

The Studebaker Avanti Story



From the fastback rear to the tip of the grille-less hood, the Avanti's graceful, sculptured lines taper forward in a flying wedge. When in motion, the car proclaims action; while standing still, it has the appearance of speed. The all new Avanti by Studebaker offers a unique four-speed floor-mounted transmission without clutch pedal.

From: Public Relations Department, Studebaker Corporation, South Bend, Indiana

Note: Picture and text are from original Studebaker April 1962 Press Release kit.

THE AVANTI STORY

The Avanti story is one of pioneering vision and a gallant attempt to save a century old vehicle manufacturer. A few dedicated people have kept the Avanti name and tradition alive through a series of what appeared to be insurmountable challenges.

Early in January of 1961, Sherwood H. Egbert, the Executive Vice-President of the McCullough Corporation, a \$70 million organization, came to the attention of the Board of Directors of the Studebaker-Packard Corporation and was selected, as it's new President. At the time of his selection he was 41 years old. He effectively took control immediately with his official effective date being February 1, 1961.

Shortly after his appointment he was on a business trip to California when he purchased all the automotive magazines he could find in O'Hara International Airport. Always restless and energetic he began to read and sketch his vision of a new automobile for the corporation. He had been charged by the Corporation's Board to strengthen its position in the automobile business. When he returned from his trip, he called famed industrial designer Raymond Loewy to review some design concepts.

Loewy had designed cars for Studebaker in the past but was astounded at the clarity and advanced looks of Egbert's drawings. Loewy was quoted as having said "I did not know the man, but I read him through the sketches he handed me. I knew then that Egbert had a natural flair for design. I knew then that I was working for a man whom I could respect for his good taste."

In just a short period, 10 days, Loewy gathered a team of designers consisting of John Ebstein, Robert Andrews and Tom Kellogg. He sequestered (hid) them away in a rented house in the Mojave Desert just outside Palm Springs, California, where he resided. Incredibly within a week the four designers had developed a 1/8-scale clay model of the proposed car that would revolutionize auto design. Loewy immediately returned to snowy South Bend with the model and presented it to Egbert. Thus began what was known at

Studebaker as the "X-SHE" project ultimately called the "Avanti."

Three weeks after this South Bend meeting, Egbert flew to California and reviewed the drawings and models that had been constructed and in about 20 minutes made a few minor changes and approved the final design. He then toasted the model with a chilled bottle of soda pop and simply said, "Let's go."

Many hurdles remained but the project was underway and Egbert knew that the car would be ready for introduction at the New York Auto show in April 1962. Some of the debates concerned the issue of steel versus fiberglass and fiberglass was the answer. Others dealt with mechanical issues such as engines and versions thereof, brakes, and other mechanicals. In the long term all of these were resolved and the project moved forward. Performance and engine power was a pivotal issue.

Egbert, while concentrating on the "X-SHE" project, was also active on other fronts one of which was the acquisition of the Paxton Corporation, headed by Andy Granatelli, which would allow him to "supercharge" the Avanti. He was also looking at other innovative ideas for the car such as caliper disc brakes, another first for an American Automobile, a roll bar, safety padding protection for passengers and an aircraft inspired cockpit interior which would separate the car from others in its' class. Work continued throughout the balance of 1961 and at last the car was ready for introduction to the public on schedule in April 1962 at the New York Auto Show.

On April 21, 1962, the Avanti prototype was sent to New York and kept tightly under wraps until April 25 when it was unveiled to the public to rave reviews. On the same day a second prototype was unveiled in South Bend at a shareholders meeting and at a press conference. Immediately after this introduction the car was placed on a military aircraft and a 24-city tour was underway.

The car was introduced in dealer showrooms in the fall of 1962 and demand was almost instant. In all 3834 1963 model Avantis were produced. These cars came equipped with either

the standard 289 V-8 R-1 engines or the R-2 Supercharged version. Of course they were all fiberglass and had transmission options of automatic or manual 3/4-speed. Other options including air conditioning, power steering and electric windows were also available. 1964 production was limited to 809 by the termination and shut down of auto production in the Studebaker South Bend facilities.

This was not the end of the Avanti as Studebaker Dealer Nate Altman and his business partner Leo Newman, determined to keep the car alive. Altman set about making this dream a reality by approaching every vehicle manufacturer in the US with his idea but none would take the proposition. Finally, he and his partner decided to undertake the task themselves. They formed the Avanti Motor Corporation and started when they purchased 6 buildings in the old Studebaker complex, including the original final assembly building for the Avanti. By July 1964 they had purchased all rights, equipment and remaining stock of parts from Studebaker. Altman approached former Studebaker chief engineer Eugene Hardig and asked him to assume the same position with them. Hardig accepted and immediately went to work to change the car to accommodate a totally different drive train.

Production began in 1965, with a total of 45 cars being constructed, on a unique assembly line making it essentially a hand-produced automobile. Initially cars were sold through a dealer network but by the mid 70's most vehicles were sold through "word of mouth" directly from the factory. 1978 was the most productive year for the company with 165 units sold.

Misfortune seemed to strike again in 1976 when Nate Altman became ill passing away on April 19, 1976 but his brother Arnold who had also been involved stepped in and took over his roll. Production continued into the early 80's when after the death of Leo Newman the families pressed Arnold to sell the company. Stephen Blake, a Washington, DC real estate developer and self-confessed "car-nut", was showing increased interest.

Blake first became interested in the company in 1975 when he made the trip to South Bend to take delivery of his second Avanti personally from Nate Altman. That night at dinner he

made his first offer to buy the company. Seven years later in 1982 it was his.

Blake set about to modernize the car, the facilities and the way the car was manufactured. South Bend had not seen this type of activity since the original days of the first Avanti. In mid year 1983, Blake introduced the 20th anniversary edition of the Avanti and essentially the first new car in a decade. Many updates and innovations were included in this car. The most obvious styling change was the incorporation of resin-molded body colored bumpers, which just highlighted the dramatic appearance of the car. Another change was the re-institution of a dealer network. By September of 1983, this network consisted of 24 dealers from coast to coast. 1983 proved to be a fantastic year with production reaching an all time high of 289 vehicles built.

Another ambitious undertaking by Blake was his entry of an Avanti in the 1983 24 Hours of Daytona road race. This event drew much attention to him and his company. While the car did not win it ran as high as fourth in the race and ultimately finished 27th overall. This was a remarkable achievement for the company.

Another new model was introduced for 1984 known as the "Touring Coupe" and again was filled with lots of new ideas and styling changes. He also produced the standard model and upgraded this car with many new standard features. He changed the paint he was using to a modern urethane paint to give the cars a more richer and deep finish.

Blake also began another new project and that was to produce an Avanti convertible. No one is quite sure where this idea originated but for sure it was underway. Some people speculate that the idea came from Raymond Loewy, himself, but no one knows for sure.

Disaster struck the Blake operation shortly after the 1984 models were introduced when it was discovered that the new modern urethane paint would not adhere to the Avanti body panels. In reality this meant a whole year's worth of production had to be repainted as the cars were under factory warranty. This was the beginning of the end and led to a

bankruptcy filing in mid 1985.

Cars were not built in 1986. In March 1986 Mike E. Kelly, a native of South Bend, but living in Texas acquired all of the assets of Blake's company and announced the revival of Avanti production in South Bend. He changed the name of the company to New Avanti Motor Corporation (NAMC). Kelly introduced his 1987 models to the press in September of that year and sold his first car a few days later. A new model for 1987 was also announced and was to be known as the LSC (Luxury Sport Coupe). By early 1987 he had either produced or had in production about 90 cars. Reports from owners and dealers stated that the cars were produced to standards of old and were reliable and dependable vehicles. Also in 1987, Kelly announced he was looking for a location in which he could build a 4-door version of the Avanti and at the same time announced the Cafaro Company of Youngstown, Ohio, had purchased an equity position in the company.

As 1987 came to close many new models were announced for the company including a "Silver Anniversary" edition with a blackout color scheme. Promotion of the 4-door continued and work to build it was in progress.

On September 1, 1988 J.J. Cafaro announced he had purchased the remaining assets of the New Avanti Motor Corporation and was the sole owner. The company was moved to Youngstown, Ohio, and cars were produced through very early 1991.

From 1991 through 1999 no cars were produced except for a concept vehicle known as the AVX, which was through the efforts of retired Advertising Executive Jim Bunting who enlisted the efforts of Tom Kellogg to produce an updated version of the Avanti. Renowned Hot Rod and Custom Car Builder Bill Lang was engaged to produce the cars on a Firebird chassis. The car was introduced at the Studebaker Drivers Club International Meet in South Bend, Indiana in June of 1997. Less than 10 of these cars were ever produced.

As did the Phoenix, the Avanti Motor Corporation has again risen from the ashes and now calls Villa Rica, Georgia it's home. The assets of the AVX business and the assets of the NAMC were purchased by John Seaton with the help of Mike

Kelly and cars began to be produced again in 2000 with two models available the convertible and the coupe.

The Studebaker Corporation from whose roots the Avanti sprang was a family owned business established in 1852 in South Bend, Indiana to build wagons and carriages. It produced the majority of all wagons used by the Federal Government during the Civil War and produced these vehicles through 1920. In 1902 Studebaker introduced its' first automobile, an electric car, followed by a gas powered vehicle in 1905. At one point in its' history it was the largest manufacturer of wheeled vehicles in the world. It was also one of the very few wagon makers to successfully make the transition from horse drawn vehicles to horseless carriages as early automobiles were known.

From horseless carriages in the 1800's to the 2003 Avanti model, the Studebaker Corporation and the successor manufacturers of the Avanti have been dedicated to producing a quality product and keeping alive a tradition of innovation and excellence in surface transportation.

See you in the future as I write about our past.

Don Jones, Easton, PA., A.O.A.I. Board Member

1963 Studebaker Avanti Specifications

Item	Data
Engine	289 OHV V-8
Bore	3.56 in.
Stroke	3.52 in.
Displacement	289 c.i.
Compression	10.25 to 1
Compression w/ Super Charger	9 to 1
Brakes	Disc- Front 11.5 in. Drum-Rear 11.0 in.
Transmission	3/4 Speed or Automatic
Front Suspension	Coil Springs w/sway bar
Rear Suspension	Leaf Springs/Radius Rods w/sway bar
Steering	Power
Turning Radius	37.5 ft.
Wheelbase	109 [n.
Length	192.5 in.
Width	70.4 in.
Height	54.0 in.
Weight Empty	3,000 lbs.