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Building a Belvedere



RICHARD KOCH PHOTO



Richard Koch's 1959 Belvedere convertible

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RICHARD KOCH PHOTO

Building a Belvedere

Second-tier Belvedere

by Lanny Knutson

Plymouth fielded a Belvedere convertible for 1959. In that, 1959 was no different than the previous five years, going back to 1954 when the first Belvedere convertible was introduced. In that year, the Belvedere name, exclusive to Plymouth sport coupe hardtops since 1951, was applied across the board—including sedans, the hardtop and a convertible—as Plymouth's top line. Belvedere retained its top high-volume line status through 1958, although the limited-production premium high-performance Fury perched above it beginning in 1956.

That changed in 1959. As is the wont of marketing people, the temptation to take a successful high-profile exclusive nameplate and apply it to lesser cars is too great to resist. It happened to Belvedere in 1954, to Pontiac's Bonneville in 1958 and Chevrolet's Impala and Plymouth's Fury in 1959, to name a few such examples. The ploy to exploit the "halo effect" of an exclusive nameplate by applying it to lesser cars usually works, for a while. Eventually, however, the halo tarnishes and the once-hallowed name becomes as mundane as the cars to which it had been affixed.

Jack Smith, father of the Road Runner, tells of a 1970 marketing scheme to apply the—by the—hugely popular Road Runner name to Plymouth's entire intermediate line, six-cylinder four-door sedans and station wagons included. Suddenly the Road Runner team which two years earlier had vigorously fought corporate opposition to putting the name of a cartoon bird on one of their cars, now had to fight as vigorously to keep the name off certain cars. They succeeded, for a time.

For 1959, the marketing types prevailed and the once-exclusive Fury name was applied to Plymouth's top line, consisting of a sport coupe (hardtop) and two four-doors, a hardtop (sport sedan) and a "post" sedan. No convertible? That was given to the new premium Sport Fury line.

Replacing the previous limited-production Fury of 1956-58, the Sport Fury was "limited" only to the number of cars they could sell. Available in a variety of colors and as either a hardtop or a convertible, the Sport Fury was aimed at a broader market than its single-color, hardtop-only predecessors.

As did the '58 Fury, the '59 Sport Fury offered two V8s, an A-block 318 and a B-block engine increased to 361 CID from the 350 CID of its '58 predecessor. Both engines lost their dual

four-barrel carburetion status. Limited to a single four-barrel, the 318 saw its horsepower drop from 290 to 260 while the 361's extra eleven cubic inches compensated for the loss of four of eight barrels to keep its horsepower at 305.

The Fury line, though downgraded, remained V8-exclusive, albeit with the base two-barrel 230 horsepower 318. The two Sport Fury V8s were optionally available not only for the Fury but all Plymouths of 1959.

The Belvedere line was demoted to the second-tier status previously held by the Savoy which, in turn, moved down to the Plaza slot while the Plaza disappeared, never to be seen on a Plymouth again.

Unlike the Savoy of the previous years, Belvedere had a convertible, taking it with its name to its newly assigned second-tier status. The Belvedere convertible became a plainer bench-seat alternative to the luxury-appointed swivel-seat Sport Fury. Although priced \$311 less than its Sport Fury counterpart, the Belvedere convertible found 927 fewer buyers. The \$311 difference—about \$2,550 in 2015 dollars—was not enough to dissuade nearly a thousand more buyers from opting for the flashier Sport Fury.

Unlike the rest of the Belvedere line, the convertible was a V8-only car. Plymouth's last flathead six-powered convertible was the 1954 Belvedere.

The Sport Fury was dropped for 1960-61 with the lone convertible going to the Fury line. When the Sport Fury returned in 1962 with its bucket-seated hardtop and convertible, the bench-seat convertible alternative remained in the Fury line.

The Belvedere name returned to a convertible in 1965 as part of Plymouth's reconstituted intermediate line. This time, as a Belvedere II, it was the bench-seat alternative to the Satellite which had replaced the Sport Fury in the intermediate line, the Sport Fury name having moved up to the new full-sized C-body line.

The Belvedere convertible came standard with Slant Six power, the first six-cylinder Plymouth convertible, not counting the Valiant, in eleven years.

After 1967, the Belvedere name was dropped from the convertible ranks, never to be seen again. By 1971, Belvedere was gone for good, but first-tier or second-tier, a good run it was.



PB

Building a Belvedere

1959 Belvedere convertible
Current odometer reading: 61,000 miles

by Richard Koch
 Palm Beach Gardens, Florida

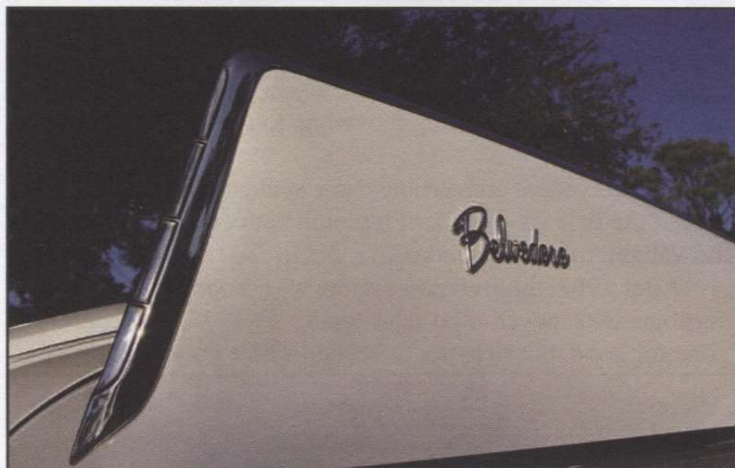
I purchased my Belvedere convertible in January 2011. A frame-off restoration was started in June 2012 and completed in October 2014.

I found the car advertised in *Hemmings Motor News*. It was located in California where it had been sitting in a field for

37 years. It had no power train and no seats. The floors were badly rusted, the inner fenders had been cut out for headers and the dash was trashed.

I had a '59 Belvedere four-door parts car, a complete powertrain, driveshaft, radiator and differential. Used inner fenders and a 60/40 front seat were found in Montana. The rear seat came from western New York State. The seller happened to be driving to Miami, near where I live. He delivered the seat to my house in the back seat of his Cadillac. The dash, differential and part of the floor came from the parts car. I have a '59 Desoto Firedome sedan and used the variable speed windshield washer system, the power brake system and the power steering gear from it.

Except the sheet metal work and welding, the upholstery and chrome plating, I did everything, including the grunt work for the welder, my friend Larry Weld (his real name) which involved removing all spot welds, as well as removing the rusted floor panels, the inner rockers and the like. New sheet metal replaced the rusted floor sections, inner rockers, right lower rear fender and trunk drop off. All other sheet metal, including the trunk floor, was saved. When the welding was done, I seamed-sealed all welds and then covered all rusted panels





Welcoming the Belvedere is the Koch stable of two Sport Fury coupes—361- and 318-powered, respectively—and a '60 DeSoto sedan.



Newly arrived from California, the Belvedere shows its solid bondo-free body and messy details. Yet, even in California, a convertible left with no top in an open field for 37 years is bound to have floorboard rust issues and this one is no exception.



Floorboards: The rusty originals are cut out by the owner, replacement panels are procured and fitted as Weld the welder welds them in. Two coats of Eastwood's Epoxy Encapsulator are applied, followed by two coats of semi-gloss black enamel. Eastwood's Thermo-Coustic Sound Deadener covers the entire floor and firewall.



Instrument panel: The original dash was trashed. A parts car gave up its dash which is stripped, primed and painted. Replacement instruments are installed and the completed unit is put in the car. The steering wheel, donated by POC '59 Tech Advisor Dan Morton <59plymouth.net>, is restored and refinished by the owner.



The body is stripped to bare metal. After a thin coating of lightweight body filler is applied, the body is sprayed with a single coat of Eastwood's Encapsulator Epoxy, followed by two coats of urethane primer/sealer. The family garage is converted into a paint booth where Richard sprays the body in sections with three coats of Pure White single-stage urethane. Assembly begins with installation of the taillights, followed by the Sport-deck lid and fin trim. The Belvedere side trim and nameplate are next.



The 318 V8 engine, donated by the '59 parts car, is completely rebuilt by a machine shop with cylinders bored to .030-over. Pistons and connecting rods are among the many new items installed. Hoisted into the waiting chassis, the engine is ready for external assembly of hoses, wires and like items. The air cleaner—painted factory red with a rattle can—sits atop a two-barrel carburetor.



Front end assembly begins, once the engine is in place. As with most '59s, the fender "eyebrows" are rusted-out and have to be repaired with patch panels. Headlight buckets come next, followed by the lights themselves which are wired and lit to give a "Christine" impression. Next come the newly polished grille, rechromed bumper with wings and a refurbished valence panel. The grille-center badge remains in place throughout the assembly.



with Ospho Rust Treatment, followed by priming with Eastwood Encapsulator epoxy paint.



**Eastwood
Rust Converter**

The entire car had been dismantled: doors, door mechanisms, fender, hood, trunk lid, dash, wheels, brakes, steering and front and rear suspension systems. Absolutely no body filler was found anywhere in the car. The gas tank was sent to the radiator shop to be boiled out and coated with inner liner material. Every part, nut and bolt was either sandblasted or glass-beaded down to bare metal and painted with epoxy encapsulator. The same was done to the seat frames and springs and the inner fenders.

The body was lifted off the frame, which was then wire-bushed, "Osphoed" and epoxy-coated. The body, doors, hood and trunk lid were brought to bare metal using paint stripper



The original gas tank was cleaned, inner-coated and reinstalled

and plastic and wire wheels, then Osphoed, given one coat of epoxy encapsulator, then block sanded and given two coats of urethane primer sealer with block sanding after each coat. Three coats of Pure White single-stage urethane

were applied, wet sanded and buffed. The dash and garnish moldings were painted with single-stage gloss black urethane. All rubber body mounts, snubbers, bumpers, weather strip, trunk gasket, inner firewall insulator panel, window channel and whiskers, firewall and body grommets and plugs plus all parts particular for a convertible—including the top well, top boot, trunk beauty boards and trunk carpet—were sourced from Gary Goers in Kalispell, Montana.

The inner air distribution plenum came from my 1960 DeSoto. It is identical to the '59 Plymouth's. (I had kept the plenum after having air conditioning installed in the DeSoto.) All the floor panels I needed came from eBay. I do dent repair and polishing of stainless steel trim as a sideline, so I did all the



The convertible top and upholstery were installed by Sergio Morales and his son, Junior.

stainless myself. I painted the body in my garage while the car was on a lift and everything was covered with plastic film. Everything else was painted, wet sanded, and buffed in my portable Costco garage.



The front valance had to be rebuilt.

The front valance, sourced in California, was in pretty bad shape. I did the body work on it, Bondoed and painted it.

The 318 CI poly A-block and the differential came from the parts car; the cast iron Torqueflite transmission I got on eBay. The engine was rebuilt .30 over, the transmission was rebuilt and the differential got new bearings and seals. The brakes were rebuilt with all new master and slave cylinders. The fuel and brake lines are new as are the brakeline hoses.

In effect the car is brand new, except for the body and windshield.

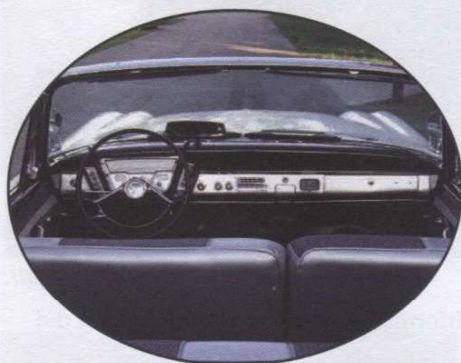
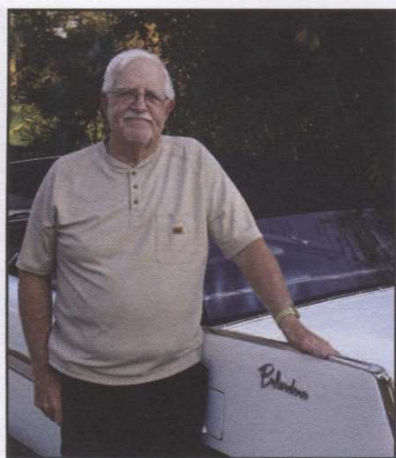
The factory-correct door panels and upholstery material came from SMS in Oregon. The factory-correct seat pattern upholstery, along with the convertible top, was installed by local upholsterer Sergio Morales of S & S Custom Upholstery.



MY WIFE YVONNE AND I drove the car to Crusin' the Coast in Mississippi and then to a family reunion in Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, before heading to New Orleans to visit family.

My first new car, purchased when I was 21 years old (I became 79 in July 2015) was a 1957 Belvedere convertible. Having done two frame-off restorations and a repaint of the DeSoto since my seventieth birthday, the only things I'm going to do for the cars in the future are oil changes, bearings, bushings and ball joints and, of course, driving them. Oh yes, I'll probably repaint my green 1959 Sport Fury. It still has original paint and is starting to show its primer.

PB



Happy Trails: In his “spare” time, Richard created a Sportdeck trailer for his Belvedere, finished off with ‘59 Plymouth station wagon taillights and tailgate bumpers, and ‘59 wheelcovers, of course.



Richard's Sport Fury—“the green car”—is the cover feature car of the October 2015 HEMMINGS CLASSIC CAR magazine.



For more:

RICHARD KOCH'S BELVEDERE convertible's restoration was featured as a two-part series in the May and June, 2015, issues of *HEMMINGS CLASSIC CAR*. With 64 photos, the articles go into greater detail than these pages can provide. The articles can be found online or in back issues.

Belvedere Beauty -

1959 Plymouth Belvedere convertible

Part I: Disassembly and metal repair

hemmings.com/hcc/stories/2015/05/01/hmn_feature5.html

Belvedere Beauty -

1959 Plymouth Belvedere convertible

Part II: Painting, final assembly and the enjoyment of driving the finished product

hemmings.com/hcc/stories/2015/06/01/hmn_feature6.html

Hemmings Classic Car back issues

May 2015 - Issue 128

June 2015 - Issue 129

hemmings.com/store/backissues.html?publication=HCC

EVEN GREATER DETAIL can be found on the 59plymouth.net website forum where 27 pages of discussion between Richard and correspondents follow—step-by-step and illustrated by more than 150 pictures—the restoration progress of his Belvedere.

Dick's convertible project

59plymouth.net/59forum/viewtopic.php?f=8&t=1747



ALL HEMMINGS PHOTOS ARE BY RICHARD LENITELLO



ANOTHER HEMMINGS PHOTO BY RICHARD LENITELLO

TELL ME HOW the Hemmings article on your Belvedere convertible came about. Did Hemmings contract you or did you first contact them? How was your experience of working with Hemmings?
— Editor

EVERY YEAR the Mopars of Brevard County (MOB) hold an all-make car show and swap meet in Melbourne, Florida. My wife Yvonne and I have been going for at least ten years. They get a minimum of 250 cars every year.

I brought the Belvedere convertible and its matching luggage trailer. Yvonne and I took a walk to get lunch and browse through the swap meet. When we got back to the car, I found a business card on the front seat saying, "Love your car, I would like to do an article on it, call me." It was from Richard Lenitello, editor of Hemmings Classic Cars. He had moved to Hobe Sound, Florida, a couple of years earlier as his base of

operation because South Florida is a hotbed of the old car hobby and has car shows year 'round. He was snowed-in half the year while living in Vermont and didn't have much to write about.

We made an arrangement to meet at my house where he could take pictures of the convertible. While he was at it he also took pictures of my green '59 Sport Fury. He certainly captured in his pictures exactly what I see when I look at my cars. I am so thrilled that others get to share that view.

Richard Lenitello is a perfect gentleman and is a pleasure to work with. Although I don't see Richard as much as I would like, we keep in touch through emails and I occasionally run into him at car shows.

The trailer I mentioned has a Sportdeck on top (it fits perfectly) and '59 Plymouth Suburban taillights and tailgate bumpers. I got bored while the upholstery was being installed in the convertible and the trailer is the result. — Dick Koch



MICHAEL OWENS COLLECTION