

# PIERCE- ARROW PIONEERING

By Brooks T. Brierley

Pierce-Arrows were made to be the center of attention. Most include a distinctive built-in feature—headlights protruding from the crown of the front fenders—that serves immediate notice of this intent. Fine coachwork is another Pierce characteristic, as is innovative engineering.

In their day, Pierce-Arrows were seen throughout the world. Never plentiful—1,500 was one year's production during World War I, with just over 10,000 built during the firm's best year of 1929—their high-profile uses created a living legend; they carried presidents of the United States, stars of Hollywood and captains of industry. Pierce-Arrow advertisements liked to point out that people said, "There is a Pierce-Arrow!" in exclamation when seeing one. People continue to say that the same way today. Pierce's superior mechanical durability remains legendary, whether the dual-valve six engine or the record-setting V12 powerplants. Many Pierces led successful second lives in roles as diverse as race cars in Japan or as Pickwick stages carrying passengers on early California highways, further enhancing the marque's reputation.





PIERCE

Pierce



Top left: This 1903 Pierce is the "Arrow" that made Pierce famous; built by George N. Pierce Company, this car is powered by a 2-cylinder 15 hp De Dion engine. This car is the only surviving example of the 1903 model.



Top right: A 1917 Pierce-Arrow Model 48 4 Passenger Touring

Pierce-Arrow history began modestly, as a partnership in Buffalo, New York, making household items such as birdcages and iceboxes. In 1878 George Norman Pierce bought out his partners in Heintz, Pierce and Munschauer to create the George N. Pierce Company. In 1886 or so—the exact date is elusive—Pierce expanded his product line to include bicycles, catching the bicycle craze sweeping the country. A sign of things to come, Pierce bicycles became known for their quality.

By the turn of the century the firm was readying automobiles for sale. The first one, called the Motorette, looked like a single-seat buggy with wire wheels, tiller steering and no top. It was powered by a single-cylinder 1¾ hp French-made De Dion engine. The Motorette made its public debut in a caravan of cars driving from New York City to the Buffalo World's Fair. The press raved about its performance, describing the Motorette's accomplishments as "the Pierce Phenomenon."

As the George N. Pierce Company grew, a new majority stockholder entered, wallpaper manufacturer George Birge. He and George Pierce were both hands-on managers and friends, sharing the same pew in church. More importantly, the design aspects of the Birge wallpaper business fueled an artistic synergy with the cars; Pierce pioneered automotive display advertising drawn by commercial artists. Another special high-profile innovation involved providing cars for American presidents (with Pierce-Arrow underwriting the maintenance).

The company's early models—the Motorette, as well as the Stanhope and the Arrow—carried only the Pierce name. They were officially described as automobiles. Subsequent, more substantial vehicles, beginning in 1906 (when Pierce advertised making the most expensive American car) were formally called cars or motor cars. In contrast, the Pierce-Arrow name began as a popular reference, combining the model designation with the Pierce name, and it soon became official.

Winning the first Glidden Tour in 1905 was Pierce's most famous early accomplishment.



Pierce was awarded a grand prize after participating in a 1904 AAA tour from New York State to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, more commonly known as the World's Fair in St. Louis. Colonel Charles Clifton, Pierce's public spokesman, is sitting in the first car. George Pierce's son, Percy, who piloted Pierce-Arrow's greatest competitive wins, is at the wheel of the second car.

The following year, the first six-cylinder model, called Great Arrow, was built. Pierce differentiated its design and construction features, making some bodies from cast aluminum. In 1913 the marque's most famous characteristic was introduced: headlights set into the crown of the front fenders rather than between them. The design was both unique and efficient; placing headlights higher and wider than conventional lights lit a greater part of the road. By this point Pierce-Arrow was well established as a maker of premier quality vehicles. The largest at the time had a torque-generating six-cylinder engine displacing 827 cubic inches, set on a long 147-inch wheelbase chassis. Identified by its SAE horsepower rating, it was named the Model 66.

A watchful art department advised customers about trimming. While World War I raged in Europe, Mary Garden, prima donna and the daughter of Pierce's New York City dealer, Robert Garden, ordered a distinctive radiator cap ornament for her car. The art department created an archer aiming his bow and cast it in silver. A decade later, when the use of ornamental radiator caps became popular, Pierce-Arrow adapted the archer design for its production models.

Pierce-Arrow changed during World War I. The owners sold the company to Wall Street investors who brought in new managers. They consolidated production for the 1921 model year to a single line of factory-bodied cars shaped by coachbuilder Leon Rubay, then the leading automotive designer in the country. He decreed a new simple visual elegance for the marque. Under the hood was innovation: by this time Pierce had doubled the engine's intake and exhaust valves—a novel application in a large displacement engine—greatly enhancing performance.

Pierce-Arrow continued its independent business model into the 1920s, building both motor cars and trucks. Briefly, in the middle of the Roaring Twenties, it was the fourth-largest builder of commercial vehicles in the United States. Concurrently, the cars offered an increasingly aristocratic image, with more restrained body styles and interiors using gold-plated hardware. But consolidation trends in the automobile industry soon began to threaten Pierce-Arrow's viability. In the summer of 1928, the Studebaker Corporation purchased control.

Studebaker's Pierce-Arrow was a completely new motor vehicle introduced very quickly at the end of 1928. The change was as visually dramatic as the 1921 cars, this time drawn by coachbuilder Ray Dietrich. Entirely new engineering included a powerful straight-eight motor, something never



An early chauffeur-driven Pierce-Arrow 48 SS touring car circa 1908 tackles a typical road of that era.

before used by Pierce-Arrow. The line was expanded beyond factory-bodied cars, following the trend to series-custom models—small production runs with coachbuilt bodies—to broaden appeal. These new models were a great success, raising sales 50 percent from the prior year.

Studebaker's plans for Pierce-Arrow defied the Great Depression: each succeeding year saw a greater selection of body styles, with relentless tweaking of technical and design points. There were high-profile sales to foreign rulers, including a parade car for the Shah of Persia, the most expensive car in the world in 1930. In 1931, Pierce participated in the industry's first annual model design change. It featured a new style of trimming: more prominent chrome on the radiator, bumpers and spare tire covers, set off by a single body and fender color. Wheelbases were stretched—the longest was 147 inches—in the effort to restore the splendor of Pierce's prewar models. For the 1932 model year, the emphasis was more technical; Pierce added two new twelve-cylinder powerplants to the line, in addition to continuing its straight-eight.

Pierce's early 1930s lines were wonderfully tweaked with introductions of entirely new series of cars in midyear. The September 1930 introduction of specially trimmed Salon models began this process. In the summer of 1931, a group of LeBaron-bodied series-custom cars was highlighted by Margaret Bourke-White's photography: her trendsetting art deco style made automotive photography fine art.

Toward the end of 1931 Studebaker hired marketing genius Roy Faulkner to guide Pierce-Arrow's broadened direction. He called the process "Pierce-Arrow Pioneering." It included



President Calvin Coolidge was a big fan of Pierce-Arrows, ordering many of these cars during his presidency. He was a famously slow driver—at home in a sedan parade like that for his inauguration in 1925.

reinstating the historic prominence of in-house bodybuilding capabilities, making Classic Era history in the process. (This was a move against competitors who relied on coachbuilders for their most prestigious models.) At the beginning of 1932, Pierce offered dozens of different models—both eight- and twelve-cylinder engine factory-bodied cars, plus two distinct series-custom coachbuilt lines. One group, built by LeBaron, emphasized owner-driver cars such as convertibles and coupes, while the other, bodied by Pierce's Buffalo neighbor, Brunn & Co., concentrated on formal chauffeur-driven models. Without much fanfare, a third new series of closed cars called the Custom Group, built with Pierce's most expensive factory construction, was added to the line. This line was Pierce-Arrow's new focus.

The next step came, in teardrop shape, with the surprise introduction of the Silver Arrow at the beginning of 1933 at the January New York Automobile Show. It was the most important automobile in the world that year. A small series of five of these radically streamlined four-door sedans were built, employing cutting-edge all-steel construction made in-house—highly unusual for a top-of-the-line luxury car. Its intriguing details included hardware production costs equal to the price of a new Ford. Most important, the Silver Arrow's list price was equal to Pierce's most expensive coachbuilder-bodied series-custom models. Pierce-Arrow reinforced this new parity with special exhibitions of the Silver Arrow and the coachbuilt cars.

The Silver Arrow, the Custom Group and the series-custom models were all fitted with a 175 hp V12 powerplant that introduced an industry first—hydraulic valve lifters. This technical feature was the catalyst to prove the engine in endurance runs at the Utah salt flats. The 1933 runs set records, fitting nicely into the 1934 model introductions, which were nearly all factory-bodied cars. The success quickly broadened goals; during the 1934 run it became apparent, despite denials, that Pierce-Arrow was attempting to break *all* world speed records of this type (it broke only 30). Concurrently, the Depression moved faster, stifling Pierce-Arrow sales despite vigorous promotion of the extensively redesigned 1934 models. With Studebaker no longer subsidizing operating costs, Pierce-Arrow was forced to declare bankruptcy very soon after the 1934 Bonneville run.



In 1955, Phil Hill's 1931 Pierce-Arrow LeBaron-bodied Model 41 became the first ever "classic" car to be awarded Best of Show at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance. The same car will be shown here this year by Phil's wife Alma and son Derek.

A fine pair of Pierce-Arrows on the 18th fairway at Pebble Beach. To the left is the 1931 Pierce-Arrow Model 41 LeBaron Convertible Victoria from the 1931 New York Auto Show, and on the right, the 1930 Pierce-Arrow Model B Waterhouse Convertible Victoria recently shown at Pebble Beach by Larry Waterhouse, nephew of the founder of the original coachbuilding company.



Pierce-Arrow reorganized quickly, restructuring to a smaller business, much like its pre-World War I self. There was a surprising smoothness in the 1935 model introductions; Pierce-Arrow shrugged off the reorganization experience and highlighted a stunning-looking convertible roadster, painted delft blue and orange, as very convincing evidence of its new direction. Redesigned models for 1936 made a good impression with buyers, too, initially increasing sales. White House publicity also continued; President Roosevelt's highly visible drives around the country were now being made in a new seven-passenger touring car. Pierce-Arrow entered niche markets to take advantage of new business trends, creating Travelodge house trailers and tourist limousines for the Grand Canyon and Yosemite National Parks. They held great promise but neither they nor the cars were restoring profitable operations, fostering a growing impatience for better financial results by Pierce-Arrow's lenders (which included the federal government). At the end of 1936, car production was reduced to give the appearance of a going concern while attempts were made to refinance the business. The efforts failed; the factory shut down in May 1938.

The 20,000 cars and trucks that remained in use ensured the official end of the Pierce-Arrow business would not stop Pierce-Arrow the institution. Pierce-Arrows continued to turn heads after World War II; a convertible sedan took General Eisenhower through the streets of Brussels, Belgium, in September 1945. In 1957, an enthusiasts' group, the Pierce-Arrow Society, was formed by Chicago architect R. Vale Faro. It now has members worldwide. There have been highly visible commercial uses, such as fire truck-maker Seagrave purchasing Pierce-Arrow's engine patterns and building them for its own vehicles until 1970. In the 1970s, Wisconsin specialty truck builder Pierce Manufacturing Co. (begun by a different Pierce family) reactivated one of Pierce-Arrow's trademarks. Over the years, some of its products have been named after Pierce-Arrow models. Pierce-Arrow's Bonneville days have been revived, too, in a 2003 re-creation of the 1934 run.

There is also remarkable permanence in the structures that housed Pierce-Arrow activities—whether the grand Manhattan showroom at 224 West 54th Street (just west of Broadway) or factory sales branches in San Francisco (at Polk and Geary Streets) and Paris (at 22 Avenue de la Grande Armee). The sprawling landmark factory buildings in Buffalo, New York, remain, too, housing small business commercial and industrial activity.

With nearly 3,000 charismatic vehicles and many historic structures still present, Pierce-Arrow is very much a part of the 20th century. Special occasions, whether this week at Pebble Beach or one of Pierce-Arrow's regularly occurring anniversaries—such as the centennial of the first truck in 2011 or the 100th anniversary of the famous fender-mounted headlights in 2013—emphasize the relevance of and enjoyment to be found in these great cars.

*Brooks T. Brierley's writings include There Is No Mistaking A Pierce-Arrow, Magic Motors 1930 and short stories about Classic Era motorcars. He is currently working on a Pierce-Arrow cookbook. Copyright © Brooks T. Brierley.*