

# 1933-42 Willys: "Half the gas... twice the Smartness"

by Karl S. Zahm

Among the pioneers who built America's cottage auto industry into the giant it was to become were such well-known names as Ford, Sloan, Nash, Olds, and Durant. Less remembered is the consummate salesman and promoter, John North Willys. Born in 1873, he began a meteoric rise to success with a bicycle sales and repair shop in Elmira, New York. By the turn of the century, he had made the transition to purveyor of horseless carriages, namely the Pierce Motorette and, shortly after, Rambler. A man of almost limitless energy and talent, Willys quickly recognized the future potential of the automobile and resolved to be a moving force in its rise to prominence.

By 1906, Willys was co-owner of the American Motor Sales Company of Indianapolis, a distribution outlet for two Indiana-based automakers, Marion and Overland. That year, Willys sold Overland's entire output of 47 cars, plus a like number of Marions.

The financial panic of 1907 caught Overland over-extended. The company, \$80,000 in debt, skidded into bankruptcy. Willys suddenly found himself unable to obtain deliveries of cars upon which he'd made advance deposits of \$10,000, so he promptly boarded a train to Indiana to see what could be done to save both himself and the struggling company from ruin. Willys singlehandedly staved off receivership and righted the company. Overland's harried directors, buoyed by his efforts and enthusiasm, were doubly impressed when Willys persuaded creditors to accept preferred stock certificates for their claims. Not surprisingly, Willys was made president and general manager in January 1908, and was given a free

hand and limitless power within the company.

Although not an engineer, Willys seemed to know intuitively what was "right" and acted accordingly. With the panic receding and production on the increase, the small company rapidly outgrew its physical plant. Having bought into the Marion Motor Car Company earlier, Willys took over part of its factory to produce parts for Overland. As a stop-gap measure, he ordered several large circus tents erected adjacent to the Overland works to provide additional assembly space. Upon learning that the Pope-Toledo automobile factory in Toledo, Ohio, was for sale, Willys quickly snapped-up the complex for \$285,000. Within the following month, he'd sold off much of the excess steel and accumulated parts at a price that almost paid for the plant. At the same time, the company reorganized and moved its entire operation to Ohio. Renamed Willys-Overland, production jumped from 465 units in 1908, to 4860 in 1909, and to a staggering 15,598 the following year. In the space of just two years, Willys had taken an impoverished, failing concern and completely turned it around. Not only did Willys emerge as one of the industry's prime movers, but his Willys-Overland Company had, by 1916, become the nation's second-largest automobile manufacturer.

This success was an open invitation to further expansion. During the next five years Willys acquired controlling interests in a host of companies including Fisk Rubber, New Process Gear, Electric Auto-Lite, Tillotson Carburetor, Curtiss Aeroplane, and Duesenberg Motors.

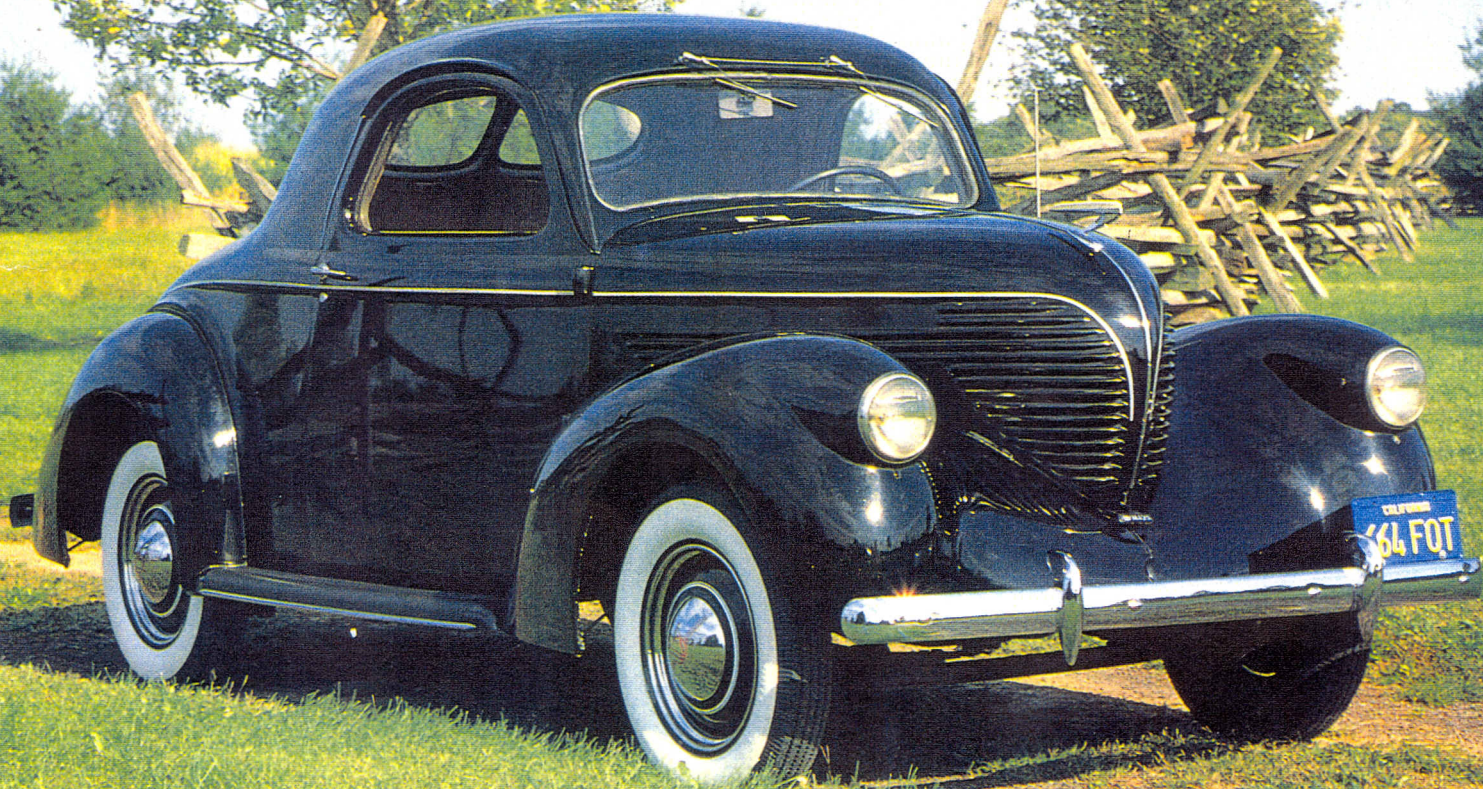
Willys possessed an uncanny knack for recognizing a promising

concept at first glance. One such idea was the sleeve-valve engine. In those days, most of the industry embraced poppet-valves, a situation that persists today in all but rotary engines. In 1913, however, poppet-valve drawbacks included excessive noise, frequent valve-spring failure, and burnt valves. Valves required almost constant adjustment and often needed complete replacement every few thousand miles. Exacerbating the problem, springs, valve stems, and tops of the cam followers were routinely unprotected and exposed to dust and dirt. In Charles Yale Knight's patented engine design, two cast-iron sleeves (each precision ground to within .003 inch) operating within each other took the place of conventional valves. At the upper end of each sleeve was a machined slot. When lined up at the proper interval, these slots acted as a valve. The movement of the concentric sleeves was activated by short connecting rods operated by an eccentric shaft, which was itself driven by the crankshaft. The timing was precise, operation virtually noiseless, and valve "float"—an all too common malady in early poppet-valve engines—was eliminated. The Knight engine actually improved with use; the eventual carbon build-up tended to enhance sealing between piston and sleeve, resulting in higher compression and a marked increase in horsepower.

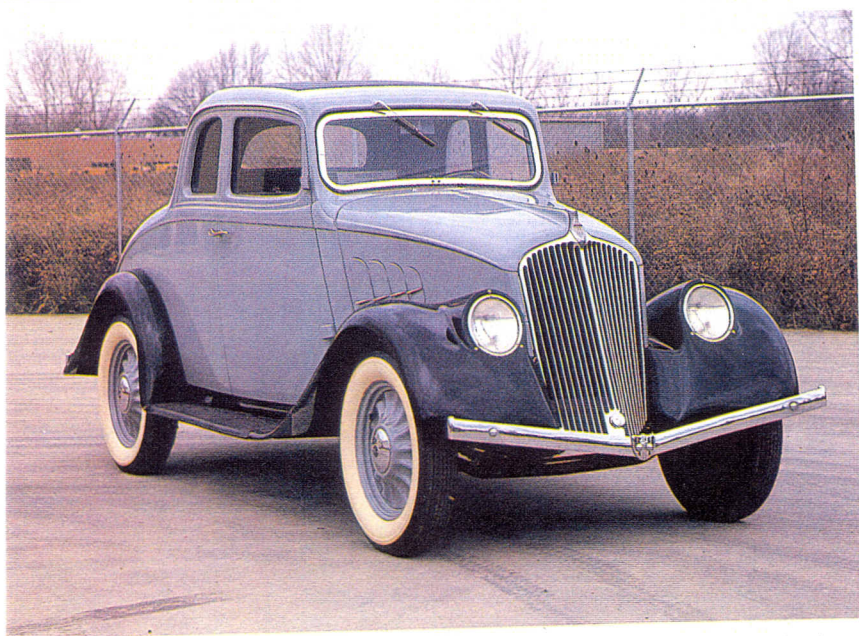
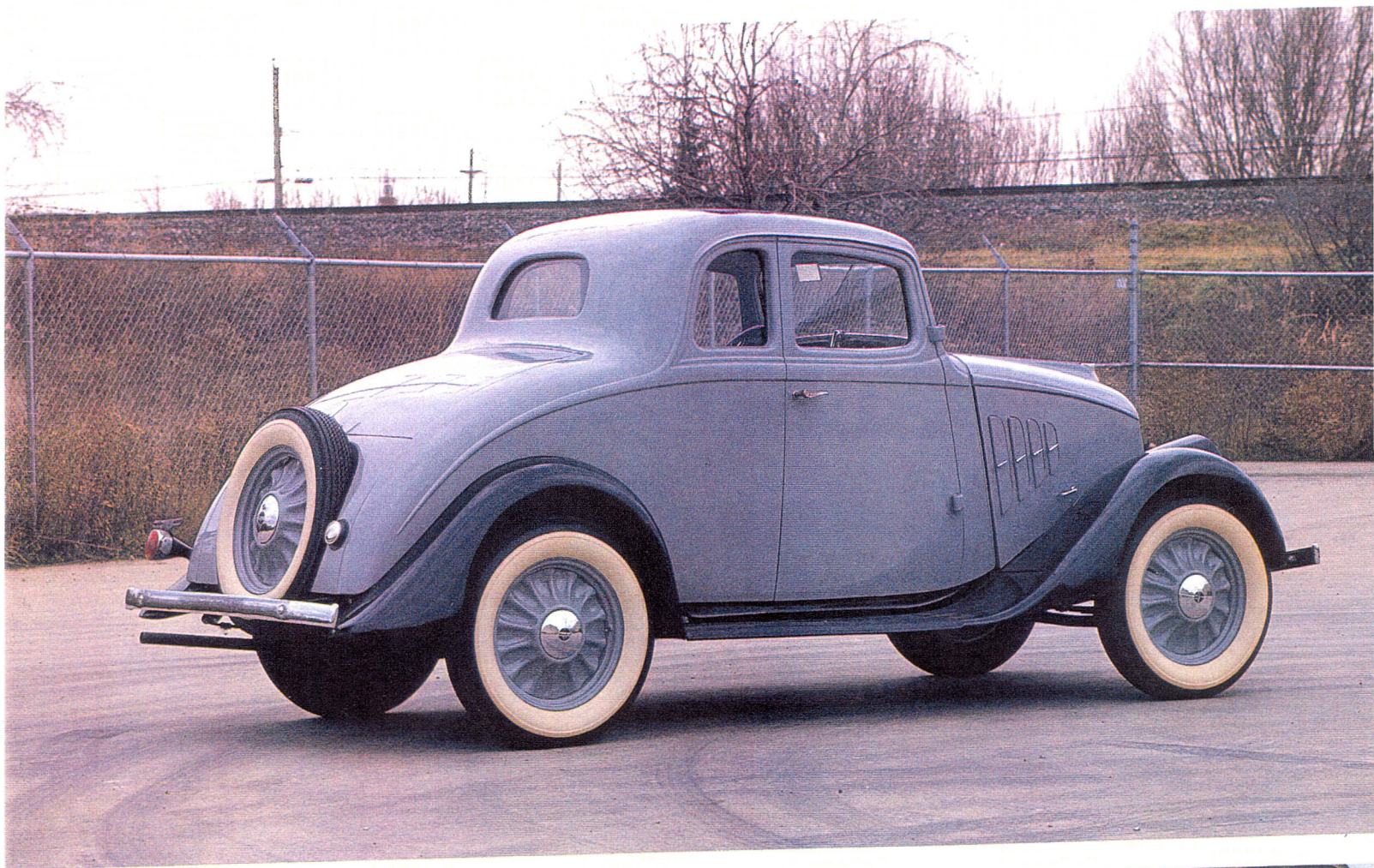
The Willys DeLuxe coupe sold for \$574 in 1938, \$75 more than the base model, \$21 less than a Ford coupe. Owned originally by a schoolteacher from Storm Lake, Iowa, it features white pin-striping, tan broadcloth interior, bumper guards, wheel trim rings, radio, heater, hood ornament, dual taillights, and whitewalls. (Owners: Ron and Debbie Ladley)



During its heyday in the Twenties, Willys built as many as 310,000 cars in one year. The Thirties would not be so kind, with output dipping as low as 6775 units in 1933. Unlike the Big Three, Willys stuck with a four-cylinder engine, offering buyers exceedingly low-cost transportation.





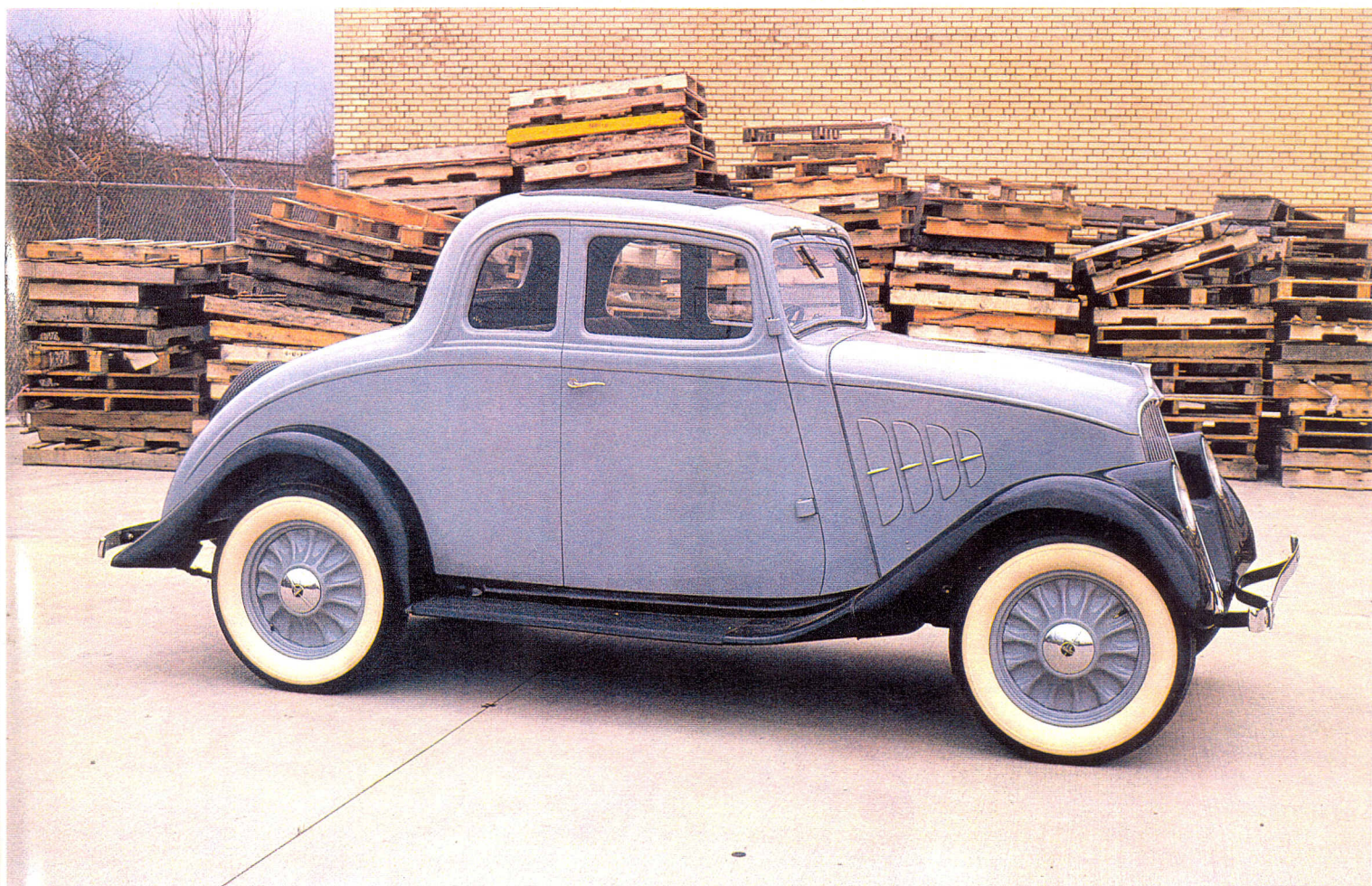


The Willys Model 77 debuted in 1933. Developed with almost no funds, it was not only significantly smaller and lighter than the soon-to-be-discontinued Willys six, but it was the car that would make or break the company. Offered as a four-door sedan or coupe (*both pages*) it was powered by a 134.2-cubic-inch flathead four that developed a modest 48 bhp. *Automobile Trade Journal* called the styling "audacious," referring to its peculiar "starfish" wheels and half-submerged, canted headlights. Willys referred to it as "full streamline from front to rear." (Owner: Tom Hrudka)



Collectible Automobiles





While there were and would continue to be other makes utilizing the Knight engine in later years, Willys-Overland took the lead in making it a resounding success. From the very first Willys-Knight cars of 1914, the company racked up an enviable sales record; in its inaugural year alone, Willys eclipsed the production of all other Knight licensees combined.

For all of Willys' abilities, he was (by his own admission) a failure at welding his far-flung and often diverse holdings into a cohesive and smoothly operating organization. This lack of fundamental management skill took the nation's second largest automaker from the peak of prosperity in 1919 and brought it to its knees just one year later. In the booming economy that preceded the severe recession of 1920, Willys expanded at a furious pace. Never one to look at the details, which he quickly left to others and then forgot, Willys lumped his acquisitions into a holding company known as the Willys Corporation. The sudden eco-

nomic downturn caught the huge and entangled operation in debt by nearly \$30 million.

Willys' house of cards would likely have collapsed then and there, except that the Chase Securities Company brought in Walter P. Chrysler to oversee a thorough reorganization. Wielding a heavy hand, Chrysler axed unnecessary personnel and overhead. Willys-Overland emerged from the purge far leaner and healthier than ever; however, Willys' holding company and most of its major assets had to be liquidated to satisfy indebtedness. But profitability increased markedly as the recession abated, and Willys quickly regained full control of his company.

Short-term debt was eliminated by 1924. With this obligation behind him, John North Willys set out to put together a new automotive empire atop the ashes of the old. Fully committed to be the world's largest manufacturer of sleeve-valve-engined cars, he moved in late 1925 to acquire the F.B. Stearns Company of Cleveland,

an old-line maker of expensive Knight-engined cars. Instead of incorporating Stearns under the Willys-Overland umbrella, Willys—seemingly oblivious to bitter past experience—formed a separate organization to manage the company, which was to provide Willys with an ultra-expensive flagship make.

In 1926, Willys announced a brand-new nameplate, the Whippet. Initially offered only as a small four-cylinder car, it was soon joined by a six-cylinder running mate. Sales of the inexpensive little cars took off like a skyrocket, and by the end of 1928 the company had turned out over 310,000 units, shooting it up to fourth place in the industry.

Supremely confident that the boom would endure, Willys sold his stock for \$20 million and retired as active head of his company in 1929. Given the largely titular position of Chairman of the Board, Willys felt free to accept President Hoover's request that he become ambassador to Poland.



Despite record profits, Willys-Overland was inherently as vulnerable as ever. Lacking Willys' presence at the helm, the company soon found itself in trouble again. The first indication of weakness came in December 1929 when the Stearns operation had to be dissolved. Willys' continued preoccupation with the Knight engine had clearly become a liability; by the late Twenties such engines were no longer economically viable alternatives to the much improved poppet-valve engines. Thus, despite the expense of a total redesign, the \$5500, 145-inch-wheelbase Stearns-Knight bombed. To compound the error, Willys had also financed the ostensibly independent Falcon Motor Corporation of Elyria, Ohio in 1927. Its product, the Falcon-Knight, was planned as an inexpensive companion car to the larger Willys-Knight, an idea he abruptly abandoned, thereby causing the discontinuance of the marque in December 1928.

Had it not been for the crippling effects of the Depression, Willys-Overland would likely have enjoyed continued prosperity in spite of the losses incurred by the Stearns and Falcon fiascos. In an attempt to interest a wider segment of the market, the company announced two new conventionally powered cars for

1930—the Willys Six and, bowing in April, the Willys Eight. With the new models priced between the inexpensive Whippet and the Willys-Knight, Willys-Overland blanketed most of the market and thus felt optimistic about its future.

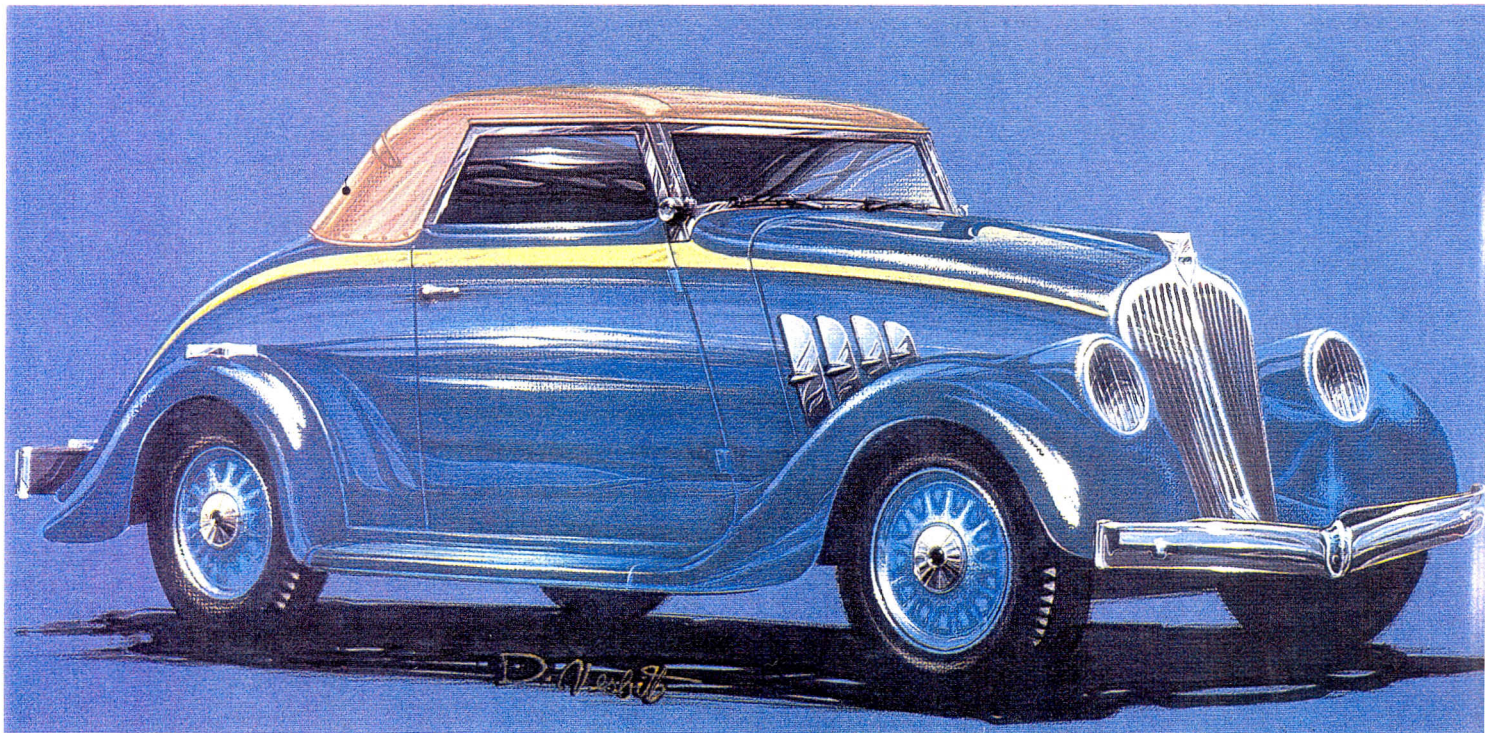
Unfortunately, sales had begun to fall even before Ambassador Willys set sail for Poland in the spring of 1930. And by year's end, a disastrous 70-percent drop in sales sent the company reeling. The Whippet reached just 17,961 buyers that year, a decline of more than 135,000 units compared to twelve months earlier.

The Whippet was dropped in early 1931 and the remaining three models evidenced few improvements as retrenchment became the order of the day. Prices were slashed by as much as \$250 on some models in a vain attempt to counter economic conditions. Willys, viewing the situation from afar, at first viewed the problem as only a temporary setback. For Willys-Overland, however, it was catastrophic; total output for 1931 amounted to only 61,782 units.

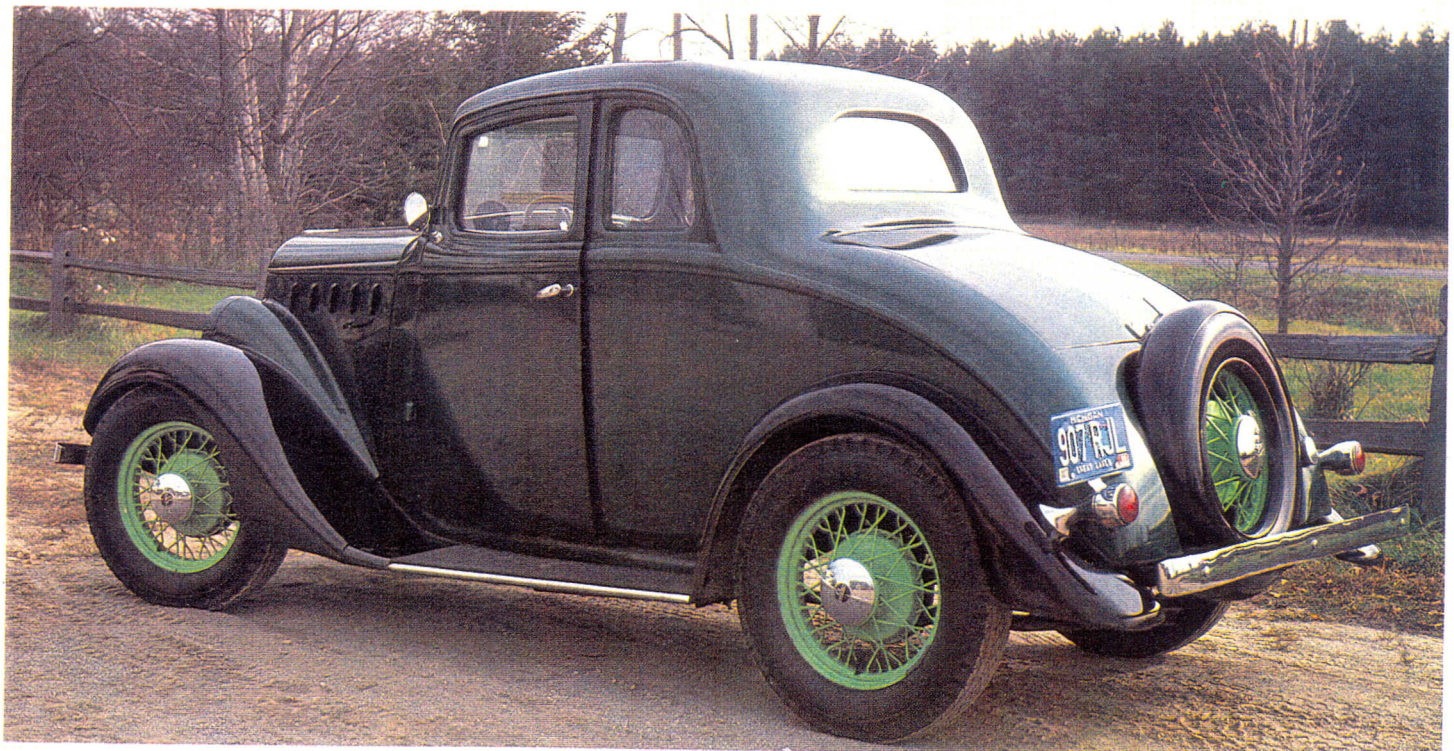
Willys-Overland called their 1931 models "Silver Streaks" in honor of the company's silver anniversary; however, near nonexistent operating capital precluded anything more than cosmetic changes. With almost \$35 million in red ink on the books and

Just as sales of the new little Willys 77 began to take off, the national banking panic arrived. The result was that on February 15, 1933 Willys found itself in receivership. That put the company on a day-to-day operating basis and—ironically—served to *limit* output.

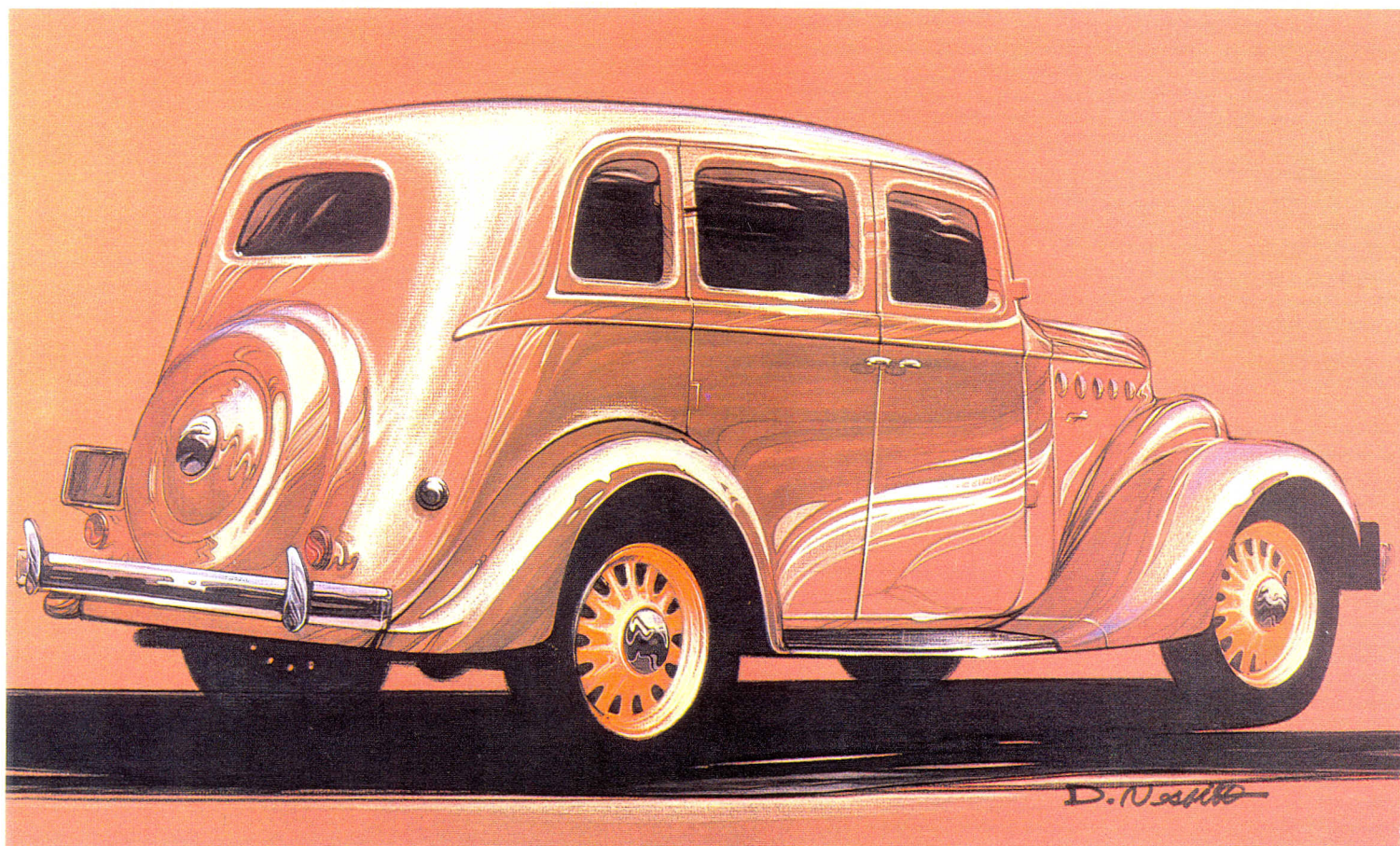
The 1935 Willys 77 (opposite page) boasted a higher, more conventional-looking hood and grille, which got away from the "potato digger" look (below) of 1933-34. Willys preferred to promote it as "The New Era Car." The 1935 model still cast an odd appearance, however, because of the way the headlights were faired into the fenders. Nonetheless, it still sold for under \$500 and, as a coupe, weighed barely over 2000 pounds. That meant a buyer could have one for \$5 per week, Willys saying it was priced to meet the "lowered purchasing power" of the Depression. Fuel economy ranged as high as 30 miles per gallon. (Owner: Jim Flicek)







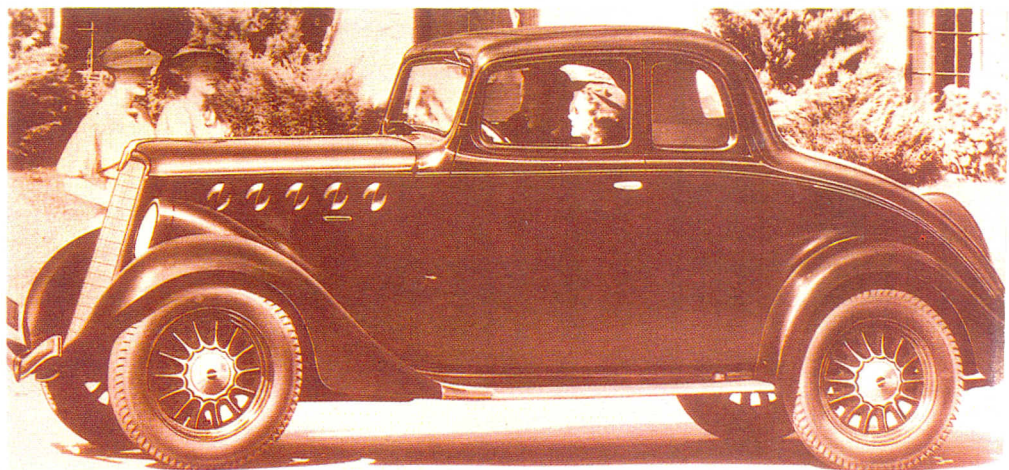




creditors threatening to sue at any moment, the company faced almost certain financial ruin. Finally realizing the gravity of the situation, John North Willys resigned his ambassadorship and hurried back to Toledo to see what could be done to rescue his company.

Willys, ever the salesman's salesman, whistle-stopped from one end of the country to the other, shoring up creditors and distributors alike, urging calmness, patience, and optimism. Although Willys had managed to rescue the company twice before, he was unable to pull it off a third time despite putting \$2 million of his own personal fortune into the attempt. Already on the ropes, Willys-Overland introduced its 1933 lineup in June of 1932. Again, it consisted of only slightly revised versions of the same three models. Hindsight reveals they needn't have bothered, for sales continued to fall. When the final tally came in, just 26,774 cars had been sold—nearly 50-percent less than the previous season's low.

Yet, for all the doom and gloom, there remained a ray of hope. A new car, one designed to meet existing



market conditions and which would supplant the existing lines, was even then taking shape amid great secrecy. Developed with almost no funds, this car was significantly smaller and lighter than the soon-to-be-discontinued Willys Six. Conceptually, it was much closer to the early Whippet Four or the Ford Model A. Dubbed the Willys 77, it would in the final analysis make or break the company.

A reviewer for *Automobile Trade Journal* wrote of the 77's "audacious"

style when it debuted in January 1933. Certainly, it was all of that, given its peculiar "starfish" wheels and half-submerged, canted headlamps that lent a stunted look to the little car. At first glance it appeared ungainly, but escaped being just another box by virtue of its full-skirted fenders, slanted windshield, faired-in headlamps, and severely sloping hood line. Like the styling or not, Willys made much of its aerodynamic virtues: "The design of the new Wil-





*Opposite page:* From the very beginning, the Willys 77 was available as a four door sedan (top). It weighed about 100 pounds more than the coupe, and listed initially for \$445 for the base model, \$475 for the Custom. The design of the 77 changed little through 1936 (bottom), the year the newly named Willys-Overland Motors, Inc. came out of receivership. *This page:* Willys entered 1937 with a completely redesigned body, of which the *Encyclopedia of American Cars 1930-1980* says, "The result was, again, less than ideal: a rounded body with pontoon fenders and a wild front not unlike that of the sharknose Graham." The engine was improved and the economy still great. (Owner: Tom Hrudka)

Willys 77 is full streamline from front to rear—low, graceful, sweeping lines and smoothly rounded corners . . . [all of which] greatly reduces wind resistance by eliminating air pockets which retard speed."

Built on a short 100.5-inch wheelbase with a narrow 51-inch tread front and rear, the prosaic Willys 77 was a harbinger of today's compact car. A slightly larger six-cylinder companion called the Model 99 was also announced, but apart from a handful of show cars, it died aborning. In fact, only 15 Model 99s were built, and they were mainly used by factory representatives for promotional purposes.

Under the 77's truncated hood reposed a 134.2-cid, L-head, four-cylinder engine that developed a modest 48 horsepower at 3200 rpm. Although similar in format to the former Whippet engine, it differed in several details and featured larger crankshaft bearings, valve seat inserts, four-ring cast-iron pistons, full-pressure lubrication, and down-draft carburetion. Its chassis was far stronger and more substantial, having a double-drop, X-member frame with an added K-member at the front, which formed a strong, box-like section to reduce deflection. Chrysler's patented "Floating Power" system of engine mounting was used under license to assure a level of smoothness not often found in cars of this type.

The lineup consisted of six models: four-door sedan and two- and four-passenger coupes, all in regular or Custom trim, at prices ranging from \$395 to \$475. A panel truck was also offered. Once again, John North Willys barnstormed the nation, telling dealers and distributors alike that the new model—promoted as "The New Era Car"—could be bought for only







\$5 per week and, better still, would deliver up to 30 miles per gallon. It was, Willys said, "a car priced to meet lowered purchasing power" of the Depression.

Because of its light weight (just over 2000 pounds), the 77 was no slouch in performance, either. A sedan averaged 65.5 miles per hour during a highly publicized 24-hour durability run at Muroc Dry Lake in California. A young race-car driver with the unlikely name of Langdon Quimby later beat out an impressive field of Bugattis and MGs to take first place in the grueling 100-mile Briarcliff Trophy road race driving a home-built roadster with a stock 77 engine. In 1935, Quimby came back to cop his second win in this event, while the following year (still driving the same car) he won the Cape Grand Prix of Massachusetts.

Unfortunately, just as sales of the

new car began to take off, the national banking panic arrived. Before it was over, the Monroe Auto Equipment Company slapped Willys-Overland with a restraining order for non-payment of debt. While Monroe's claim amounted to only \$17,905, the company owed more than \$1.5 million to other creditors and \$2 million to various banks holding a first mortgage on its Toledo plant. On February 15, 1933, the Federal Court stepped in and named company president Linwood A. Miller and John North Willys as receivers. Willys-Overland would be permitted to operate, but only on a day-to-day basis subject to court supervision. Monthly production limits of 1500-2000 units were established, which seemed arbitrary in the face of rising demand. Leaving Miller to operate the company, Willys shuttled back and forth to plead in court for higher produc-

tion quotas while working out plans to refinance the company.

In September 1933 the court authorized minimal revisions to the car's existing design in anticipation of the next season; however, it wasn't until early December that Willys-Overland obtained permission to exhibit its updated model in the upcoming New York Auto Show. Sales were down again, this time to 12,820 units. More than twice that number could have been sold had the court allowed higher production.

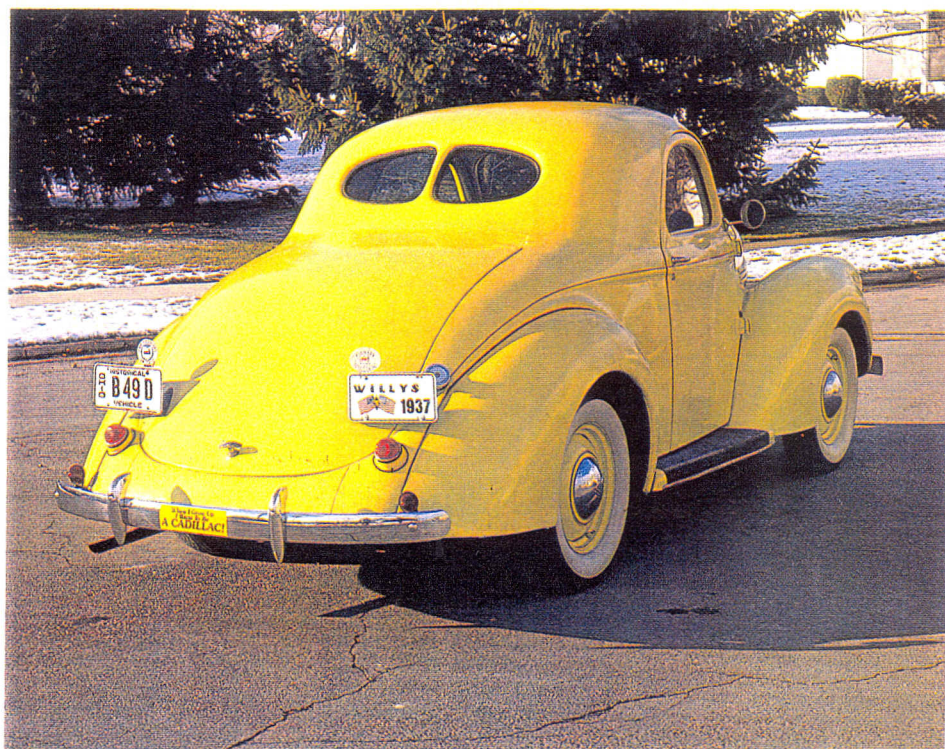
The Willys 77 for 1934 consisted of just three models: a coupe priced at \$430, a four-door sedan at \$450, and a panel truck at \$425. There were no mechanical changes, but wire wheels and horizontal hood louvers served to differentiate the new model from its predecessor.

David R. Wilson, president of Wilson Foundry and Machine Company



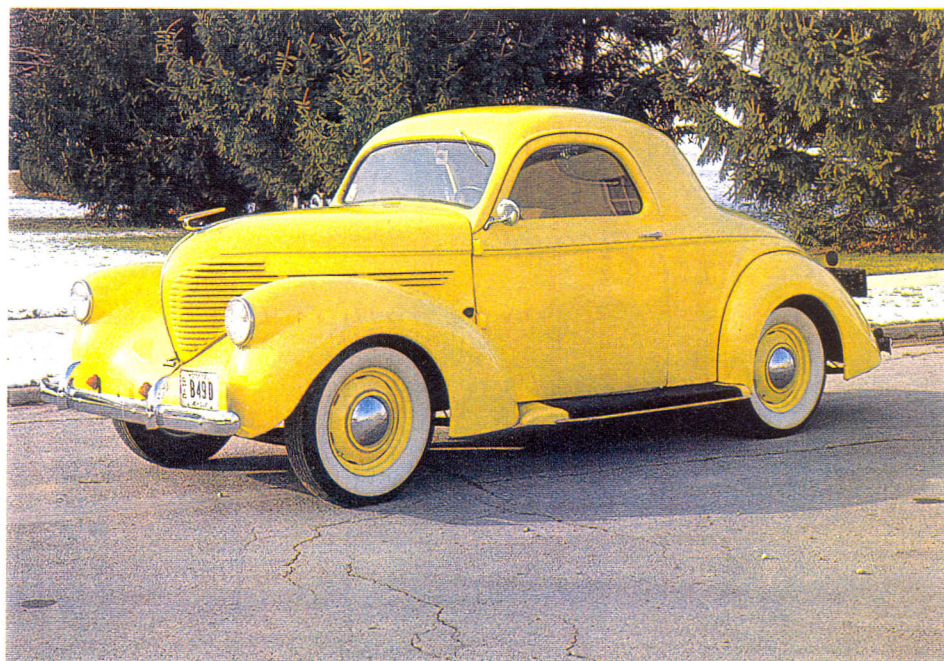


Willys referred to its all-new 1937 Model 37 as the "Surprise Car of the Year" and made much of its full-size width and ample luggage space, claiming a "new era in USABLE space" had dawned.



(builder of engines for Willys-Overland) was appointed to succeed Miller, who had resigned in January. Somehow, and against great odds, Willys-Overland stumbled on, slowly working its way out of trouble. Sales, however, remained severely depressed due largely to court restrictions. Production remained at rock bottom in 1934 when a mere 13,179 Willys 77s, the only model offered, were built.

Body lines conforming to the popular style were evident in the 1935 Willys 77. Particularly attractive was an all-new front-end ensemble, which featured a higher hood and a narrow, V-shaped radiator shell. The headlights were moved closer to the radiator and mounted in the aprons rather than the fenders, while a series of semicircular hood vents replaced the horizontal louvers of the preceding model. A novel folding trunk that ap-



Although the Willys grew almost a foot to 175.5 inches for 1937 (both pages), the 100.5-inch wheelbase still measured a foot shorter than Chevrolet's. Its appearance was considered quite modern at the time, featuring smoothly curved, flowing lines with a gracefully rounded hood. The fenders were deeply crowned and the headlights were streamlined into their leading edges. (Owners: Ed and Eleanor Todd)







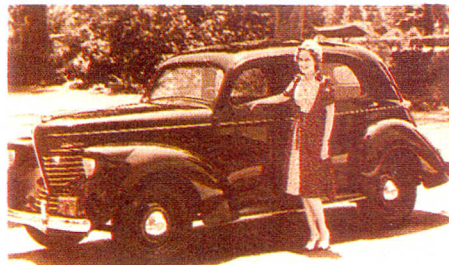
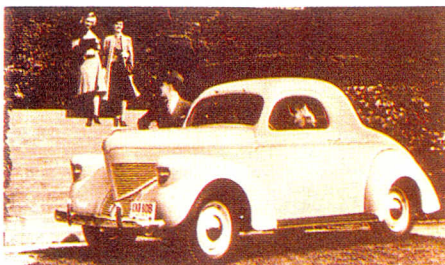
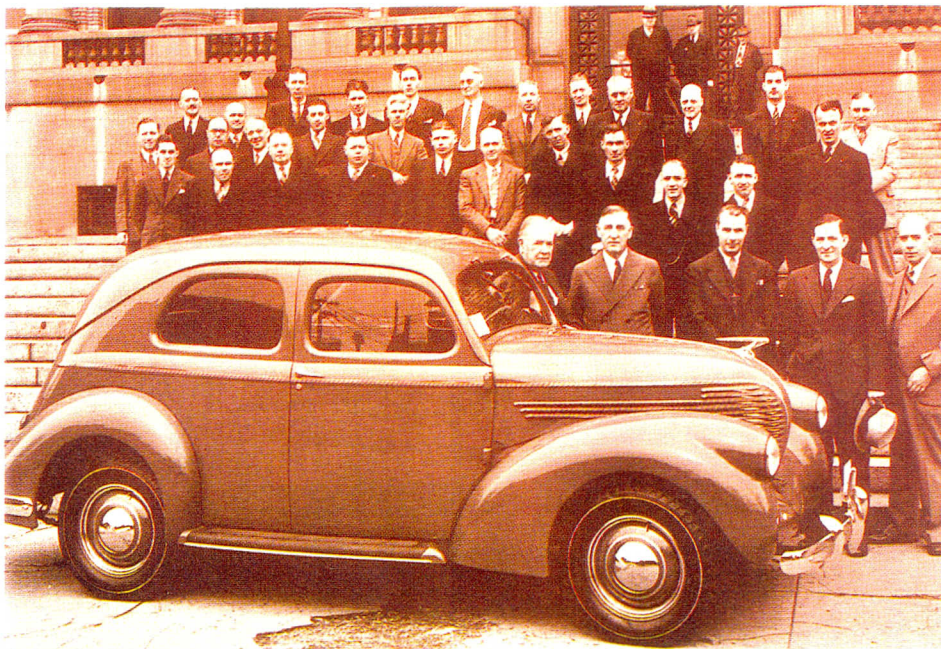
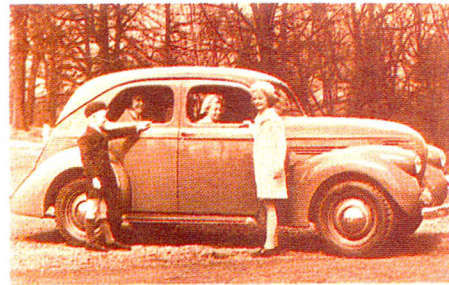
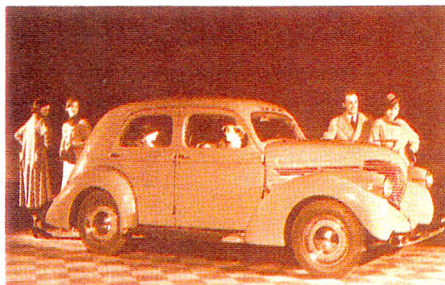
peared to be an integral part of the car's all-steel body was offered as an appeal to those requiring additional carrying space. An additional body style, the pickup, became available for '35, but even that didn't help as total production slipped to 10,715.

In January 1935, Willys regained the presidency of Willys-Overland when preferred stockholders assumed control of company affairs. His tenure was regrettably short-lived. Wan and exhausted from his attempts to revive the foundering concern, Willys sustained a heart attack in May. Although he recovered sufficiently to oversee company affairs, John North Willys died in his sleep on August 26 at the age of 61. Had he lived another six months, Willys would have seen his namesake company reborn. Ward M. Canaday, a long-term associate of Willys and president of the United States Advertising Company, formed Empire Securities, Inc., in August 1935 to assume bondholder and creditor claims against the company. Aided by Willys' personal attorney, George Ritter, a plan was hammered out that, when approved by the court early in 1936, resulted in Willys-Overland Motors, Inc. taking over the assets of the former Willys-Overland Company. With Canaday as chairman of the board and Wilson as president, the company looked forward to a new era of profitability.

Heralding the reorganized concern, an expanded line of cars greeted the public as early as September 1935. The Willys 77 for 1936 boasted several improvements, including a slightly higher compression ratio, vacuum spark advance, and seats that adjusted not only fore and aft, but up and down. Replacing the wire wheels were drop-center, pressed steel wheels. New body types were added during the season: a deluxe sedan and a touring sedan with built-in trunk. Prices started at an incredibly low \$395.

Practical motorists found another good reason to purchase a '36 Willys after it took first place in class A-1 in the Gilmore-Yosemite Official Economy Run. A fully loaded sedan averaged 33.2 miles per gallon through a mountainous 524.02-mile route.

Unfettered by the constraints of receivership, production and sales in the first quarter of 1936 jumped sig-

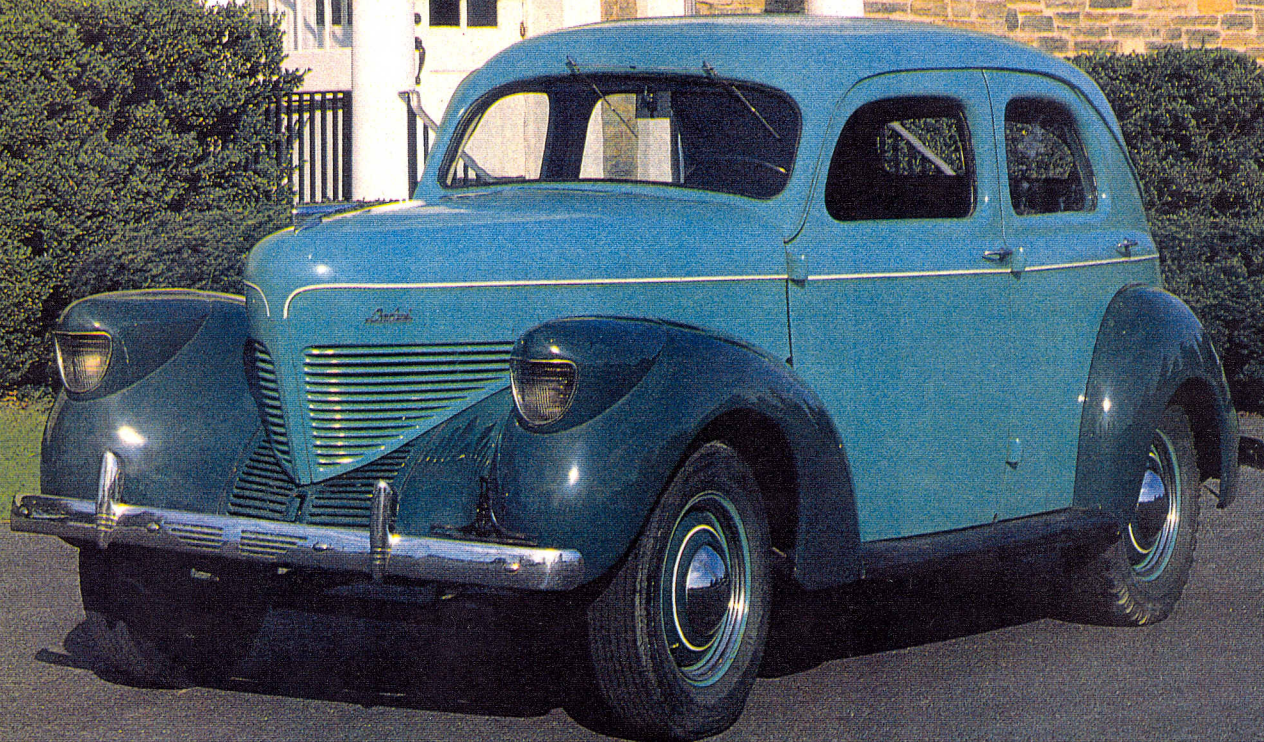


nificantly, with total 1936 output reaching 30,825. Infused with \$3.5 million in new working capital, Willys-Overland moved to redesign their three-year-old car into an up-to-date automobile. Both the big Toledo factory and the company's Los Angeles assembly plant were closed down in October for retooling in preparation for the November 11 debut. Confident that the new design would be a resounding success, Willys-Overland geared up for a production run of 70,000 units.

Referred to by Willys as the "Surprise Car of the Year," the all-new Model 37 debuted as a larger replacement for the 77. Willys made

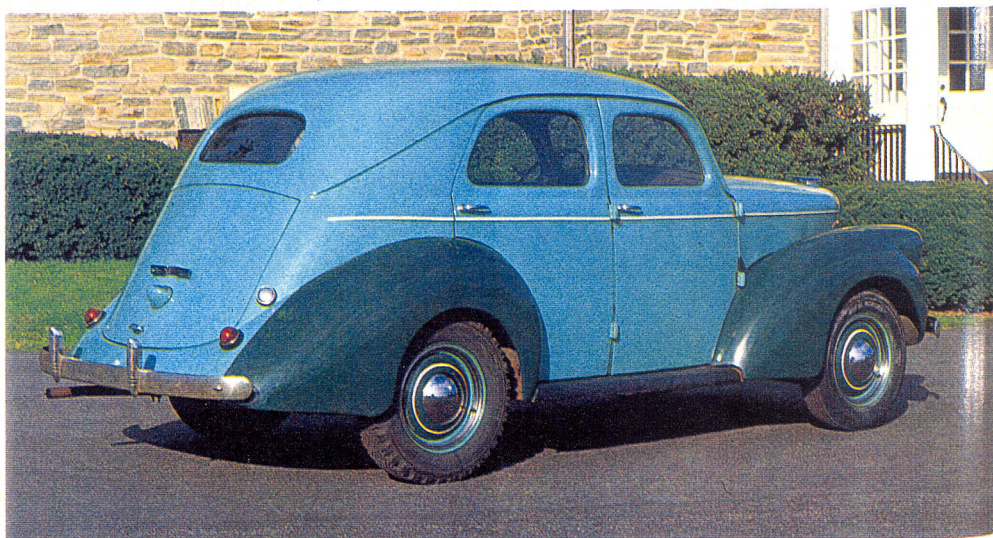
Willys' 1937 models had proved popular, with some 63,467 finding owners that year. That success put Willys solidly into the black for the first time in more than eight years. Not surprisingly, the 1938 models (*opposite page*) were little changed. (Owners: Ron and Debbie Ladley) *This page:* The 1937 Willys DeLuxe four-door sedan sold for \$589 (*top left*). For 1938, Willys debuted the Clipper, available as a coupe or two-door sedan (*top right*). During that year, about 75 Canadian Willys dealers visited the Toledo, Ohio plant for a sales conference and driveaway of Clipper sedans (*above center*). Hood and headlights were modified for 1939 (*above left*), and different on the more deluxe Willys Overland (*above right*), a new model that year.





*This page:* By 1939, the little Continental four as used in the Willys was pumping out 61 horsepower. This Model 39 four-door sedan features a light green body with dark green fenders (originally black) and a completely redone chocolate mohair interior. Accessories include bumper guards, dual taillights, hood ornament, tandem wipers, and wheel trim rings. (Owners: Ron and Debbie Ladley)

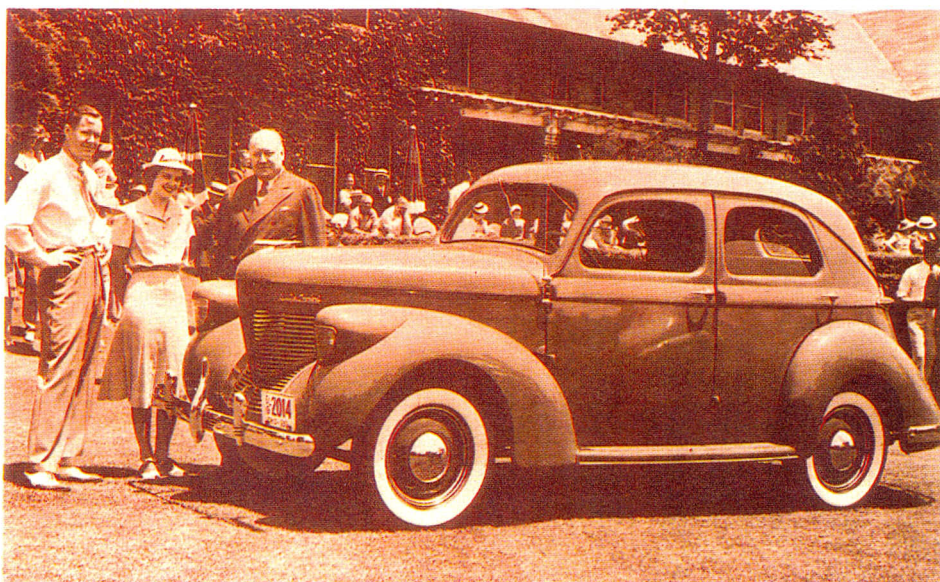
*Opposite page:* Willys often shipped its cars by boat on the Great Lakes, as shown in this 1939 photo (top). Byron Nelson, National Open Golf Champion, signed on as club professional at the Inverness course in Toledo and expected to do a lot of traveling in his 1939 Willys Overland DeLuxe (center). Mr. and Mrs. Nelson (on the left) accepted delivery of the car from Joseph W. Frazer, president of Willys. Willys still touted streamlining in 1939 (bottom), to the point of comparing its prow with that of a New York Central locomotive.





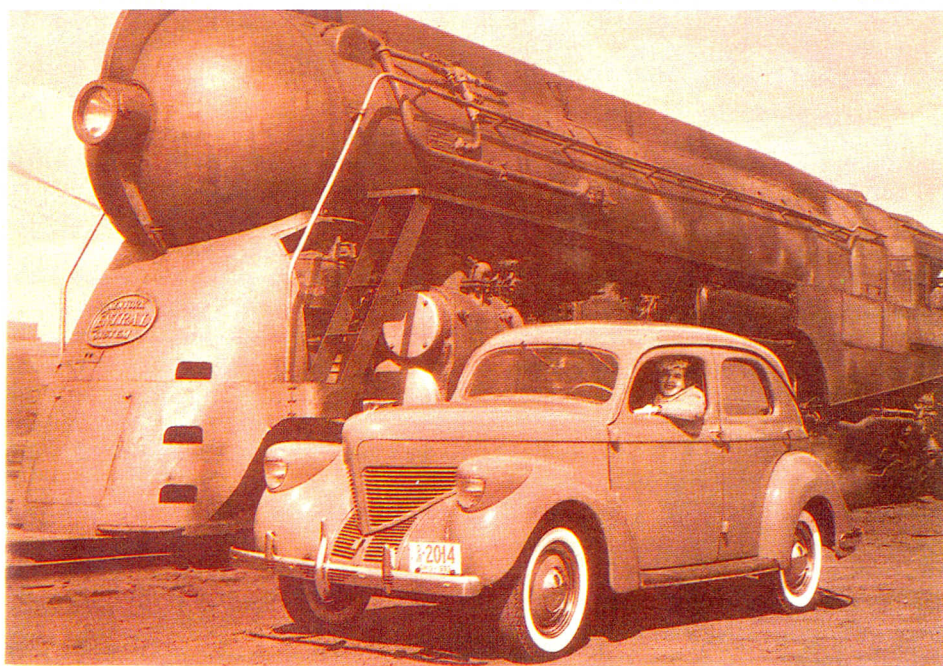


John North Willys, tired and wan from his attempts to revive the company during the Depression, suffered a heart attack in May 1935. He recovered sufficiently to run the firm, but on August 26 he died in his sleep.

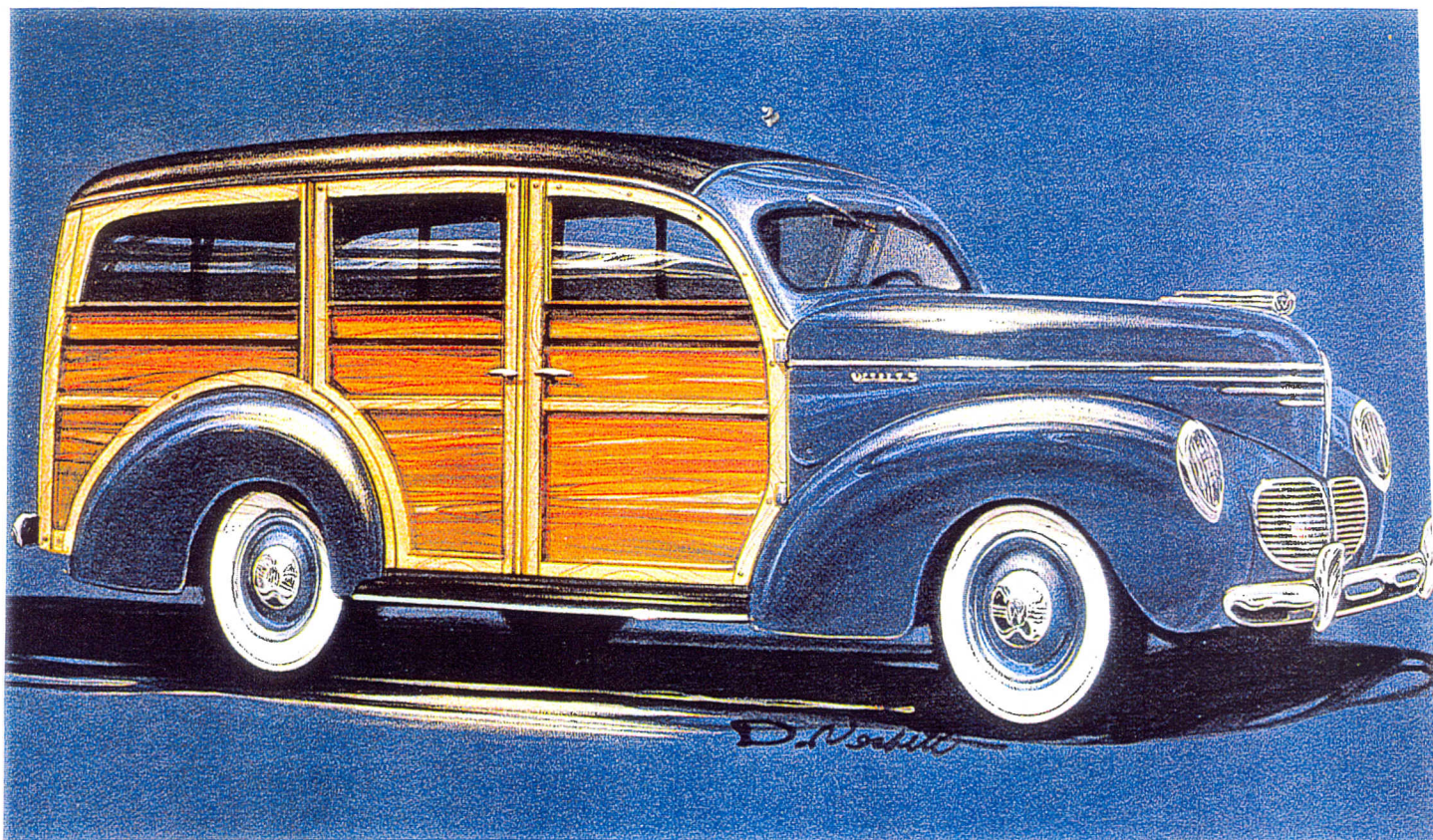


much of its full-size width and ample luggage space, claiming that "a new era in USABLE space" had dawned. The 37's appearance, considered quite modern at the time, featured smoothly curved, flowing lines with a gracefully rounded hood. Deeply crowned fenders with headlights streamlined into their leading edges swept forward towards the center and formed a splash pan at the base of the hood. The top and sides of the hood together with the radiator grille were a single unit. Lifting a convenient handle at the bottom center of the hood allowed the entire assembly to be raised, providing access to the engine, radiator, and battery. Since the hood extended all the way back to the windshield, the usual cowl ventilator was mounted at the rear of the hood itself. The wheelbase still measured 100.5 inches, a foot shorter than Chevrolet's, but the car's overall length grew by almost a foot to 175.5 inches. Wider tires, extra-long springs, and tubular, aircraft-type shock absorbers smoothed out the roughest roads.

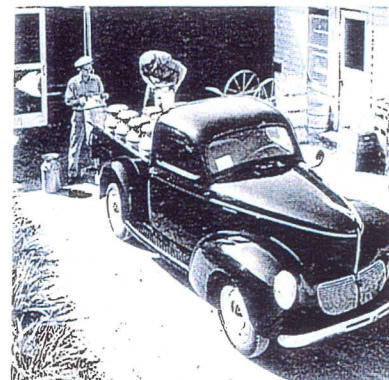
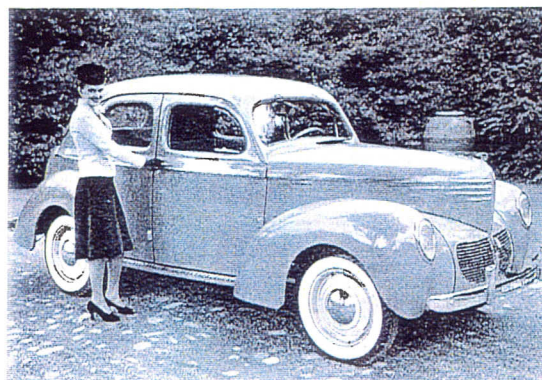
The dependable four-cylinder engine was continued but boasted such improvements as a new variable-venturi Tillotson carburetor, improved manifolding, stronger but lighter pistons, and better engine lubrication. Perhaps the most desirable aspect of the new 1937 Willys was its price and economy: \$499 for the standard coupe and up to 35 miles per gallon. Or as the brochure touted, "Half the gas . . . twice the Smartness." That same brochure boasted that a Willys had averaged 75.07 miles per hour in a 24-hour con-







Willys restyled and renamed its cars for 1940. Immediately noticeable were the flush fender-mounted headlights and low-set grille. Two distinct series were offered, the lower-cost Speedway and the DeLuxe. Three Briggs-built body styles were offered: coupe, four-door sedan, and for the first time, station wagon. The DeLuxe sedan (right) sold for \$672, \$76 more than the Speedway sedan, while the wagon listed at \$830, the year's priciest offering. Willys also built commercial vehicles for 1940, including a smart-looking pickup (far right). Note that it lacks the bumper guards, dual wipers, and chrome trim on the hood that can be seen on the DeLuxe sedan.



tinuous run of 1810 miles at Muroc Dry Lake, and after that proceeded to go another 1080.48 miles averaging 45 miles per hour and 36.03 miles per gallon. Willys also pointed out that it had taken first place in the annual Australian Hill Climb in both 1935 and 1936.

Willys-Overland experienced a whopping 297-percent increase in sales in the space of just two months, and there was talk of setting still higher production quotas for the year. For the first time in more than eight years the company was solidly in the black. Because of strong market response, no real changes were made to the car for 1938 apart from the addi-

tion of larger commercial models to the truck line.

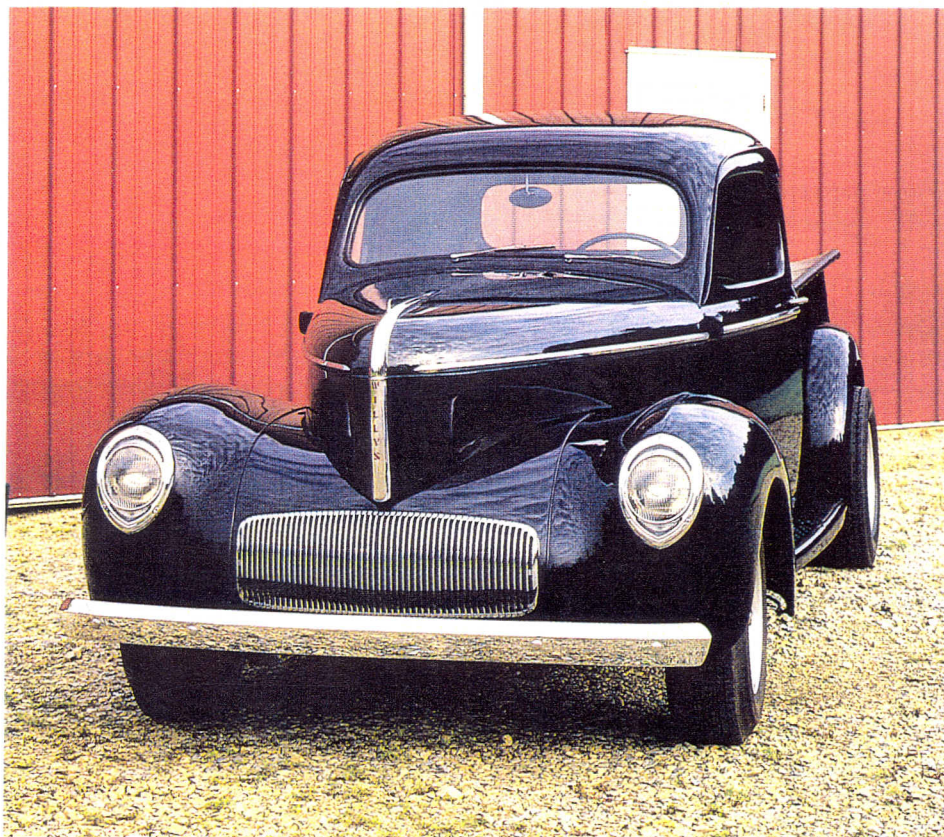
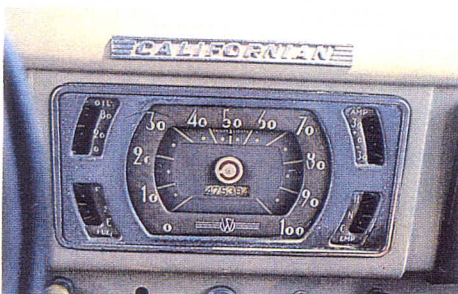
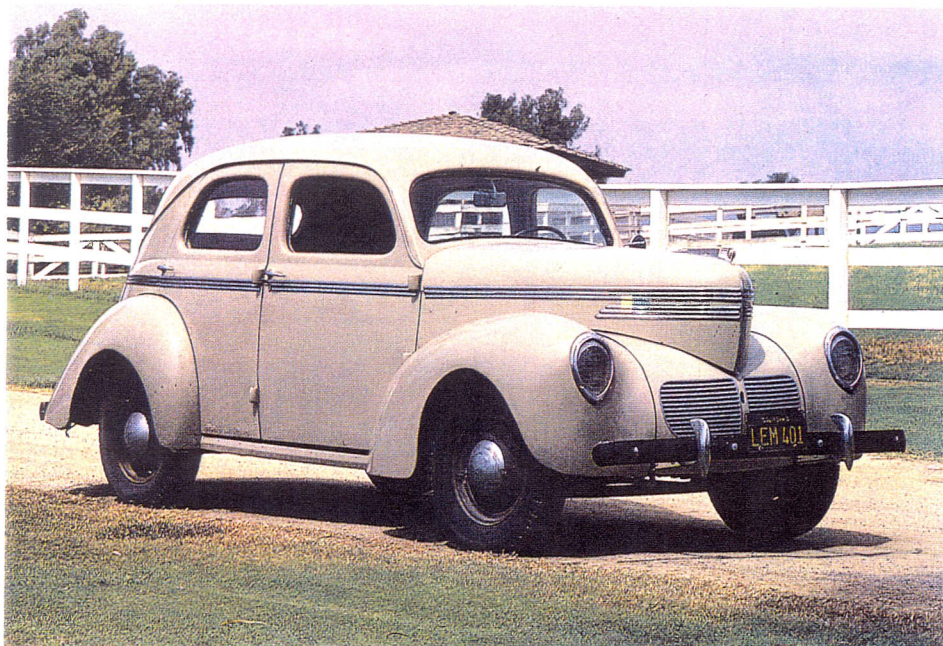
The nation's economy, which had been improving steadily throughout 1937, was suddenly engulfed in a severe recession early in 1938. Auto sales plunged alarmingly throughout the industry. More vulnerable than most automakers, Willys-Overland saw its sales drop some 70 percent. Whereas 1937 had seen 63,467 Willys cars find buyers, only 26,690 units left the factory in 1938.

Undaunted, the company hit back for 1939 with the Overland 39 as a higher-priced running mate to the Willys 38, which was continued. Although the cars were basically simi-

lar, numerous upgrades were found in the Overland. Both used the same basic 134.2-cid engine, for example, but the Overland offered 62 horsepower as compared to 48 for the Willys. This increase was due to a new camshaft design, higher compression ratio, and an improved fixed-jet carburetor. In addition, the Overland came with hydraulic brakes, larger tires, automatic manifold heat control, and a steeply raked front end ensemble on a slightly longer 102-inch wheelbase. Various model names and trim levels enabled the company to offer the Willys in both

(continued on page 50)





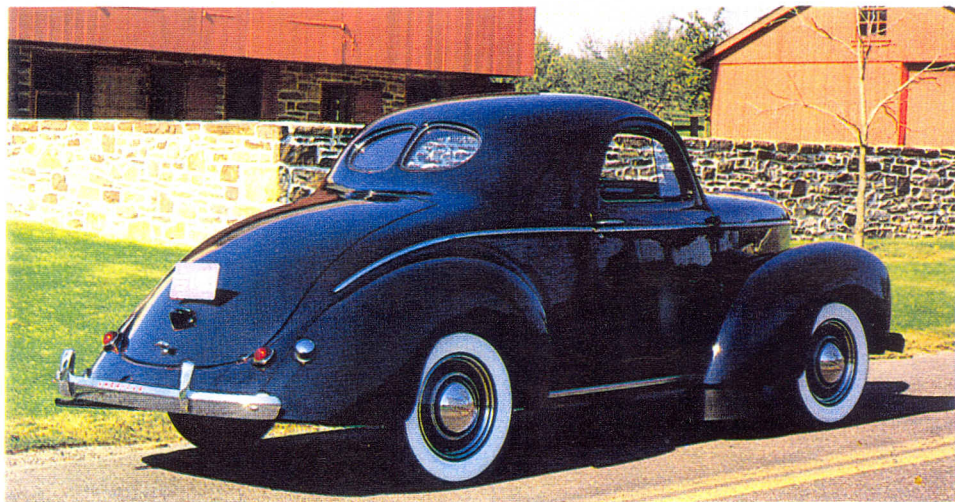
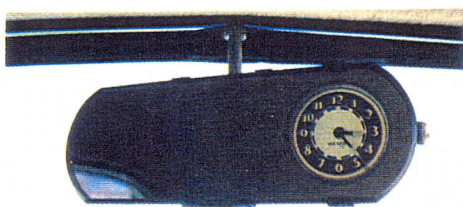
When Joseph W. Frazer became president and general manager of Willys-Overland in January 1939, he immediately set about to develop "The lowest-priced, full-sized car in the world." He also tripled the dealer body and oversaw product advertising.

standard (Series 48) and deluxe (Series 38) versions, the Overland (Series 39) as the Standard Speedway, Speedway Special, and DeLuxe. Series 38 and 48 models retailed for \$499 to \$614, with some commercial models slightly higher. Overland prices started at \$596—still \$32 less than the cheapest Chevy—and it turned out to be far more popular than the Model 38 and 48, accounting for 15,214 of the 17,838 total units produced for 1939.

Joseph Washington Frazer, formerly vice-president of Chrysler, was elected president and general manager of Willys-Overland in January 1939 to succeed Wilson. Joining Frazer a few weeks later was Maurice Golden, previously Chrysler's sales manager. These two dynamic men allied themselves with Delmar "Barney" Roos, Willys-Overland's chief engineer and past president of the Society of American Engineers, to develop what Frazer described as,

*This page:* Willys marketed a "Californian" model in 1940 (top and center), apparently a regional model to perk up sales. Note the chrome trim as compared to the 1940 DeLuxe pictured on page 48. (Owner: Ron South) Willys restyled the grille for 1941, as seen on the pickup (left)—note the Centerline Wheels and oversized tires. (Owners: Ron and Debbie Ladley). *Opposite page:* This award-winning owner-restored 1941 Willys bears the Americar name, chosen probably because of its patriotic overtones, understandable given the times. The Americar could be had in seven models in three series: Speedway, DeLuxe, and Plainsman. The DeLuxe coupe, as shown, sold for \$685; the dash featured center-mounted gauges. (Owners: Ron and Debbie Ladley)





### Comparative Specifications-1933<sup>1</sup>

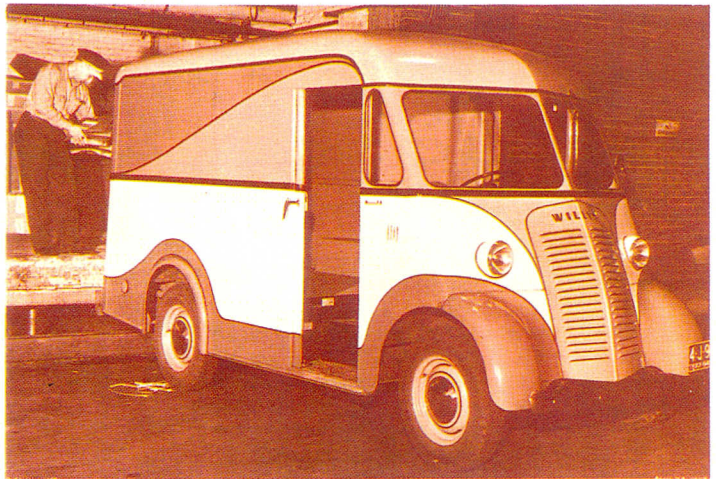
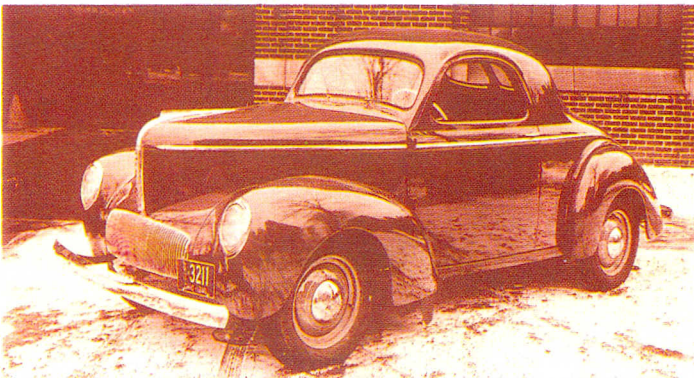
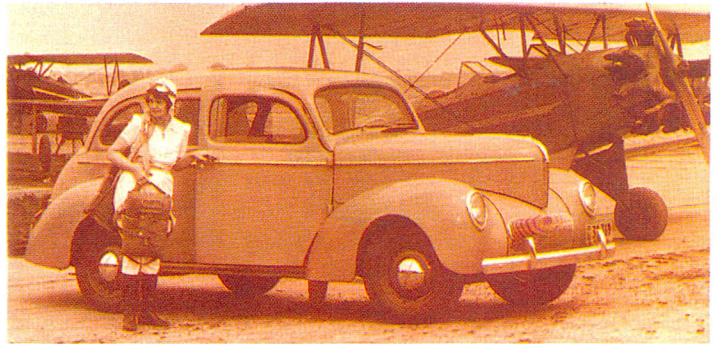
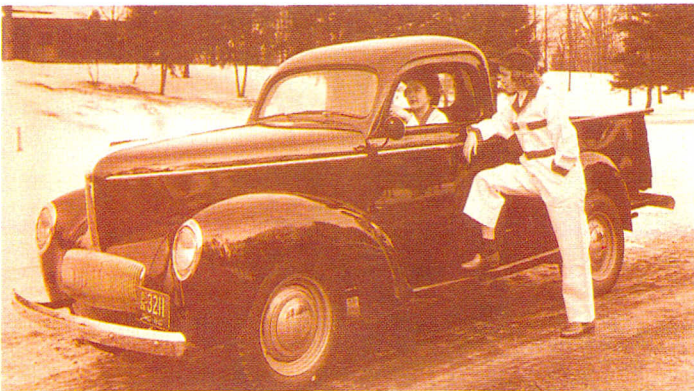
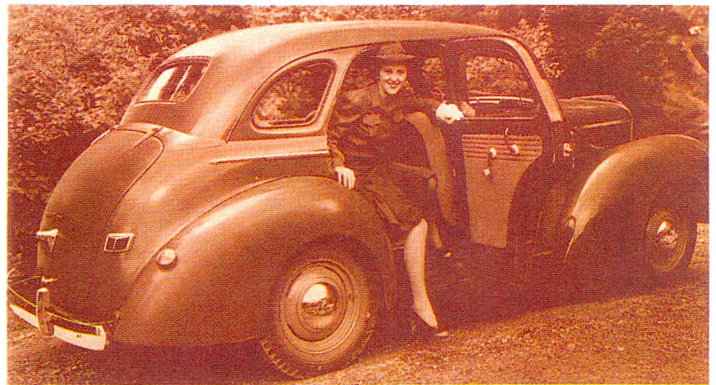
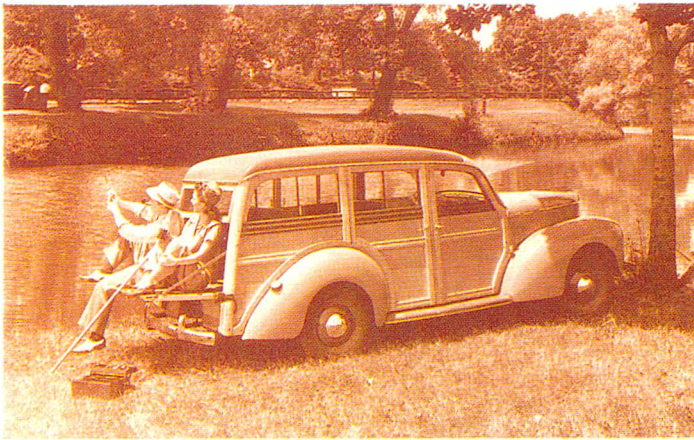
Make	Model	Price	Eng. Type	CID	bhp @ rpm	WB (in.)	Brakes	B/A <sup>2</sup>	Weight (lbs)	Total Sales <sup>3</sup>
Austin	3-75	\$285	4-L	45.6	13 @ 3200	75	Mech	54	1100	4,726
Willys	77	\$335	4-L	134.2	48 @ 3200	100	Mech	134.3	2058	15,667
Continental	40	\$380	4-L	143.0	40 @ 2700	101.5	Mech	160	1995	3,987
Ford	B	\$440	4-L	200.5	50 @ 2800	106	Mech	186	2520	311,113
Chevrolet	Std.	\$445	6-I	180.9	60 @ 3000	107	Mech	128.4	2425	474,493
Plymouth	PC	\$495	6-L	189.9	70 @ 3600	108	Hyd	106.6	2418	249,667

### Comparative Specifications-1939<sup>1</sup>

Bantam	60	\$399	4-L	45.6	20 @ 4000	75	Mech	76	1240	3,000
Willys	48	\$495	4-L	134.2	48 @ 3200	100	Mech	134.3	2181	14,734
Overland	39	\$560	4-L	134.2	62 @ 3600	102	Hyd	134.3	2137	
Ford	60	\$580	V8-L	136.0	60 @ 3500	112	Hyd	162	2463	481,496
Chevrolet	JB	\$628	6-I	201.3	82 @ 3600	112.3	Hyd	158.3	2780	598,341
Plymouth	P7	\$645	6-L	201.3	82 @ 3600	114	Hyd	144	2724	348,807

Notes: 1: All are coupes; 2: B/A square inches of braking surface; 3: Total by marque. Figures from R.L. Polk & Co. Sources: *MoToR Annual* for 1933, 1939; NADA Vol. 13, No. 1 (January, 1946); NADA Vol. 1, No. 11 (October, 1934)

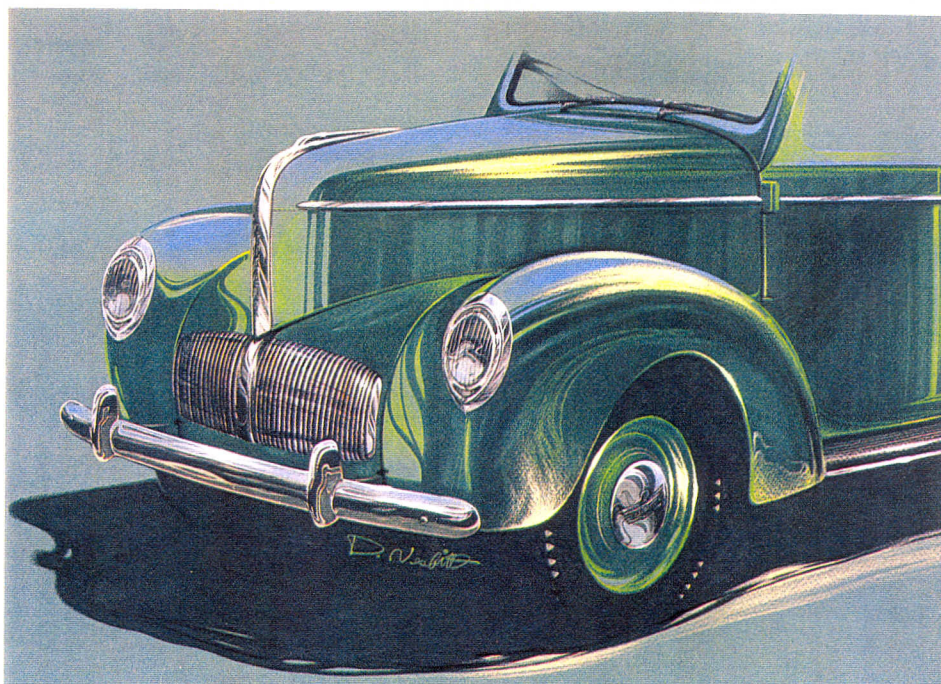






"The lowest-priced, full-sized car in the world." Although Frazer arrived on the scene too late to do much about 1939, he quickly laid the groundwork for 1940. Upon joining the company, he was dismayed to find just 631 dealers. Within six months, Frazer nearly tripled their ranks. He also ordered Roos to spare no effort in making Willys' engines even more long-lived and efficient. Leaving nothing to chance, he oversaw product advertising and worked to streamline production methods.

The snub-nosed Willys and the Overland were axed for 1940. In their place debuted a single model, the Willys 440, a smartly styled car. It was offered in three Briggs-built body styles: coupe, four-door sedan and, for the first time, a station wagon. Two distinct series—Speedway and DeLuxe—with differing levels of options and trim were available at prices from \$529 to \$830. The car's frontal appearance was greatly improved by eliminating the upper grille and giving the hood a more rounded form. The front fenders were redesigned with the headlights flush at the leading edge. Running boards were optional. The economical four-cylinder engine saw a number of improvements, including a counterweighted crankshaft and an optional aluminum cylinder head with 7.0:1 compression ratio; top speed of the 440 moved into the 80-mph range. A new clutch, generator, optional steering-column shifter, and longer springs were some of the car's other features. The new Willys 440 had a lot to offer, but nothing so influenced the public as its



*Opposite page:* A look at the Willys lineup for 1941: coupe (top row) in Americar Blue (Owner, David M. Cronk); station wagon, one-half ton pickup, and coupe (left row); two views of the four-door sedan, one taken at Roosevelt Field, New York; and a Willys package delivery van. *This page:* The 1942 Americar was little changed, save for a bold vertical bar in the center of the grille (top) and various detail improvements. Prices were up about \$75, however, with the cheapest coupe now starting at \$695 and the station wagon going for \$978. Joe Frazer (center) advertised the Americar as "The People's Car" and was regularly featured urging the public to "Save Gas for Uncle Sam—Drive a Fuel Saving Willys Americar." Frazer quit Willys during the war, and teamed up with Edgar J. Kaiser to build Kaiser and Frazer automobiles after the war in a huge war plant in Willow Run, Michigan.

**Clubs for 1933-42 Willys Fans**  
**Willys Club**  
 719 Lehigh Street  
 Bowmanstown, PA 18030  
 Telephone: (215) 852-3110  
*Membership:* 700. Bi-monthly publication. Recognizes 1933-63 Willys cars, trucks, and Jeeps; marque ownership not required.

**Willys-Overland-Knight Registry**  
 1325 New Jersey Avenue  
 Lorain, OH 44052

Telephone: (216) 288-1406  
*Membership:* 1000-plus. Publications: Quarterly magazine and a 10-times-per-year newsletter. Recognizes Willys products through 1942, plus all Knight-powered cars.

**Also of interest**  
**West Coast Willys Club**  
 5073 San Juan Place  
 Santa Barbara, CA 93111  
 Recognizes 1933-42 Willys hot rods and race cars.



## 1933-42 Willys Specifications, Prices, Production

Year	Model	Wheel- base	Weight	Horse- Power <sup>1</sup>	Price	Pro- duction <sup>2</sup>
1933	77 Coupe 2P	100.5	2058	48	\$395	12,820
	Coupe 2-4P	100.5	2072	48	425	
	Sedan 4d	100.5	2136	48	445	
	Custom Coupe 2P	100.5	2072	48	415	
	Custom Coupe 2-4P	100.5	2105	48	445	
	Custom Sedan 4d	100.5	2156	48	475	
1934 <sup>3</sup>	77 Coupe 2P	100.5	2058	48	430	13,179
	Sedan 4d	100.5	2131	48	450	
1935	77 Coupe 2P	100.5	2034	48	475	10,715
	Sedan 4d	100.5	2111	48	495	
1936	77 Coupe 2P	100.5	2034	48	395	30,825
	Sedan 4d	100.5	2131	48	415	
	DeLuxe Sedan 4d	100.5	2237	48	480	
1937	37 Coupe 2P	100.5	2146	48	499	63,467
	Sedan 4d	100.5	2200	48	538	
	DeLuxe Coupe 2P	100.5	2146	48	579	
	DeLuxe Sedan 4d	100.5	2306	48	589	
	Standard Coupe 2P	100.5	2145	48	499	26,690
1938	38 Clipper Sedan 2d	100.5	2258	48	539	
	Standard Sedan 4d	100.5	2247	48	563	
	DeLuxe Coupe 2P	100.5	2155	48	574	
	DeLuxe Clipper Sedan 2d	100.5	2258	48	575	
	DeLuxe Sedan 4d	100.5	2263	48	614	
1939	38 Custom Sedan 4d	100.5	2336	48	700	17,838
	38 Standard Coupe 2P	100.5	2181	48	499	
	Standard Sedan 2d	100.5	2258	48	539	
	Standard Sedan 4d	100.5	2300	48	563	
	DeLuxe Coupe 2P	100.5	2181	48	574	
	DeLuxe Sedan 2d	100.5	2258	48	575	
	DeLuxe Sedan 4d	100.5	2306	48	614	
	48 Coupe 2P	100.5	2181	48	524	
	Sedan 2d	100.5	2258	48	565	
	Sedan 4d	100.5	2300	48	586	
	39 <sup>4</sup> Standard Speedway Coupe 2P	102.0	2137	62	596	
	Standard Speedway Sedan 2d	102.0	2217	62	616	
	Standard Speedway Sedan 4d	102.0	2249	62	631	
	Speedway Special Coupe 2P	102.0	2193	62	610	
	Speedway Special Sedan 2d	102.0	2262	62	631	
	Speedway Special Sedan 4d	102.0	2306	62	646	
	DeLuxe Coupe 2P	102.0	2193	62	646	
	DeLuxe Sedan 2d	102.0	2262	62	667	
	DeLuxe Sedan 4d	102.0	2306	62	689	
1940	440 Speedway Coupe	102.0	2146	61	529	32,340
	Speedway Sedan 4d	102.0	2238	61	596	
	DeLuxe Coupe	102.0	2190	61	641	
	DeLuxe Sedan 4d	102.0	2255	61	672	
	DeLuxe Wagon 4d	102.0	2124	61	830	
1941	441 <sup>5</sup> Speedway Coupe	104.0	2116	63	634	30,100
	Speedway Sedan 4d	104.0	2230	63	674	
	DeLuxe Coupe	104.0	2135	63	685	
	DeLuxe Sedan 4d	104.0	2265	63	720	
	DeLuxe Wagon 4d	104.0	2483	63	916	
	Plainsman Coupe	104.0	2175	63	740	
	Plainsman Sedan 4d	104.0	2305	63	771	
1942	442 <sup>5</sup> Speedway Coupe	104.0	2142	63	695	11,910
	Speedway Sedan 4d	104.0	2261	63	745	
	DeLuxe Coupe	104.0	2184	63	769	
	DeLuxe Sedan 4d	104.0	2295	63	795	
	DeLuxe Wagon 4d	104.0	2512	63	978	
	Plainsman Coupe	104.0	2242	63	819	
	Plainsman Sedan 4d	104.0	2353	63	845	

<sup>1</sup> Engine (all years): 4-cylinder L-head; 134.2 cubic inches; bore × stroke (in.): 3.125 × 4.375.

<sup>2</sup> All models. <sup>3</sup> Second series, beginning January 1934. First series same as 1933.

<sup>4</sup> Overland <sup>5</sup> Americar

100,000-mile or three-year guarantee—the only one of its kind in the industry. Willys referred to it as “The most sensational guarantee in automotive history” in a special brochure—but neglected to provide details spelling out the coverage!

Great jubilation prevailed at Willys-Overland by the end of April 1940 as sales of the new model ran 73-percent ahead of the entire 1939 season. Flushed with success, Frazer congratulated Golden, who expansively predicted that, “The low-priced new car market belongs naturally to the Willys by virtue of its superior value.” Since production for 1940 had spurted to 32,340, making a good thing better seemed the wisest course for 1941.

Thus, Willys-Overland hewed to the same basic design, but showed a number of detail refinements. Most obvious for '41 was the change in name to Americar—short, easy to remember and, given the times, patriotic. Launched in September 1940, the Americar could be had in seven models in three series: Speedway, DeLuxe, and Plainsman. The first was a bare-bones car priced at \$634 for the coupe; the DeLuxe slotted in as the company's mid-line version at \$685. Flagship of the fleet was the \$740 Plainsman which (although few were sold) came equipped with a number of extra-cost options, as well as overdrive and a finned, high-compression head. The wheelbase grew to 104 inches and the rear tread increased by two inches for better weight distribution. Underneath, a still-wider and far stronger frame was employed. The engine boasted 63 horsepower and was made smoother by a newly engineered four-point rubber mounting system. The bodies were set on 12 rubber pads, insulating them from shock and noise. A new hypoid differential and stronger drive shaft imparted a greater degree of silence throughout all speed ranges. The column shifter and integral parking lamps became standard on all models. The exterior displayed a simplified hood ornament, larger windshield with wipers at the bottom edge and, on the sedan, rear quarter windows.

Frazer insisted that “Today's over-size, over-weight, over-powered, and over-dressed cars are on the way out.” However, auto buyers shied away from the sensible and economi-



cal Americar, which was pitched "To everyone who weighs a dollar's value." Output for 1941 topped out at a far-less-than-expected 30,100 units.

By mid-1941, Willys-Overland Motors was deeply involved in the burgeoning defense industry and was one of three manufacturers of GPVs for the U.S. Army. The GPV (General Purpose Vehicle) soon came to be known generically as the jeep, and later synonymous with Willys-Overland, although it was in fact originally developed by the American Bantam Car Company. Meantime, Willys announced its 1942 passenger car line in September 1941. An advertising blitz proclaimed the new Americar 442 "The People's Car" and regularly featured a tactiturn Joe Frazer urging the public to "Save Gas for Uncle Sam—Drive a Fuel Saving Wil-

lys Americar."

Few changes attended the 1942 model apart from a switch to molybdenum alloy pistons and improved sound-deadening insulation. A bold vertical chrome strip bisected the grille; inside, the dash sparkled with additional plastic trim. Running boards, still standard on the Speedway, were optional on the DeLuxe and Plainsman DeLuxe models. There was a general price increase on all models in the lineup including the station wagon, which listed as the company's most expensive car at \$978 (later \$1055).

Pearl Harbor and America's subsequent entry into World War II put an end to all auto production until late 1945. For Willys-Overland, production of passenger cars ceased on January 24, 1942, after just 11,910

Model 442s had been assembled. Thus ended the brief lifespan of the Americar and Willys' attempt to compete in the lowest-price portion of the market—the Americar would not be revived after the war.

Of course, a postwar Willys passenger auto did eventually emerge for 1952. Like the Willys cars of 1933-42, it offered compact size, light weight, spritely performance, and outstanding economy as its main virtues. And while Americans weren't ready for compact economy cars even during the Depression, they were adamant that bigger *was* better in the Flashy Fifties. In fact, during the decade immediately before and after the war, most Americans scarcely knew—or cared—that they had a "common sense" alternative in the Willys.