Studebaker Joins Wagon Train with 1954-Model Conestoga

Better brakes, glossier interiors, and a new entry in the hot station-wagon fight, mark next year's line-up.

By Frank Rowsome Jr.

STUDEBAKER is back in the wagon business that launched the company more than a hundred years ago. But the wagon they are making now is scarcely calculated to tote pioneers across the plains. This one lugs the kids to school, hauls plywood back from the lumberyard, and carries the whole family, including the pup, on vacation trips.

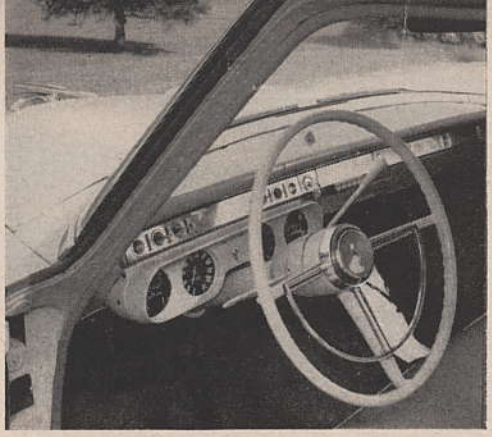
This latter-day prairie schooner, the company's bid for the growing market staked out by the Plymouth Suburban and the Ford Ranch Wagon, is called (more or less inevitably) the Conestoga. On looks, at least, Connie is a comer.

Loewy wagon. Up front, it has the same sloped, downhill lines that made the Loewy-styled 1953 Studebaker such a snaky, "Continental" craft. Beginning at about the door, the lines square out, blending into the same shape that characterizes most current station wagons—that of a miniature and rather sporty hearse. Pert little kickups of rear fend-

ers repeat the rear lines that helped make the '53 car such an eye-popper. For the lady of the house who wouldn't mind cutting a wider swath in suburbia, there are some juicy combinations of color and interior details, guaranteed to green the eyes of other matrons whose wagon interiors are finished in utility-gray fiberboard.

Never a company to let the gewgaws crowd out the gears, Studebaker has also built some solid service into its wagon. It is a two-door, two-seat vehicle, able to carry six persons plus some 32 cubic feet of payload. If you want more space, flip-flop the rear seat so it lies flush with the floor, which gives room for three people and 64 cubic feet of enclosed payload space. If you aren't exceptionally tall, you can spread a sleeping bag out on the 69½-inch-long rear floor. (If you're more than five-nine, try it kitty-cornered, or let your feet sleep out on the tail gate.)

Engineering the wagon. When the Conestoga project came up, Studebaker design people figured they might have to beef up their basic chassis. This turned out to be unnecessary (one exception: frame steel on the six-cylinder job is going to be a few thousandths thicker). The wagon's dry weight checks out at only 170 pounds more than that of a four-door sedan. The Conestoga does carry, however, these changes:

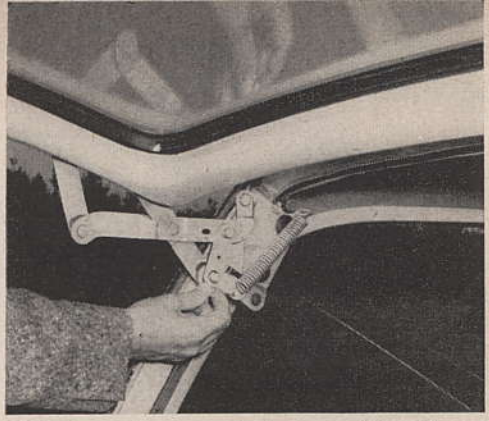


INSTRUMENT PANEL is redesigned with a single shroud over instruments, and has new flat switch toggles. Interior colors and fabrics are going to be extra-luxurious this year.

New rear springs. Standard rear springs, fitted to an experimental Connie, gave a fine ride at moderate loads. When Studebaker engineers piled in a severe overload—some owners will inevitably heave in a passel of cement bags—the Conestoga sat sadly down on its haunches. The answer to that was a special two-stage spring. It has two extra leaves arranged so that they don't come into play until the wagon is heavily loaded. With up to three people aboard,

VERTICAL FINS on grille are the best recognition feature for '54 jobs. The V-8 hood ornament was put on in mid-1953 after Mercedes squawked about earlier Y-shaped one.

FLOP THE REAR SEAT and there's 88½ inches of floor length with the tail gate down. Tailpipe dumps the exhaust in turbulent air behind wheel to lessen chance of any swirl-in.



SPRING partly counterbalances weight of rear window. If you want to drive with it up (in hot weather, a wagon is almost as breezy as a convertible), snap this link over a pin to lock it up. But don't forget to unsnap link before closing window or you'll bend bracket.

the new springs have the same rate as the old ones, and the same easy ride. But when you pile the pounds on the tail gate, she won't squat down like a depressed rabbit.

New shock valving. Having jiggered the springs this way, Studebaker changed the valving on the rear shocks so they'd have a matching damping characteristic. Connie rides well, without that trundling little jowl-shake some wagons have.

Axle and tire options. A Conestoga buyer will have a chance to tailor it to suit his country and his expected service. Depending on the engine he elects (six or V-8), on his transmission (automatic or manual with or without overdrive), and whether or not he lives in a hilly country or wants economy or performance, he may get one of a half-dozen rear-axle ratios. These range from 3.54 to 4.88. If he expects to be lugging heavy loads, larger, extra-ply tires will be fitted.

Other '54 changes. Aside from Connie the rest of the line stays close to '53. There is a new front grille with vertical fins, and bumper guards have been redesigned to overcome an annoying tendency to underride and lock onto other cars. The armrest in the rear of the swanky hard-top coupe has been made removable—not that you can now seat a passenger in the middle, where his tail bone would still clunk inelastically on the drive-shaft tunnel—but a youngster can now stretch out across the rear seat.

Better brakes. The best mechanical news for 1954 is that they've beefed up the brakes. The previous ones got by, but they were hardly distinguished performers. The new ones are bigger, have self-centering brake-shoe pivots, and deliver far better stopping performance.

In the engine department, Studebaker's OHV V-8 has gone from 7.1 compression to 7.5, which was an option last year. This boosts output around two percent, to about 122 or 123 hp. Octane requirements increase slightly, though the engine is still contented with regular gas. (Studebaker doesn't plan to blow any bugles on this power rise.) Other changes under the hood are minor: new linkage to prevent throttle movement on hard turns or panic stops, and a bit more copper in the V-8 radiator.

FACTS ON '54 STUDEBAKER

Model: Commander Regal Station Wagon.

Engine: 90° V-8; 120 hp. at 4,000 r.p.m.; compression ratio, 7.5:1; piston displacement, 232.6 cu. in.; piston travel (in feet per car mile at 20 m.p.h.), 1,637; bore and stroke, 3⅜" by 3¼"; torque, 190 lb.-ft. at 2,000 r.p.m.

Weight: 3,368 lb.; per hp. 28.07 lb.

Transmission: standard, manual shift (overdrive and automatic available); rear-axle ratio, 4.09 with standard transmission, 4.27 with overdrive, 3.54 with automatic.

Steering ratio: 33.8-24-33.8 (over-all); radius of turning circle, left, 19¾'; right, 19¼'.

Effective brake-lining area: 173.4 sq. in.

Springs: front, coil; rear, 6 semi-elliptic leaves, 2½" by 50".

Outside dimensions: height, 62⅜" (loaded); over-all length with bumpers and guards, 195 19/32"; width, 69¾"; wheelbase, 116½"; overhang, front 35 3/16", rear 43 15/16"; tread, front 56½", rear 55½".

Inside dimensions: seat-cushion width, front 59½", rear 59"; leg room, front 42½", rear 41½"; headroom, front 38", rear 36"; seat height, front 14¼", rear 14½"; vertical distance, steering wheel to seat cushion, with seat in rear position, 5¾"; front-seat adjustment, horizontal 5½", vertical 15/16".

Tire size: 7.10 by 15.