Both were driving Marquette-Buick Model 100s with 594 ci displacement engines.

When cars #1 and #2 withdrew, Arthur Chevrolet in the #3 Marquette-Buick was first onto the course. Driving what newspapers called the "Great Marquette-Buick," Burman started 13th in car #17.

Tire troubles followed the two Buick drivers throughout the day. Chevrolet, running 11th, finally went out for good on the 9th lap with a broken crankshaft. Burman finished the race in third, with 15 tire changes plaguing him for much of the distance. Burman's Buick won $2000 for being the first American car to finish and was further credited with having made "the best showing ever attained by an American car in a long road race."

In the weeks that followed Louis Chevrolet's wreck in the October Vanderbilt, Chevrolet rebuilt and modified his Marquette-Buick, planning to



Louis Chevrolet behind the wheel at 1911 Indianapolis. According to Harry Winterhoff, Louis' riding mechanic, Chevrolet's Buick was the fastest qualifier.

enter it in the Paris Grand Prix. However, Billy Durant, then losing his battle to retain control of General Motors, changed his mind and the car never got to France. But it did make an unexpected trip to Indiana, where, if documents recently discovered in the Scharchburg archives at Kettering University are accurate, the car was very impressive.

Who Really Was The Fastest At The First 500?

The first races run at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway were held August 19th, 20th and 21st, 1909, some two years before the first 500. Buick entered and won two of the three events, including the first race ever held at the track.

July 2 and 4, 1910, found the team back at Indianapolis (with their earlier disqualification problems now behind them) and running stronger than ever. Buick dominated the competition.

The most prestigious event on the program was the race for the Remy Grand Brassard Trophy. The lucrative prize awarded a weekly check to the winner for as long as he could defend his title. Marmon's Ray Harroun had won the award in May and he wanted to keep it. But the Buick men had their collective eyes hard set on the Brassard and went all out. Burman won the 100-miler, driving what the press called the "mighty white Marquette-Buick," forcing Harroun to a distant 3rd in the process.

Buick broke nine speed records during the events, most of them set earlier by the Marmon team at Atlanta. Marmon was badly wounded. All this set the stage for a virtually unknown and fascinating footnote to Indianapolis 500 racing history.

When Durant decided against traveling to France, Chevrolet still had a modified Marquette-Buick in his Detroit shop that he was certain would be competitive. Knowing he had lost his chance to race the car in Paris, Chevrolet decided to try to run in the first Indianapolis 500 instead. Since the date had passed to complete and mail the necessary entry forms, Chevrolet took his car to Indianapolis hoping he would be allowed to enter it as a "post entry." The car is said to have been spectacular while qualifying.

In the 1950s two of the team mechanics, Peter MacGregor and Harry Winterhoff, wrote separate accounts of that long-ago day at the Brickyard. Winterhoff, who was riding with Chevrolet that day, stated flatly that a suggestion was made to Chevrolet before he even went on the track to qualify that he "keep her under 80" since the speed necessary to qualify was only 75 mph.

Winterhoff goes on to write that Chevrolet failed to heed the advice, and qualified at 93 mph, making his Marquette-Buick the fastest car at the track!

According to rules then in effect, Chevrolet's request for a post entry had to be "approved" by all the other drivers and manufacturers entered in the race before he would be allowed to compete. That set up a unique situation.

Photo taken at Buick Engineering Department circa 1936. Walter Marr (seated), Buick Race Team manager and first Chief Engineer, shows racing photos to Dutch Bower, Buick's Chief Engineer.

With the Marmon team still smarting from their earlier Buick thrashings, and with Chevrolet's Buick having posted the fastest qualifying time, Winterhoff wrote: "The Marmon Company did not like our speed and refused to permit us to enter. The Marmon Wasp won the race." MacGregor also confirms a Marmon challenge to the Buick entry in his letter.

While the Marmon Company may have refused Chevrolet the "post entry" he so badly wanted, apparently the drivers did not.

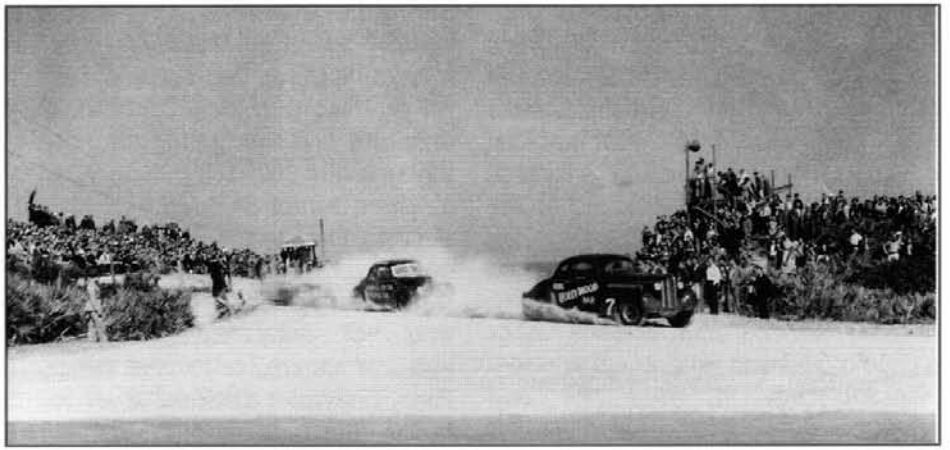
Chevrolet had originally been listed as a relief driver for his brother Arthur, and Charles Basle, both of whom had entered Marquette-Buicks. On Friday, May 26th, 1911, the "Indianapolis News" reported that all of the drivers entered in the race had signed a petition started by Chevrolet's friends. The petition was directed to the racing board and asked that Chevrolet be allowed to enter his car as a post entry. However the petition had to be unanimous and, reported the News, "signatures of three manufacturers interested in the race are yet to be obtained." Apparently Marmon was one of the three.

It is Speedway history that Ray Harroun's Marmon Wasp won the first Indianapolis 500 with an average speed of 74.602 mph. Newspaper reports confirm that Chevrolet's Marquette-Buick was withdrawn prior to the start of the event.

A picture of the car taken at the track that day in 1911 still exists. Unfortunately Speedway records do not show the qualifying times for any of the 1911 entrants, nor do they show the reason why Chevrolet's Buick was withdrawn.

If the 93 mph qualifying speed is

Pace car for first Daytona Beach race (1936) was this 1936 Buick Special convertible coupe. (Courtesy Volusia County Historical Society)



Joe Littlejohn in #7, the 1938 Century coupe he drove to 2nd place in the July 7, 1940, beach race.

correct as the two mechanics claim, and there is no reason to doubt their accuracy, then it was faster than the best qualifying times for both the 1912 and 1913 races too. Not until 1914 was a faster qualifying time posted for the event.

This whole situation is a tantalizing historical footnote. And while it would have been fascinating for Chevrolet's modified Marquette-Buick 100 to have been in the hunt for that historical first 500 win, along with the Marquette-Buick 100s entered by Basle and Arthur Chevrolet, one can hardly blame the Marmon people for taking the position that they did. The two Marquette-Buicks that did run that day finished no better than 34th and 36th.

End of the Era

By early 1911 Durant was gone from the company and so was much of the support for the team. The bankers who were running General Motors now didn't seem to have too much use for the big smelly race cars with the loud exhausts they suddenly found themselves owning. The team was broken up, and the great team drivers and cars went their separate ways.

Flint local Billy Liesaw somehow got his hands on a Marquette-Buick and entered it in the 1912 Indianapolis 500, but he finished no better than 18th and was out after 72 laps.

Several of the venerable team cars have survived the years. One of the Buick Bugs still survives, thanks to C.S. Howard, who located the car in the early 1920s in a mid-western barn and got it from Burman's widow. In 1940 Buick's Chief Engineer Charley Chayne spotted the car while it was being stored in Howard's San Francisco service department and in Chayne's words "got quite excited" when he realized what the car was. Howard placed the car in Chayne's care and Chayne eventually oversaw its restoration in the Buick engineering department. It is currently on display at the Buick Gallery And Research Center at the Sloan Museum in Flint.

At least two of the Marquette-Buicks are still in existence, one of them, the car Louis Chevrolet was driving when he won the Cobe Trophy, is owned by the Speedway Museum in Indianapolis.

Buick didn't let go of the team's accomplishments easily. For several years after the team had been disbanded, Buick was still advertising its exploits and track records in sales catalogs published by the company.

Walter Marr never did forget about the fun, the excitement, or the importance of his work with the team. In 1936 he traveled from his home on Signal Mountain, Tennessee, to his Michigan birthplace. During his stay he visited Flint and reminisced with then Chief Engineer Dutch Bower about what the team had accomplished and its seemingly impossible exploits. It was a very long conversation

And remember the early trips Buick made to Daytona? It wasn't the last time Buick was there on the beach.

The Day The Flatheads Died

It was March 8, 1936, when the roar of stock car engines hit the beach at Daytona for the first time. No one knew it then, but the drivers in that race had set in motion an historical chain of events that would set the direction of stock car racing for decades. Daytona Beach was heading for the big time.

The 27 cars entered that day included 19 Fords, two Auburns, two

Willys, one Oldsmobile, one Dodge, and a Chevrolet. Every car in the race except the Chevrolet had a flathead engine.

Buick, as the pioneer builder of overhead valve, had long advertised that its engines would develop more power than those offered by the competition. But you couldn't prove it in that first race at Daytona.

By the mid 1930s, if you were racing a production engine, chances were good you were running a Ford V-8. There was good reason: the V-8 Fords were well on their way to becoming racing legends.

The first Daytona race was paced by a 1936 Buick Special convertible coupe. A supercharged Auburn entered by Bill Cummings had the best qualifying speed at 70.39 mph. The race was won by Milt Marion in the Number 23 Ford. As expected, Ford V-8s dominated and went on to take the top six places.

In the 1937 race, Ford again dominated and won handily in the process.

On July 10, 1938, the Fords ran off and hid, taking the first 10 positions with them. Three Packards, two Auburns, a Hudson, and a Buick were also-rans.

Ford repeated again on September 5th, again sweeping the top 10 positions. A flathead Auburn, the only non-Ford in the race, finished 11th.

The driver of the winning Ford was none other than Bill France, Sr. France would go on in 1947 to found NASCAR, the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing. But back then he was just one of the boys out for an afternoon of beach racing.

The three races run in 1939 were again dominated by Ford and Mercury flatheads.

Then came 1940. In the March 10th event, beach veteran Joe Littlejohn set a course record when he qualified for the pole at 79.8 mph driving a 1938 Buick Century coupe with a Straight Eight engine.

Buick had introduced a new combustion chamber design in 1938 and had noticeably improved performance. The new combustion chamber, along with the weight of the car, had helped Littlejohn power through the sand-banked turns and hammer down the straightaways.

Littlejohn led until he lost almost 2 minutes during a pit stop on the 29th lap. Driving a steady race, he worked back up to second and finished there behind Roy Hall in a '39 Ford.

Ford and Mercury took the next seven spots. Bill France finished fourth in a 1939 Mercury. But France had noticed what Littlejohn's Buick had done. So had several others.

On July 7, 1940, the unbroken reign of the V-8 Fords ended. France had decided to enter a Buick. The results were nothing short of amazing.

France was considered a dark horse. He entered with car No. 14, a 1939 Century sedan owned by Andy Beardon of Atlanta, and qualified for the pole. France's Buick came to the beach that day with an engine built by the great racing mechanic Red Vogt. Littlejohn again entered his 1938 Century coupe, also rumored to have a Vogt-built engine, and qualified third.

When the race started, France ran hard into the first turn and held onto the Number 1 position. Running with an exhaust note seldom heard on the beach, he wound his 320 ci machine to the limit and remained Number 1 at the end of the first lap. Littlejohn moved from third to second, chasing hard after him. Hammering down the sand and asphalt, the pair continued to run one-two on every lap for the rest of the race.

Using identical tactics, the two Buick drivers would run flat-out down the straightaways, and then they would back off to run conservatively in the turns. It worked. They were never seriously challenged.

France had a strong race car. With his slower speed in the corners, he was gaining ground by hitting 107 mph on the paved section of the course. He averaged "about 75 mph" for the entire race and was credited by observers with being strong enough to have lapped the entire field. As it was, he did lap everyone except Littlejohn and was ahead of him by nearly a lap at the finish.

The two Buicks were so strong that the win turned out to be the most lopsided event in the 5 years the race had been held.

To make things even better, France, ever the promoter, later stated that he had intentionally slowed down in the final laps knowing the crowd wanted a closer finish! Including lap money, the victory earned him some $600.

The France and Littlejohn showings with their ohv Buicks was the only time between 1936, when the races started, and 1948 that Ford or Mercury V-8s did not dominate the event. The Buick "big thumpers" had suddenly surprised everyone by running to the front of the pack and handing the Fords their first defeat on the beach.

The valve-in-head Buicks had suddenly become a force to be reckoned with. It was no secret that many Ford people in the racing community felt that things had gotten a bit out of hand.

The drivers and pit crews with the 29 Fords and Mercurys on the beach that day must have been fit to be tied. Considering what had just happened, they had good reason to be.

In short, the mighty Buick Centurys had suddenly become a mighty big problem. They were too fast!

Immediately after the race, a newspaper report stated that new rules were being considered to handicap any Buick that might be entered in the future.

Sure enough. By the time the 1940 Labor Day beach race rolled around, a rule was in effect stating that cars had to cost less than $1100 in order to compete. They took care of the 1940 Buick Centurys. The lowest priced model that year was a business coupe and it cost $1128!!

Then, just to be sure that someone didn't discover an earlier Century that might fall within the new price rule, a second rule was passed; it restricted the race to cars with engines

of less than 120 hp. That took care of ALL the Centurys back to 1936, Buick's first year for the model, when the car was rated at an even 120 hp! Buick had effectively been legislated right off the beach.

Due to these two new rules, the ohv engine would not be well represented again on Daytona Beach until after World War II.

Bill France never forgot that 1939 Century. Many times in the decades that followed, whenever he was introduced to someone from the Buick factory, France would say, "I used to race a Buick." Then a little smile of recollection would play across his face.

It was a pretty good memory. Bill France had helped make history that long ago July afternoon, when the valve-in-heads from Flint rammed around the course ending the unbroken reign of the V-8 Fords from Dearborn. Buick was forever in the Daytona record books, and the handwriting for the flathead engine was clearly on the wall.

Acknowledgments

This work is the result of more than 30 years of interest and research into the history of early Buick racing. More than 20 years ago, while working with co-author Lawrence R. Gustin on the racing chapter for the Automobile Quarterly book *The Buick: A Complete History*, it became clear that any meaningful chronicle of the team's activities would never be possible without the help and cooperation of many people. That assistance has continued to the present day. The author gratefully acknowledges those contributions and wishes to thank the following: Lawrence R. Gustin, Public Relations Department, Buick Motor Division, for his first person account of his Buick Bug driving impressions, for historical photographs, and for commenting on this work. Walter Marr's granddaughter Sarah Close and her husband Bill, for sharing invaluable documents from Walter Marr's personal papers and for supplying original photographs of the team in competition. Greg Fauth, early Buick historian, for information pertaining to both Buick's pre-1908 racing activities and Bob Burman's racing career and for construction details of the "Mighty" Marquette-Buicks. Joe Taubitz, early Buick historian, for his first-person Buick Bug driving impressions and for commenting on this work. Jim Johnson, David White, and Jeff Taylor, the Buick Gallery & Research Center, Sloan Museum of Transportation, Flint, Michigan, for allowing the author to personally inspect the one remaining Buick Bug and for research assistance in documenting the team's activities. Loren Hodge, last known surviving member of the Buick team, for his oral and written first-person accounts of the team's activities. Brad Hindall for making C.E. Easter's racing scrap-book and its contents available for research. Jim Hoggett, curator, Indianapolis Motor Speedway Museum, for supplying documentation relative to the AAA disciplinary actions taken against the Buick team in 1910 and for allowing the author to personally inspect the 1909 Cobe Trophy-winning Marquette-Buick driven by Lewis Chevrolet. Richard P. Scharchburg, Professor of Industrial History, Kettering University, deceased, for his friendship and for his seemingly unending and patient research assistance with the Scharchburg Archives at Kettering University. Charles Chayne, retired Chief Engineer Buick Motor Division, deceased, for his oral recollections of the Buick team's activities and for information relating to the surviving Buick Bug. John Burnside, retired director of Buick Owner Relations, deceased, for his many long years of friendship, for his passionate interest in the history of the company he served for so long, and for sharing information relating to the Buick team's activities. Norb Burwell for supplying the only known image of the railroad boxcar used to transport the Buick team. Richard Betts, racing historian, for supplying historical photographs of a number of the cars used by the team. Peter Helck, racing artist and historian, deceased, for his recollections and observations regarding the team. Jonathan and Bob Mauk, NASCAR, Daytona Racing Archives, for research assistance on the 1940 beach race. Robert F. Lloyd, Lloyd Buick-Cadillac, Inc., Daytona Beach, Florida, for his recollections of Buick on the beach. Halifax Historical Society, Daytona Beach, Florida, for archival assistance. Lastly, Mrs. Sandi King, Associate Editor, *Antique Automobile*, for her encouragement and suggestions relative to this article. Without them, this work might never have seen the light of day.