

The 1937 Studebaker Dictator: A Glimpse into Automotive Innovation and Shifting Tides

By Ed Wenger

The 1937 Studebaker Dictator stands as a fascinating artifact of automotive history, embodying both the technological advancements and the rapidly changing socio-political landscape of the pre-World War II era. While its name would later become a liability due to the rise of totalitarian regimes, at its inception, the Dictator was envisioned as a standard-setter, a car designed to "dictate the standards" for its class. Beginning in 1927, the Dictator model represented a blend of stylish design, robust engineering, and an attempt by Studebaker to regain its footing in a competitive market.

Studebaker, a venerable American automaker with a long history of quality and reliability, faced significant challenges in the early 1930s, including financial strain from ventures like the acquisition of Pierce-Arrow. A strategic restructuring, including the sale of Pierce-Arrow and a complete redesign of its model lines, revitalized the company. The Dictator, positioned as the economical six-cylinder option alongside the more upscale President, played a crucial role in this resurgence. The 1936 model year saw strong sales, with nearly 100,000 units sold, and the



The National Studebaker Museum published a 1999 calendar featuring Studebakers of the Rich and Famous. The above photo includes Hollywood actresses (left to right): Carole Lombard, Kathryn Stanley, Leota Winters, and Anita Barnes posing in front of a 1927 Studebaker Dictator. 1927 was the first production year for the Dictator model.

1937 Dictator built upon this success with subtle refinements and new features.

Page 27: Studebaker advertised in the August 14, 1937, issue of The Saturday Evening Post.



WHAT A STANDOUT IN *good looks* THIS BIG EASY-HANDLING STUDEBAKER IS!

A FEW CENTS A DAY MORE THAN A LOWEST PRICED CAR!



SO REFRESHINGLY COOL TO RIDE IN, TOO!



GAS AND OIL SAVINGS THAT EQUAL AND OFTEN BEAT LOWEST PRICED CARS—World's first car to offer both the sensational Fram oil cleaner and the optional gas-saving automatic overdrive, the new 1937 Studebaker is convincingly showing that it bows to no car in low-cost operation. Your Studebaker dealer will gladly exhibit sheaves of owner-authenticated proofs of Studebaker's superiority in gas and oil economy.

YOU'RE getting much more than the smartest car you'll see in any company this summer, when you put your money into the superbly engineered new Studebaker.

You're getting a ride as smooth as gliding on calm water . . . and instantly controlled ventilation that's a refreshing relief on the sultriest days.

Your Studebaker doors click lightly and tightly at a touch. Your quiet, strong Studebaker body of seamless steel reinforced by steel is thickly insulated inside . . . its exterior gleams in a paint finish twelve coats deep.

And as a plus to the luxury of spacious interiors tastefully styled by Helen Dryden, you have the most commodious luggage compartments of the year . . . swift, effortless acceleration . . . and workmanship that puts many a costlier car to shame.

All this costs you very little more than a lowest priced car. So see the low priced Studebaker Dictator Six or the inexpensive Studebaker State President Eight before coming to any decision. Time payments are pleasingly low on the Studebaker C. I. T. budget plan. The Studebaker Corporation, South Bend, Ind.

- WORLD'S FIRST CAR OFFERING
- DOUBLE SAFETY OF
- AUTOMATIC HILL HOLDER
- PLUS HYDRAULIC BRAKES
- ★
- WORLD'S ONLY CAR WITH
- REVOLUTIONARY NEW RATTLE-PROOF
- ROTARY DOOR LATCHES
- ★
- EXTRA ROOMY INTERIORS WITH
- CHAIR HEIGHT SEATS—LEG ROOM
- AND HEAD ROOM TO SPARE

Exciting 1937 Studebakers

*Wayne and Marcia Hadden's
1931 Studebaker Roadster*





Photo by Tracy Lesher



*Above: The Wenger family's 1937 Studebaker Dictator looks sleek even on a rainy 2024 Revival AAA Glidden® Tour day. Page 29: Clockwise from the upper left—The Studebaker ad that appeared in the June 14, 1937, issue of *Life* magazine, aimed for a wide audience. *Life* magazine on February 22, 1937, published this ad promoting the Dictator as an economical buy. Page 2 from the 1937 Studebaker brochure., designed by Helen Dryden, a noted artist, fashion designer, and industrial designer. At the peak of her career, she was the highest paid female artist in the United States.*

From a design perspective, the 1937 Dictator showcased the prevailing Art Deco influences of the period, characterized by sleek lines and aerodynamic considerations. While the basic body remained largely unchanged from 1936, the 1937 model received a streamlined face lift. This included a more pointed grille, an alligator hood that opened from the front, and extended hood louvers, contributing to an overall appearance of motion and modernity. The car featured chrome-plated radiator shells and bullet-shaped headlights, adding to its distinctive visual appeal. Inside, the Dictator aimed for spaciousness and comfort, with tasteful upholstery and a well-organized dashboard that often featured wood-grain accents. The "Bat-wing Coupe" body style, with its distinctive rear window, was a notable design element that offered unique styling.

Beyond aesthetics, the 1937 Studebaker Dictator incorporated several advanced engineering features for its time,

emphasizing both performance and safety. It was powered by an L-head six-cylinder engine, typically a 218 cubic-inch unit producing around 87-90 hp, coupled with a three-speed manual transmission. This power-train provided respectable performance for the era, with a top speed approaching 80 mph. Crucially, the Dictator boasted a four-wheel hydraulic brake system, a significant safety advancement. Other notable features included an 18-gallon fuel tank for extended range, dual defrosters for improved visibility, and rotary door latches with safety catches for enhanced security. The independent front suspension and standard hydraulic shock absorbers contributed to a smoother, more tranquil ride, setting it apart from many contemporaries. Studebaker's commitment to innovation and driver comfort was evident in these details, making the Dictator a practical yet pleasant vehicle to operate.



TRUE TO LIFE NEWS SHOTS OF NEWSWORTHY

PERSONALITIES IN THE 1937 MOTORING SCENE

Cheerful sight on the streets of the city of Lansing, Michigan, is the Morlok family's car. Its usual occupants are Carl and Sadie Morlok and their seven-year-old quadruplet girls, Edna A., Wilma B., Sarah C., and Helen D.

Although Lansing is headquarters city of many famous automotive factories, Carl Morlok picked a South Bend, Indiana car, an exciting new 1937 Studebaker Dictator.

"I had to have roominess, of course," he laughingly explains. "And with my expenses what they are, I naturally decided to buy a car that is easy on gas and oil and that will stand up for many years."

Exactly the spotlight style car of all the 1937 cars, the impressive, money-saving Studebaker is teeming with thrilling inno-

ventions . . . doors that click lightly, tightly and silently at a touch without slamming . . . the sensational Fram oil cleaner and the gas-saving automatic overdrive . . . the automatic hill holder and triply sealed leather-touch hydraulic brakes . . . mimiable interior styling by Helen Dryden . . . super-strong, super-safe, steel-reinforced-by-steel bodies gleaming in a paint finish twelve coats deep . . . steering that halves the turning effort of parking.

Prices of the beautiful 1937 Studebaker Dictator Six are just above those of the small cars . . . and the superb Studebaker State President Eight is America's lowest priced luxury car. Time payments are low on the Studebaker C. I. T. budget plan. The Studebaker Corporation, South Bend, Ind.



Four are seven in the photographs above and below, inasmuch as the school-going little Morlok quadruplet sisters were born May 19, 1930. Quads may come only once in every 371,000 births but parents Carl and Sadie Morlok have already provided over 30,000 meals for these young ladies. Look how comfortably they and their dollies fit in the big Studebaker trunk. It holds more luggage than most families usually take along.



Maynard shoots rifle, revolver and larriat like nobody's business in his feature act in the Cole Bros.-Clyde Beatty Circus. And handsome Ken, darling of America's millions who like "Westerns" as their movie diet, shoots smoothly from one circus stand to another, up and down and across the nation, in—? You've guessed it—his big powerful 1937 Studebaker State President.



Flying auto in this strange vehicle, perfected by famous flyer Waldo Waterman. A car on the highways, it adds wings at its hanger and smoothly takes to the skyways. Its power plant is a 6-cylinder Studebaker Dictator engine which operates on ordinary filling station gas.

STUDEBAKER

★ NOT LOWEST PRICED . . . BUT ALMOST

Smart America HAS MADE THIS

1937 STUDEBAKER ITS SPOTLIGHT FAVORITE



Costs only a little more than lowest priced cars!

ACTUAL PHOTOGRAPH

GAS AND OIL ECONOMY OF LOWEST PRICED CARS



DOORS LIGHTLY CLOSED ARE TIGHTLY SHUT . . . IN 1937 STUDEBAKERS ONLY! You never need slam the doors of a 1937 Studebaker! They have revolutionary and exclusive new rattle-proof rotary door hinges which engage securely at a light pressure and shake shut instead of opens when your Studebaker is under way!

IT'S the world's only car with the double safety of the built-in automatic hill holder and leather-touch hydraulic brakes! Its new steering gear halves the turning effort of parking! Its great engines with their lightning acceleration, give driving a new thrill!

And the 1937 Studebaker, first among all cars, makes available the dual economy of the Fram oil cleaner and the gas-saving automatic overdrive!

Gleaming in a paint finish twelve coats deep, the air-curved, steel-reinforced-by-steel Studebaker body has the world's largest one-piece steel top . . . and the lavishly roomy interiors are inimitably styled in the best of good taste by gifted Helen Dryden!

Called smarter in every flowing contour than any other 1937 car by critical motorists, the new Studebaker sells within a few dollars of smaller, lowest priced cars. And the Studebaker C. I. T. budget plan assures low cost time payments. Studebaker Corp., South Bend, Ind.

- WORLD'S FIRST CARS WITH DUAL ECONOMY OF FRAM OIL CLEANER AND GAS-SAVING AUTOMATIC OVERDRIVE
- ★
- EXTRA ROOMY INTERIORS WITH CHAIR HEIGHT SEATS AND SMART HELEN DRYDEN STYLING
- ★
- ENORMOUSLY SPACIOUS LUGGAGE COMPARTMENTS
- ★
- WORLD'S ONLY CARS WITH BUILT-IN AUTOMATIC HILL HOLDER AND HYDRAULIC BRAKES

Exciting 1937 Studebakers

EXCITING NEW *Studebaker* **STYLING**
INSPIRED BY GIFTED HELEN DRYDEN



IN these spotlight cars of 1937, famous Helen Dryden, foremost stylist of her day, again has collaborated with Studebaker's distinguished body engineers to create glorious new motor car body design, refreshingly vigorous and smart.

Definitely different in appearance from any other cars you'll see, from their silvery "Winged Victory" radiator grilles and louvers to their impressively air-curved rear decks, these spirited new Dictators and Presidents achieve their distinction by adhering to fundamental good taste.

Their long flowing, beautifully rounded hoods have a graceful one-piece top devoid of the customary unsightly center ridge. It lifts up from the front for radiator and engine servicing and holds securely in position till pulled down again.

The gleamingly lacquered front fenders of heavy steel are wider and lower than any others you'll see . . . and they're cleverly air-foiled in true airplane manner. The torpedo shaped headlamps are







Sarah and Wenda with the family's 1937 Studebaker Dictator. (Photo by Ed Wenger)

Studebaker in 2022. Jerry Kurtz, its former owner, was an active Mid-Atlantic Region member. At the age of 16, Jerry bought the Dictator from a junkyard. Overtime he lovingly restored and re-restored it. He was extremely proud of this automobile and that it was loaded with almost every factory option available. These options included: fog lights, radio, spot light, and dual side mounts. He added an overdrive to it.

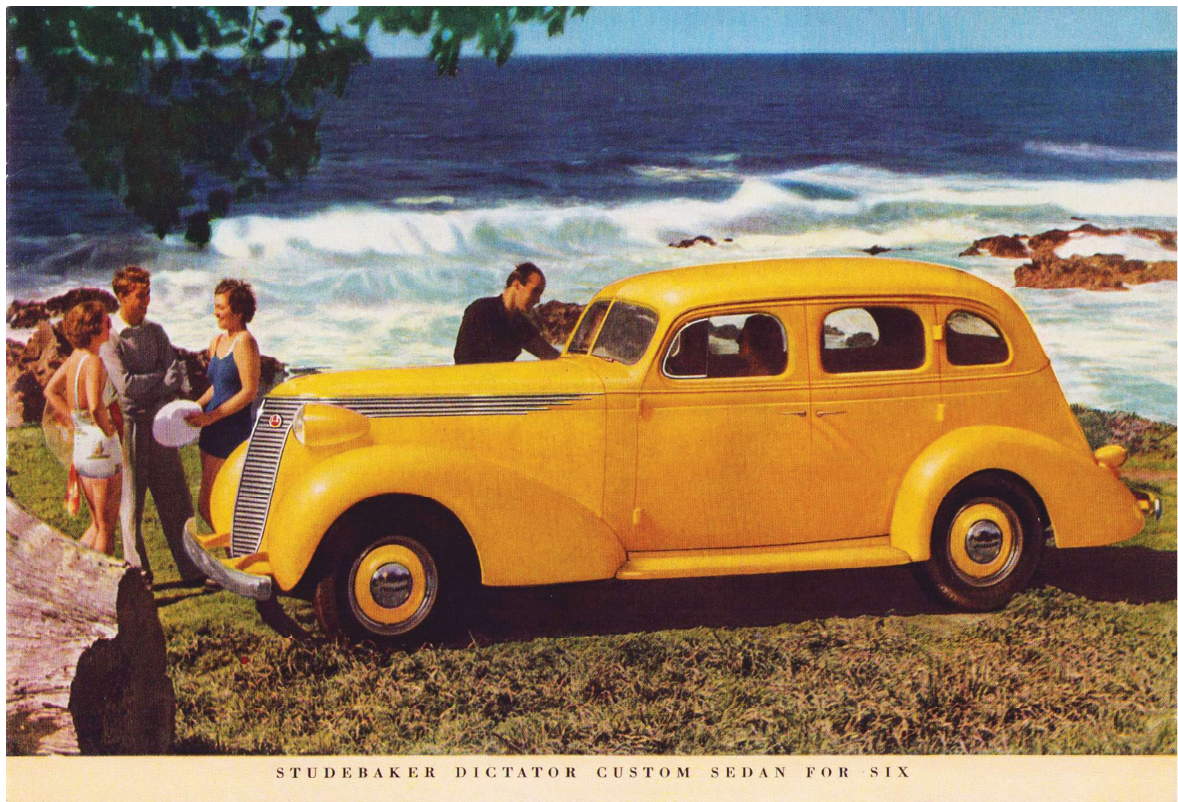
The 1937 Studebaker Dictator represents more than just a classic automobile; it is a microcosm of its time. Its stylish Art Deco design and advanced engineering highlighted Studebaker's capacity for innovation and its efforts to thrive in a competitive industry. Yet, the car's controversial name serves as a stark reminder of how rapidly global events can reshape language and perceptions. Despite its short-lived moniker, the 1937 Dictator remains an important chapter in Studebaker's history, a testament to a period when American automakers pushed boundaries in both design and technology, even as the world around them teetered on the brink of profound change.

However, the most enduring and perhaps unfortunate aspect of the 1937 Studebaker Dictator is its name. At the time, the word did not carry the overwhelmingly negative connotations it would soon acquire. As the 1930s progressed, the rise of authoritarian figures like Hitler and Mussolini in Europe dramatically shifted public perception of the term "dictator."

The once-clever marketing ploy became a significant liability, particularly in export markets where the car was often re-badged as the "Director" to avoid offense. By the end of the 1937 model year, with global political tensions escalating, Studebaker recognized the growing inappropriateness of the name. Consequently, for 1938, the "Dictator" was quietly dropped from the lineup, and the "Commander" name was resurrected to take its place as the entry-level model.

For our family, this auto become a reliable touring vehicle. It will participate in its third Glidden Tour this fall in Dover, Delaware. We plan to drive there from our home in South Central Pennsylvania. My wife Wenda and I were fortunate to purchase this

(Images by Tracy Leshner and Ed Wenger)



STUDEBAKER DICTATOR CUSTOM SEDAN FOR SIX

The Dictator is being showcased as a sporty adventure seeking automobile. The page is from the 1937 Studebaker brochure.

Page 30: Ed's Studebaker has a correct 1937 Pennsylvania license plate with a "York, PA, Community of Craftsmen" topper mounted above the driver's side tail light.

