

# The 1934 to 1940 LaSALLE

**By John Milliken**

National CCCA Board Member  
who serves on the Classification Committee



Compare the very traditional styling of this 1934 Packard 1100 Sedan with the streamlined modern design of the 1934 LaSalle on the opposite page.



The 1934 LaSalle (nc) served as the Pace Car for the Indy 500 that year.

**I**n 1927, General Motors created its Art & Colour Section. The purpose of this new department was to impose an entirely new approach to automotive styling, moving away from the established method wherein engineers designed bodies to accommodate the mechanical aspects of an automobile, often resulting in stodgy, square bodies. Art & Colour would give engineers free rein to design a body placing a priority on aesthetics resulting in a cohesive form.

Alfred Sloan, president, chairman and CEO of General Motors wrote about Harley Earl and the Art & Colour Section in his autobiography, "My Years with General Motors."

*I was so impressed with Mr. Earl's work that I decided to obtain the advantages of his talents for other General Motors car divisions. On June 23rd, 1927, I took up with the Executive Committee a plan to establish a special*

*department to study the question of art and color combinations in General Motors products.*

*Fifty persons would make up the department, ten of them designers, and the rest shop workers and clerical and administrative assistants.*

*I invited Mr. Earl to head this new staff department, which we called the Art & Colour Section. Mr. Earl's duties were to direct general production body design and to conduct research*

*and development programs in special car design.*

Earl grew up in Los Angeles and spent years as Chief Stylist for Don Lee Cadillac, creating many custom Cadillacs for wealthy clients in the emerging motion picture industry. Prior to the formation of Art & Colour, Earl's first project was to design a new companion car for Cadillac, to be introduced for the 1927 model year. This new nameplate

would fill the \$700 gap (in 1920 dollars) between Buick and Cadillac and provide a smaller version of the luxury car. That car was the LaSalle, named for an early French explorer of North America. Earl favored European designs with an edge toward Hispano-Suiza and its treatment of grill, hood louvres and headlights, incorporating them into the new LaSalle for 1927. The result was a huge success and set the course for the LaSalle into the early 1930s. A 1927 LaSalle 303 roadster was selected to pace the 1927 Indianapolis 500 race.

LaSalle's built from 1927 to 1933 have been recognized as CCCA Classics almost since the club's inception. But what about LaSalle's built from 1934 to 1940, the last year for the marque? Let's take a look.

By 1933, General Motors had streamlined its portfolio of brands and ceased production of its companion cars: the Buick Marquette, the Oldsmobile Viking, and, in a turnaround, the Oakland was superseded by its companion car, the Pontiac. LaSalle did not sell well during the Depression years of 1932-33 and it too, was also considered for termination. However, for Harley Earl, LaSalle was his baby and he had no intention of letting fall by the wayside.

He realized that, in the continuing Depression, he must build a smaller, sportier luxury car that would also be less expensive. He presented ideas to his design staff and left for Europe to gather ideas. He returned a month later and, late one night he wandered through the studio and saw a sketch done

by one of his Fleetwood stylists, Jules Agramonte. This was exactly what Earl was looking for: a different and bold approach to auto design, which included a tall, slender grill with vastly tapered hood headlights attached to the radiator shroud. A full-scale mockup of the design in clay was created for presentation to management.

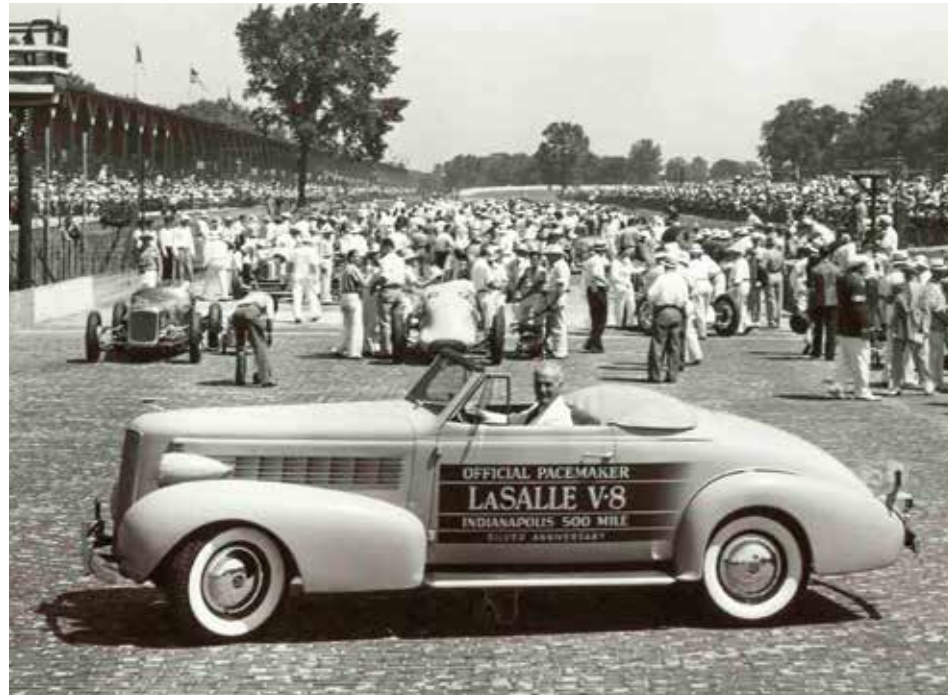
The result was stunning visually with strong Art Deco and aerodynamic cues. It was immediately accepted by GM management and was entirely built by Fleetwood craftsmen on a new 119" wheelbase chassis, compared with the previous year's 130" wheelbase chassis. It was priced at \$1,000 less than the previous years and while downsized and cheaper, the new model was no less important. In fact, the 1934 LaSalle >



became a huge influence that revolutionized the streamline styling that became the standard for the rest of the 1930s. It literally changed the car design world. Now, instead of American designers looking to Europe for ideas, Europe began to look enviously at the American design of this new 1934 LaSalle. Again, a LaSalle was selected to pace the 1934 Indy 500. This design was carried through the 1936 model year but only the 1934 carried a Fleetwood body.

The 1934 LaSalle has been declined for Classic status four times since 1988 and the 1940 LaSalle was declined as part of another application in 1992. I believe the earlier LaSalle was declined because of a perception that it was powered by the Oldsmobile straight-eight engine. An inline eight design was necessary during the 1934 to 1936 model years because of the very narrow hood, which could not accommodate a wider V-8 engine. The new straight-eight engine looked very much like the prevailing Oldsmobile inline eight, but according to Matt Larsen and Ron Van Gelderen writing in their well-researched book, "LaSalle: Cadillac's Companion Car," the engine was entirely built by Cadillac, to Cadillac tolerances. I do not think most collectors realize the significance of the new design. Just look at comparisons between the 1934 LaSalle and almost every other car built in 1934.

The 1937 model year saw another redesign of LaSalle, with a new 124" wheelbase shared with the 60 Series Cadillac and a return to the Cadillac V-8 engine. This was the same engine used in the 1936 Cadillac and had a slightly smaller bore, displacing 322 cubic inches



The 1937 LaSalle (nc) was again chosen as the Indy 500 Pace Car.

and 130 horsepower versus the 346 cubic inches and 135 horsepower for the Cadillac. New this year was a gorgeous convertible sedan and it was the last year for the floor shift transmission. As the Depression was nearly over, this became the highest year of production, with 32,000 LaSalle's sold and, again, for the third time, a convertible coupe was chosen to pace the Indy 500.

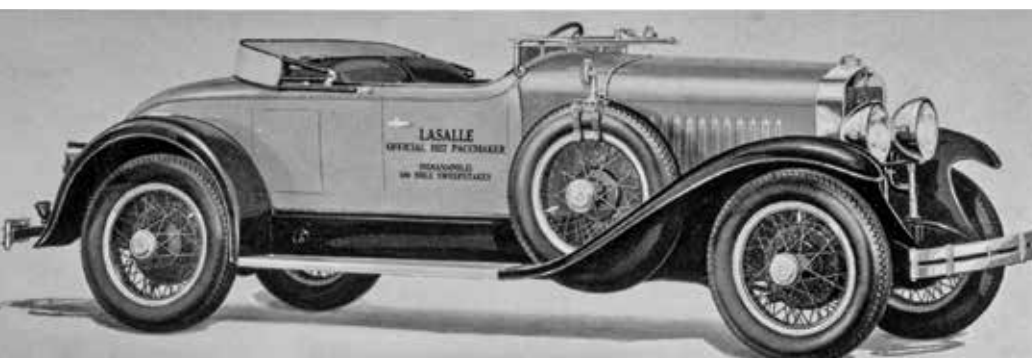
I am a bit curious to know why, in the final year the LaSalle was produced, 1940, Cadillac offered two completely different LaSalle's. The Series 50, with its older but successful streamlined bodies, continued and was supplemented by a larger 52 Series that shared its chassis, engine and the all-new torpedo style body adopted by Cadillac in 1940. The only difference between the

LaSalle Series 52 Special and the 62 Series Cadillac was the front clip just ahead of the cowl. Cadillac initially planned to continue the LaSalle into the 1941 model year, but by then it was too close in price to the 61 Series Cadillac and was dropped.

I have owned and driven three LaSalle's: a 1936, a 1938 and a 1939 (my first car). All were convertible coupes. The '36 was one of the most beautiful cars for that year, however, I found its power and performance rather anemic. Not so with the 1938 and 1939 rumble seat convertibles as they drove very much like the Cadillacs I have also owned from those same years, with plenty of power and excellent handling. When I first started researching these LaSalle's, I had planned to advocate for Classic status only for the 1937 to 1940 models. The more I learned about the importance of the 1934 model and the fact it was built entirely by Fleetwood, I came to the conclusion that the 1934 should be considered, as well.

During its 14-year run, LaSalle built some 205,000 cars and it is estimated about 850 still exist. (Currently, the Cadillac-LaSalle Club lists 478 1934 to 1940 LaSalle's in its roster.) The LaSalle badge has been considered for re-use many times by General Motors. In 1963 the newly introduced Buick Riviera was, for a time, going to be called LaSalle, as was the Cadillac Seville, introduced in May 1975. ●

The LaSalle nameplate was introduced in 1927 and garnered a lot of attention when it paced the Indy 500 that year. (1927 to 1933 LaSalle's are currently recognized as Full Classics.®)



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