

BUICK'S CENTURION: 1971 – 1973

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A new line for Buick, replacing the Wildcat series, the Centurion was built with the idea of a full size sedan on steroids. The Centurion was a masculine, performance image machine that was built with a clean look. The side trim was kept to a minimum with only bright chrome rocker panel moldings and wheel well moldings. The classic Buick vent ports were gone, along with a grille with special texture and the taillights that had bright grids over them. The Centurion name appeared on the front fenders and the round Centurion medallion was on the sail panels and on the deck and hood.

Centurion was to carry on the fight of a full size performance car taking over where the Wildcat left off. The Centurion was packed full of creature comforts, known to all Buick buyers. On the down side the Centurion was tipping the scales at 4,300 pounds.



Ken and Jill Churchman's '71 Centurion

Performance wise the power plant for the new Centurion was a simple choice. It can only be had with the stump pulling 455. The 455 was standard for the 1971 and 1972 years before Buick downsized for the 1973 year to the 350 as the standard engine, leaving the optional 455 for those performance addictive buyers. It should also be known that Buick did offer a high output engine option which indeed is a rare option. The engine option came equipped with the oversized Stage 1 valves along with dual exhaust.

The Centurion was definitely an “all new” and fresh look for Buick. It carried a macho and performance look at a time when both characteristics were on the downslide with the industry leaning more toward economy and handling. The public response was not overwhelming, but Buick did manage to sell close to 12,000 two-door coupes and just over 15,000 four-door sedans. In addition to those numbers, Buick produced only 2,162 Centurion convertibles, making the ragtops most desirable.

For the 1972 year the Centurion still shared the same 124-inch wheelbase platform with her sister, the LeSabre. Buick did make some distinguishing changes for the '72 model year. The Centurion now sported a new vertical grille along with minor changes to the front and bumpers and lights. As for the power plant, Buick stayed with the 455 being the only offered engine. Buick fared better for the 1972 year in sales, with a total of 36,165 units! Of that amount again, only 2,396 units were convertibles.



A collectable convertible

The 1973 year was to be the swansong for the Centurion. With rising fuel and insurance prices topped with public demand for small economical cars, the Centurion along with other performance vehicles found themselves on the corporate chopping block. Buick attempted to stave off slumping sales and now offered the 350 engine as the standard engine for the Centurion. The 350 engine had a rating of 175 net horsepower which proved to be a bit weak when

moving over 4,300 pounds of steel. The 455 power plant was now an optional engine.

For the 1973 model year, the 455 fender emblems mounted directly under the Centurion name plate distinguished Centurions equipped with the 455 engine option. Visually the 1973 Centurion had a slight face lift, sporting the federally mandated crash absorbing front bumper along with a new grille design and a new rear bumper and lights. The Centurion name still carried on the higher end of performance with luxury over the LeSabre. Amazingly though, sales for the 1973 Centurion would end up being the highest of all three years. Total sales topped out at 44,976 units.

Also up for the 1973 year were the Centurion convertibles. Buick produced 5,739 of them. One important note to this. I wrote to Sloan some time ago regarding the breakdown on how many Centurion convertibles for the 1973 year came equipped with the optional 455 engine. Unfortunately their reply was that they had no record of the breakdown. Their educated guess and I quote, "based on the two previous production model year numbers (1971 and 1972 Centurion convertibles), it would be safe to say that at least half of the 5,739 number would have had the optional 455 engine, with the other half being equipped with the standard 350 engine".



A Cohort of Centurions

The Centurion could be basically considered an upbeat model of the LeSabre but was now gone for the 1974 model year. The LeSabre soldiered on with the mighty 455 engine still being part of the series until the mid 1970s. Only now, some thirty years later, the Centurion is becoming a desired classic car, with the convertibles being the most wanted.

This past BPG Nationals we did have the pleasure on having all three years represented. These three Centurions are fine examples of Buick's full size muscle.

Article sourced by WA Buicks