

The Ten Most Significant Oldsmobiles

By Gary Witzenburg

1901-07 Curved Dash Runabout

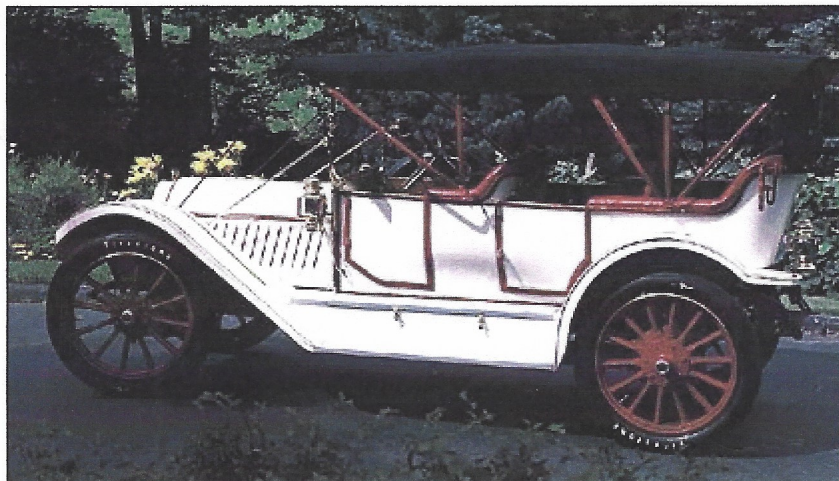


1902 Oldsmobile Curved Dash Runabout

Ransom Eli Olds shipped his first (steam-powered) horseless carriage to India in 1893, making it America's first auto export. He incorporated Olds Motor Works in 1899, built the country's first dedicated auto plant and - despite a disastrous fire that destroyed the factory and all but one prototype car -- began cranking out single-cylinder Curved Dash Runabouts from a rudimentary assembly line in 1901. The \$650 4-hp Curved Dash became America's best-selling car and Olds the country's leading maker. It peaked at nearly 4,000 units in 1903 before being phased out in 1907.

The Ten Most Significant Oldsmobiles

1910-12 Limited



1911 Oldsmobile Limited Touring Sedan

While the modest Curved Dash established Olds on the automotive landscape, the magnificent Limited raised its profile well above it. Debuting in 1910 in \$4,600 Roadster and Touring and \$5,800 Limo versions (SERIOUS BUCKS back then), it was upgraded for 1911 with a massive 707-

cid, 60-hp 6-cylinder engine. At 198 in. long on a 138-in. wheelbase with 42-in. wheels and two-tiered running boards, it dwarfed nearly everything on the road and was capable of cruising at 60-70-mph. As depicted by William Harndon Foster's famous 1910 painting, "Setting the Pace," one reportedly raced the 20th Century Limited railway express from New York to Albany and won. Given their prices and exclusivity, these apply-named Olds flagships were produced in very limited volumes: 325 in 1910, 182 in 1911 and 140 in 1912, including two bare chassis and three chassis intended for fire truck bodies.

The Ten Most Significant Oldsmobiles

1940-42 Series 90/98

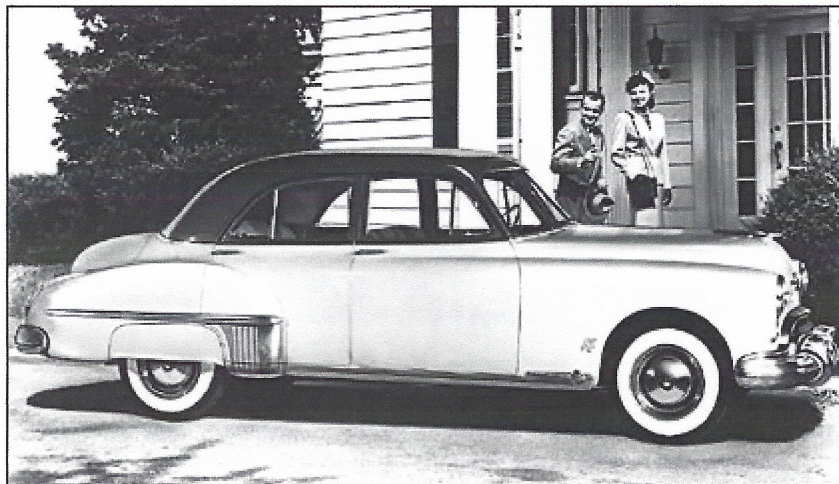


1940 Oldsmobile Series 90 Phaeton

Olds and Buick offered a column-shifted (semi-automatic) "Safety Automatic Transmission" for '38, but the real breakthrough came two years later with the industry's first mass-produced fully automatic gearbox, the 4-speed Hydra-Matic, a \$57 option on all '40 Olds models. The 110-hp 8-cyl. Series 90 L-40 Custom Cruiser proved a surprisingly strong seller at \$1131, second only to the \$963 95-hp 6-cyl. Series 70 G-40 sedan. Total Olds production neared 200K, then climbed to 270K for '41 before WWII curtailed '42 output to about 68K.

The Ten Most Significant Oldsmobiles

1949 Futuramic 88

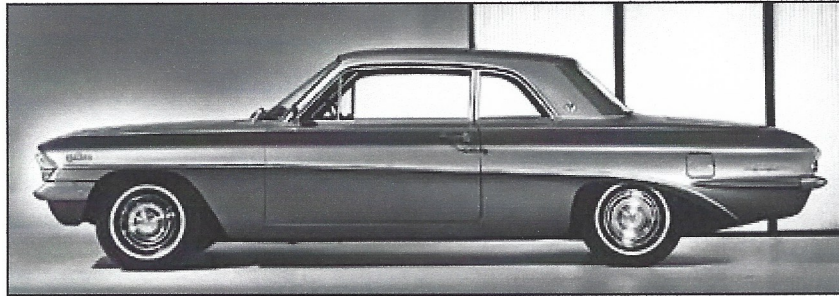


1949 Oldsmobile Futuramic 88

Olds whacked the hungry post-war car market upside its collective head with a hot, high-compression 135-hp OHV "Rocket V8," standard in 88 and 98 for '49. The swoopy "Futuramic" styling that arrived on the top-shelf 98 the year before extended to the more affordable '49 88 and (6-cyl.) 76, and this combination of V8 power and modern good looks made the 88 America's hottest car on street and track. It paced the 1949 Indy 500, won the 1950 Pan American road race and took NASCAR championships in 1949-51 as '50 Olds production topped 416K.

The Ten Most Significant Oldsmobiles

1961-63 F-85



1961 Oldsmobile F-85 Cutlass

Olds' first modern "small car" debuted for '61 in response to growing interest in imports and domestic compacts, trumping them all with a 215-cid aluminum V8 good for 155 hp standard and 185 hp in a higher-performance Cutlass Coupe model. Preceding the official start of the muscle car wars by two model years, Olds raised the ante with a 215-hp fluid-injected "Turbo-rocket" turbocharged version in a \$3,049 Jetfire hardtop coupe with bucket seats and console for '62. As output grew to 448K for '62 and 477K for '63, turbocharged Jetfire production totaled 3,765 and 5,842, respectively.

The Ten Most Significant Oldsmobiles

1964-67 F-85/Cutlass/442



1964 Oldsmobile Cutlass with 4-4-2 package

F-85 grew to "mid-size" for '64 with a wheelbase stretch from 112 to 115 in., while a high-performance "4-4-2" (4-bbl. carb, 4-speed manual trans, dual exhausts) package provided viable competition for Pontiac's GTO, Chevy's Chevelle SS and a growing phalanx of mid-size muscle machines from all U.S. makers. Cutlass became the upscale series name, and a handsome Vista Cruiser wagon debuted with raised rear seats and roof and tour-bus-style upper windows. The 4-4-2's 330-cid V8 offered 310 hp as Olds sales soared to 587K for '66, its best year since 597K in '55.

The Ten Most Significant Oldsmobiles

1966 Toronado



1966 Oldsmobile Toronado

With radically innovative styling and a 385-hp Rocket V8 driving its front wheels through a unique planetary gear (vs. ring and pinion) differential, Olds' new flagship Toronado was the first U.S.-built front-drive car since the mid-'30s. Its 4-speed automatic transmission, mounted backward

next to the 425-cid longitudinal V8, was driven by a specially-developed high-torque chain. With prices starting at \$4,617, it was Motor Trend Car of the Year, won Car Life's Engineering Excellence Award and sold nearly 41K in its debut year.

The Ten Most Significant Oldsmobiles

1968-72 Cutlass/4-4-2/Hurst Olds



1970 Oldsmobile 4-4-2 Convertible

The "F-85" moniker stayed at the bottom of what was fast becoming the "Cutlass" line as Olds' popular mid-size series sported from a bold new look for '68. The 4-4-2, now motivated by a muscular 400 cid V8 rated from standard 325 to 360 hp with an optional "W30" (drag racing) package, was promoted to its own model series with sport coupe, "Holiday" hardtop coupe and convertible variations. A still higher-performance 455-cid "aftermarket" Hurst/Olds (H/O) package jointly developed by Hurst Performance Products debuted for '69. For '72, the 4-4-2 again became a Cutlass option package, a Hurst/Olds paced the Indy 500, and Oldsmobile hit 759K to become America's third best-selling brand, after Chevrolet and Ford.

The Ten Most Significant Oldsmobiles

1977 Delta 88/98



1977 Oldsmobile Ninety Eight Regency

Cutlass became America's best-selling nameplate in 1976, and GM took its boldest risk in decades by "downsizing" its popular and profitable full-size gunboats for '77 in response to rising fuel prices and a crippling 1973 availability crisis. The \$6,609 Ninety Eight lost 800 lbs and shrank a full foot in length to 220.4 in. and eight inches in wheelbase to 119 in., while the \$5,145 Delta 88 dieted down to 217.5 in. on a 116-in. wheelbase. Hardly enthusiast bait, these were nonetheless breaths of fresh full-size air that proved highly successful and contributed to record model year output of 1.136 million units, Olds' first million-plus year.

The Ten Most Significant Oldsmobiles

1995 Aurora



1995 Oldsmobile Aurora

After topping a million sales for the sixth and last time in '86, Olds began a long slide to oblivion with GM's (poorly executed) second round of downsizing and across-the-board conversion to fwd beginning with '86 full-size models and continuing through an awkwardly-styled, V6-powered new fwd Cutlass series for '88. Sales slipped below 400K for '93 while Olds engineers desperately developed this sexy luxury sport sedan, which they hoped would revitalize the venerable marque as its 100th birthday approached. Powered by a new 250-hp 244-cid DOHC V8, the \$31,995 Aurora sold nearly 50K units in its first year at the top of Olds' line and was a terrific car in most ways. But so timid were Olds' marketers that it wore no Oldsmobile badging and was far too little too late to contribute much toward saving the brand.

Find this article at:

http://www.automobilemag.com/features/0409_significant_oldsmobiles/index.html

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.