

Cadillac Trucks - Some Passing Thoughts on the Passing Scene

By Jeff Kinzler

I wondered if I was the only Cadillac enthusiast watching the proliferation of rebadged Chevrolet Tahoes and Avalanches masquerading as "Cadillac Escalades" and asking myself if General Motors was once again diluting the prestige of its great luxury brand by casting a Chevy as a Cadillac.

(See, www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cadillac_Escalade).

After all, GM had done this before. Remember the Cimarron - a thinly disguised Chevy Cavalier wearing a Cadillac name plate, or the last generation of rear-wheel-drive Fleetwood Broughams (1994-1996) that bore such a striking resemblance to the Chevy Caprices they were derived from, down to the 5.7 liter small-block engine? Yet there seems to be no shortage of buyers.

On the other hand, there was the Cadillac Seville of 1975. Built on a modified Chevy Nova unit body and powered by a fuel-injected Olds engine, (full circle, sort of, if you have been following the story) its styling, engineering and luxury appointments made up a unique automobile that was accepted by the public as a real, albeit smaller Cadillac. But I digress.

Now I suppose that any car manufacturer would be foolish not to "rationalize" their products to make efficient use of parts that can function equally well on a number of vehicles. Sharing similar components or platforms, to produce different cars is a cost-saving game that virtually all auto manufacturers play. But when the true qualities that make a fine automobile unique are lost in the transformation, isn't the overall prestige of the brand somehow diminished?

As I pondered that question, my thoughts again turned to contemporary SUV's, really latter day substitutes for the popular station wagons of the 1950's-1980's. The first SUVs were derived from light trucks with station wagon (or suburban) bodies. The original Chevy Suburban, a large wagon on a commercial chassis introduced in the mid 1930s as the "carry-all suburban," may be the "grand-daddy" of this type of vehicle.



CHEVROLET CARRY-ALL SUBURBAN—112-inch Wheelbase

Chevy Carry-All Suburban, 1937
(www.classictruckshop.com/clubs/earlyburbs/history)

This led me to the question: did Cadillac ever build a truck of its own that legitimately *could* have evolved into a *real* Cadillac SUV?

The answer is yes, no, and maybe. According to the Cadillac Database, (see, www.car-nection.com/yann/). Cadillac trucks were first advertised around 1904 on the single cylinder chassis. These small vans were offered with either solid or canvas tops and were designed to take the place of horse-drawn delivery wagons. Because they were more reliable and cheaper to operate than horses, they held the same appeal to businessmen that the Cadillac car had to the motorist. They strongly resembled the automobiles they were based on.



1904 Cadillac Model A Delivery Wagon

The Cadillac quickly grew into a large and substantial four cylinder car and an even larger V-8. For example, in 1915 Cadillac produced a standard wheelbase in its first V-8 model of 122 inches, up from 120 inches the previous year. By 1917 the standard model had grown to 125 inches with an extended model available on a 132 inch wheelbase. By 1925, wheelbases of the standard and stretched models were 132 and 138 inches respectively. By 1954 the wheelbases had grown to 129 inches for the standard series, 133 for the 60 series and 149-3/4 inches for the 75 series. We know that Cadillac historically furnished its heavy-duty commercial chassis to outside custom coach builders.

Here are a few examples (shown in the Cadillac Database) of trucks and suburban-

type vehicles that were built on Cadillac chassis:



1913 Cadillac Tow Truck



1916 Cadillac V-8 Hearse



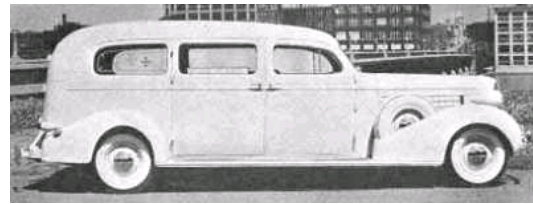
1920 Cadillac Fire Truck



1924 Cadillac Armored Car



1933 Cadillac Fire Truck



1936 Cadillac Eureka Custom Ambulance. Note similarity of body style to the '37 Chevy Suburban



1955 Cadillac 12 Passenger Skyview Limousine

Most of us are familiar with Cadillac hearses and limousines that were used as funeral cars. Cadillac developed a very strong presence in this niche market because its smooth V-8 and heavy-duty frame combined with automobile-based riding qualities, made these cars well suited for applications where comfort and reliability were as important as heavy load capacity. The custom hearse and ambulance bodies by builders such as Hess & Eisenhart, Miller-Meteor and Superior, to some extent resembled the suburban carry-all made by Chevrolet.

So, while Cadillac itself may not have produced much in the way of trucks after its one-cylinder delivery vans, it did supply heavy-duty commercial chassis to outside coach builders, whose suburban type vehicles might have evolved into a modern-day SUV. Some would argue that the association with hearses and ambulances might have made such a vehicle unappealing to the average consumer, but maybe the market just wasn't ready for a commercial chassis based Cadillac SUV. (Perhaps I spotted the beginning of a trend when I observed some upstate college students driving a 1962 Cadillac hearse complete with sheer curtains and large Grateful Dead decals on its side windows, back in the early 1970's.) Coach builders produced some Cadillac wagons for private owners over the years as well, but they never seemed to catch on. Currently Cadillac produces the SRX wagon, based on its CTS model, which is available with a Northstar V-8.