

STUDEBAKER DREAMING

THE CARS THAT ALMOST WERE



Hemmings

CLASSIC CAR

THE DEFINITIVE ALL-AMERICAN COLLECTOR-CAR MAGAZINE

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WALTER P. CHRYSLER
PROFILE OF BRILLIANCE



GM'S FIRESTORM
LIGHT TRUCKS OF '73-'87

1940

LINCOLN

Continental

AN AMERICAN MASTERPIECE



RESTORATION PROFILE

1959 PLYMOUTH BELVEDERE—
FROM PARTS CAR TO SHOW-
WINNING BEAUTY — **PART I**



PLUS:

- OLDS HISTORY—PART II
- 1940 LA SALLE
- 1961 RAMBLER

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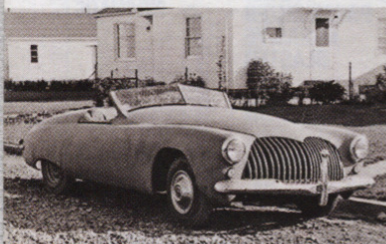
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Belvedere Beauty

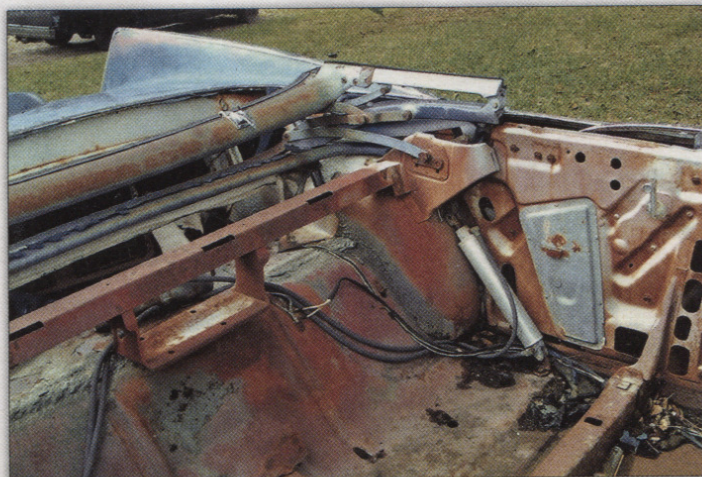
*Thanks to the valiant effort of its owner, a fairly rare 1959 Plymouth Belvedere convertible gets saved from being parted out—
Part I: Disassembly and metal repair*

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD LENTINELLO • RESTORATION PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD KOCH





After Richard determined all that was needed to restore the Belvedere to concours condition, he removed the entire front clip. He then removed the heater assembly and every single component that remained on the firewall, as well as the doors and trunk lid.



Although it looks bad, all the metal here was solid, and all the important and hard-to-find convertible top mechanisms were in place. But that was it; the rear seat was missing, as was the convertible top. A replacement rear seat was found in upstate New York.



Due to sitting in a field for 37 years, without a convertible top to offer some protection from the elements, the floor pan rotted away—you can even see the frame rails below. New reproduction floor pans made of 20-gauge steel were MIG-welded in place.



With the main body stripped of all its parts, it was lifted off the frame using Richard's two-post lift. Then the chassis was rolled out from below and into a portable tent "garage," where it was then painstakingly sandblasted down to bare metal.

Its sleek lines, canted fins and low stance combine to make the 1959 Plymouth convertible one of the more attractively styled American automobiles of the early postwar era. Even when new, their production was somewhat limited, especially when compared to the more popular convertibles from Ford and GM. The scarcity of useable parts makes restoring a 1959 Plymouth today a far harder task than if you were to restore a 1959 Ford or GM convertible.

Although the mid-range 1959 Belvedere was the more affordable convertible compared to the top-tier Sport Fury, it's oddly much rarer. Just 5,063 of the \$2,814 Belvederes were produced, compared to

5,990 examples of the \$3,125 Sport Fury. These were the only two convertibles that Plymouth offered that year and both were only available with V-8 power, so it's no surprise that Plymouth and Mopar enthusiasts today covet them so highly.

Back in 2011, when he was looking through the February issue of *Hemmings Motor News*, Richard Koch of Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, spotted a classified ad for a 1959 Belvedere convertible in need of restoration for a mere \$4,495. He already owned two 1959 Plymouths, both hardtops, but had always wanted a matching convertible, and this seemed like the ideal car, and at a great price. It resided in Jamestown, California, about 60 miles east of Stockton, in a relatively dry climate.

"My very first new car was a 1957 Plymouth Belvedere convertible," Richard tells us. "I simply love the Forward Look models that were designed by Virgil Exner. The 1959 models have the best looking fins of all the Plymouths."

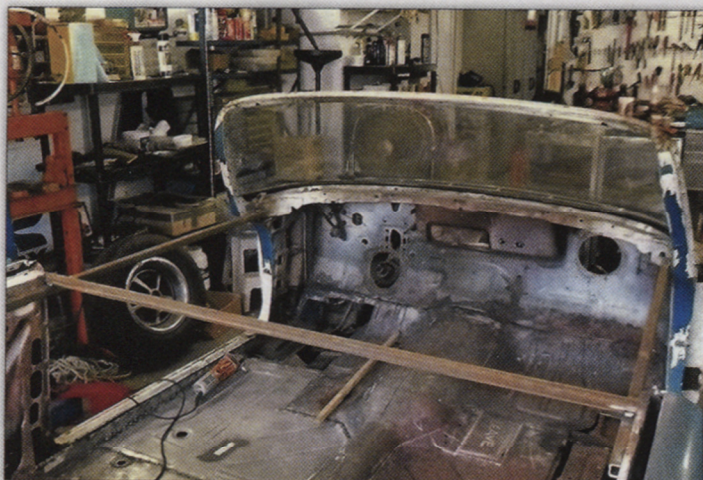
Richard decided to buy the old Plymouth after the seller answered a few questions, firmly believing that the car was still worth the asking price regardless of its condition and all of the parts that were missing. After spending an additional \$1,500 to have the car shipped to Florida, Richard soon found out that not all cars from California are free of rusted metal. The Belvedere had been parked in an open field for 37 years, so you can well imagine its condition; the fact that it was



The entire undercarriage and every square inch of the frame was covered in a light layer of corrosion. Fortunately, the frame was straight and solid, without any holes to weaken the structure. It was only a matter of unbolting some 12 bolts to remove the body.



It wasn't important that the old shocks and exhaust system were covered in rust because they'd be replaced anyway. The original gas tank was dipped in a hot tank to remove the corrosion, then it was coated on the inside. Body metal appeared to be sound.



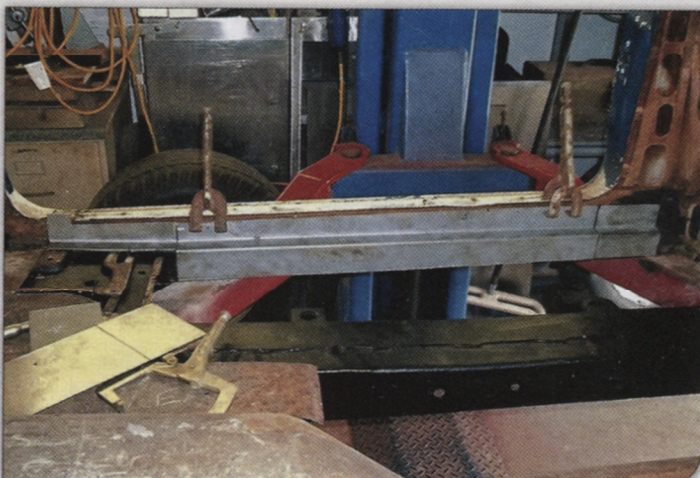
Before the corroded floor pans were removed, a solid metal brace was welded in between each door opening and the rear of the body to prevent it from twisting out of place. Note that the entire instrument panel and the wiring harness were also removed.



Even after nearly four decades of sitting outdoors, the body remained solid and relatively free of corrosion. The only area that rusted out was the entire bottom section of the quarter panel on the passenger side. Even the bumper brackets were solid.



After the patch panel on the lower quarter panel was MIG-welded in place, the welds were ground down until they were smooth; this was followed by the application of a thin layer of lightweight body filler that was needed to fill in any low spots that remained.



Before the floor pans were installed, new inner rocker panels were custom made of 18-gauge metal, and two welding-clamp Vise-Grips were used to firmly hold the rocker panel in place while it was being MIG-welded onto the surrounding door-opening frame.



Welds spaced a half-inch apart provided the necessary rigidity to prevent the door opening from distorting. Each weld was then ground down smooth; then the entire panel was given a coat of Eastwood's Epoxy Encapsulator to prevent rust.



All the seams were given a thick layer of seam sealer to prevent moisture from seeping between the joints. Then two coats of Eastwood Epoxy Encapsulator coating was applied, which would then be sprayed over with several coats of black semi-gloss enamel.



After the frame had been sandblasted, a layer of Ospho metal treatment was applied. This chemical transforms whatever rust remains into a tough surface, which then allows subsequent paint layers like the black semi-gloss enamel to bond solidly.



The body was temporarily placed atop the frame so the reproduction floor pans could be welded in. Twenty-gauge pans were made in sections, but once welded together, the floor became a solid panel. Welds were initially made every few inches, to prevent distortion.

a convertible only made things worse. The interior floor pan was rotted away, the inner fenders were cut to accommodate exhaust headers, the instrument panel was trashed, the differential was of the wrong year as were the wheels, and the engine, transmission, radiator, driveshaft and seats were all missing. Oh, and a light coating of surface rust was everywhere. However, in light of all that, this car wasn't the mess it could have been. The trunk pan was intact, and the body, apart from one lower quarter panel section, was solid without an ounce of body filler found anywhere; it was very straight and free of any prior accident damage.

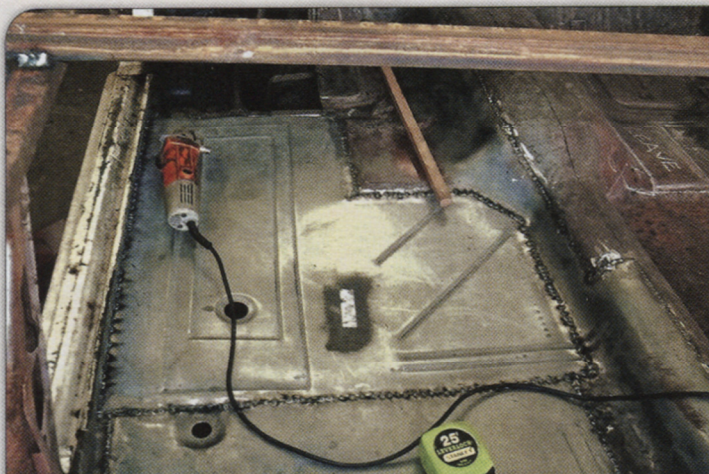
Thankfully, Richard rescued this Belvedere from oblivion, and took the chance

knowing full well that he could, and would, restore it, and in the most authentic way possible. The trick up his sleeve was the extensive stash of 1959 Plymouth parts that he had been squirreling away for years, waiting for a project such as this to come along.

Having a large supply of parts makes buying a roller project such as this, a worthwhile exercise. Richard's main source of parts came from his 1959 Belvedere four-door sedan and his '59 De Soto Firedome sedan, both parts cars that were beyond salvation yet yielded many components needed to rebuild the convertible. Parts from the Plymouth sedan included the 317.6-cu.in. V-8, driveshaft and differential, while the De Soto donated its inner

air distribution plenum, instrument panel, variable speed windshield washer system and power brake and steering components. And, of course, numerous factory-correct fasteners and trim pieces.

Upon delivery of his Plymouth, Richard took inventory of all the parts and trim pieces that were missing, and thoroughly assessed what needed to be done. His goal was to give the Belvedere a body-off restoration and bring it back to original factory showroom-new condition. Being the hands-on enthusiast that he is, Richard performed most of the work himself, including the body preparation and refinishing. The only jobs outsourced were the plating of trim pieces, upholstery of the seats, and machining and building of



It took several days to complete the installation of the new floor pans. Then a grinder with 3-inch abrasive discs was used to smooth down all the welds prior to painting. Although not difficult, installing floor pans is very time consuming to do right.



After the transmission tunnel, firewall and other original interior panels were coated with Ospho, new seam sealer was applied, followed by two coats of Eastwood's Epoxy Encapsulator. This was followed by two coats of semi-gloss black enamel.



What a difference in how the rear interior body area looked after all the surface rust was removed and everything refinished compared to the way it looked on page 61. Lots of work was required to get to this stage, but the effort was clearly worth it.



The original trunk floor was surprisingly solid, apart from one small area around the left side body mount. Using a 4-inch plastic wheel on a drill, the surface rust was removed before the floor was coated with Ospho phosphoric acid, seam-sealed and then epoxied.

the engine and transmission. The welding of new floor pans and other minor metal repairs were handled by his good friend, Larry Weld—yes, that's his real name—but it was Richard who cut out the old floor pan and removed all the little factory spotwelds.

According to Richard, "the replacement engine is a 317.6-cu.in. A-block, which is often referred to as the original Wide Block 318. Its block was bored .030 over and fitted with new pistons and bearings. The replacement transmission I bought online; it's a cast-iron case Torque-Flite three-speed automatic and was given a complete rebuild by the late Fred Sheirs of Burma Auto Repair in nearby Riviera Beach. Fred also installed new bearings

and seals in the differential, which has a 3:31 final drive."

The remaining parts that Richard had to source, because the ones in his parts cars were also missing, included used front inner fenders and the 60/40 front seat, which he found for sale in Montana; while the rear seat came from Western New York.

To keep himself busy when he's not restoring old Mopars, Richard enjoys restoring damaged metal trim pieces in his home garage, not only for himself but for others, too. And this made reworking the few dents and dings in the existing trim on his Belvedere an easy task. Also in Richard's three-car garage, there's a two-post lift and a bead blast cabinet, which

he used to strip, as he put it, "every possible part and body piece to bare metal. This was one of the most time-consuming aspects of the entire restoration."

Although restoring this Belvedere was a monumental task, considering just how many significant parts were missing, Richard greatly enjoys immersing himself in performing such in-depth, ground-up restorations. "If you make it fun and something you want to do every day, it's not work," Richard tells us. "Just picture yourself cruising down the road when you're finished."

Next month, in Part II, we will look at the finishing work and the many other numerous tasks required to complete the project. 🛠️



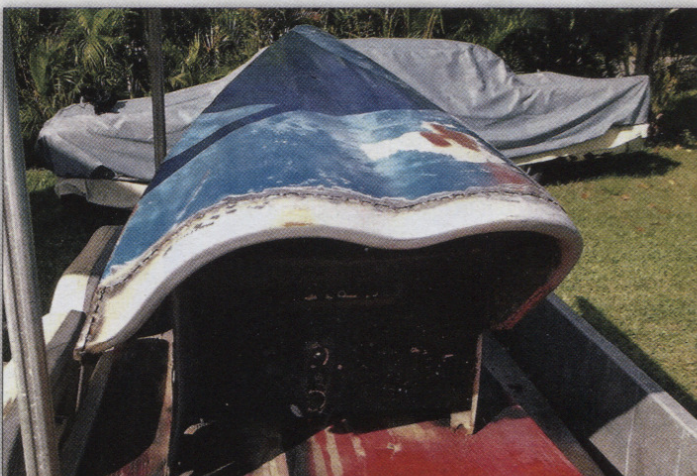
To prevent moisture from finding its way into the corners and between adjoining body panels, a thick application of 3M Seam Sealer was applied on every seam throughout the body. This was done after the metal was coated with Ospho, and before the epoxy.



All the removable body panels were placed on wooden horses outdoors and had aircraft paint stripper applied to remove their existing finish. After two applications of stripper, a 3-inch nylon wheel on a drill was used to get down to clean, shiny metal.



Both doors were solid, with just light surface rust present. After paint stripper removed all the existing topcoats, a nylon wheel was used to get down to bare metal. The nylon wheel doesn't scratch the metal, and gets into all the small crevices.



The leading edge of the 1959 Plymouth's "floating headlamps" fenders are a known rust trap, and these fenders were no exception. Replacement double-barrel patch panels were grafted on. Stainless steel molding then goes over the leading edge of the fender.



This passenger-side front fender shows the twin headlamp assembly in place before it was removed to patch the top side of the fender's leading edge. Then this assembly was bead blasted down to bare metal before being refinished in flat black as original.



The rest of the body was solid and free of any rust or accident damage. These quarter panels are huge, and each took an entire day to strip down to bare metal. After a thin coating of lightweight body filler was applied, they were block sanded smooth.