

Like A Rock: Chevy Celebrates 100th Anniversary

Tom Krisher, AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — We saw the USA in them. We drove them to the levee. We even worked on our night moves in their back seats.

For a century, Chevrolets won America's love with their safety, convenience, style and speed — even if sometimes they were clunky, or had problems with rust or their rear suspensions.

Chevy, which lays claim to being the top-selling auto brand of all time, celebrates its 100th birthday on Thursday.

For most of its life, Chevy stayed a fender ahead of the competition by bringing innovations like all-steel bodies, automatic shifting, electric headlamps and power steering to regular folks at a low cost.

Chevy also embedded itself in American culture, sometimes changing it by knowing what people wanted to drive before they did. Snappy jingles and slogans dominated radio and television, and bands mentioned Chevys in more than 700 songs. No other automotive brand has come close to the adoration that Chevy won from customers, especially in the 1950s and '60s.

"The American car from the mid-1930s to the end of the '60s was a Chevrolet," said John Heitmann, an automotive history professor at the University of Dayton and author of a book about the automobile's impact on American life. "It was the car of the aspiring American lower and middle classes for a long period."

On the way to selling more than 204 million cars and trucks, Chevy invented the sport utility vehicle and an electric car with a generator on board to keep it going when the batteries die.

But it also helped ruin General Motors Co.'s reputation for many. In the 1970s, it began cranking out rust-prone, nondescript cars with gremlin-infested motors and transmissions. Now it's in the midst of a comeback, selling better-quality vehicles as a global brand with 60 percent of its sales coming outside the United States.

Chevrolet Motor Co., was launched on Nov 3, 1911, in Detroit when Louis Chevrolet, a Swiss-born race car driver and engineer, joined ousted GM founder William "Billy" Durant to start a new brand.

Their first car was the stylish and speedy Series C "Classic Six." It had a powerful six-cylinder engine at a time when most cars had only four. And it came with an electric starter and headlamps, which were a rarity. But at \$2,150 (\$50,000 today, when adjusted for inflation), it was out of reach for most people.

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

Their next car, the "Little," was smaller and less-expensive, with a reliable four-cylinder engine. It was far more successful.

But the founders clashed over the future of the company. Chevrolet wanted to pursue his dream of building high-performance cars, while Durant was determined to cater to the masses. In 1915, Durant bought out Chevrolet, who returned to auto racing.

A year after Chevrolet's departure, the company sold about 70,000 cars, giving Durant enough cash to take control of GM. He later made Chevy a separate division of the company.

While Fords were made of wood and canvas, Chevys were steel, giving drivers more comfort and safety. Chevy had independent suspensions for each wheel that made cars ride and handle better. And it mass-produced modern hydraulic brakes, which stopped cars with less effort and didn't pull to one side like the mechanical brakes used by Ford, according to Heitmann.

By 1927, Chevy overtook Ford as the country's most popular brand, selling more than 1 million cars that year.

Through a combination of innovation and affordability, Chevy was the top U.S. brand for 52 of the next 83 years.

In 1950, Chevy became the first low-priced brand with an automatic transmission. But while most Chevys were practical, cheap and cost little to maintain, these vehicles also lacked a stylistic distinction from other brands.

That all changed in 1955, when Legendary GM design head Harley Earl created a car known for its beauty and speed. The Bel Air had chrome accents and was powered by a small, V-8 engine. For those who couldn't afford a Bel Air, Chevy made plainer, low-cost versions, the 210 and the 150.

Through Earl, Chevy gave cars personalities, and made style as important as mechanics. The Bel Air was among the first car models that could be customized. Two-tone paint, four-barrel carburetors and AM radios with rear speakers were all available — for a price.

Chevy's timing was good. The Bel Air hit the marketplace in the flush years after World War II, just as American culture was becoming more car-centric.

"Because of its design, it really woke up the culture," said Jim Mattison, a Chevrolet sales executive in the 1960s who often speaks about the brand's history.

Chevy sold 1.49 million or more of the cars from 1955 through 1957, the period that many consider GM's finest.

As a 17-year-old high school student in South St. Paul, Minn., Kirby Lawrence borrowed \$2,000 to buy a 210 hardtop and repaid the loan with the money he

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earned working at his father's plumbing business.

"It was the most powerful thing around, and it was very reasonably priced," said Lawrence, now 74 and the historian for a Minnesota-based club called Chevy's Best, made up mainly of people who have restored 1955-57 Chevys.

As the cars caught on, Chevy's advertising did, too. The "Dinah Shore Chevy Show" made its television debut in 1956, featuring Shore singing "See the USA in your Chevrolet" at the end of every one-hour show. Chevy used the song in its ads after the show ended in 1963. The ads got even bigger as Chevy sponsored singer Pat Boone's variety show and the popular western series "Bonanza." Chevy even arranged for the Corvette to star in the early 1960s series "Route 66," about two men finding themselves while driving across the country.

With the 1960s came another Chevy sales boom, led by the Corvette Sting Ray, the Impala family car and the muscular Camaro. The Sting Ray, the second generation of the Corvette, came with hidden headlights and jet-like looks. Even though relatively few Sting Rays were sold, it cemented Corvette as a cool brand.

But in the mid-'60s, Chevy's hot streak went cold.

Safety problems surfaced with the Corvair, a compact car with the engine in the rear, a feature previously found only in Volkswagens and exotic race cars. On early models, the suspension couldn't handle the rear weight, and the car could spin out of control. Consumer advocate Ralph Nader publicized its problems in his book "Unsafe at any Speed."

Throughout the 1970s, a variety of Chevy models, including the Vega, gained notoriety for their reliability problems. The timing couldn't have been worse. It coincided with the rise of Toyota and Honda, which earned kudos for reliability.

Don McLean's hit song "American Pie" in 1971 ("Drove my Chevy to the levee, but the levee was dry") and Bob Seger's "Night Moves" in 1976 ("Out in the back seat of my '60 Chevy ...") kept the brand on many lips, as did the jingle "Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet."

A catchy 1980s ad proclaimed Chevy the "Heartbeat of America." But for most people, it wasn't.

"The Chevy car moved from something that at one time captured the spirit of Americans to something so unexciting that only an old person with no interest in automobiles would buy one," Heitmann said.

Cheap gas and a robust economy in the 1990s gave birth to a truck and SUV boom, and this helped Chevy regain some prominence. A 1991 ad campaign featuring Seger's hit song "Like a Rock" bolstered truck sales by showing the rugged Silverado pickup at work climbing over rocks and running through mud. The campaign was so successful that Chevy stuck with it for 13 more years.

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Chevy, which invented the SUV in 1935 with the Suburban Carryall wagon, sold more than 3.8 million SUVs in the 1990s alone, led by the S-Blazer, Tahoe and supersized Suburban, according to Ward's AutoInfoBank.

But Chevy's lackluster lineup of cars later proved to be a problem. When gas prices spiked in 2008, truck sales plummeted. Buyers looking for gas mileage found little in Chevy's long-neglected car lineup. Battling a financial crisis and a recession, GM found itself weighed down by expensive union contracts and too much debt. GM, and its rival Chrysler, had to be saved by a government bailout and bankruptcy-court reorganization.

GM shed its Hummer, Pontiac, Saturn and Saab brands during bankruptcy so that it could focus precious marketing dollars on Chevy. The gambit paid off.

A leaner GM is making billions again, led by Chevrolet models like the compact Cruze, the crossover SUV Equinox and the electric Volt.

More than 4 million Chevys were sold last year, or half of GM's total sales. Worldwide, it ranks fourth behind Toyota, Volkswagen and Ford.

Heitmann said it's unlikely that any car brand will be admired again like Chevy was in the '50s and '60s, but GM is trying to recapture the magic. New ads with the slogan "Chevy Runs Deep" feature the brand's history, and marketing head Chris Perry says new products are fueling the comeback.

He points to the Cruze, which replaced the slow-selling Cobalt in 2010 and became the top-selling compact in the U.S. this year. "We went from an also-ran last year in that segment to a very, very competitive product," he said. "When we put that product out, I think the passion for the Chevy brand comes through."

Source URL (retrieved on 07/31/2014 - 8:21am):

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