

Words by **Walt Tomsic**, Managing Editor, OpenRoad
Photographed by **Michael Craft**

The automotive landscape following the five-year hiatus that was World War II resembled a defoliated battlefield... very little new growth. The vast majority of cars of the 1946 through 1949 model years were little more than lightly massaged pre-'41 stampings. It would be the end of that tumultuous decade before much fresh would emerge... with one notable exception...



this car—or more precisely, it's slightly older brother.

1951 Studebaker Champion Custom Starlight Coupe

COLLECTION OF LEMAY—AMERICA'S CAR MUSEUM



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The 1947 Studebaker Champion Custom Starlight Coupe—*don't you just love the pre-alpha/numeric era of car names*—bears the unmistakable stamp of the man credited with its 'styling'... Raymond Loewy. From its undercut snout and 'bullet nose' to its streamliner flanks, the little 'Studie' is an apple that did not fall far from the Loewy Design Studio tree. All are visual cues that can be found on his Greyhound Scenicruiser bus and Art Deco-like S-1 locomotive. You can even see similarity between the straight on view of the car's concentric chrome nose rings and the 'target' on a pack of Lucky Strikes... another of Loewy's creations.

As is so often the case, the fellow whose name is on the door and letterhead gets the credit when, in fact, most of the work is done by lower echelon employees. It warrants noting that Virgil Exner and Robert Bourke did much of the actual hands-on designing of the car. Bourke was also principally responsible for penning the seductive shape of the 1953 and '54 Starlight and Starliner "Loewy Coupes"... a car whose transcendent beauty has finally achieved classic status.


Suffice to say, the Studebaker Champion Custom Starlight Coupe got noticed. In addition to the novel front fascia, the car featured a startling in appearance, while highly functional, wrap-around rear window. The design aspect that created the most buzz was the... ah... 'butt' of jokes. The flattop rear deck so mimicked the car's frontal profile that many questioned—in jest of course—whether the car was coming or going. The comedian Fred Allen once quipped, "Next year Studebaker is coming out with a model that you won't be able to tell if it's going sideways."

The "Staudenbecker"...?

Pedar, Clemens and cousin Heinrich Staudenbecker came to America from the Ruhr region of Germany in 1736. During the emigration process, their last name was incorrectly recorded as "Studebaker." I can relate. The Tomsicht family name was similarly subjected to clerical amputation upon reaching these gilded shores. The then newly christened Studebaker clan began a familial history that can only be characterized as "interesting." To wit...

Over two plus centuries Studebakers moved to Indiana, were killed by Indians, opened a blacksmith business, built supply wagons for the Union Army in the Civil War, launched an electric car in 1902 and a gasoline powered one in 1904, acquired Pierce-Arrow, brought out a car named after a popular football coach, had the company head commit suicide over a bad business decision, lobbied congress during the depression to change bankruptcy laws thus allowing the company to stay in business, manufactured B-17 engines and M29 "Weasels" during WWII, marketed some of the most 'futuristically' styled post-war designs, merged with Packard... and, in 1966, went bust!

It's that last bit of history between "Packard" and "bust" that is most Byzantine.

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Studebaker... the final chapter

Compared to the late '30s rehashes pumped out by Detroit's major manufacturers, the Virgil Exner penned 1947 Studebaker line projected a fresh and forward facing image. The Starlight Coupe quickly emerged as the company's 'halo' car. In 1950, Studebaker recorded record sales of 343,164 units.

Unfortunately, halcyon days have a way of evaporating. Korean war restrictions and an abbreviated model year meant Studebaker couldn't approach its 1950 sales record. In 1951, production dropped to 268,565 cars. The company's war experience—making trucks for the military—helped offset slumping car sales and allowed Studebaker to roll into 1952 at least appearing to be financially viable.

Reality was less rosey and in 1954 Packard bought out Studebaker and formed the Studebaker-Packard Corporation. The Studebaker Hawk, released to rave reviews in 1956, continued Studebaker's impressive string of unique automobile designs. The Hawk was followed in 1957 with the introduction of a compact appropriately dubbed the "Lark." Sales of the Lark in its first year were strong but gradually lost momentum. By the late 1950s, the Packard brand had been dropped.

The next and, as it would turn out, last major Studebaker and Raymond Loewy collaboration appeared in 1962, the fiberglass bodied Avanti "sports car." Built utilizing a Lark chassis and engine, the Avanti, though striking in appearance, was hopelessly outclassed in what had become a highly competitive marketplace. The die was cast.

In December 1963, Studebaker shuttered its South Bend plant, ending production of its cars and trucks in America. The company's Hamilton, Ontario, facilities remained in operation until March 1966, when Studebaker shuts its doors for the final time after 114 years of business. 



SPECIFICATIONS

1951 Studebaker Champion Custom Starlight Coupe

Base Price	(no options) \$1,566
Engine	Straight-six , iron block and L-type head Displacement: 169.6 cubic inches Bore x stroke: 3.00 x 4.00 inches Compression ratio: 7.0:1 Horsepower @ rpm: 85 @ 4,000 Torque @ rpm: 138-lbs.ft. @ 2,400 Fuel delivery: Single Carter one-barrel downdraft carburetor
Transmission	3-speed manual, synchromesh on 2 nd and 3 rd gears, no optional overdrive
Wheel base	115 inches
Weight	2,650 pounds
Production run	Custom: 2,781, DeLuxe: 9,444, Regal: 14,103

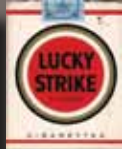


AUTO TRIVIA

■ In the Mobilgas Economy Run of 1951, a V-8 powered Commander with overdrive managed a 28-mpg average from Los Angeles to the Grand Canyon via Death Valley. The impressive showing bested the 1950 L-head Six Commander's mileage by more than four miles per gallon.

■ Albert Russel Erskine led the company from 1915 to 1933. Under Erskine's leadership, Studebaker launched the affordably priced but short-lived Erskine and Rockne lines—the latter named for the famous University of Notre Dame football coach. While president, Erskine purchased the White Motor Company at substantially inflated prices. The move landed Studebaker several million dollars in debt. In 1933, due to feelings of guilt over the way he had handled the company's affairs, Erskine committed suicide.

■ The circle is a reoccurring motif in Raymond Loewy's work. In addition to the famous circular "bullet nose," he redesigned Studebaker's logo and created the iconic Lucky Strike pack.




■ In 1926, Studebaker became the first American automobile manufacturer to open an outdoor proving ground. In 1937, a pattern of 5,000 pine trees was planted on the

grounds spelling out the name "Studebaker." The grove still stands and has proven to be a popular 'hit' on such satellite photography sites as Google Earth.

■ Many of Studebaker's dealers either closed, took on other automakers' product lines, or converted to Mercedes-Benz dealerships following the closure of the Canadian plant. Studebaker's General Products Division, which built vehicles to fulfill defense contracts, was acquired by Kaiser Industries. In 1970, American Motors (AMC) purchased the division, which exists to this day as AM General.

■ In 1958, with lackluster sales and a switch to the compact Lark, the company no longer needed the "Starlight" moniker and it was permanently retired at the end of the model year. However, good names die hard. In 1960, Ford named its 2-door hardtop "Starliner."

■ Raymond Loewy was the first industrial designer to be featured on the cover of Time magazine. Born in France, he spent most of his professional career in the United States. His body of work included home and office furniture, Shell and BP logos, the Greyhound Scenicruiser bus, Coca-Cola vending machines, Pennsylvania Railroad GG1 and S-1 locomotives and Coldspot refrigerators. His career spanned seven decades. 

Michael Craft, ACM's official photographer, created these striking photographs. To see more of his work visit www.michaelcraftphotography.com

Built in Los Angeles, CA (ID G899049) the car is equipped with: "Deluxe" trim chrome head lamp surrounds, "Deluxe" trim chrome tail lamp surrounds, "Regal" trim chrome rear fender stone guards, radio, heater, full wheel covers, white wall tires, tinted windows and backup lights. The car's blue color is a "as painted at the factory" near match.

Six-cylinder Champions had three trim levels: base Custom, mid-range DeLuxe and high-line Regal. All three were available in two-door sedan, two-door coupe, two-door Starlight coupe and four-door sedan. The Regal was also available in convertible form.

Designer Robert E. Bourke created a roof rounded at the rear with a wrap around window system providing a panoramic effect similar to a railroad observation car. The curved window was achieved with four fixed panels of glass.

