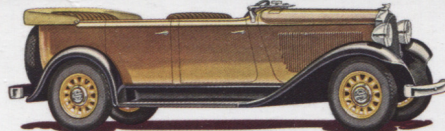


A GUIDE TO COACHWORK

BODY STYLES DEFINED

Hemmings



CLASSIC CAR

THE DEFINITIVE ALL-AMERICAN COLLECTOR-CAR MAGAZINE

NOVEMBER 2018 #170



OLDSMOBILE'S NOVA
1976 OMEGA BROUGHAM



FIREFIGHTING FORD
MODEL T FIRE TRUCK

CLASS OF 1959

DETROIT'S LONG, LOW & WIDE MODELS



LAST-BUILT
PLAYBOY
GETS
RESTORED



PLUS
1910 SEARS
1957 STUDEBAKER
BRIGGS CUNNINGHAM



SPECIAL
SECTION:
RESTORATION

OLDSMOBILE 98
HOLIDAY SPORTSEDAN



Class of 1959

The last year of the '50s saw some dramatic repositioning from the biggest of the Big Three and independents alike

BY JEFF KOCH • PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE AUTOMAKERS AND THE HEMMINGS ARCHIVES

Life, it is said, is what happens while you're making other plans. As late as mid-1956, the 1959 model year was supposed to be a season of carryovers and facelifts for just about every American car company, lacking anything new or newsworthy. It wasn't for Detroit's engineers and stylists being lazy; it was the calm before the storm of the new-for-1960 compacts went all-out against the imports and beat 'em back across the ocean. While gearing up for the dawn of a new decade, and the crucial new models that were intended to shape those years, Detroit was also prepping to say goodbye to an era. Model year 1959 was the last year that things stayed simple, when volume car companies (other than Ford and Chevrolet, which had specialty cars in the Thunderbird and Corvette) were able to get away with offering versions of a single passenger car in their lineup.

Coupes, sedans, wagons, convertibles... Detroit's collective engineering wisdom and might concentrated on a single basic car for each marque each year. Leave it to the stylists to determine how much chrome was on the high-line version, and to the engineers to figure out how much oomph was available. Consider: In 1959, your Plymouth could be a Savoy, a Belvedere, or a Fury or a Sport Fury; despite ever-shuffling trim and running gear, it was all the same basic body and chassis beneath. Some marques had multiple model lines, like

Oldsmobile, but the only significant difference between an 88 and a 98 was a four-inch splice in the frame rails and a couple of hundred bucks in price. Options, colors and styling were near enough to identical. And this plan was going to see Detroit float through 1959 unimpeded, a last hurrah as engineers hunkered down on the new 1960 compact models.

But, the best-laid plans of mice and Detroit product planners gang aft-agley. Two unforeseen issues threw a wrench into all of those tidy five-year plans, and they became crucial in 1959: how the industry would recover from the recession of 1958, and the launch of GM's last-minute, all-new full-size models.

We'll start with GM's new B-, C- and D-bodies. Their genesis can be traced clear back to mid-1956, when GM's styling bosses collectively freaked out over sneak-peaks of Mopar's longer-lower-wider "Forward Look" 1957 models; they made GM's own upcoming '58 lineup look positively frumpy by comparison.

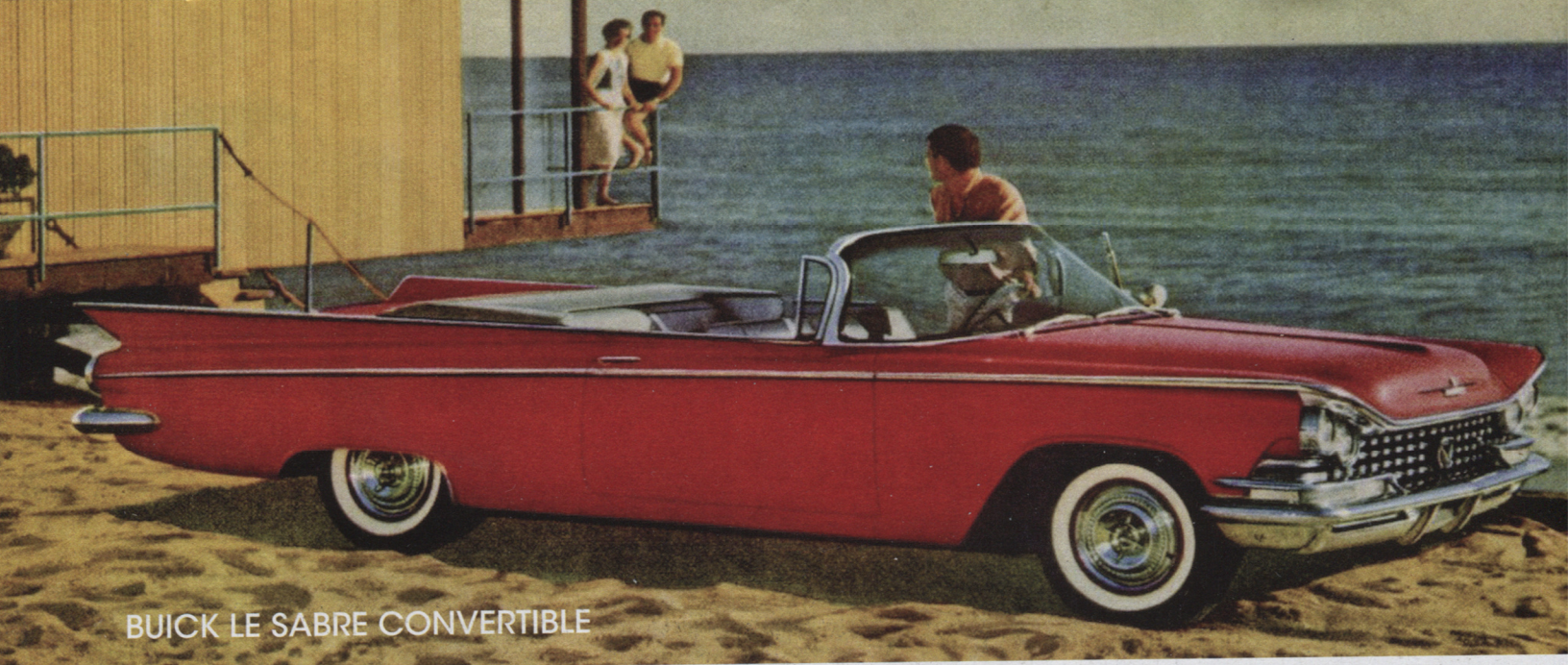
What was worse, GM's all-new '58s were already locked in by late 1956—there was nothing they could do. Or was there? Rather than suffer a three-year cycle of outdated styling and limp through 1960, GM did the sort of bold thing that only GM had the guts to do in those days: it broke out a clean sheet of paper and sought to out-longer, out-lower, and out-wider the



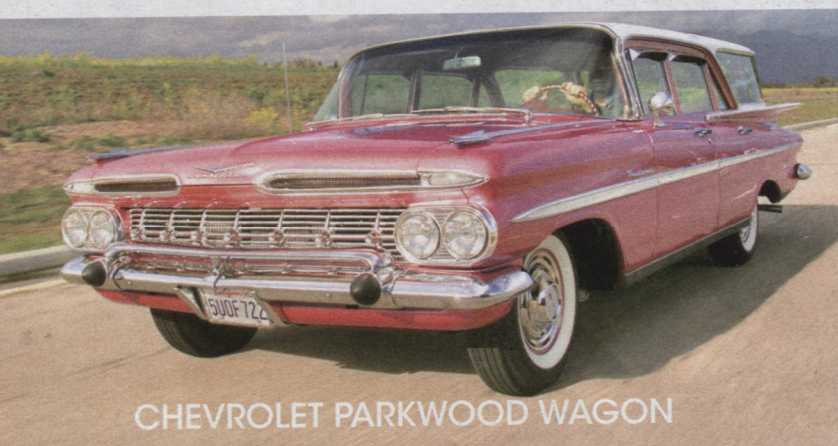
DODGE CUSTOM ROYAL SUPER D-500 CONVERTIBLE



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CHEVROLET PARKWOOD WAGON



CADILLAC SERIES 62 CONVERTIBLE



PONTIAC
BONNEVILLE
WAGON

Forward Look Mopars. An all-new body and chassis were on the docket. The program was to get the 1959 models in shape for the fall of '58 throughout 1956 and '57. This also meant that GM's A-body, which underpinned Chevrolets and Pontiacs for decades, disappeared. The B-body became GM's standard-sized platform starting in 1959. No time to rationalize so many chassis in a crash program like this one.

All of the big Chevrolets (Biscayne, Bel Air, Impala) used a 119-inch wheelbase. Over at Pontiac, the Catalina and Bonneville wagon rode a 122-inch wheelbase, while the Star Chief and all non-wagon Bonnevilles rode on 124 inches. Buick and Oldsmobile shared a pair of wheelbases—Invicta, LeSabre, and both 88 series (Dynamic and Super) rode a 123-inch-wheelbase B-body, while the Electra and Ninety-Eight rode a 126.3-inch C-body chassis. Cadillac rode an exclusive 130-inch wheelbase, save for the Series 75, which rode on a majestic 149.75 inches. To celebrate the new models, Buick gave its cars all-new names. Out went Century, Special, Limited, and Roadmaster, and in came Invicta, LeSabre, and Electra.

A full variety of coupes, sedans, convertibles, and wagons were available across the board. (Chevrolet even added a pickup variant, called El Camino.) All marques, even Cadillac, were available with the new Vista-Roof. The idea with the flat-top was to let as much light into the cabin as possible while still offering the protection and security of a steel top. This meant true hardtop construction (which GM had pioneered in 1949), thin pillars, and front and rear glass that wrapped around a full 90 degrees; all contributed to an airy-feeling cabin, despite marginally diminished headroom, thanks to 1,711.8 square inches of outward visibility. Keep in mind that this style was in addition to the standard four-door body styles each marque had at the time—some with solid B-pillars, some true hardtops, none with the wraparound backlite and roof overhang that the Vista-Roof models had.

And all of this planning was going on while America suffered the recession of 1958, a short-and-nasty economic hiccup that really did a number on Detroit. Twenty-percent unemployment around the Midwest, tumbling GDP, and halved steel production all affected the auto industry. Cars from healthy brands sold poorly (most of them), new brands such as Edsel were hobbled out of the gate, and independent marques like Packard were consigned to the dustbin of history. In 1958, Lincoln and Continental were marketed separately;



DE SOTO ADVENTURER
CONVERTIBLE

for 1959, they were counted together, and sales still slipped 11 percent. Edsel, on the heels of its disastrous 1958 launch, saw a 29-percent year-to-year drop. De Soto's sales fell 10 percent in the same time frame. (Edsel would be gone by the end of 1960, followed by De Soto.) If the recession of '58 continued into 1959, GM could be badly hurt by its investment.

GM needed its new cars to be smash hits, and for the most part, they did well. Chevrolet retained first place in the sales race, jumping 22 percent to 1.462 million cars. Pontiac blew up, nearly doubling its output to more than 383,000 cars and jumping from sixth to fourth in the annual sales tally. Oldsmobile, improving sales by 23 percent (to nearly 383,000 cars) slid to fifth overall, thanks to Pontiac's strength. (It was close: Fewer than 500 units separated Pontiac and Oldsmobile in 1959.) Others failed to gain their former robust sales strength: Buick sold 44,000 more cars in 1959—a 16-percent bump over its dismal '58 year—but tumbled from fifth to seventh in the overall sales race. It's not that Buick did badly (it would be hard to think that, with more than 285,000 cars sold); it's that everyone else did so much better. Cadillac retained its 10th-place spot while selling 15-percent more cars, topping 142,000 for 1959.



MERCURY
PARK LANE



EDSEL RANGER



LINCOLN
CONTINENTAL
MARK IV

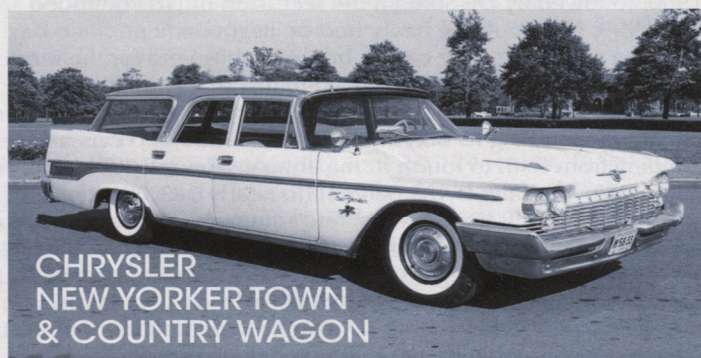
PLYMOUTH FURY



The good news wasn't limited to the General's divisions. Ford retained second place in 1959 and sold nearly 50 percent more cars than the year before (1.45 million, barely 11,000 units shy of toppling Chevy for first place). Plymouth retained third, though improved its sales by just four percent—roughly 15,500 units. Dodge remained in eighth place, improving by nearly 20,000 units and 13 percent. Mercury kept ninth place secure by improving by 17,000 cars and 12 percent. Chrysler sold 6,000 more cars (a gain of 10 percent) but slipped from 11th to 12th in the overall count. Similarly, Imperial sold 1,100 more cars—a seven percent gain, but it also slipped on the overall sales chart, from 16th to 17th.

Development on the 1960 model year compacts started in mid-1957, ahead of the '58 recession, but the failures of 1958 may have helped justify Detroit's decision to get small. The steady onslaught of import cars (primarily Renault and Volkswagen, although a number of British marques contributed), combined with a 31-percent year-to-year drop in car sales, surely helped popularize the push for the compacts that were due in 1960. As a stopgap measure, adopting the "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em" approach, some carmakers briefly caught import fever. These captive imports were made overseas by in-

FORD GALAXIE SKYLINER



ternational divisions of the Detroit companies, and were surely meant to compete against Rambler as much as the imports. Buick dealers sold German Opels, while Pontiac vended British imprint Vauxhall. Ford offered its European Consul/Zodiac/Zephyr line in the States as well. Most of these were dropped after the American wave of compacts arrived for 1960 and '61.

It wasn't just imports eating the Big Three's lunch. Adding a station wagon model to the new-for-'58 Rambler American lineup helped the marque jump to sixth in the 1959 production race. This more than doubled its sales over 1958 (the only marque to improve in the recession year), and was fourfold the brand's 1957 sales. Rambler was the closest thing America had to a home-grown import car, in size and intent; the combination of low price, overall economy, and reliability was apparently irresistible to the budget-minded. The rest of the industry surely marveled at the notion of smaller cars, bereft of the latest gadgets and styling tricks, capturing the imagination of the American public.

But while the compact Rambler could have been seen as an outlier, a new entry from another American independent suggested that the compact-car trend was a vital new category with a huge upside. For the second time in a dozen years, Studebaker was able to beat the Big Three to market, and was very successful in doing so. (Recall the all-new postwar 1947

FORD
THUNDERBIRD



Studebaker models beating the Big Three's 1948-'49 models to market.) Offering two engines (straight-six or V-8 power) and three body styles (coupe, sedan or two-door wagon; convertibles and four-door wagons arrived for 1960), the compact Lark gave perpetually down-on-its-luck Studebaker something to crow about.

IMPERIAL CROWN
SOUTHAMPTON



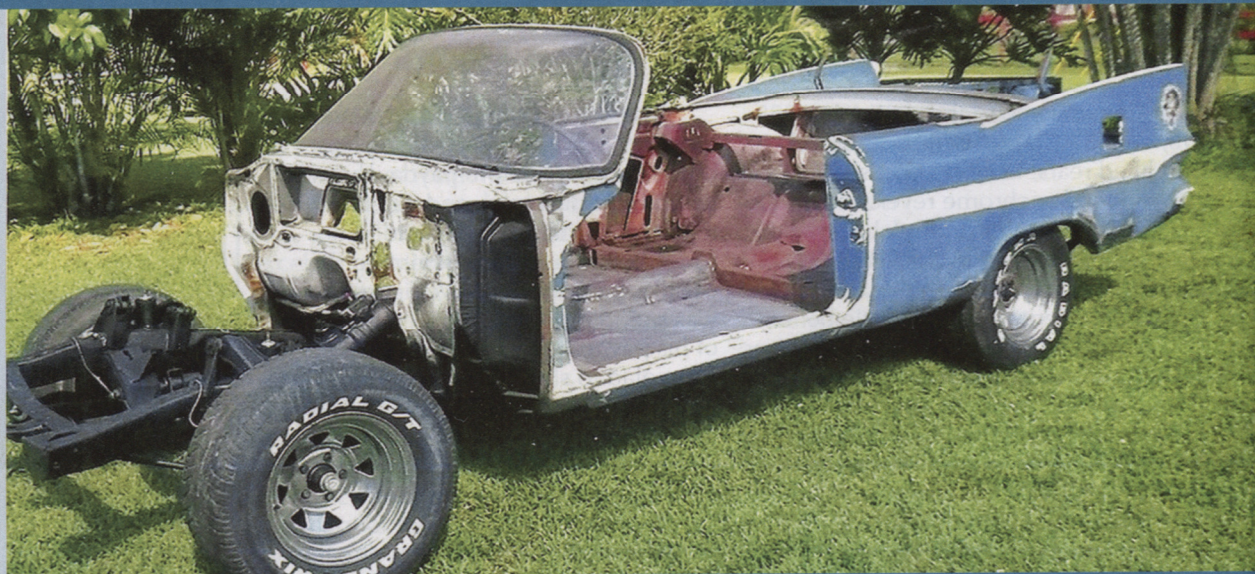
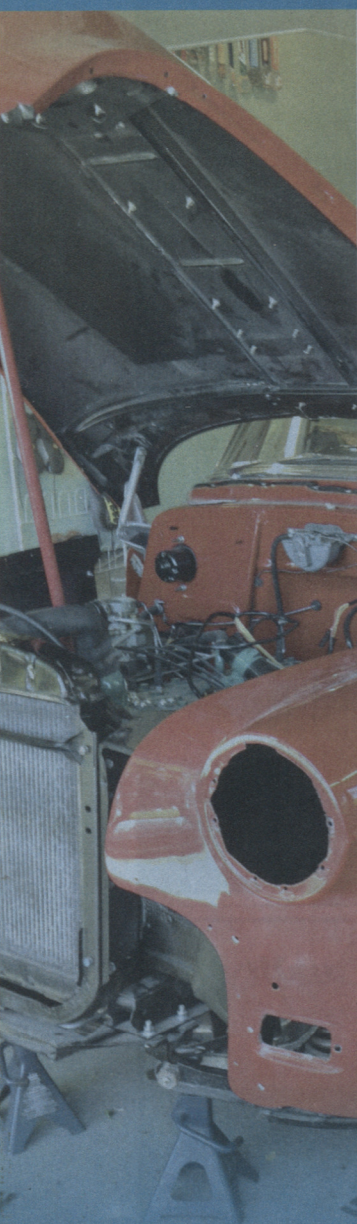
Studebaker sales surged from 14th to 11th in the annual production figures, nearly tripling its 44,759 sales numbers for 1958, up to 126,156 for '59. Studebaker confirmed what Rambler, in the preceding year, had only hinted at: Small cars were the right idea for America, and beating the Big Three to market by a full model year amounted to a coup for the South Bend crew. Rambler and Studebaker did well enough that the Big Three had to be of two minds: pleased that it looked like their investments in compact cars would pay off, and annoyed that development lead times couldn't bring them to market any faster to take advantage of a hot segment.

No, the compact Lark didn't sell as many cars outright as GM's five divisions did. Lark didn't make the money that the others did. But Studebaker's proof of concept, the right hook that followed Rambler's left jab in its compact-car one-two punch, meant that in the long run, the Lark was probably a stronger indicator of the future. GM's new 1959 models were a reaction to two-year-old models by the guys across town; the Lark pointed the way toward a compact future.

Yes, life is what happens while you're making other plans. And 1959 is what happened while Detroit was planning for 1960—the year everything *really* changed. 🐼

RAMBLER REBEL CUSTOM
CROSS COUNTRY WAGON





Restoring Old Cars

BY RICHARD LENTINELLO

Taking an old car, truck, or motorcycle that's worn, rusty, and totally disheveled looking, and transforming it back into the way it was first built, is truly one of the greatest pastimes one can partake in. Restoration, be it an old car, house, or piece of furniture is pleasurable, and oh-so rewarding.

But let's face the truth, restoring old cars is a monumental endeavor, which can be overwhelming if not done correctly. From the start, you need to identify the type of restoration you want to do. Will it be a body-on or body-off restoration? Will it be a high-quality rebuild for street use, or do you seek a concours-quality restoration of the highest caliber? Deciding up front what you want your car to be is imperative, because all the numerous jobs that encompass the entire project will be greatly affected by that decision.

The easiest cars to restore are those that are often referred to as "catalog" cars. The most popular models are Camaros, Chevelles, Corvettes, Falcons, Mustangs, Novas, GTOs, and Firebirds. Because they are so popular, thousands of body parts have been reproduced, all of which are easily bought via catalogs. Being able to purchase parts doesn't make the actual restoration work any easier, only that it lessens the time-consuming burden of finding the components needed to complete the project.

The most problematic issue is not so much the work itself but being overwhelmed by the sight of seeing thousands of parts scattered all over your garage floor. But if you plan ahead and do everything in carefully choreographed stages, your interest level will be maintained, and the project will have a greater chance of reaching completion.

If you don't have any experience doing body

and paint or engine building and upholstery, don't let that discourage you from enjoying the restoration experience. Contract those jobs out to known experts who you can trust (get references beforehand) as this will then allow you to concentrate on the car's disassembly and reassembly.

Prior to disassembling the car, be sure to take lots of photos from every angle, inside and out, with numerous details taken up close, so later you will know just how everything was originally assembled and connected. Then, once the body returns from the body shop all painted like new, you can enjoy the tasks of rebuilding the brakes and suspension, installing the new interior, and bolting it all back together. That's the fun part.

So, how long should it take to restore a car? The question really depends on the condition of the car when you start, and how easy or difficult it will be to find the needed parts. The amount of time that you can spend working on the car will greatly affect the progress, too, as well as your bank account. The more work you can contract out, the faster the process will go, but so too your budget.

Regardless of the time and money that you will invest in a restoration, when it's completed that proud feeling that you will get when you're able to take your restored pride and joy for its first ride will all be worth it. 🏁

50
RESTORATION 101

58
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