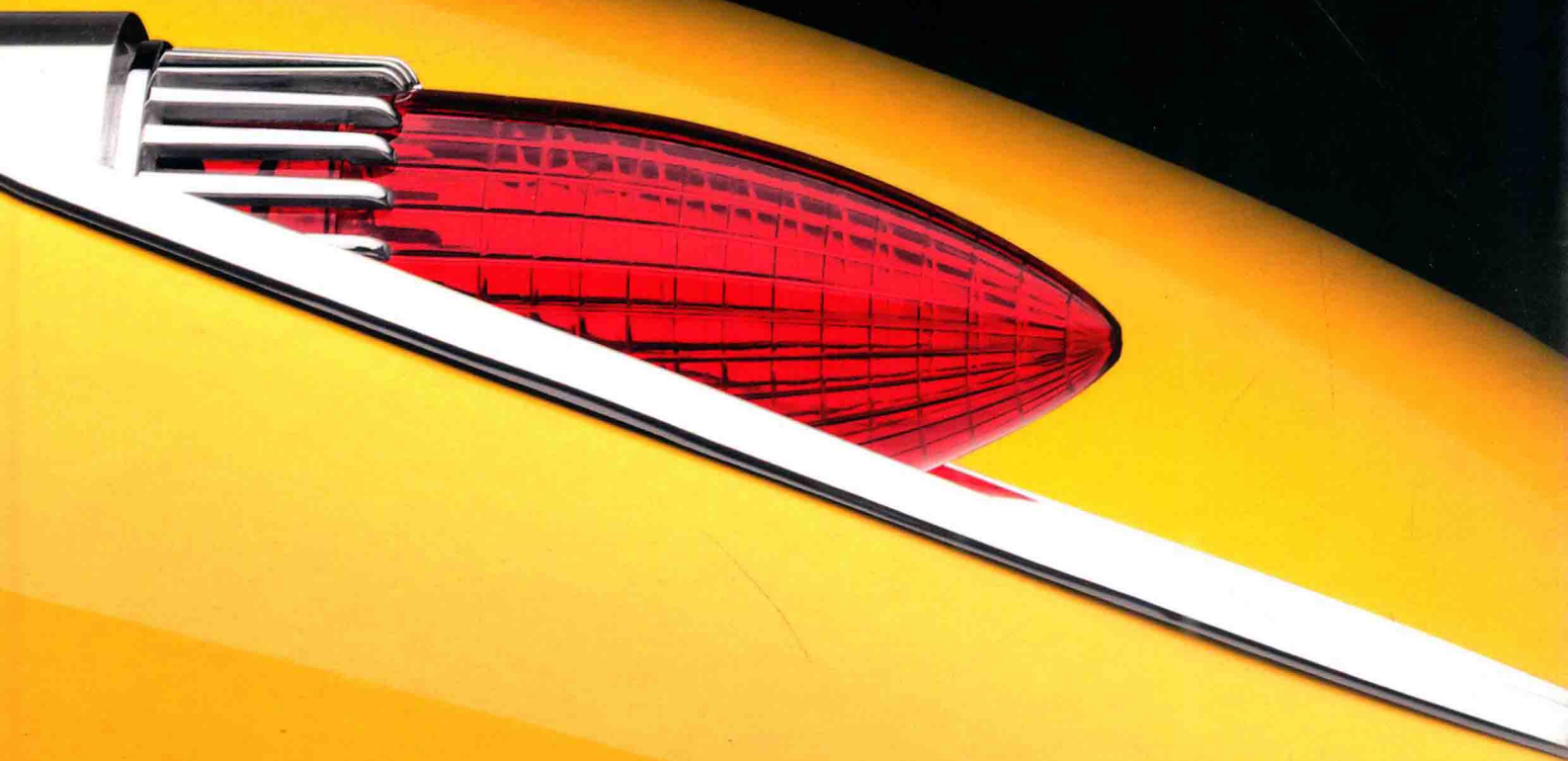
AMERICAN CARS

MATT DELORENZO



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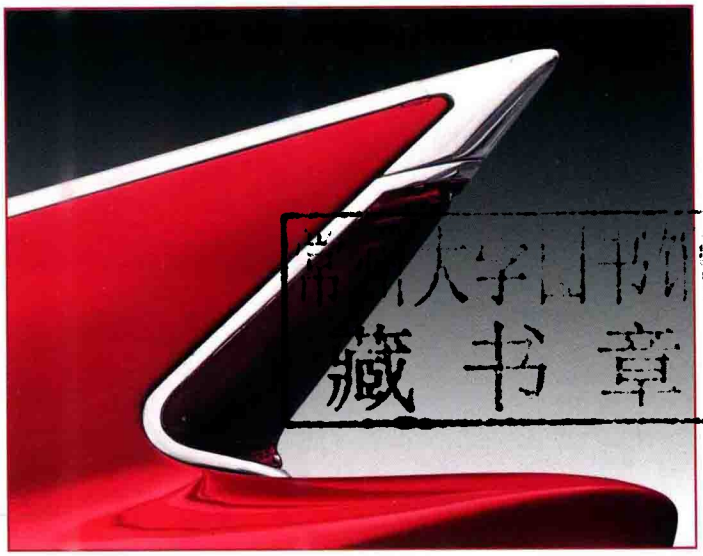

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332 This forward thrusting hood ornament from the 1947 Cadillac says much about the spirit of the American car–it's is always about looking ahead, looking for the next big idea.

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Maria Cucchi

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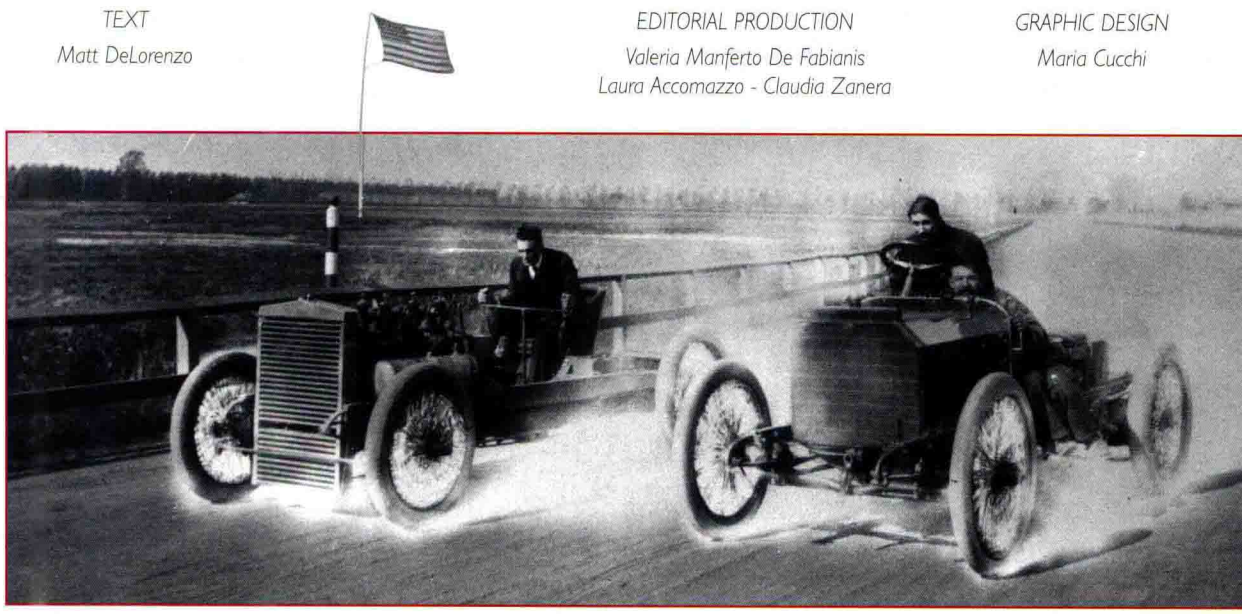
9 Heny Ford (left) drives a 999 in a 1903 demostration run.



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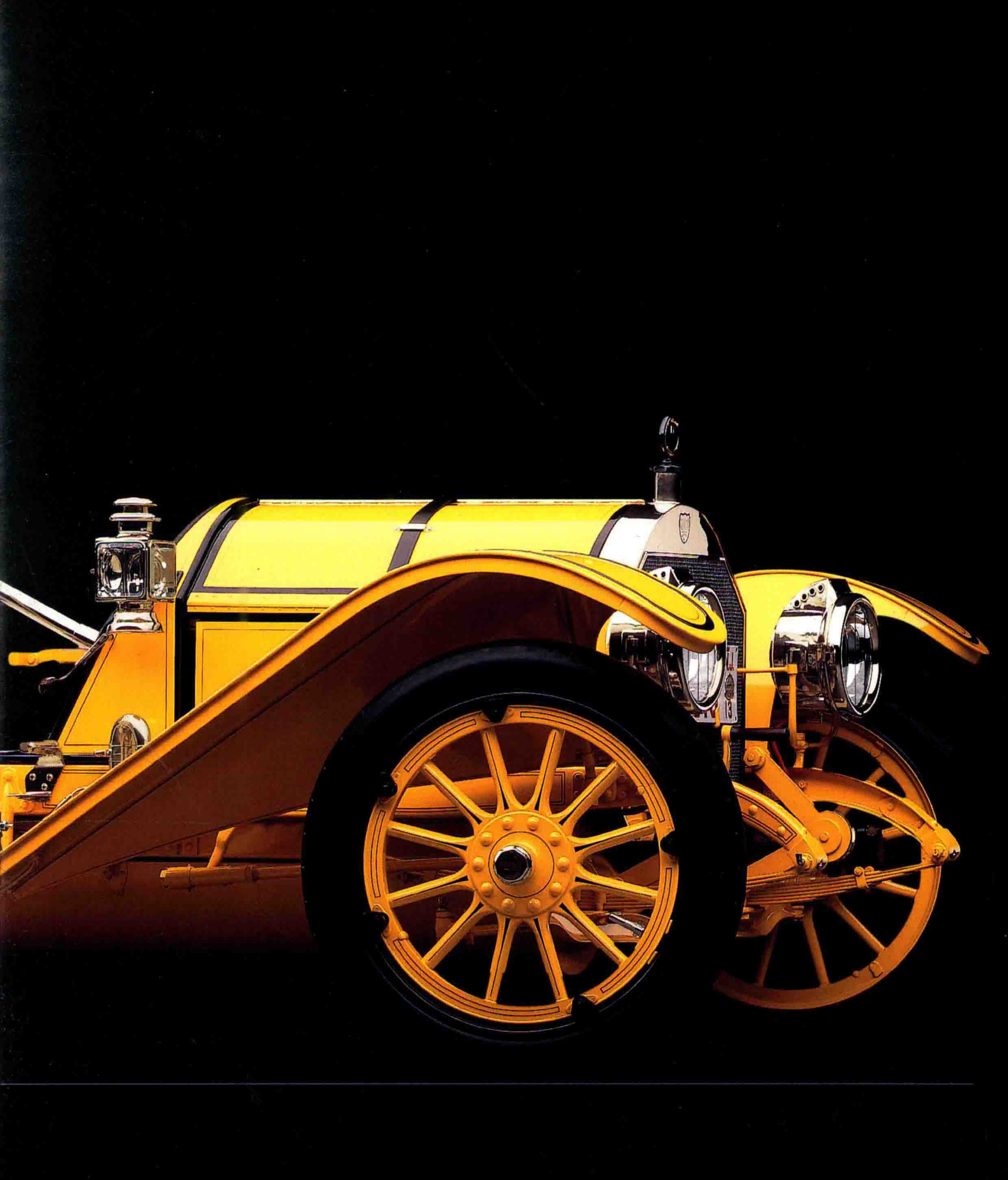


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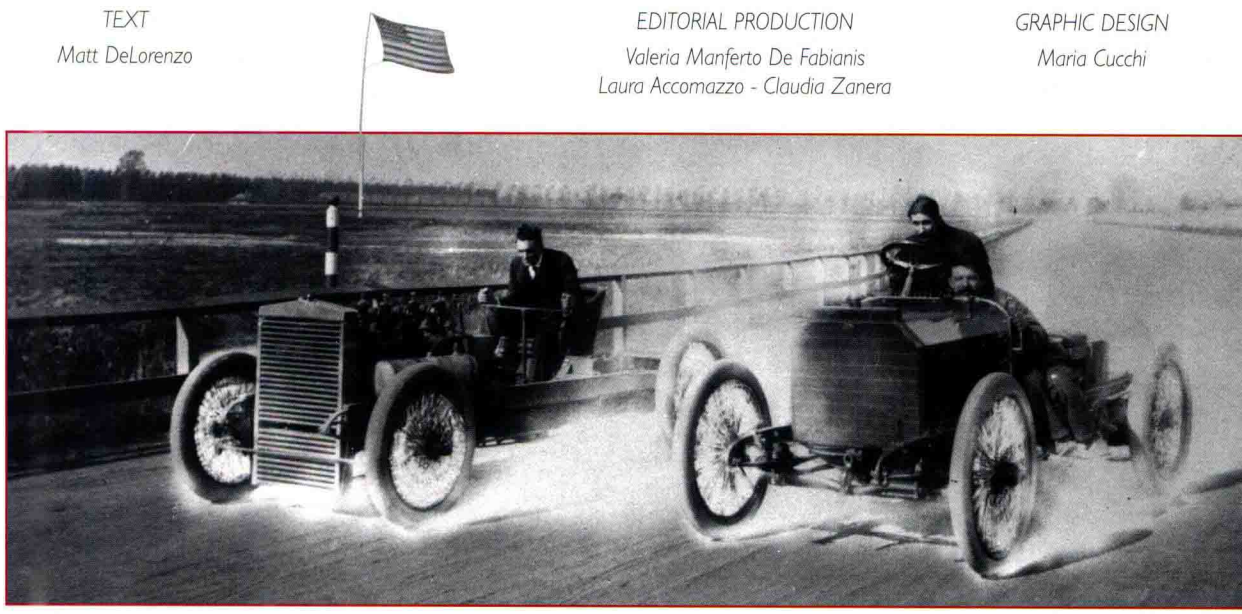
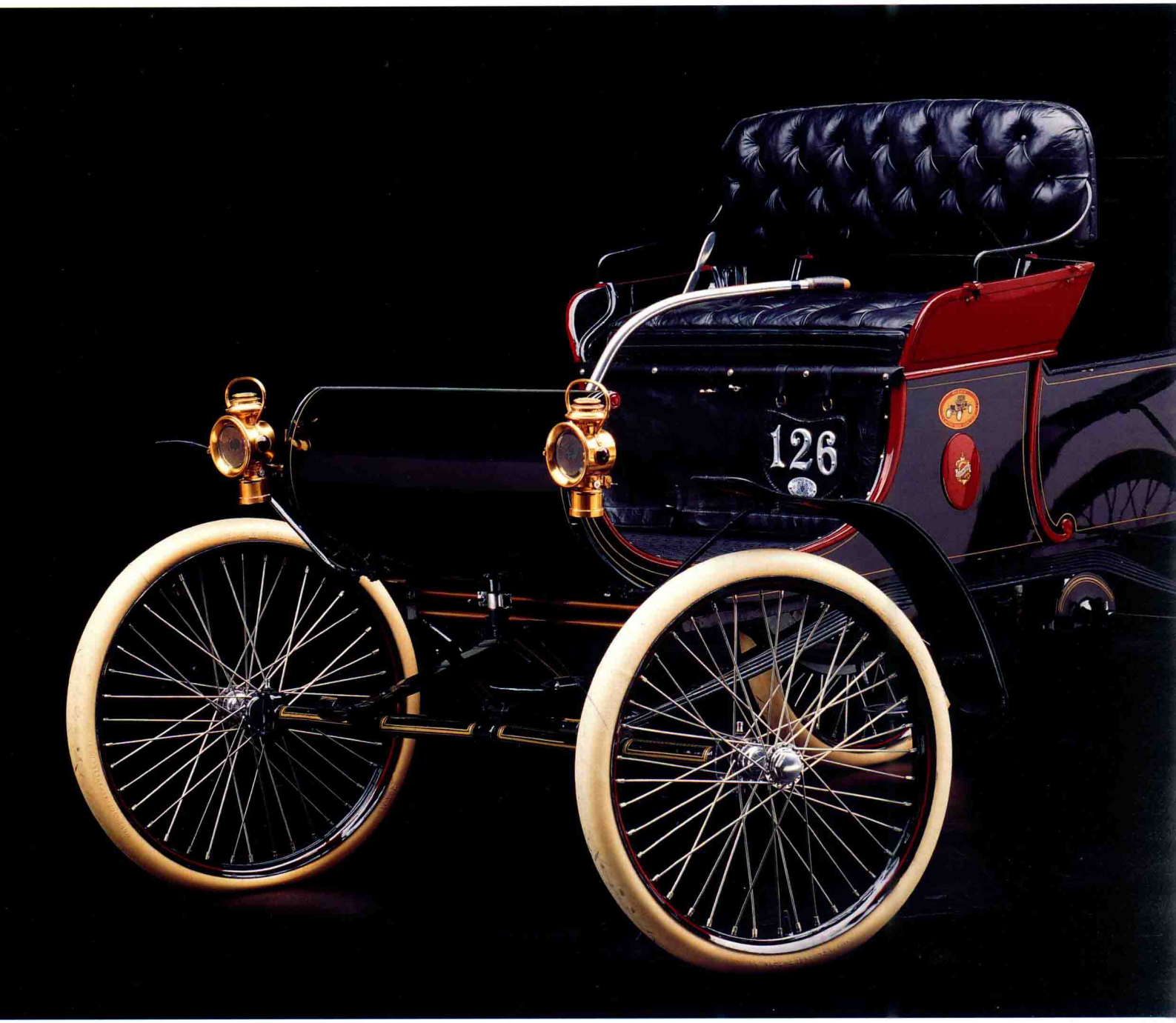


INTRODUCTION



Many books have extensively cataloged the numerous auto companies that have produced cars in America since the turn of the previous century. Yet another encyclopedic treatment of the subject would be redundant. Instead, this work is a broad overview of the history of American cars and establishes a context for how the automobile has evolved and thrived here. Cars may be a universal product, but that's not to say that they are the same everywhere. Viewed from afar, American cars (and trucks) look too big, have engines that are too large and are considered impractical for solo commuting. Considering America's vast continent with its wide, open roads, readily available parking and low energy prices, one begins to understand why automobiles here differ from those found elsewhere in the world.

The car may have been invented in Europe, but it was America that set the stage for its mass production. Good old-fashioned American ingenuity as demonstrated by Cadillac's mastery of interchangeable parts and Henry Ford's invention of the moving assembly line helped make the personal transportation as ubiquitous as it is today. The first automobiles look remarkably the same worldwide—essentially motorized carriages. But as technical sophistication grew, with the invention of such features as the self-starter, electric lighting and closed bodies, each company's offerings began to take on individual characteristics that reflected not only a particular firm's identity, but also the country of origin. One of the first steps in this process was the fact that America settled on left-hand drive, while Britain chose right-hand drive. As automobiles became a foundation of American society in the 1920s and 1930s, these vehicles began to take on a personality all their own, especially as styling became as important a selling point as a vehicle's function. American cars on average tended, even then, to be a larger and more expressive, than their European counterparts. In the wake of World War II, American cars became unlike those seen anywhere else. The United States' large land mass and low energy prices resulted in a culture that was built upon the automobile as its primary mode of transportation. Cars were the catalyst in the move from an urban to a suburban lifestyle.

Post-war prosperity and a highly competitive industry combined to make the annual model change a standard business practice in the American market. Meanwhile, a devastated Europe, with crowded urban areas and a road system that predates all of American history, needed smaller, more efficient cars.

And while some of these European designs were more "sensible," American cars from that era were and

10-11 The 1901 Curved Dash Oldsmobile by virtue of its light weight and low cost, was the first automobile with mass appeal that would eventually lead to the motorization of America.

11 The striking hood ornament of the 1954 Packard Panama Clipper.

still are revered for their almost whimsical, space-age designs. America's contribution to worldwide automotive design in this era can be summed up in a few short words: the tail fin.

This automotive exuberance couldn't last as a severe economic downturn and the increasing popularity of imported European cars at the end of the 1950s led the U.S. makers to consider the compact car and less ostentatious designs in the 1960s. But while styling was somewhat subdued, the quest for more power had just begun. This was the era of muscle cars, vehicles powered by huge, tire-smoking V-8s. Gasoline prices were at an all-time low, the push further into the suburbs continued, and new highways seemed to pop up overnight.

During the 1970s, it took two energy crises, and government edicts to clean up the air and to build safer vehicles to rein in the manufacturers' ability to make the large, powerful cars that the average Americans demanded. And while the new smaller, front-drive vehicles began to look like their European counterparts, lower fuel economy standards and less stringent emissions regulations for trucks provided the loophole manufacturers needed to build the large, powerful vehicles still craved by the American market. Trucks, ranging from cargo-carrying pickups to large four-door sport-utility vehicles, are every bit as likely to provide daily family transportation as cars.

Close examination of the history of the car in America is also an exercise in déjà vu. Even among the earliest car companies, one could find the same names over and over again—Henry Ford was involved with his own company, as well as Cadillac. Henry Leland left Cadillac to start Lincoln, a company later bought by Henry Ford. Ransom E. Olds, after being ousted from his own company, started REO. Walter P. Chrysler worked for Buick, as did Louis Chevrolet.

Even seemingly new ideas have all been tried before. In the industry's infancy, the internal-combustion gasoline engine competed with both electric and steam power before prevailing as the powerplant of choice. Today manufacturers are spending untold sums to develop electric or fuel cell technology vehicles in a bid to move beyond internal combustion power. In the early 1900s, Rolls-Royce, Fiat and Mercedes assembled cars in the United States, faint echoes of the larger Japanese and German plants that would be built in the U.S. during the last two decades of the 20th century. Chrysler sought to use the aerodynamically styled Airflow in 1934 to gain a leg up on its competitors; Ford revolutionized automotive design in the 1980s with its aero-styled Taurus family sedan. Even the establishment of General Motors in 1908, combining the forces of Chevrolet, Buick and Oldsmobile set the stage for other mergers that are a daily fact of life.

Every so often, a manufacturer would look around the market and decide that America needs another new car division to satisfy some unmet need. Oldsmobile had Viking, Cadillac, and LaSalle, Ford had Edsel, and GM had Saturn. Conversely, in bad economic times, the same manufacturers would decide that there were too many divisions to satisfy the market and would ax some legendary names—like Chrysler to DeSoto and Plymouth, and more recently, GM with Oldsmobile, Hummer and Pontiac. And every generation has a visionary who declares that he or she will re-invent the automobile, from Buckminster Fuller and his Dymaxion, to Preston Tucker and his Torpedo, to John DeLorean and his DMC12. The history of the American industry is a rich tapestry of cars, characters and corporations. And like most tapestries, it's best enjoyed by not examining each individual thread, but by stepping back and taking in the broad strokes of the entire work.

14-15 Although exaggerated in proportion, many of the styling details on the Mako Shark, such as the hood treatment, chrome bumperettes and fender contours, were used on the production Sting Ray.

16-17 More than just a show car turned production model, the Dodge Viper gave Chrysler Corporation a much-needed lift in employee morale and public image during the early 1990s.

12-13 GM Design favored the predominance of jet age styling cues, as is most evident in the rear end of this 1960 Cadillac Series 62 convertible.