

For a great 1938 — better buy Buick

By Robert C. Ackerson

Buick production for the 1938 model year fell 23 percent from the level of 1937. At first glance this seemed to be the type of performance for which the word "dismal" had been coined. But 1938 was also a year when the economy slipped into a major recession and unemployment increased from 14.3 percent in 1937 to 19.1 percent in 1938. The President and Congress, after cutting back on government projects in early 1937, had no choice but to increase expenditures for such programs as the WPA and the CCC. When viewed in this perspective Buick's position in the automobile industry loomed far healthier as a comparison of Buick production from 1936 through 1938 indicates:

Calendar Year	Buick Production	Buick's Market Share
1936	179,538	4.9%
1937	227,038	5.8%
1938	173,905	8.8%

The view of numerous Buick historians regarding the 1938 models as the most desirous of the prewar Buicks was foreseen by a writer in the October 1937 issue of *The Buick Magazine*, which depicted the 1938 model as possessing two of the most remarkable engineering advances of the century. This bold assertion referred to the use of new "Turbulator" pistons in the "Dynaflash engines plus the introduction of rear coil springs on all Buicks."

As in the past the Buick's pistons were constructed of an aluminum alloy. But a new crown contour provided an increase of the compression ratio that in turn allowed for an eight percent increase in horsepower without any loss of fuel economy.

Buick's president and general manager, Harlow H. Curtis, put the new pistons in recent historical perspective. Understandably proud of the Buick engine he noted that "long ago, Buick

settled on the valve-in-head principle," even though "costlier to make, it is nevertheless basically better." With 30 years of experience producing these engines, Curtis added: "To see just how fine the process of development has been drawn, just consider what has happened in the past two years.

"Two years ago we gave you the Anolite piston, to supply more of that brilliance and nimbleness you so desire.

"Last year, the principle change in the engine consisted of streamlining the intake valves, though we also redesigned the tail pipe and developed a new

carburetor patterned after airplane practice."

With the introduction of the turbulator piston, Curtis promised his audience that "when you drive the 1938 Buick with the Dynaflash engine you command a power plant unlike any other on the highway." It was "livelier, faster, more brilliant, more responsive," an engine that "covers familiar distances with definitely increased economy of fuel."

Relative to their immediate predecessors the latest Dynaflash engines were significantly more powerful. The 248 cid version used in the Series 40 models



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"Better buy Buick!"

Buick sought to explain how turbulence made for a better-running engine through ads like these.

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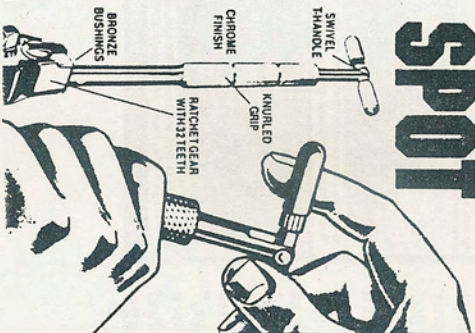
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GET INTO A TIGHT SPOT



BUICK

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of propulsion is fundamentally better. But for 1938, the old-fashioned leaf spring is gone... This new springing not only adds to safety by reducing skidding dangers by about one third, but also provides a greatly improved ride.

"The car doesn't bounce, doesn't throw, and doesn't roll on curves, it flows over bumps with an almost fluid smoothness."

Less successful than the use of crowned pistons and rear coil springs was Buick's venture into the murky nether world of primitive semi-automatic transmissions. Buick's version, appealingly called the "self-shifting" transmission, was available only on the lowest priced Series 40. But it was dropped after the

1938 model year in which less than 3,000 units were installed. The Self-Shifter was essentially a semi-automatic, four-speed planetary transmission with a clutch pedal used to select low gear to set the car in motion. Subsequent shifts were made automatically as the selector lever (mounted on the steering column) was moved into the high range. When the car moved away from a stop with the selector still in the high range, the transmission started in first gear before shifting to third (bypassing second gear) and finally to high gear.

More often in conflict rather than in concert with the Buick's torque tube drive, Select-Shift was not offered for 1939. Not until 1948 when Dynaflo was introduced was a Buick offered with a truly automatic transmis-

sion.

In terms of styling, the 1938 Buicks closely resemble the 1937 models. Primary differences consisted of a new grille and front fenders. This close proximity to an older model marked the 1938 Buicks as cars that brought a styling cycle dominated by massive grille work with bold vertical bars and hood-mounted headlights to a close. The 1939 models, in contrast, moved the grille lower and outward, while positioning the headlights into the flow-line of the front fenders. The age of streamlining had arrived at Buick, but the 1938 models were not impediments to progress, rather, they were the beneficiaries of a tradition of solid engineering that made "Better Buy Buick" advice well worth heeding.