

# Buddy L Toys

Written by **Dan Whetzel**  
Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

**“Since Grandfather was a boy,  
Buddy L quality steel toys.”**

The advertising slogan of Buddy L toys captures the essence of the popular steel toys that first rolled off an assembly line in East Moline, Illinois. The idea for building the unusual toys originated with Fred A. Lundahl, owner of Moline Pressed Steel Company that originally manufactured pressed steel parts for the automobile and farm industries beginning in 1910. The company successfully stamped out parts for McCormick-Deering, International Harvester, and 36 automobile manufacturers.

During the summer of 1920, Fred Lundahl used spare materials from an International Harvester order to build a model that represented one of the farming company’s trucks. As Lundahl explained, he was building the toy “for recreation and with the thought of building something that would not break.” The toy truck was intended for his son, Arthur Bud Lundahl, who was known by the nickname Buddy “L.”

A severe economic downturn in 1921 pushed Moline Pressed Steel Company to the verge of bankruptcy. When orders for the manufacture of automobile parts dried up, Lundahl began thinking of the truck he created a year earlier for Buddy “L” and was inspired with the idea of manufacturing toys. Lundahl personally visited International Harvester offices in hopes the company would agree to sell toys as promotional items. Following a rejection by International Harvester, Lundahl approached major retail stores of the time, including Butler Brothers and Marshall Field; both stores declined his proposals. After receiving a series of rejections, Lundahl’s fortunes improved when F.A.O. Schwarz toy store of New York placed an order for 500 units. According to Lundahl, this was “the beginning of my toy business.”

The initial model was soon joined by an express truck, dump truck, steam shovel, and Ford automobiles. Sales of the Buddy L line of toys were greater than expected with

more than 76,000 units shipped in 1923, so Lundahl decided to concentrate on toy making and end automobile and farm implement production.

Buddy L dealers and customers wrote enthusiastic letters revealing satisfaction with the workmanship, finish, and general quality of the toys—they often used the terms “indestructible” and “educational.” A dramatic demonstration of Buddy L’s strength impressed customers when the 220 pound Lundahl stood on top of his toy vehicles. An air driven Buddy L tugboat crossing from an island in the Mississippi River to the Iowa shoreline reinforced the image of realism Lundahl sought to portray in his line of products. Building on successful promotions and sales, Buddy L expanded its line to include trains, airplanes, conveyors, sand loaders, construction equipment, and a wide variety of automobiles and trucks.

The Great Depression took a toll on Buddy L sales, although the large toys were still sold until the beginning of World War II. When production resumed after the war, Buddy L toys were smaller and more scaled than pre-war models. Postwar Buddy L’s are generally considered less collectible than their pre-war counterparts, particularly those made after 1970.

Fred Lundahl eventually sold the company, and it has subsequently changed owners several times. In an interesting twist of fate, Buddy “L” Lundahl became a top executive for John Deere & Company, one of the companies his father supplied from the East Moline factory.

The Buddy L brand continues to be collectible, particularly the early models. A Garrett County collector has assembled an impressive representation of Buddy L’s and other big toys from different manufactures over a two decade time period and is making seven models available to the new transportation museum that will open this summer in Oakland, Maryland.



Buddy L toys came in a variety of styles, shapes, colors and types, from airplanes to trucks and busses and fire fighting vehicles, that actually pumped water. They came equipped with bells, electric lights, sirens and steering wheels that worked. These were very sturdy toys that held up well and for the most part were big and heavy.

The children were photographed with the toys to demonstrate the size. Children (left to right) are: Connor, Madison, Brady and Riley O'Brien.

