

A M E R I C A N ♦ C L A S S I C S

PLYMOUTH 1946-1959



Jim Benjaminson



ing that they would paint 100 Plymouths in glow-in-the-dark colors at no extra cost for an introductory period of two weeks. Developed by 3M, the glow-in-the-dark paint was sprayed over the regular finish. Available in green, blue, brown, and Magenta Red, the colors were claimed to be visible 1500–1700ft away at night compared to less than half that distance for normally painted vehicles. How many people took up Petzold on the offer was not noted and 3M's luminous paint never caught on, at least in the automobile industry.

The end of the model year was marked by an industry-wide downturn from the record year of 1955. Plymouth sales were off 37 percent, dropping from 1955's 743,000 cars to 571,000. As in 1955, Plymouth found itself in fourth place, trailing Chevrolet, Ford, and Buick. Nonetheless, one new Plymouth still rolled off the assembly line every 20sec (total assembly time per car was just 53min). Airfoil styling had come to Plymouth, pointing the way into the future—just how far into the future was just around the corner.

Diesel Plymouths

The mid-1950s are best remembered by enthusiasts as the beginnings of the horsepower race, tailfins, and chrome applied with a trowel. In the Chrysler Corporation laboratories, it was also a time of serious research into alternative forms of powering an automobile. This was not a search for economy, as gasoline was cheap and the Arab oil embargoes were decades away, but a search for viable alternatives to the piston-engine. Chrysler's gas turbine program drew reams of publicity, but in the long run, after

spending millions of dollars over nearly three decades, the gas turbine program is no closer to production today than it was in the 1950s.

Taking a back seat to the turbine cars was Chrysler Corporation's work with diesel power. The diesel, despite the fact that it probably held greater production line potential than did the turbine, gathered barely more than passing mention in the trade press.

The April 1956 *Motor Trend* mentioned only "that Chrysler is offering a Perkins four-cylinder diesel engine in the Plymouth Belvedere as an alter-



The only clue to this car's power source is the word "diesel" written across the windshield. A team consisting of Perkins of England, Hunter N.V., and the Plymouth assembly plant in Antwerp, Belgium, con-

verted a small number of cars such as this 1955 Belvedere sedan to diesel power. *Chrysler Historical Foundation*

native to the conventional gasoline engine." Three short lines most readers probably glanced over and quickly forgot.

Plymouth's diesel engine program was the collaboration of three companies: Perkins Diesel of Peterborough, England; Hunter N.V. of Antwerp, Belgium; and Chrysler's Antwerp subsidiary Societe Anonyme Chrysler. The Antwerp plant was among the oldest of Chrysler's overseas assembly plants, its main purpose to supply locally assembled Chrysler products to the European lowland countries.

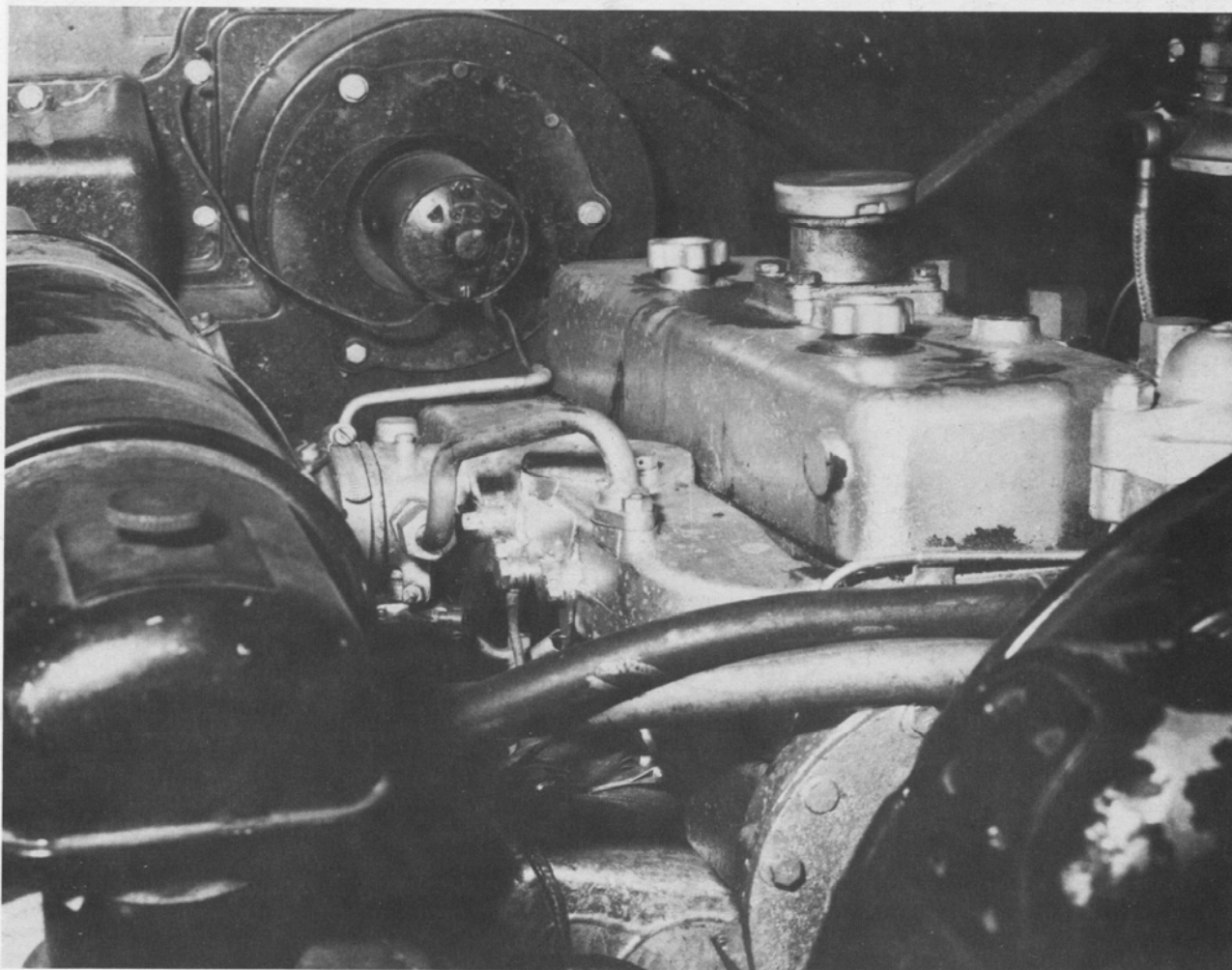
Actual development of the Perkins diesel conversions was done by Hunter N.V. B. Geerstem, managing director of Hunter stated, "We developed the Plymouth conversion, based on P4 Perkins engines. A reasonable number were transformed in our own workshop. Most of them went to Belgian taxi companies and for many other professional uses."

Perkins P4 engines (Perkins had three "P" series engines in 3-, 4-, or 6-cylinder form) shared a common 5in stroke with a choice of 3-1/2in or 3-9/16in bore. Horsepower ratings, torque, and other

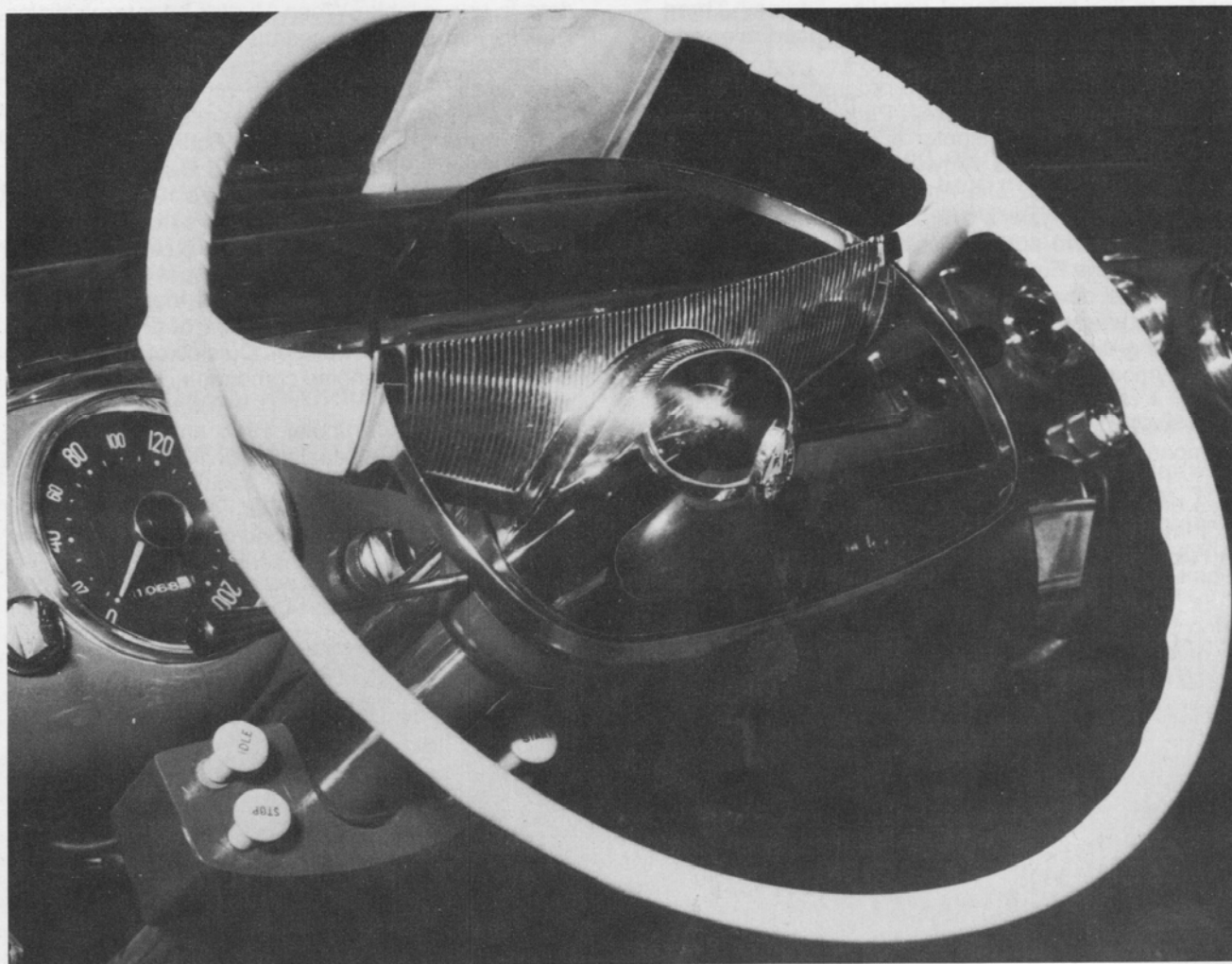
data is unavailable. When Hunter began retrofitting Perkins into Plymouth sedans is uncertain—there is some indication the practice may have gone back as early as the P15 models of the late 1940s.

Proof of a Plymouth diesel's existence surfaced in the Chrysler Historical Foundation archives in 1988 when photos of a 1955 Belvedere sedan were found predating *Motor Trend's* 1956 article. Except the word "DIESEL" written across the windshield, the car looked entirely stock. Interior photos of the same car revealed four control knobs—reading heat, start, idle, and stop—not found on regular Plymouths. Detailed photographs of the engine revealed a four-cylinder diesel. Outside of an additional 6-volt battery, the engine compartment was basically stock Plymouth.

While this particular 1955 may have been a one-off to test the feasibility of fitting the Perkins diesel, sources indicate that about 100 1956 diesel-powered cars were built. In its February 1957 issue, *Motor Life* wrote, "Some experimental work has gone on in the past year with diesel-powered Plymouths in



Power came from a Perkins P4 four-cylinder diesel engine. Chrysler Historical Foundation



Modifications to the dash included special knobs to control engine functions including heat, idle, start,

and stop. Note the speedometer marked in kilometers per hour. *Chrysler Historical Foundation*

Belgium. The research, involving about 100 limited-production units, was conducted by an English firm called Perkins, which has offices in Canada."

According to *Motor Life*, these 1956 diesel Plymouths sold for "about \$750 over the cost of the same car equipped with a six-cylinder engine"—about \$2,700 U.S. "The idea behind the whole project is to develop something in which the higher initial cost would be offset by lower operating expenses," the article said. This was a particularly viable concern in Europe where the price of gas was already high and oversized American-built cars were falling out of favor.

Perkins, which had branches in Canada, apparently saw to it that a handful of diesel-powered cars were shipped there, where at least one car has survived. The diesel experiment was considered enough of a success that plans were made to continue the project into 1957. The 1957 Plymouth, with its much lower hood line (which dictated a 'shallow' carburetor in regular production) was considered a

major challenge. "Whether or not the new combination will be placed upon the market—which might or might not extend to other countries—depends on test results," *Motor Life* commented. The October 1959 *Motor Life* later reported, "Plymouth diesels are being seen more and more in taxicab fleets from coast to coast. Under-hood unit is the Perkins diesel. While they may be successful in cab operations, where continuous running is a factor, they are unlikely to be worthwhile as a private vehicle. The added cost of diesel installation could not be offset by fuel savings in life of the engine."

Nothing more was reported on the project, and whatever development took place went unnoticed by the U.S. trade press. Hunter N.V. continued to make Perkins diesel conversions and still does to this day—a current project finding a Perkins 6.247-liter diesel placed into a Jaguar XJ6! During its heyday, even Valiants were commonly converted to diesel power.



The only known surviving Perkins diesel-powered Plymouth is this 1956 Savoy which surfaced in Canada. The grille is the same as that used on the

DeSoto Diplomat (a Plymouth converted and sold as a DeSoto). Owner: Burnice Bamping.



The only external clue to the car's powerplant is this Perkins emblem on the deck lid. The regular deck lid

ornament indicates that the car was built with a six. Owner: Burnice Bamping.