

## Chrysler Town & Country Minivan Product Heritage

**Background:** While the all-new Chrysler Town & Country is correctly defined as a modern-day "multipurpose vehicle," its lineage dates to the large station wagons of the Thirties. Derived from the "depot hacks" of the Twenties, which were created to carry passengers and considerable amounts of luggage to and from railroad depots, the first rear-tailgate station wagons consisted of wooden bodies built by independent manufacturers mounted atop standard production chassis. The first "factory-available" wooden-bodied station wagon was the 1934 Plymouth Westchester "Semi-Sedan" Suburban. Both Plymouth and Dodge produced Westchester models; the 1938 Westchester was the first station wagon to be officially classified as a car rather than a commercial truck.

**Development:** With the 1941 Town & Country, the Chrysler brand entered the growing station wagon market with a flourish, creating the first "luxury" wagon that would appeal to affluent buyers while providing a larger and more refined cargo area than the earlier rectangular, "wooden box" models. Described by one historian as "the most intriguing body style of the immediate prewar era," it was first sketched in concept drawings by Chrysler designer A. B. "Buzz" Grisinger around 1938. Indeed, to many this first Town & Country wasn't a wagon at all, but rather a "fastback sedan." Its blend of distinctive (some said "glamorous") design and carrying capability quickly drew interest from potential buyers, but the outbreak of World War II would limit the T&C wagon to a manufacturing cycle spanning only two model years (and just 17 months of production).

**Design:** Grisinger's design transformed the evolving "streamlined" design of the Chrysler Windsor into a one-of-a-kind "barrel-back" suburban vehicle that combined the comfort of a large sedan with the cargo-carrying capability of the box-design wagons. But there was nothing boxy about the T&C; its curving countenance extended gracefully from the sculpted front end through the smoothly-styled cabin before terminating in a highly-styled rear end featuring double, side-hinged "clamshell" cargo doors. From the firewall to the rear bumper, the distinctive body was wrapped in a grid of white ash framing and mahogany panels which contrasted pleasantly with striking body colors like St. Clair Blue, Polo Green and Sumac Red. From bustling business districts to the tree-lined roads of suburbia, no one would mistake the Town & Country wagon for any other vehicle.

**Engineering:** Significantly, the 1941 Town & Country was the first steel-roofed station wagon. The handsome wooden side and tail treatment was a design element, not a structural necessity as in other wood-bodied wagons, and the absence of the fabric roof common to those other cargo-haulers helped take the Town & Country to a higher level of design sophistication while enhancing its strength and providing greater comfort for passengers. Two models were offered - one for six passengers and another for nine. Both were powered by Chrysler's in-line, L-head six-cylinder engine. Fluid Drive was standard, and the new "Vacumatic" semi-automatic transmission was an extra-cost option. In both models the back seats could be stowed in a forward position, creating a larger cargo area, or toward the rear, providing more room for passengers. In the nine-passenger model, limousine-style folding seats were located behind the front seat.

**Name:** At the time of its introduction, one wag said the car's name could be explained by the fact it looked like a "town car" in the front and a "country car" in the back. Another pundit called it "a lumber yard on wheels," a less-than-gracious reference to the copious amounts of wood carried by the body. But both the name and the distinctive wood-bedecked design resonated with customers, and for good reason: the Town & Country was a car that could transport passengers to the theater and other "city" events with a high level of comfort and style and concurrently transport large quantities of groceries, hardware and other items essential to suburban or "country" life.

**Evolution:** The Town & Country was attractively restyled for the 1942 model year, with five chrome bars wrapped around the front end from wheel opening to wheel opening. The horizontal-bar theme was repeated on the rear fenders, giving the cars a much more modernistic flavor than their 1941 predecessors. Production began in August 1941, only to end abruptly in January 1942 in the wake of the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

At the end of the production cycle for the first Plymouth Westchester "Semi-Sedan" Suburban wagon in 1934, a scant

35 units had been sold. By contrast, over the 17-month production run for its 1941 and 1942 models, the Chrysler Town & Country wagon could report sales of 1,996 units, of which 1,646 were the larger, nine-passenger version - clearly an indication of rising customer interest in the new "luxury wagon" category created by the Town & Country.

**Derivatives:** The wood-paneled, top-of-the-line Chrysler Town & Country concept would reappear after World War II - but not as a station wagon. While the elegant postwar Town & Country convertibles, sedans and hardtops enjoyed a brief if enthusiastic reception, the time of the true wood-bodied automobile was to be short-lived; production of T&C "woodies" ended in 1950. In 1951 the Town & Country nameplate was applied to a steel-bodied station wagon, coinciding with the debut of the famous HEMI® V-8 engine and rekindling the association of Chrysler and luxurious, high-performance station wagons. The company enhanced this reputation through the creation of numerous station wagon engineering firsts, including roll-down rear windows for tailgates in 1951 and rear-facing third row seats in 1957. Although the Town & Country brand name last appeared on a station wagon in 1988, it was to enjoy a fitting comeback as the top-of-the-line Chrysler minivan, beginning in 1990.

**Family tree:** The most memorable design element of the 1940s Town & Country vehicles, the elegant ash-and-mahogany trim, lost favor over time with initial buyers because of its extensive (and expensive) maintenance requirements. Chrysler recommended revarnishing the wood once a year, a maintenance tip perhaps overlooked by many owners. But the inherent elegance and ongoing appeal of the wood-trim look led to its replication (with other materials) in subsequent Chrysler vehicles, including steel-bodied station wagons and, eventually, K-cars and minivans. Today, in addition to sharing such 1941-42 Town & Country characteristics as sophisticated design, generous seating and ample cargo capacity, the 2008 model year Chrysler Town & Country also honors the appearance of its ancestors through tasteful interior wood-trim accents.

**Then and Now:**

|                              | <u><b>1941 T&amp;C (9-passenger)</b></u>                       | <u><b>2008 MY T&amp;C Minivan</b></u>                                      |
|------------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Wheelbase:</b>            | 121.5 in. (309 cm)   | 121.2 in. (307.8 cm)   |
| <b>Weight:</b>               | 3,600 lbs. (1,633 kg)  | 4,621 lbs. (2,096 kg)  |
| <b>Engine (as equipped):</b> | L-head inline six cylinder                                     | Single OHC V-6 (one example)   |
| <b>Horsepower:</b>           | 108 hp (81 kw)   | 251 hp (189 kw)  |
| <b>Displacement:</b>         | 241.5 cu. in.  | 241.2 cu. in. (4.0 L)  |
| <b>Bore/Stroke:</b>          | 3.375 in. x 4.5 in.<br>(8.6 cm x 11.4 cm)                      | 3.78 in. x 3.58 in.<br>(9.6 cm x 9.1 cm)                                   |
| <b>Compression ratio:</b>    | 6.5:1  | 10.3:1   |
| <b>Transmission:</b>         | Three-speed manual, Fluid Drive                                | Six-speed automatic, adaptive electronic control                           |
| <b>Suspension:</b>           | Front independent coil springs, rear longitudinal leaf springs | Front independent MacPherson strut, rear twist-beam axle with coil springs |
| <b>Brakes:</b>               | Front and rear: hydraulic drum                                 | Front and rear: disc brakes, anti-lock (ABS)                               |

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