1963-66 Studebaker Wagonaire: Variable and Versatile

by Richard Quinn

Its days were sorely numbered in the early Sixties, but Studebaker wasn't going down without a fight. The firm that brought out the Avanti and radically modernized the Hawk also sought ways to broaden the appeal of its Lark family cars, including a sky's-the-limit wagon.

As the rank-and-file employees at Studebaker walked out of the South Bend, Indiana, plant on a cold and bleak December day in 1963, they were handed a single sheet of paper. The message on it informed them that the plant was closing permanently and all automotive production was moving to Canada. Thus ended 111 years of Studebaker vehicle production in the United States.

There had been numerous warning signs during the previous few years so the news could not have been a great surprise. But coming as it did only a few weeks after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and shortly before Christmas, it was a severe blow to a workforce of more than 6000, many of who had never worked for anyone else.

Still, it was true that during its last few years of existence, the company was able to create some of its most advanced automotive achievements, despite being strapped for cash. Of course the Avanti (*CA*, May 1984, February 1998), designed under the auspices of Raymond Loewy, tops this list, but engineering achievements ran apace. High-performance engines, compliments of the Granatelli brothers of California, helped the corporate image, while the company led the industry in offering optional front power disc brakes (standard on the Avanti), seatbelts, as well as safety-padded instrument panels and a transistorized ignition. Out of this same burst of creativity came an intriguing new take on the humble station wagon.

Famous for building quality horse-drawn conveyances starting in 1852, Studebaker produced its first automobile, an electric, in 1902. Its first gasoline-powered car came two years later. The company rebounded from the tragic, Depression-ravaged administration of president A. R. Erskine to become the industry's leading independent automaker by the time of America's entry into World War II.

After the war, the company scooped its rivals with the first all-new postwar cars (*CA*, August 1994). Between 1947 and '52, Studebaker enjoyed some of the best years in its long history, with record profits (1949) and record sales (1950). Revolutionary new styling for 1953 (*CA*, Febru-

Studebaker called on industrial designer Brooks Stevens to come up with a contemporary new skin for the Hawk sports coupe and to update its Lark compact, both for 1962. Stevens further refined the Lark design for '63, creating a novel station wagon with a top panel that could be retracted to carry tall cargo. Thus was born the Wagonaire, of which the Daytona was the fanciest version. (Owner: Bob Montgomery)


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ary 2000) gained critical acclaim, but a combination of corporate mistakes, cutthroat competition from the Big Three, and labor problems brought the company—which merged with Packard in 1954—to near extinction by the late Fifties.

President Harold Churchill's gamble on a new compact in 1959, the Lark (*CA*, August 1989), provided a brief glimmer of hope—and a $28.5 million profit. The recovery was stunted, however, when the Big Three brought out compacts in 1960 (*CA*, December 1997). In early 1961, Churchill handed over the presidential reins to 40-year-old Sherwood Egbert, a dynamic former Marine who had until recently been the head of a California company that made superchargers. Though Egbert threw himself into the job with great vigor, he couldn't stanch the red ink, and by fall 1963, he was forced by the circumstances of his own terminal illness and poor sales to resign.

During his brief tenure of leadership, Egbert chose to outsource much of the styling responsibilities. In addition to Loewy, he relied heavily on the talented Milwaukee designer Brooks Stevens (*CA*, June 2005). He created a completely new look from the 1953-generation hardtops for the GT Hawk (*CA*, August 1988) introduced in 1962. Likewise, it was his genius that created a sliding-roof station wagon, the aptly named Wagonaire that made its debut in fall 1962. The car was modeled loosely after the Scimitar, an aluminum concept car built under Stevens' direction in Germany in 1959. Stevens patented the sliding-roof design, but later assigned it to Studebaker when the cars went into production.

Studebaker had never been a major player in the wagon market—insofar as self-propelled vehicles are concerned. Its first true station wagon was a "woody" produced in very low numbers between 1937 and 1939. Studebaker next gave the station wagon some fleeting thought for the 1947 model year and actually produced a prototype woody on the Champion chassis. However, when management had to choose between adding a convertible or a wagon to the lineup, it opted for the ragtop. (The wagon prototype survives in the Studebaker National Museum in South Bend.)

It was 1954 before the company mass-produced a wagon, an all-steel job with a name that harked back to the firm's nineteenth-century origins: Conestoga. Sales were good, and Studebaker was in

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1. Brooks Stevens (standing, right), creator of the Wagonaire concept, makes a point during a dealer preview for the '63 Studebakers. Stevens first used the sliding-roof idea on the Scimitar show car he designed in the late Fifties. *2, 3.* When retracted, the Wagonaire's sliding roof uncovered almost half of the top surface area. That made it easier to load and unload long items, and an optional step built into the tailgate eased passenger access to the rear of the car. *4.* Wagonaires were built on a 113-inch wheelbase. Prices for the flossy Daytona started at $2700 with a six, or $2835 with a V-8. *5, 6.* During the '63 model year, a new entry-level Standard series joined the Lark line—primarily for fleet sales—and included Wagonaires. A fixed-roof variant was added, too, saving money and allaying fears of water leaks.

the wagon market to stay. Between 1954 and 1962, it assembled more than 125,000 wagons, approximately 14 percent of its total automobile sales, which was slightly above the industry average.

Of course, being the feisty independent, Studebaker was always looking for an edge against its bigger competitors. The hope was that Stevens' unique and functional sliding-roof wagon just might catch the fancy of the car-buying public in 1963.

The new '63 Studebakers began arriving in dealer showrooms in September 1962. While they looked quite similar to the '62s, there were numerous differences. The most significant of these came from eliminating the wraparound windshield, which was accomplished by creating a new cowl section. The roof panel was revised, as were the rear quarters and back glass. In the front, a Mercedes-like fine-mesh grille was flanked by quad headlights. Narrower door pillars gave the car a more airy look than its predecessors.

For '63, Studebaker offered a full line of Larks on wheelbases of 109 and 113 inches. The Wagonaire was available only as a four-door model on the longer chassis. The standard engine offerings included a pair of ohv powerplants, the 169.6-cid "Skybolt" six or the 259.7-cube V-8. The former produced 112 bhp; the latter was rated at 180 horsepower with the standard two-barrel carburetor or

195 with the optional four-barrel. The first step up for V-8 models was a 289-cid "Thunderbolt" engine that made 210 or 225 bhp, depending on carburetion. For those who really wanted to get to the grocery store in a hurry, there was the 289 four-barrel "Jet Thrust" V-8 from the Avanti, making 240 bhp in normally aspirated R1 form or 289 bhp as the supercharged R2 mill.

Studebaker gave the new wagon top billing in its advertising for '63. Calling it "three cars in one," ads stressed the utilitarian virtues, as well as the "convertible" nature of the new body. Though it was essentially a six-passenger wagon, one could order it with an optional rear-facing hideaway third seat that could accommodate smaller children. When so equipped, special captive-air tires were provided since there was no room for a spare. (When the tailgate was lowered, an optional stirrup step could be pivoted down to ease passenger entry.) Of course, when that roof was slid forward, "the sky was the limit" for carrying anything from refrigerators and Christmas trees to bales of hay and large crates.

The rear window on the Wagonaire retracted into the tailgate. For ease of operation, an optional power control was offered. Turning the key in the outside lock actuated it. During the model run, a safety switch was introduced that made the rear window inoperable when the tailgate was open. At about the same time, a mechanism was added to the sliding roof that allowed for positive locking of the roof in three positions.

As with all new models, there were some teething problems with the sliding roof. A few owners complained that, in heavy rains or when washing their cars, there were leaks toward the front of the opening area. The engineering department quickly solved this with a newly designed weather strip. Though a general recall was avoided, the main office sent a six-page illustrated service letter to dealers outlining corrective measures. Despite the quick fix, the negative publicity so soon after introduction was a damper on early sales.

Perhaps as a result of the bad press from this episode, Studebaker decided in January 1963 to make available a wagon with a nonretractable roof. It was a "delete option," meaning it had to be specifically noted on all dealer orders. Ordering the fixed-roof version saved the purchaser $100.

The Wagonaire originally came in two

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1. Newsreel photographers from Movietone United Press International News test out the Wagonaire as a camera platform after their agency purchased a fleet of 30 Daytonas in '63. *2.* Brooks Stevens poses with a 1964 Studebaker at the new-model introduction meeting in Chicago. Stevens devised a new full-width look for the front of the '64s. *3.* A 1964 Daytona Wagonaire serves as the perfect perch from which to photograph a Daytona two-door hardtop. Production of the new models started at South Bend, Indiana, and Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, but when the South Bend plant closed in December 1963, a scaled-down range of Studebakers was made in Hamilton. *4.* A name change had the Commander replacing the Regal as the midlevel series for 1964. *5, 6.* Patterned vinyl covered the seats and door panels of Daytona Wagonaires. An optional rear-facing third seat was best suited for carrying children.

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trim levels for the domestic market. (A third line, the Custom, was available solely for overseas markets.) The Regal was the lower-line model and it started at $2550 with the six or $2685 with a V-8. The top-line Daytona was $150 more in each category. The Daytona was easily distinguishable from the Regal by its wider bodyside moldings and nameplate on the rear quarter panel.

In January 1963, a stripped-down version of the Wagonaire became available. Referred to as the "Standard," it lacked the bodyside moldings and the hood, tailgate, and grille ornaments of other models. This no-frills Wagonaire was aimed at fleet buyers and the economy minded. Available as a six and an eight, it listed for just $2430 and $2565, respectively.

No one in the industry offered a wider range of options on their wagons than did Studebaker. Among the most popular were the twin-traction differential, power disc brakes, four-speed transmissions, power steering, and air conditioning. Of course the hill holder, pioneered by Studebaker in 1936, and the overdrive transmission were popular accessories on all the standard-shift models. Though base prices were quite reasonable by the

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standards of the time, a fully loaded Wagonaire could set one back close to $4000.

Standard features included rustproofing, a 35-amp alternator, a dual master-cylinder braking system, and flat floors. The padded instrument panel deserves special mention for its simplicity and functionality. Instruments were clustered in three large round bezels directly in front of the driver. The one at left contained the oil-pressure, ammeter, fuel-level, and water-temperature gauges (i.e. no "idiot lights"). The speedometer/odometer was on the right. In the center, the buyer could opt for either a clock or a tachometer. Rather than a customary glovebox, Studebaker offered a women's vanity with a flip-up mirror. In its June 1963 road test, *Car Life* declared the dashboard to be the interior's most impressive feature and stated "it is doubtful that there is a better one in the industry for sheer simplicity and functional design."

The Wagonaire offered buyers an exceptionally nice package, and many people thought them a good value for the dollar. *Motor Trend* did a drive report on a Daytona wagon and was generally positive about the car. The only significant negative comments involved its understeer and feeling of "too much weight on the front end." Of course, *Motor Trend* staff seldom drove a car the way the average consumer did, so their expectations were higher.

Many Wagonaires were sold to fleet buyers. Movietone News United Press International purchased a fleet of 30 and used them extensively. It even shot a newsreel showing numerous cars with the roof retracted and cameras mounted on tripods in the back. All were top-of-the-line Daytona models painted white

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1, 2. Despite the closure of the Indiana assembly plant, the foundry remained open to produce engines. Thus, the '64 Studebakers were the last to have company-built engines. This Daytona is equipped with the optional R-1 240-bhp 289-cid V-8. Though base prices were up by only a few dollars for 1964, Studebaker's shaky position was giving car buyers pause. Wagon production was less than half of what it had been in '63. (Owner: Doug Lemay)
3, 4. The Wagonaire lineup was trimmed to two models for 1965, beginning with the Commander, which cost $2620 with a six or $2760 with a V-8. Engines were essentially Chevrolet designs built by a General Motors subsidiary in Canada. (Owner: Gary Ash)

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with blue vinyl interiors. The White House also ordered one, which remained in service for many years. It was a Daytona with an optional 289-cid four-barrel engine, disc brakes, and automatic transmission. It is unclear what function it served; perhaps it was used by the Secret Service. The car has survived and is now in the hands of a collector.

The '63 Wagonaire was not a runaway sales success, but did find 11,915 buyers. This amounted to 15 percent of the company's auto sales that year. Unfortunately, it did not bring profitability to the ailing corporation. Studebaker began a diversification program in 1958, and by the end of 1963, it had 12 divisions and net sales of more than $400 million. The 11 non-automotive divisions showed profits in excess of $8 million, but the Automotive Division lost $25 million! It was obvious that the 1964 model year would be crucial to the automotive operation's survival.

The '64 station wagons differed from their predecessors only in frontal styling. Stevens abandoned the Mercedes-like grille in favor of a full-width ensemble that encompassed the headlight bezels. (Dual headlights were standard on series below the Daytona, but quad lamps were optionally available.) The front edge of the fenders was squared off and a new hood ornament was added. Bumpers were slightly longer and wrapped around the lower edge of the fenders. Stevens produced an attractive package that looked all-new, yet cost Studebaker little for tooling.

Some series names were changed. The Challenger replaced the Standard as the low-cost offering. Also, Studebaker revived the Commander name (first used in 1927 and abandoned after 1958) in place of Regal. The Daytona remained the top of the line, and it was to go exclusively V-8. The Lark name was being phased out and, while still used in print, did not appear on any of the '64 cars. There were no significant mechanical changes in the new cars.

Despite the best efforts of many people throughout the Studebaker organization, the new models did not impress the public and the plug was pulled on South Bend production on that cold December day in 1963. Only 5785 of the '64s had been assembled there, of which 761 were Wagonaires. What future Studebaker had as an automaker now lay in Canada.

Studebaker assembled cars in Walkerville, Ontario, from 1911 to 1936. Production resumed in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1948 in a new building that had been previously used for making war materiel.

When the decision was made to concentrate all production north of the border, the company opted to concentrate on what it considered its bread-and-butter vehicles. This meant the termination of GT Hawk, Avanti, and truck production. In addition, high-performance engines were dropped from the options list.

On the Canadian Wagonaires, the Challenger was dropped. Only two models, the Commander and Daytona, were built, the latter available as a six or an eight. There were no outward differences between the Hamilton-built cars and their South Bend counterparts.

It was hoped that the move to a smaller, more modern manufacturing facility would bring back profitability. In fact, the break-even point for the Canadian plant, originally estimated at 25,000 units, was eventually massaged down to just 20,000. But the general loss of public confidence led to dismal sales for '64. Wagonaire production alone was less than half of what it had been in 1963.

With precious little money for retooling, there were no significant exterior changes to the remaining 1965 models, though quad headlights did become standard on all models and the wide grooved molding across the top of the Daytona Wagonaire tailgate was deleted.

1963-66 Studebaker Wagonaire: Models, Prices, Production

1963	Weight	Price	Prod
(wb 113)			
Standard 4d wgn, I-6	3,285	2,430	—
Standard 4d wgn, V-8	3,435	2,565	—
Regal 4d wagon, I-6	3,200	2,550	—
Regal 4d wagon, V-8	3,450	2,685	—
Daytona 4d wgn, I-6	3,245	2,700	—
Daytona 4d wgn, V-8	3,490	2,835	—
Total 1963 Studebaker Wagonaire			**11,195***
1964			
(wb 113)			
Challenger 4d wagon, I-6	3,230	2,438	—
Challenger 4d wagon, V-8	3,480	2,573	—
Commander 4d wagon, I-6	3,265	2,558	—
Commander 4d wagon, V-8	3,515	2,693	—
Daytona 4d wgn, I-6	3,240	2,708	—
Daytona 4d wgn, V-8	3,555	2,843	—
Total 1964 Studebaker Wagonaire			**5,163***
1965			
(wb 113)			
Commander 4d wagon, I-6	3,265	2,620	—
Commander 4d wagon, V-8	3,465	2,760	—
Daytona 4d wgn, V-8	3,505	2,890	—
Total 1965 Studebaker Wagonaire			**1,824**
1966			
(wb 113)			
4d wagon, I-6	3,246	2,555	—
4d wagon, V-8	3,501	2,695	—
Total 1966 Studebaker Wagonaire			**940***

Production totals for 1963 and 1964 include output from plants in the U.S. and Canada. Production of 1965 and 1966 cars carried out entirely in Canada. *Includes an unknown number produced with a full, nonretracting roof. Sources: *Encyclopedia of American Cars*, by the Auto Editors of Consumer Guide®, Publications International, Ltd., 2002; *Studebaker Cars*, by James H. Moloney, Motorbooks International, 1994; *Standard Catalog of American Cars 1946-1975*, John Gunnell, editor, Krause Publications, 1987.

Loading Up: A List of Options for the Wagonaire

The following list represents selected options and accessories available for the 1963 Studebakers:

289-cid V-8 engine (over the 259-cid V-8)	$38.74
R1 Super Lark package	$484.85
R2 Super Lark package	$680.02
Four-speed transmission	$188.30
Power Shift automatic transmission	$273.00
Front power disc brakes	$97.95
Power drum brakes	$44.95
Air conditioning	$277.50
Power steering	$88.50
Bucket seats	$102.22
Hill holder	$15.06
Twin Traction differential	$38.93
Tachometer	$53.80
Clock	$15.75
Climatizer heater	$79.95
Radio with antenna	$69.50
Seatbelts, front	$17.95
Seatbelts, rear	$17.95

The following accessories were available solely for the Wagonaire:

Luggage rack	$42.50
Tailgate step	$7.70
Third seat/captive air tires	$123.74
Power rear window	$32.16
Rear deck cushion, front	$10.95
Rear deck cushion, rear	$18.95
Cargo mat	$7.95

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1-6. The final Daytona Wagonaires were offered in 1965, and their $2890 price tags included a 283-cid V-8 with a two-barrel carburetor that made 195 bhp. Appearance was virtually unaltered from 1964. (Owner: Brian Stouck) *7.* Studebaker made one last stab at car production in 1966. The Wagonaire was now marketed as a stand-alone model, though its trim and appointments approximated that of the base Commander sedans. When manufacturing ceased in March '66, just 940 wagons had been built for the year. *8.* To the end, Stevens had more ideas for Studebaker. This Wagonaire prototype, built in Italy in 1962, looked forward to a future the company never got to have.

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The real difference was under the hood, where two powerplants of comparable size and horsepower would replace the Studebaker six and V-8.

After Studebaker closed its South Bend foundry in mid 1964, it was forced to outsource engines for the first time since it purchased Continental engines for the 1927-29 Erskine. Early in '64, Studebaker's small engineering staff began testing both Ford and General Motors engines in the Studebaker chassis. After considerable experimentation, it opted for the latter due to the ease of conversion and availability. The inline ohv six was a 194-cid unit that developed 120 bhp and the V-8 was a two-barrel-carb 283-cid powerplant that made 195 bhp, both of which were found in Chevrolet's Chevy II compact (*CA*, June 1993) and Chevelle intermediate (*CA*, August 1992). Engines were purchased from GM's McKinnon Industries plant in St. Catherines, Ontario. Though loyal Studebaker owners would shun those new "Chevybakers," the engines were on a par with those they replaced and were slightly lighter in weight.

The only other mechanical changes for '65 were the introductions of transistorized ignition, flanged rear axles, and a suspended accelerator pedal—the last two being mid-model-year additions. On Wagonaires, the fixed-roof option was not offered. All '65 Daytonas—Wagonaires included—came only with the V-8.

Sales in the entire model line dropped significantly, a fact reflected in the mere 1824 Wagonaires that found new buyers. Though Canadian sales were relatively strong, U.S. buyers now saw the Studebaker as an import and most opted to go car shopping elsewhere.

Studebaker struggled on into the 1966 model year with alterations to front-end styling that provided an appreciably different look. Again, Brooks Stevens did the honors. He fashioned a new, more substantial-looking grille of four separate horizontal elements and returned to dual headlights. He also lowered side moldings to better protect the body finish from door dings. The Detroit firm of Marcks, Hazelquist and Powers won a contract for the interior styling and came up with some very rich-looking, attractive offerings in both fabrics and colors.

No longer badged a Commander or Daytona, the Wagonaire became a model in its own right (though trim hewed toward the Commander). The fixed-roof option was reinstated. Engines were carried over from '65, but a 230-cid Chevy six was added as an extra-cost option.

When it became obvious to the directors that the company wouldn't be able to sustain even the 20,000-car break-even point, they decided to terminate production. The official announcement came on March 4, 1966, and the last Studebakers rolled off the line 13 days later. A Wagonaire was the last six-cylinder car to be assembled on that date.

The sliding-roof wagon was a unique and functional vehicle. Jim Wright, *Motor Trend*'s technical editor, asked in his 1963 road test, "Why hasn't someone come up with this idea before?" That Studebaker did so is not surprising in view of the many other "firsts" that the company introduced in its long history. It took another 40 years before GMC adopted the idea for its short-lived Envoy XUV, hailing it as the "first powered sliding roof" when it came out in 2003.

The Wagonaire, with its retractable roof section, did not save Studebaker; one could make a strong argument that very little could have after the mid Fifties. The company built some very fine automobiles in the Sixties and gave an excellent accounting of itself in both engineering and styling. That Studebaker did not survive is not surprising given the competitive nature of the business. The surprising thing is that it survived as long as it did. **CA**

Clubs for 1963-66 Studebaker Wagonaire Enthusiasts

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