



Mid-Century Mommy-Mobile

This '57 Buick comes from a time when even station wagons were pieces of art

BY RICHARD TRUESDELL ■ WHEN WE THINK OF BUICKS, TWO THINGS IMMEDIATELY COME TO MIND: DOCTORS AND GOLF. IN THE HIERARCHY OF GM BRANDS, BUICK TRADITIONALLY WAS THE LAST STOP ON THE ROAD TO OWNING A CADILLAC, THE CHOICE OF UPPER MIDDLE-CLASS PROFESSIONALS SUCH AS DOCTORS AND LAWYERS, THE KIND OF GUYS WHO PLAY THE GAME OF CHASING A LITTLE WHITE BALL AROUND ON SATURDAY MORNINGS.

And the connection to golf has been furthered over the years by Buick's connection to the sport, first through its 50-year sponsorship of the Buick Open, and for the last decade by association with the game's greatest

player, Tiger Woods. It seems that until the introduction of the Enclave, he thought Buicks were for his parent's generation, but times have changed. The Enclave is an unqualified success story for Buick, setting new standards in

the crossover utility vehicle (CUV) class. [Editor's note: Having rented an Enclave for a long work trip recently, I can vouch for the "setting new standards" part of Truesdell's claim. - BB]

Fifty years ago, if you wanted a car



with the utility of a modern CUV, you bought a station wagon...it's that simple. And in 1957, the family hauler that sat like the alpha lion atop Buick's lineup was the Caballero four-door hardtop Estate station wagon. (Hardtop station wagons came of age in the mid-'50s with the introduction in 1956 of the Nash and Hudson Rambler pillarless four-door station wagons. Stylish hardtop station wagons remained in lineups all the way through the 1964 Chrysler Town and Country station wagons. Frankly, we miss them.)

Doctor David Wilhelm, a dentist living



INTERIOR: Although details of its past are vague, the current owner does know that this 68,000-mile Buick wagon underwent a full restoration before he acquired it.

in Coto de Caza, California, has had a lifelong love affair with Buicks and owns the eye-catching 1957 Buick Caballero four-door hardtop Estate shown on these pages. It features a stock 364ci V-8 boasting 300hp. Because of the

expense and relatively low demand for these beautiful and graceful station wagons, the Caballero was relatively short-lived, available only for 1957 and 1958. Less than 15,000 were built over the two-year life span. The hardtop



EXTERIOR: The SUV/CUV of its time, this Buick Caballero hardtop gave Dad and Mom the utility they needed, without the stigma of a traditionally dull station wagon.

station wagons were discontinued when GM restyled the full-size lineup for the 1959 model year.

In explaining his fascination with Buicks, and his Caballero in particular, Wilhelm offered up these comments.

"I grew up around cars as a child. My dad always worked on his own cars, and he loved Buicks. My older brother, who is seven years older than I am, always had what I thought were really cool cars, most notably a 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air that was lowered in front and really looked too cool. When I was old enough to look over the steering wheel and fantasize about driving, Dad purchased in succession three Buick Century two-door hardtops, a 1955, a 1956, and a 1957. From then on I have loved Buicks, as I thought they were the greatest cars on earth."

After graduating from dental school, and enjoying a succession of Ferraris (he currently owns three – a 1972 365 GTC4, a super-rare 1983 400i five-speed, and a 2003 Maranello) he decided to scratch his Buick itch and found his car on the Internet, available at Duffy's Collectable Cars in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

"I wanted someone very knowledgeable to inspect the car before purchase," says Wilhelm, "so I



hired the president of the Buick Owners Association to go over the car and judge it as if it were in a concours competition. Alan Oldfield surveyed the car and sent me a five-page documented inspection sheet, and said that if I didn't buy the car, he had 17 people who would. I bought the car on the spot."

(When buying a car sight unseen such as on eBay, Wilhelm suggests finding someone knowledgeable in the field to inspect the car. It's the best \$500 you'll ever spend, the alternative being to fly

out and inspect the car yourself. Unless you are really knowledgeable, relying on an impartial expert is the better choice.)

"I bought the car the day of Christmas 2003. It was my Christmas present to me. When I bought the car it had 68,012 original, documented miles. I don't know the complete story of the car, but what I was told in 2003 is that it was part of a larger collection of cars that it had been restored. The owner from which it was bought just had too many cars, and his age forced the sale."



CARGO: Clever engineering produced a flat cargo floor with storage below or a third-row seat.



WHEELS: The current owner installed a set of optional Buick Skylark wheels.



The car had been fully restored at some point, and Wilhelm continues to improve on the strong foundation. In 1957 the Buick Skylark wire wheels were optional, so Wilhelm purchased a set of the original rims and installed them on the car. About the only other issue he's addressed since purchasing the car was to replace the gas tank. Everything works, including the original Sonomatic radio.

When commenting on how the car drives, this is what the owner has to say.

"The drive train has the wonderful Dynaflo transmission, which Buick advertised as the smoothest ride in the world. There were no gears in the Dynaflo transmission as it was just a straight fluid drive. The car is incredibly smooth to drive as it just floats down

the road. It is amazing how comfortable the ride is when compared to today's technology. When driving the Buick, I often remember the times I spent with my dad in his Buicks, which are pleasant memories. It is as if the car reconnects me with my father, and I would feel comfortable driving the car cross-country, it has such a comfortable ride."

When asked about his car's strongest attribute, Wilhelm related this comment.

"Its timeless styling. It is a beautiful car to look at, and it still takes my breath away. The Buick is my connection to my wonderful childhood of growing up around cars."

Wilhelm notes that when he shows the car or when people stop him while driving, they invariably say that their parents had a car like that, or they had

a car like that. What the car does is to reconnect people to their past, as it does for me.

Station wagons were a fixture of suburban American life at mid-century, a time when many current baby boomers were growing up. They were the kind of cars that when equipped with third-row seats, could transport entire Little League teams – truly the minivans of their time. In the case of Wilhelm's Caballero, it represents a time when GM ruled the automotive world and is an outstanding way to celebrate GM's 100-year history. With a Cadillac CTS station wagon coming in the 2010 model year, primarily for international markets, could we finally be seeing a renaissance of the great American station wagon?

We hope so.