

A RENAISSANCE FOR BUICK

By Tom McQueen

The radically new 1959 Buicks were designed under the leadership of William Mitchell, who succeeded Harley Earl as GM's Vice President of Design. Honors for the new car included Motor Trend's "Best Looking Car for 1959."

Luminaries in the automotive press, including Tom McCahill and Floyd Clymer, praised the new car's performance and handling.

Breaking from tradition, Buick models were named LeSabre, Invicta, and Electra, replacing the familiar Special, Century, Super, Roadmaster, and Limited designations used since 1936. Remarkably, the makeover went so far as to remove Buick's iconic "venti-port" portholes, which dated from 1949.

My 1959 Buick Electra 225 convertible, was built at Buick's Wilmington, Delaware, plant and purchased on August 13, 1959 by Lt. Col. Verna McCluskey at Page-Hughes Buick in Falls Church, Virginia. Verna loved this car until her passing in 1982.

When I purchased it from her estate, Verna's car had 58,300 miles showing on the odometer. I fell in love with it because of its "clean winged style," "rakish tilt" of the front fenders, and radical "chrome studded" grill. Like Verna, I am a convertible lover and couldn't resist this well-cared-for low-mileage one-owner example. By 1983, it was still in good running condition, had a very nice original interior, and only some typical lower body rust under the stainless rocker trim. For many years it was Verna's second car, getting only "sunny day" use. She must have loved Buick convertibles as her trade in was a 57 Buick Century Convertible, also a rare and desirable car.

Verna paid \$ 4,704 for her new Buick, including \$373.52 IN extra cost options: Wonderbar radio (\$102.13), heater (\$102.13), EZI glass (\$43.00), 6-way power seat (\$73.10), door edge guards (\$5.16), and white wall tires (\$48.00). Dealer undercoating added another \$40.00. Verna also purchased the dealer supplied "Dinsmore" compass that is still present today. To put the Buick's

cost in perspective, the base price of a new 1959 Cadillac, Series 62 2-door hardtop was \$4,892. So, the Electra 225 convertible, designed to replace the Roadmaster 75/Limited series, was a fairly expensive car at the time.

Early on, I had a body shop strip the car to bare metal, weld in new metal where needed, prime and repaint it. I also had new seals installed in the Twin Turbine Dynaflow. Much later, I had the seats reupholstered and the bumpers, grille, and other parts rechromed. The 325 horsepower "nailhead" V8 engine has never been rebuilt, but the car's normal wear and tear items have been addressed.

During my ownership, the Buick, nicknamed "Otilia" (after the lady who actually found the car for me) and I have travelled to a number of Buick Club of America (BCA) national and regional meets, and to many Washington, DC area shows. Among the many awards won are some "special" awards, including the "Norman R. Thompson Buick Award" for Best Electra and the "Best Buick" at Metro BCA's "All GM Show."

By far, the most memorable event was the 1986 Buick Club of America's National Meet at Indianapolis Motor Speedway. This event memorialized the 1959 500 mile race when a car like mine served as the Official Pace Car. One of the activities at the Meet allowed my Buick and me the thrill of driving a few laps around the famous "Brick Yard," along with several other Buicks. That was the greatest! Years later, my 59 was also displayed at the AACA Museum's "Indy Pace Cars" exhibition, and until the end of April is on display at the AACA Museum as part of the "Land Yacht" exhibition.

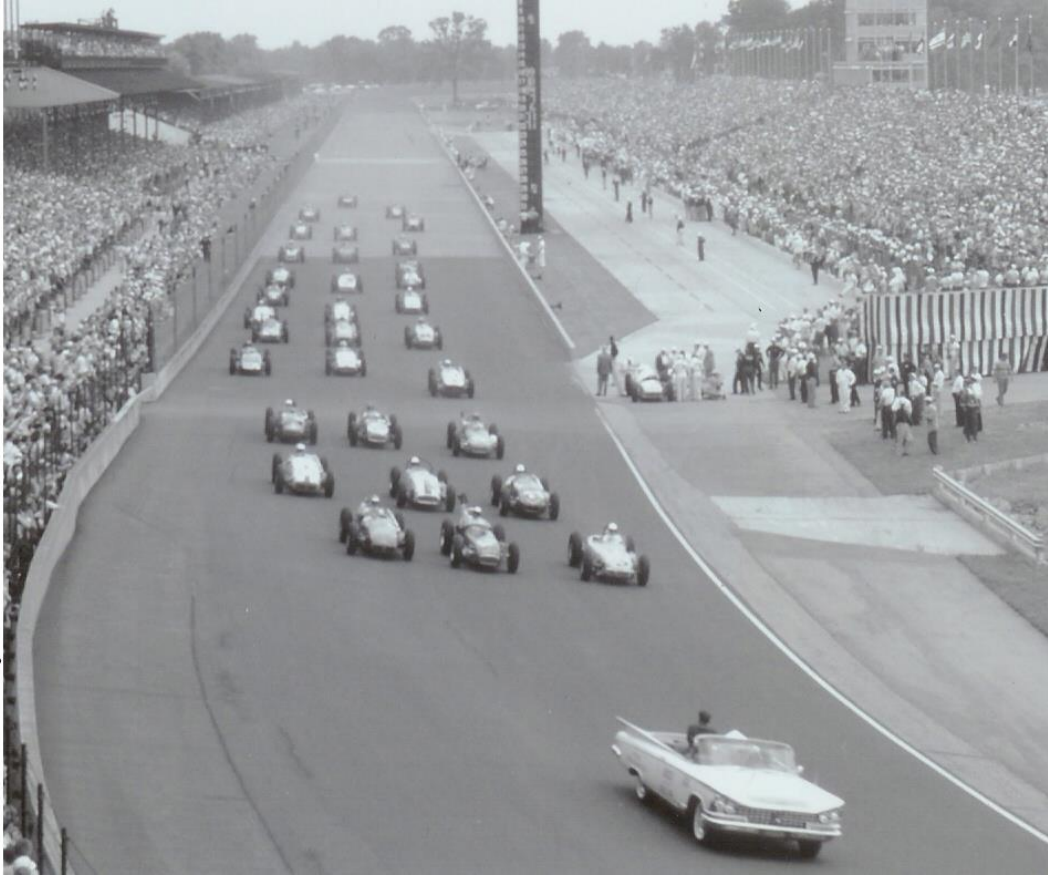
The week prior to Memorial Day is known as "Speed Week" in Indianapolis, and includes a number of pre-race events. For 1959's race, two Indianapolis Buick dealers, Monarch Buick and Ogle-Dellen Buick, provided the Buick Pace Car, and a number of "Official" courtesy cars for use by the officials and other dignitaries. In addition to the actual Pace Car, a second "Pace Car" was provided as a "spare" just in case there were mechanical problems. We know through photographs, film, etc., that a red 1959 Buick convertible was also present. Other publicity photos show various Buick models, including a station wagon, in use at the track and around Indianapolis before and during

Speed Week. The cars were painted with "BUICK OFFICIAL PACE CAR" lettering on the doors. Additional lettering of "Indianapolis 500 Mile Race, May 31, 1959" was painted on the rear quarter panels, and "Monarch Buick, Ogle-Dellen Buick" was painted on the car's trunk lid. Both the actual pace car and the "spare" were Arctic White with red leather bucket seats, and other options, including air conditioning. In other words, they were very well equipped. All those Buicks, short of the actual Pace Car, were presumably sold after the conclusion of the 1959 Indy 500, much the same as "official" and "courtesy" cars are today. This was a great marketing opportunity for the Indianapolis Buick dealers, providing valuable exposure and wonderful "free" advertising. Unlike some manufacturers, where "replica pace cars" are provided to dealerships across the country as a promotional item, Buick had no "replica" program.

Along with the winning purse, the Electra 225 Pace Car was awarded to race winner, Roger Ward. He reportedly enjoyed driving his Electra 225 for several years. While it is assumed that the Speed Week "official" cars all had their lettering removed for resale, the race winner left his car's lettering in place, thus enjoying the celebrity aspect of being the 1959 champion.

As to the actual Buick Pace Car used in the 59 Indy 500, its whereabouts are unknown. I am sometimes asked if my car was "the" Pace Car as it is the same model, with some of the same options, and in the same exterior color of Arctic White.

Photo Courtesy of IMS Photos



The 1959 Indianapolis 500 Mile Race Memorial Day Classic is about to get underway as a 59 Buick 225 Electra paces the field toward the green flag. This Electra is almost identical to this month's Car of the Month.



Buicks were a large presence at various Brickyard pre-race activities.



The author's pristine 1959 Buick 225 Electra as shown here is nearly identical to the 1959 Indy 500 Pace Car. Worry not as the lettering is attached magnetically for use at shows.