

## CAR LIFE CLASSIC

# THE PIERCE-ARROW THAT NEVER GOT A CHANCE

TEXT AND DRAWINGS BY JEFFREY I. GODSHALL

**I**F IS APRIL 11, 1938. A small group of somber men stand before Federal Judge John J. Knight in a Buffalo courtroom. At issue is the survival of one of America's oldest fine-car manufacturers. After hearing from the assembled attorneys, factory officials, and creditors, the judge declares the company insolvent and sadly orders its liquidation. . . . So ended the Pierce-Arrow Motor Corporation, aristocratic producer of fine cars since 1901.

After years of struggle, Pierce-Arrow was gone. Yet only a few months earlier there had been hope and optimism. In the executive and engineering offices of the 44-acre factory complex in Buffalo, plans were laid for a new, smaller Pierce-Arrow to sell in the medium-price field. This was Pierce-Arrow's "survival car," its last glimmering hope.

This survival car was to save a company that had been producing quality products since 1865, when George N. Pierce founded the firm to manufacture ice boxes and other small house-

hold items (including bird cages). The company had prospered—by 1901 Pierce had joined the ranks of automobile manufacturers. Quickly becoming a leader in the fine-car field, Pierce-Arrows became widely known for their high quality and patented headlamp design, both staunchly maintained to the end.

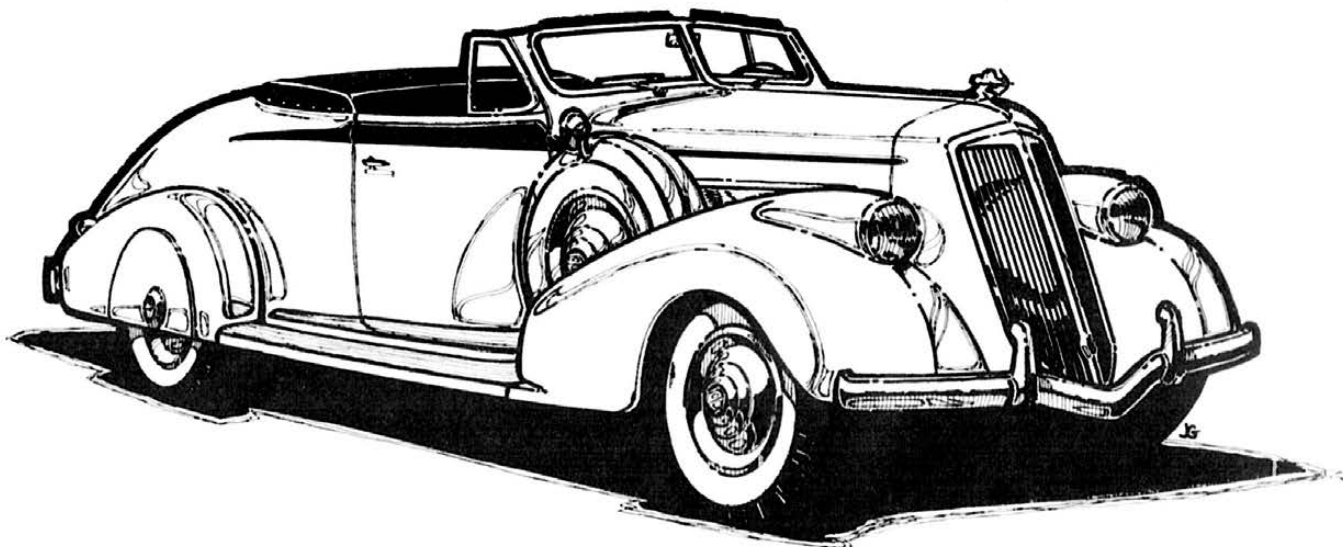
By 1928, however, management had concluded that an affiliation with a major manufacturer was necessary to the company's survival in the coming world of mass production. Thus in August of that year a merger with Studebaker was announced that seemed to assure Pierce-Arrow's future.

But even so large and stable a manufacturer as Studebaker was not immune to the devastating effects of the Great Depression. Studebaker was in receivership by 1933 and desperately needed cash. To raise money, the Studebaker receivers sold Pierce-Arrow to a group of prominent Buffalo businessmen and bankers who came forth with \$1-million. On August 23, 1933, Pierce-Arrow again became an

independent automobile company.

But P-A registrations had fallen from a 1929 high of 8442 to only 2152 in 1933, and the new owners felt that a connection with a larger company was still desirable. But P-A was unable to find a suitable partner and the company underwent a financial reorganization in March, 1935. A new Pierce-Arrow Motor Corp. acquired the assets of the former company. Despite falling sales, the new company proceeded to introduce the finest cars in its long history with the 1936 models.

Featured were completely new bodies with some of the most graceful styling ever to appear on a Pierce-Arrow chassis. Safety was a prime consideration. The new cars featured the most rugged frame ever found in an American automobile up to that time. An improved braking system was so efficient that a 5600-lb. Pierce-Arrow could be stopped in less than half the time and distance set as standards by the laws of 22 states. The new line included three series—a 150-bhp



## PIERCE-ARROW

continued

straight eight on 139- and 144-in. wheelbases; a 185-hhp V-12 on these same wheelbases; and a Custom Twelve on a 147-in. wheelbase.

Yet despite the new styling and engineering, sales were a dismal 787 cars during the calendar year, even less than in 1935. This came as a bitter disappointment to Pierce officials.

The 1937 models were continuations of the previous year, and sales continued to fall, this time to 167 cars. Production lines were shut down and the huge plant was closed early in 1937. The company was at a standstill, drifting, seemingly suspended in time.

But abruptly in August, 1937, Pierce-Arrow came to life. President Arthur J. Chanter announced the company was preparing to storm the medium-price field with a new car to sell for \$1200. Obviously looking to Packard's success with its cheaper car, Pierce-Arrow hoped to stage a successful comeback of its own. Officials estimated that a 1938 production schedule of 1200 senior cars, 4800 trailers (a Pierce-Arrow diversification), and 25,000 of the new medium-price cars

would earn the company \$1.8-million before Federal taxes. To build the "survival car," Pierce was planning to raise the \$11-million necessary through the sale of 1.3-million shares of stock.

In the winter of 1937-38, the stock market collapsed again and with it Pierce-Arrow's hope of survival. When it became apparent the company was through, Judge Knight had no choice but to order the liquidation a few months later. Automotive history is full of "ifs." If Pierce had been able to raise the money, it would have been able to go ahead with its cheaper car. But what kind of a car? What would the \$1200 Pierce-Arrow have been like?

The price class that P-A was preparing to enter was a tough one. Included in the group of cars priced from \$1000 to \$1400 were the Buick Century 8; Chrysler Imperial 8; Graham Supercharger 6; Hudson 8; Hupmobile 6 and 8; La Salle V-8; Lincoln-Zephyr V-12; Nash Ambassador 8; Oldsmobile 8; Packard 6 and 8; and the Studebaker President 8. The company was to place its new Pierce-Arrow squarely in the middle of this field at \$1200.

A completely new car was needed, but lack of development time was a major obstacle. There was no time to style and tool a new body.

Pierce apparently was going to utilize the body dies for the 1935-36 Reo, changed where necessary to provide a

Pierce-Arrow look. These bodies, built by Budd, were also used by Graham-Paige for the 1936-37 models. At Reo, the cars were made on 115- and 118-in. wheelbases. But the new Pierce had to be as big as the average car in the \$1200 class, which meant a wheelbase of 125 in. The use of a borrowed body was a compromise, but the dies were modern enough to be used until a new body could be tooled up for, say, 1940. Pierce was noted for its conservative styling anyway, and it was the allure of the Pierce-Arrow name that was to be the car's main attraction, not advanced styling.

The car, never produced even as a prototype, probably would have looked like the drawings shown here. A Pierce-Arrow front end grafted onto the Reo-Graham body would provide the necessary look, together with new body moldings styled like the senior cars. Styling was kept up-to-date with the addition of more rectangular fenders in the current vogue. But since this was to be a medium-price car, economies would be necessary. Grille construction would be modified to use cheaper stampings without thermostatically operated shutters. Single-bar bumpers would replace the multi-piece design of the senior cars, and operating ventilators in the hood sides gave way to stamped louvers. Traditional fender-mounted headlights, a Pierce-Arrow hallmark, would be retained, but the advanced driving light system

mounted to the grille sides in the larger cars would be optional. Upholstery and other interior appointments were to be reduced to a level befitting the projected price tag. Included in the cost reduction were less luxurious fabrics and elimination of such accessories as the instrument panel tachometer and cigar lighters and vanity cases in the rear compartments.

Standard body styles would include a six-passenger, four-door trunk sedan and a three-passenger, two-door coupe (five-passenger with rumble seat). A third model, a convertible coupe, would add the necessary glamor to the line. Equipped with sidemounts, white sidewall tires, and fender skirts, it would be the showroom "attention-getter."

In laying out the new car, the engine presented the most serious problem. Company engineers would have naturally wanted to use a Pierce engine but their existing straight-eight and V-12 were large, heavy, and expensive to build. What was needed was a smaller, lighter eight for the new car, but again there wasn't time to design and tool a new powerplant.

Using a Continental or Lycoming engine was probably considered, but the sales department would have insisted on a genuine Pierce engine. So the engineers had little choice but to use one off the factory shelf, in this case, the company's straight-eight. With a 3.5 x 5.0 bore and stroke, the 385-cid engine produced 150 bhp at 3400 rpm. Installed in a \$1200 car, it

would be the largest engine in its field, the closest being the Buick Century with 320 cid and 144 bhp. To reduce the engine's cost somewhat, certain features had to be sacrificed. Hydraulic valve lifters became mechanical tappets, aluminum pistons lost their Invar struts, and the aluminum cylinder head gave way to cast iron. Yet with its large displacement and 6.4:1 compression ratio, the engine guaranteed Pierce-Arrow leadership in the medium-price field.

But more cost cutting was needed. The new chassis would be adequate, but some traditional P-A features would be dropped. Quadruple mufflers, automatic starting, and power brakes were too costly for a \$1200-car. Freewheeling and automatic overdrive became options rather than standard. The semi-elliptic springs lost their ball-bearing shackles. But the design approach to the new chassis would not be entirely negative. Pierce-Arrow engineers had the opportunity to add more modern features such as hydraulic brakes and stamped steel wheels, replacing the mechanical power brakes and wire and steel artillery wheels on the senior cars. And 7.00 x 16 tires would be standard, with six-wheel equipment optional.

Economically, 1938 was a bad year in general and a very bad year for the automobile industry. Nearly every manufacturer saw sales decline by half. Packard, which produced 109,518 cars in 1937 was to build only 50,260 in 1938. An example of the

fate awaiting any company trying to enter the medium-price market that year was Hupmobile. Out of production for 18 months, Hupp had struggled valiantly to re-enter the field with a new 1938 car and a projected run of 15,000 units. Actual production amounted to 1800 cars. Pierce-Arrow was in even worse shape than Hupp, and its dealer organization was a shambles. On January 1, 1938 there were just 70 Pierce-Arrow dealers in the United States, and only 28 of these handled Pierce-Arrow exclusively. This moribund dealer organization was the real problem. Without more dealers, the new Pierce-Arrow would have failed in any case.

If Pierce had survived 1938, it might have made a profit in 1939 when industry sales picked up, and by 1941 could have been engaged in defense production. Perhaps we might have seen planes and boats powered with Pierce-Arrow engines during World War II. Perhaps.

But there was no medium-price Pierce-Arrow and the "survival car" remained only a paper dream. After the liquidation order, Pierce-Arrow assets were slowly sold off piecemeal to the highest bidder.

Early in 1939, president Chanter, who had been overseeing the liquidation, asked plaintively if anyone would be interested in buying the Pierce-Arrow name. Chanter believed there was "considerable trade value in such a well-known name," but there were no buyers. ■

