



LABOR OF HERCULES

1941 PONTIAC CUSTOM TORPEDO

THEY WERE ELEGANT yet practical. Expensive yet utilitarian. Rugged yet fragile. Modern yet old-world. No American automobile was as great a study of contrasts as the classic wood-bodied station wagon.

While the first automobiles were built with techniques firmly rooted in the horse-and-carriage trade, by the mid-Thirties the construction of most American automobiles was thoroughly modern. Once the steel industry perfected the manufacture of the wide sheet metal needed to stamp one-piece steel tops,

the use of fabric or wood in body construction was but a memory. Even the most humble American car of the late Thirties was a tribute to the modern technology of moving assembly lines and welded steel construction—with one notable exception.

Parked in the driveway or in front of the country club, a station wagon was a symbol of good taste and good income, much like the minivans and sport utility vehicles of today. But where Explorers and Caravans are everywhere, the wood-bodied station wagon offered an air of elegant exclusivity.



STORY AND COLOR PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS GLATCH

FROM ITS HUMBLE BEGINNINGS as the first horseless carriages were converted to haul cargo, the station wagon grew to become the conveyance of the rich and famous. As resorts and hotels needed a vehicle to carry customers from train depots to their destination, the surrey-topped depot hack built on a Model T or other similar chassis evolved into a more comfortable vehicle. Local carriage shops or wood workers built the bodies and made the conversions. That changed in 1923 with the introduction of the Star Station Wagon built by Durant Motors. Describing the first factory-built station wagon offered to the public, Durant proclaimed: "The Star Station Wagon is especially suitable for general farm use, city delivery, express service and station service for country resorts and estates. Framework, posts and windshield are finished in natural wood with small panels in walnut stain. There are two doors on the right and one on the left side."

The world leader in automobile production at the time, Ford Motor Company also saw a virgin market in the station wagon business. The Model T, that most versatile of vehicles, was a prime source of station wagon conversions. Ford's catalog of 1922 showed a wagon built by York, Hoover & Mifflinberg. On April 25, 1929, Ford began offering its own station wagon, a pretty \$650 number built on the Model A. It sold 4,576 wagons that year. So serious was Ford about the wagon market that, in 1932, it established a factory in Iron Mountain, Michigan, in the resource-rich Upper Peninsula, to build the wood bodies. Only 2,013 were sold in 1933—the height of the Depression—but Ford's gamble paid off.

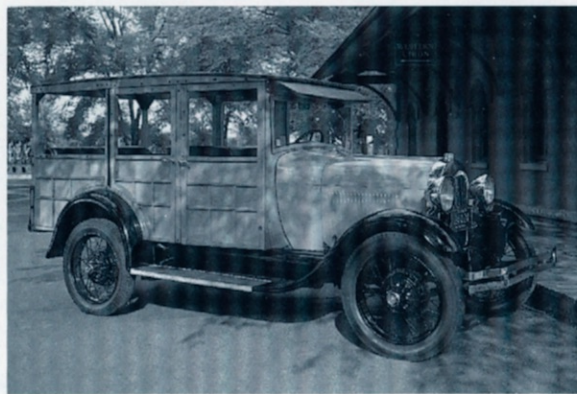


1922 Ford Model T Depot Hack.

The station wagon phenomenon surged so that, by 1941, a total of 30,961 were purchased. Ford, though losing its total sales lead to Chevrolet in 1936, still dominated the wagon market with 15,602 sold. The nation's number three car, Plymouth, was second with about 4,000 station wagons. Third was top-selling Chevrolet with 2,045 produced. Slightly more upscale from the three most popular brands came Pontiac in fourth with approximately 1,000 wagons built.

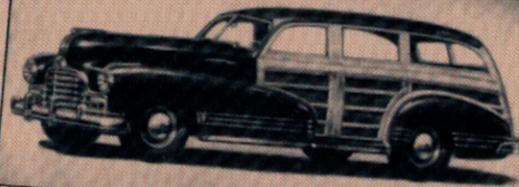
What caused the station wagon boom? Despite their utilitarian nature, station wagons were seen more as a conveyance of golf clubs and hunting rifles than the carrier of children and groceries. Clark Gable's purchase of a Dodge Westchester Suburban station wagon in 1937 certainly reinforced that image. Spencer Tracy drove a 1941 Chevrolet wagon given to him by the manufacturer for being voted America's top movie star. Other Hollywood types preferred the luxuries of Buick, Packard and Chrysler woodies. Yet those who could afford just a Chevy or Ford wagon belonged to the same seemingly exclusive club.

By 1941, Ford continued to build bodies in-house from



1929 Ford Model A Station Wagon.

PARTS LIST PONTIAC



Station Wagon Body by

YPSILANTI FURNITURE CO., INC.
IONIA, MICHIGAN

Makers of **IONIA** Bodies

its Iron Mountain plant. The company was so demanding of uniform quality, it is said that Ford rejected far more lumber than it used. Chrysler also went in-house by purchasing the Pekin Wood Products Company in Helena, Arkansas, to construct bodies for the luxurious new Chrysler Town and Country. Interestingly, Chrysler preferred more highly figured wood to give each automobile more individuality. But for other manufacturers, including giant General Motors, building a wood body was such a specialized, labor-intensive task that it was best left to contractors. Ionia Bodies, a division of the Ypsilanti Reed Furniture Company, supplied Buick, Oldsmobile, Chevrolet and Pontiac from its Ionia, Michigan, plant. J.T. Cantrell Company of Hunting-

ton, New York, also produced bodies for Chevrolet. Buffalo-based U.S. Body & Forge delivered station wagon bodies from its Tell City, Indiana, plant to Willys, Studebaker, Plymouth and Dodge. Hudson was late in offering a station wagon, beginning in 1940 with its Seaman Body division of Milwaukee as supplier.

Typical of station wagon body builders was the Hercules Body Company, Inc., of Evansville, Indiana. Founded as the Hercules Buggy Works in 1902, the company began to supply bodies for Sears high wheelers in 1906 (see *AQ*, vol. 35, no. 1). They also produced truck bodies and canvas tops for vehicles serving American troops in World War I. Reorganized in 1920 as the Hercules Corporation, production shifted to the building of refrigerators under the Serval brand name. They attempted to build the McCurdy automobile in 1922, but only a few were sold.

Hercules Corporation was sold in 1925 and the name changed to Serval, although the Hercules Product Division continued to supply the industry with truck bodies. In 1936, the Hercules Product Division was purchased from Serval by George Specht and renamed the Hercules Body Company, Inc. They began to build station wagon bodies in earnest that year—Mr. Specht's timing could not have

No Another
Big Year For
Pontiac!



THREE OUTSTANDING NEW LINES OF "TORPEDO" SIXES AND EIGHTS
De Luxe "Torpedo" . . . Streamliner "Torpedo"
Custom "Torpedo"

The bold 1941 Pontiac brochure (above) touted the Torpedo models while the ad in *The Saturday Evening Post* (right) called the Custom Torpedo Six Station Wagon "extra special." Ypsilanti Furniture Company (opposite top) was one of the makers of wooden station wagon bodies.

been better. The station wagon boom was starting and, by its peak in 1941, Hercules was producing bodies for Pontiac, Oldsmobile, Chevrolet and the Packard 120 model. Their bodies shared the same materials and construction of the other builders, with the main skeleton made of white ash, the same tough, figured hardwood used to make Louisville Sluggers. Inset panels and interior trim was made of Honduras mahogany, a reddish hardwood that contrasted beautifully with the golden color of the ash. Like the other independent builders, the completed bodies were shipped on rail cars to the manufacturers for final assembly.

A fine example of Hercules' workmanship is David Doyle's 1941 Pontiac called the Custom Torpedo Station Wagon. Pontiac sought to carve a place in the market

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST March 1, 1941

Looking for Something Extra Special?



Let your eyes linger on the gay, young grace of this Pontiac "Torpedo" Convertible Sedan Coupe. It's "extra special," all right, with its long, clean lines, its colorful upholstery, its invitation to come and have fun. At the same time, it's a Pontiac through and through, sharing with all other Pontiacs an earned reputation for giving you fine quality at low cost. And like all other Pontiacs, it is exceptionally inexpensive to drive and to maintain and is available as either a six or an eight with the eight costing only \$25 more!

De Luxe "Torpedo" Six Convertible Sedan Coupe \$1023* (white sidewall tires extra)



"Extra special" in closed cars for 1941 means, to many thousands of people, the Pontiac Streamliner "Torpedo" Sedan Coupe with its Body by Fisher. Beyond any question this General Motors masterpiece ranks as the number one style success of the year. It comes to you in Pontiac at the lowest price of all.

Streamliner "Torpedo" Six Sedan Coupe, \$923* (white sidewall tires extra)



You'll find the Station Wagon, as Pontiac designs and builds it, "extra special" on three counts—style, utility and comfort. In many homes, a Pontiac "Torpedo" Station Wagon is the second—and favorite—car. That's because it's smarter still to make that Station Wagon a Pontiac.

Custom "Torpedo" Six Station Wagon, \$1175* (white sidewall tires extra)

* Delivered at Pontiac, Michigan. State tax, optional equipment, accessories—extra. Prices subject to change without notice.

THE FINE CAR
Pontiac
WITH THE LOW PRICE

PONTIAC
PRICES
BEGIN AT **\$828***

FOR THE DE LUXE
"TORPEDO" SIX
BUSINESS COUPE

above the common Fords, Chevys and Plymouths, yet below the Packard and Buick wagons. For 1941, the ads proclaimed: "It's another big year for Pontiac!"

Pontiac's three brilliant new lines of cars for 1941 start with the De Luxe "Torpedoes"—five big, handsome models at prices any new car buyer can afford.

Next come the Streamliner "Torpedoes," slightly larger, strikingly different and only a little higher in cost.

The array is completed by the Custom "Torpedoes," including the popular Station Wagon, which, in view of all the luxuries they offer, are very reasonably priced.

And any one of the models shown—any 1941 Pontiac, in fact—is available either as a six or an eight, with the eight only \$25 more than the six.

Thus, it is actually true that now there's a Pontiac "Torpedo" for everybody—from owners of lowest-priced cars to those accustomed to buying in the higher brackets.

In typical General Motors fashion, Pontiac shared platforms with Chevrolet, Oldsmobile, and Buick, yet Harley Earl's Art and Colour Section did an admirable job of giving the Pontiac a distinct persona. Under the direction of Vincent Kaptur, Bob Lauer and Joe Schemansky, the 1941 Pontiacs featured the more streamlined shapes that the public wanted, including more integrated headlights and concealed running boards. Most notable was Pontiac's famed "Silver Streak" styling introduced by stylist Franklin Q. Hershey in 1935. With its three horizontal chrome strips along the front and rear fenders, the Silver Streaks on the 1941 Pontiacs were as distinctive as Buick's portholes. Of course there was also the well-known Indian hood ornament to announce to the world that this was not an Olds or Chevy, but rather the Chief of the sixes (and eights). That image of value must have worked: in

1941, Pontiac had record sales of 330,061 cars, placing it first in the mid-priced field and fifth in overall production.

"The Station Wagon With The Sedan Ride" is one way Pontiac sought to separate its wagon from the crowd.

Your first ride will prove that this Station Wagon travels as comfortably, quietly and smoothly as the most luxurious sedan.

That's because it's built on Pontiac's biggest, finest chassis—the same as that used on the most expensive Pontiac passenger cars. Thus, passengers are protected from bouncing and swaying by Pontiac's famous, exclusive "Triple-Cushioned Ride"—the greatest comfort combination in the industry.

"NOW THERE'S A Pontiac Torpedo FOR EVERYBODY!"

3 Great New "Torpedo" Lines
The De Luxe · The Streamliner · The Custom
with your choice of a Six or an Eight in any model!

PONTIAC'S 1941 brilliant new lines of cars for 1941 start with the De Luxe "Torpedo"—the big, handsome models in price which any new car buyer can afford. Next in line come the Streamliner "Torpedoes," slightly larger, strikingly different and only a little higher in cost. The story is completed by the Custom "Torpedoes," including the popular Station Wagon, which, in view of the benefits they offer, are very reasonably priced.

And any one of the models shown—any 1941 Pontiac in fact—is available either at a 100 cc. or 150 cc. with the single only \$21 more than the six.

That, it is actually true that now there's a Pontiac "Torpedo" for everybody—more owners of interesting cars in show accompanied in being in the higher brackets.

A visit to your nearest Pontiac dealer will reward you with detailed information about the remarkable industry's number one value for 1941.

It's Another Big Year For Pontiac!

In the same rare brochure for the Custom Torpedo wagon, Pontiac described what it felt were its many uses:

BEACH WAGON

The interior of this Station Wagon is beautifully finished in the finest, most durable materials—that will withstand an extraordinary amount of use. This makes it ideal for beach parties, picnics, and other fun fests.

SMART DELIVERY

Commercial users find that this Station Wagon serves as a good advertisement and creates prestige for their concerns. And, of course, there's loads of room for delivery purposes when the rear seats are removed.

RESORT HOTEL

The Pontiac Station Wagon is a "natural" for this use. It provides smart-looking, comfortable, economical transportation for as many as eight passengers with room left over for a generous amount of luggage.

SCHOOLS AND CLUBS

Passengers ride in maximum safety—protected by Hi-Test Safety Plate Glass . . . shatterproof glass side windows . . . solidly constructed body . . . multi-sealed hydraulic brakes and many other safety features.

In addition to the above general uses, the Pontiac Station Wagon makes an ideal second car for the family. Ladies, especially, like it because it is so smartly modern in appearance—and because it will prove indispensable for taking the children to school . . . for shopping . . . for picnicking . . . and for dashing off to the country club, etc.

No "Like A Rock" or "Ram Tough" imagery here, just the genteel pastimes of upper-class suburbia.

A basic 1941 Pontiac Business Coupe started at \$865, and even the appealing convertible began at \$1,023. At \$1,175, the most expensive Pontiac that year was the Custom Torpedo Station Wagon. Built on GM's large "C"-body platform, the Custom Torpedo rode on a 122-inch

wheelbase. These top-of-the-line Pontiacs were available in notch-back sedan and coupe bodies, along with the elegant Station Wagon. Add the \$25 eight-cylinder engine, the \$50 leather-trimmed "Special" six-passenger interior, and a few other accessories, and the Pontiac wagon could approach \$1,300. Even at its \$1,175 base price, the Pontiac was costlier than the Ford Deluxe (\$965) and Super Deluxe (\$1,015), the Chevrolet Special Deluxe (\$995) and the Plymouth Special Deluxe (\$995). Still, the Custom Torpedo Station Wagon was substantially less than the Buick Estate Wagon (\$1,463), the Packard 120 wagon (\$1,541) and the new Chrysler Town & Country (\$1,412). In the mid-price wagon field, the \$1,176 Oldsmobile, the \$1,141 Mercury, the \$1,383 Hudson and the \$1,326 Packard 110 were Pontiac's only contenders as Studebaker, Nash, Dodge and DeSoto had no wagons in '41.

The extra expense of the Station Wagon was certainly justified. Looking through the parts book Hercules printed for its Pontiac bodies reveals the complex nature of these vehicles. Take one assembly, the top, as an example. Called the "deck assembly" by Hercules, the main structure consisted of two large side rails made of two lengths of ash each. Two end cross rails of ash were bolted to the side rails. Another eight ribs of ash were attached to the side rails by mortise-and-tenon joints. Over these ribs a total of 30 oak slats were attached. Across the rear, to reinforce the cargo hatch area, were another eight slats running longitudinally with five more ribs. A mahogany dome light block was installed above the passenger compartment. After the finished "deck assembly" was mounted to the other wooden side structures, the top was covered in fabric (General Motors was unique in offering optional top material matching the body color). The whole top structure was solid and strong, and a joy to behold from inside. Hercules offered a replacement "deck assembly" for \$55 varnished and trimmed complete, or \$38 varnished but without hardware. Contrast this, then, with the top of the all-steel GMC Suburban which was made of a single piece of sheet metal formed by a handful of punch press hits.

Purchasing a wood-bodied automobile was more than just buying a car, it was entering into a type of sacred trust and social obligation. The shop manual for the 1948 Chrysler Town and Country explained:

The Chrysler Town and Country car is designed and built for those who recognize and appreciate fine things. It has the grace and elegance of a yacht. In fact, the wood is quite similar to the planking of a ship both in construction and treatment. Care of the finish should be thought of in terms of boating rather than motoring. The typical Town and Country owner de-



SPECIFICATIONS

Wheelbase	122 in.
Track Width (Front/Rear)	58/61.5 in.
Overall Length	213.5 in.
Height	69 in.
Ground Clearance	8.375 in.
Curb Weight	3,670 lbs. (six), 3,740 lbs. (eight)

CHASSIS

Front Suspension	Independent, "Knee Action," coil springs, double action shock absorbers
Rear Suspension	Leaf springs, two-way direct-action shock absorbers
Steering	Worm & roller, 19:1 ratio
Brakes	Four-wheel Bendix hydraulic, 149 sq. in. lining
Rear axle	Hypoid gear, 4.3:1 ratio (3.9:1 or 4.55:1 optional)
Tires, standard	Four-ply blackwall tube-type 6.50x16 inch

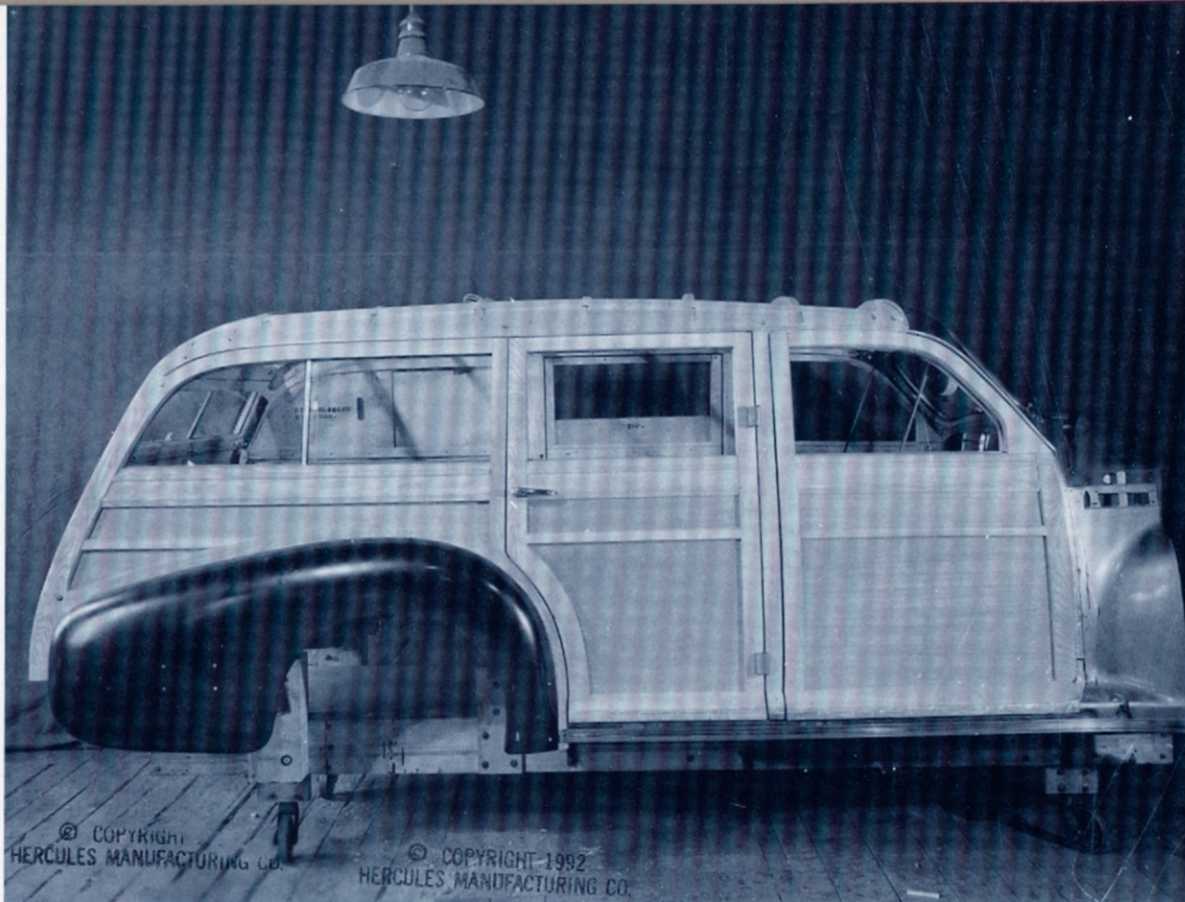
ENGINES

Model	L-head Inline Six	L-head Inline Eight
Bore & Stroke	3.5625 inch x4 inch	3.25 inch x3.75 inch
Displacement	239.2 cu.in.	248.9 cu.in.
Horsepower	90 @ 3200 rpm	103 @ 3500 rpm
Torque	175 lb-ft @ 1700 rpm	190 lb-ft @ 2200 rpm
Compression Ratio	6.5:1 (7.2:1 opt.)	6.5:1 (7.2:1 opt.)
Carburetion	Carter 1-bbl	Carter 2-bbl

TRANSMISSION 3-speed manual synchromesh, column shift

PRODUCTION approx. 1,000

BASE PRICE \$ 1,175.00 \$ 1,200.00

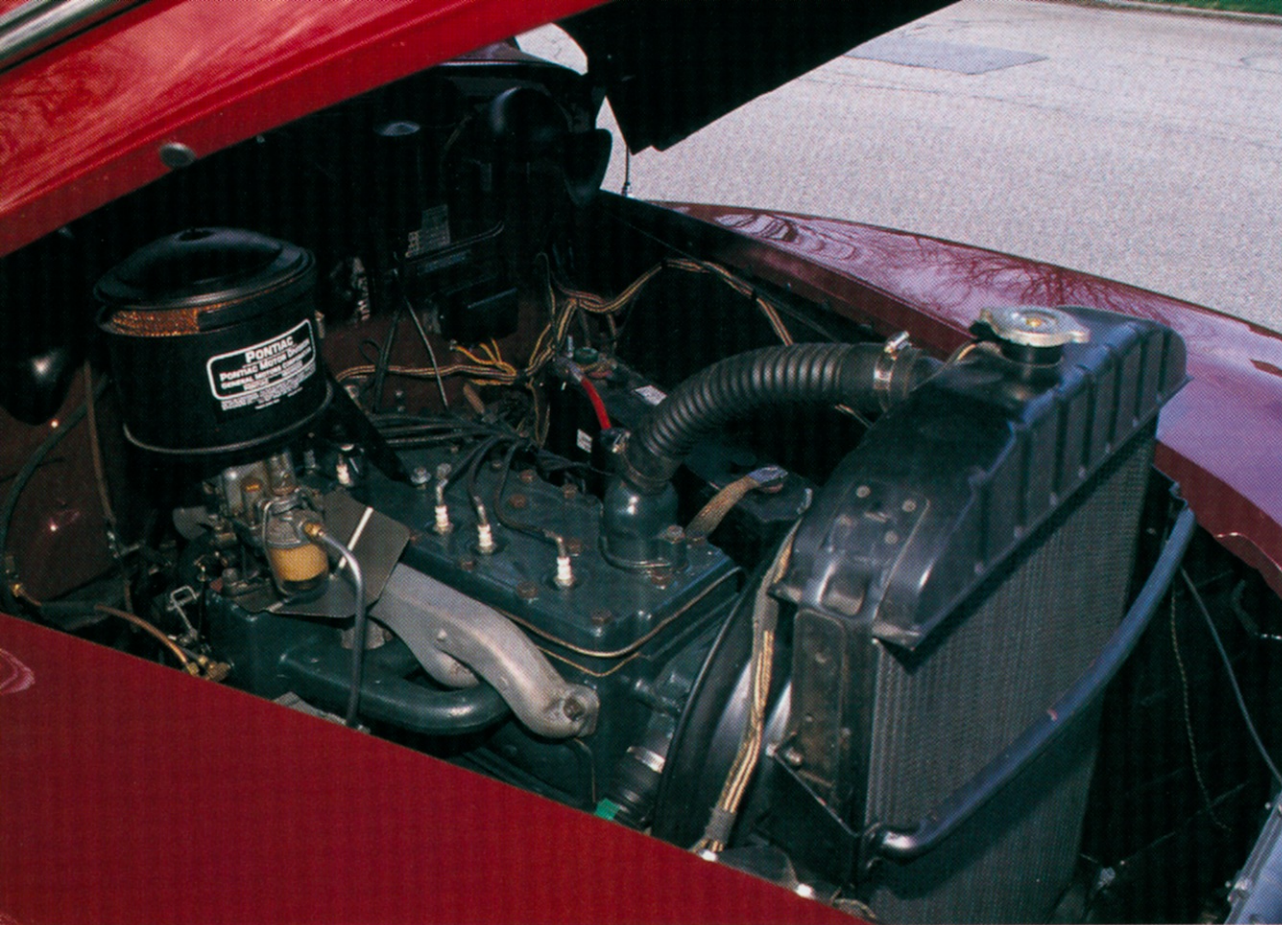


An October 1940 Pontiac Torpedo advertisement (opposite) included a station wagon in the lineup. The Hercules bodies (above and left) used Honduras mahogany inset panels in a white ash frame work.

sires his car to be the outstanding one in his community by virtue of its exceptional beauty maintained by proper care. If the necessity for adequate maintenance of the finish is explained to him, he will, in most instances, be glad to have the cooperation of the dealer in establishing a revarnishing program.

That's right; like a classic Chris Craft boat, the wood had to be refinished yearly.

The expense of manufacturing the bodies and the added maintenance of preserving the wood did not escape the auto manufacturers. The same wide sheet metal that allowed them to build all-steel auto bodies also allowed them to build a steel station wagon. The GMC Suburban proved that it could be done, although the buying public shunned it. But when Chrysler's luxurious and expensive Town and



This Torpedo Station Wagon came equipped with the standard 90hp six-cylinder engine (above). The Pontiac station wagon body plate (below) specified paint and trim and identified Hercules as the body builder.

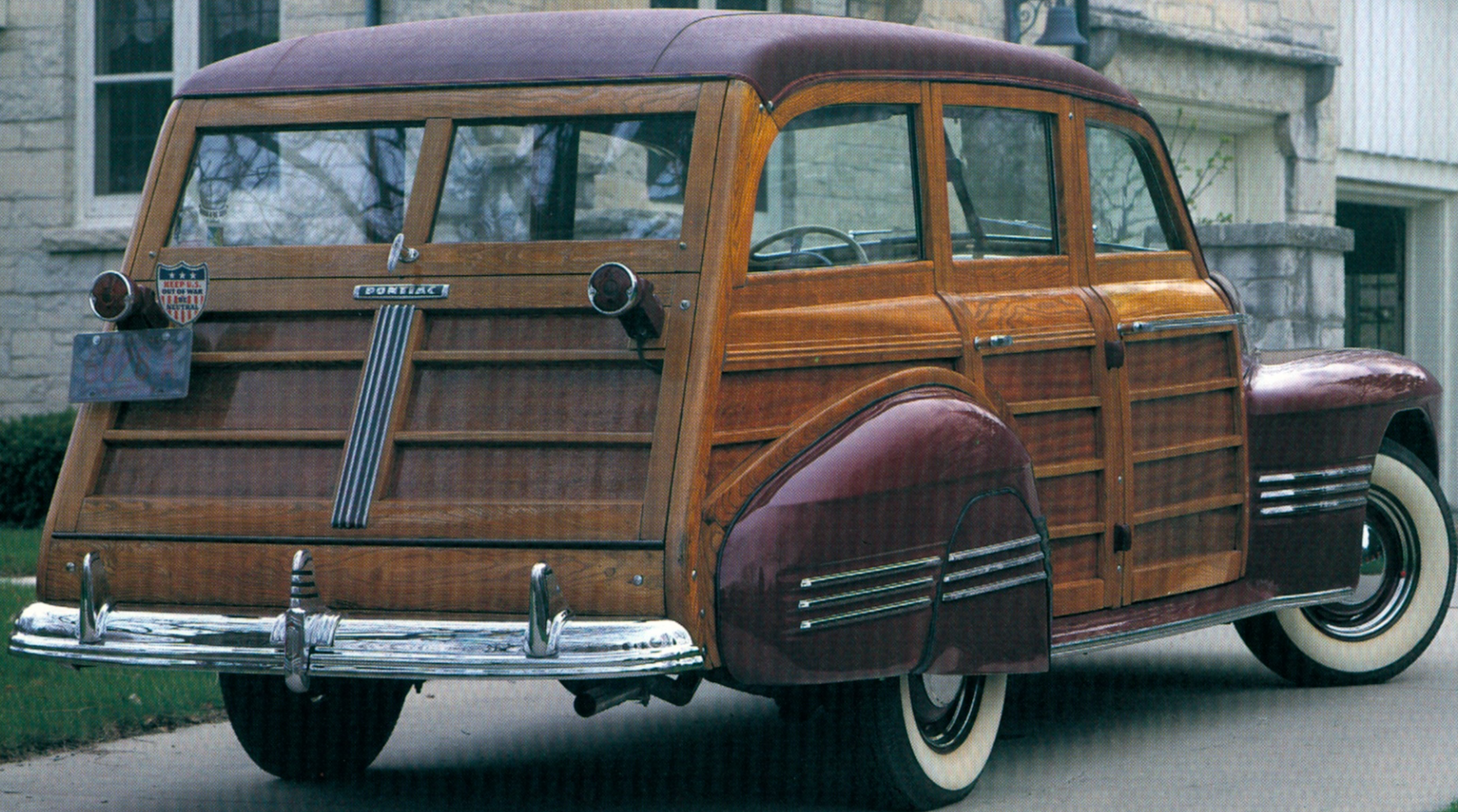


Country appeared in 1941, it featured real wood trim over a steel body. The final assembly still required a stationary line and much hand work, but the handwriting was on the wall for the wood-bodied station wagon.

After the Town and Country's mahogany door inserts began splitting from improper maintenance, Chrysler began to use an imitation material called DiNoc in 1947. Ford's new 1949 station wagon also featured real wood trim on a steel body. Plymouth introduced its own all-steel wagon that year, available with or without imitation wood trim, and this time the public—booming postwar suburban America—welcomed the concept heartily. By 1951, only the prestigious Buick continued to use real wood, though the structure was mostly steel. Everyone else built wagons completely out of steel, with or without imitation wood trim. Only one manufacturer, Ionia Bodies, converted to the production of steel station wagon bodies for General Motors, which it did until 1963. Hercules, like the other suppliers, stayed with the technology they knew. (Hercules continues to build insu-







lated truck bodies in Henderson, Kentucky, today.) Finally, in 1953, Ionia Bodies produced the last wood Buick station wagon body, and the woodie was no more.

It is estimated that just 15 1941 Pontiac Station Wagons are extant; the effects of rust and wood rot have ruined most of them. That is why David Doyle set out on a six-year mission to bring his wagon back to life. A social worker by vocation, Doyle, of West Bend, Wisconsin, is one of a number of amateur and professional restorers whose avocation is rescuing these wood-bodied wonders. The Pontiac was the seventh, and possibly the most challenging, woodie he had restored. "It came from Wisconsin, and while suffering from neglect and marginal storage, the car itself was remarkably complete," said Doyle. "The sheet metal was marginal and much of the rockers and floor were gone, but the wood was in good condition with no evidence of dry rot or cracking. In my pursuit of wood-bodied cars, I have come to focus almost exclusively on the condition of the wood. Body and mechanical components can always be found, but the wood itself is the big ticket item. This is especially true for smaller makes such as Pontiac as the wood is not currently being reproduced."

Today, resplendent in "Parma Wine" paint with the optional matching fabric top, David's Pontiac is a fine example of a wood-bodied wagon. His is powered by the standard 90hp six, and has the standard eight-passenger interior. Even with the modest trim, there is no doubt that this was Pontiac's "halo car," the image builder that set the standard for the entire line. A close inspection of the Pontiac's woodwork reveals its fine construction. The fit and finish of the wood had to be of a high standard unlike metal bodies which can have flaws hidden by filler. "Most of the workmanship was very good," remarked Doyle. "But some of the pieces were rough in places. As a restorer it was tempting to smooth those pieces, but I left them as they were." A ride in his Pontiac reveals a tight body structure, with the only squeaks and rattles coming from the removable rear seats.

David Doyle sold his 1941 Pontiac shortly after the photography was completed, but not before the car was invited to the 1996 Pebble Beach Concours d' Elegance where the new owner was expected to show it. And David Doyle's passion for preserving these wooden beauties continues: he is finishing a 1946 Ford Station Wagon and has just purchased another Pontiac, this time a '47.

There may be parallels to the wood-bodied wagons of the Thirties and Forties and today's minivans and SUVs. It is doubtful, however, that 50 years from now people will be dedicating themselves to the preservation of Windstars and Grand Cherokees. But we are sure people like David Doyle will still be caring for and resurrecting those grand, glorious woodies. ♦



The interior featured mahogany door panels, a faux woodgrained steel dashboard and leatherette upholstery.

