

BUICKS TO THE RESCUE IN 1906!

For Charles Howard, his journey had begun in New York in 1903 when the young cavalry veteran quit his job as a bicycle repairman and headed west to try his luck. Arriving in San Francisco with two dimes and a penny in his pocket he set up a bicycle repair shop downtown. His timing was perfect. It was the dawn of the automobile age and the few locals who had invested in horseless carriages were discovering a flaw in the wondrous machines: unreliability. The industry was so new that garages didn't yet exist, so owners began bringing their ailing cars to the closest thing to an automotive mechanic in the city - Charles Howard.



CORBIS



Charles Howard and one of his 1905 Buicks

Tinkering with “gasoline buggies”, Howard became fascinated with the new technology, foresaw a revolution and headed to Detroit. There he introduced himself to Will Durant, chief of Buick automobiles and future founder of General Motors. Howard walked away with the Buick franchise for all of San Francisco. It was 1905 and he was not yet 30 years old.

With three Buicks in tow, Howard returned to San Francisco, where he met a hostile marketplace. His commodities, which churned up dust clouds and bogged down in mud, were banned in the city's tourist areas. With no local gas stations, owners had to lug fuel cans to drugstores, filling them up for 60 cents a gallon. And the “devilish contraptions” were prohibitively expensive, costing twice the average annual salary. As Howard wheeled his automobiles into his makeshift showroom, the parlour of his bicycle shop, his success was far from assured.

His turn of luck came in hideous guise. At 5.12 a.m. on April 18, 1906, the earth beneath San Francisco heaved inward upon itself and liquefied in a titanic convulsion. In sixty seconds, the city shuddered down. Fires licked to life and raced over the ruins towards Howard's shop, consuming four city blocks per hour. The horsedrawn city was in dire need of transport for water, firemen, the



Scenes of the 1906 Fire, following the Earthquake

injured and 250,000 homeless - more than half the population - but conventional vehicles were crippled as wagon horses sagged from exhaustion

Howard, owner of three erstwhile unsaleable automobiles, was suddenly the richest man in town. His Buicks joined others to become a lifeline, ferrying the wounded and probably bearing Army explosives used to blast burn-proof zones. As the fire swept toward them, soldiers and firefighters packed Howard's shop and the surrounding buildings with dynamite and detonated all in a desperate attempt to prevent the flames from swallowing the last of the city.

Howard, like virtually everyone else, lost everything. But as San Franciscans started over, Howard took the opportunity to lure them into the automotive age. The earthquake had proven the automobiles' superiority to the horse in utility: two weeks after the quake, a day's rental of a sound horse and buggy was \$5, while a two-seater runabout fetched \$100 per day.



Early San Francisco Fire Engine

Howard set out to prove its durability. He tested his Buicks in speed races, hill climbs and “stamina runs”, in which contestants raced up and down local roads until their beleaguered automobiles burst into flames or shed their wheels - the last one rolling was the winner.

Howard’s aggressive promotion worked. By 1908 the one-man Howard Automobile Company had sold 85 two-lunger White Streaks at \$1,000 each. “The day of the horse is past, and the people of San Francisco want automobiles,” he wrote that year, “I wouldn’t give five dollars for the best horse in the country.”



San Francisco after the Fire

L Haime WA Buicks (Courtesy of Internet Articles)