

SALUTE TO THE THUNDERBIRD

BY GRIFF BORGESON

It's more than just a matter of speed and styling—after nearly a year of solid success, it amounts to the acceptance of a genuinely new idea in cars that'll influence the shape of things to come

IN AN industry where conservative imitation is a rule that's rarely broken, the Ford Motor Company has come up with what can only be called a revolution in personal transportation. The product of this revolution is the Ford Thunderbird.

The Thunderbird is a new kind of car. It was not designed to appeal to the die-hard devotees of spartan, high-performance machinery, and it is a far cry from the traditional shake, rattle, and roll sports job. Instead, it has looks, luxury, and most of the conveniences of the bulky automotive palaces in the upper price bracket.

Still, few experts deny that in concept, performance and style, the T-Bird is in the sports car class. Even the purist fan magazines that specialize in the drawing of fine distinctions between sports and pseudo-sports machines agree that its claim to the adjective is legitimate. About the only authority that has *not* labelled the T-Bird a sports car is the Ford Motor Company itself.

Ford prefers to call it a "personal" car, and with good reason. In the first place, many of the dream cars

displayed to the public in recent years have also been called "sports" cars. The experts guffawed, but more important, most of the solid citizenry yawned. Furthermore, there is a vast body of American car-buyers that is convinced that sports cars are for eccentrics. Most of them wouldn't buy a Ferrari even if it cost as little as the Thunderbird. The "sports" label would not be likely to intrigue them. But a car that was "personal"—and therefore distinctive and desirable—would.

Ford's reasoning has been borne out by the results. Middle-aged matrons think the T-Bird is the cutest thing they've ever seen. The business executive whose boss might glower if he suddenly appeared in the cockpit of a hairy, all-out sports car, becomes no less respectable at the wheel of a Thunderbird. And ownership of a T-Bird is acutely craved by tens of thousands of Americans who want a spirited, precise, high-performance touring machine of nearly all-around utility.

The Thunderbird is the first American car which has

(Continued on page 62)



DRIVER'S REPORT

TWO SUPERCHARGED T-BIRDS

TWO of the most persistent rumors from Detroit concern the 1956 Ford Thunderbird; one says it will appear with fuel injection, the other maintains the McCulloch supercharger will be optional equipment. Either or both these reports may or may not be true. However, quite a number of Thunderbird owners are having the blowers installed on the 1955 models with performance results that are exceptionally interesting.

In view of all this, an invitation of Paxton Industries (the sales division of

McCulloch Motors) to test drive a compressor-equipped T-Bird was accepted. While the investigation did not assume the proportions of a comprehensive road test, a fifth wheel and Weston electric speedo was used to insure accuracy.

Two Thunderbirds were taken out on a straight stretch of pavement for acceleration tests. One had a Fordomatic transmission, the other carried the overdrive unit. Speedometer corrections were made first and disclosed the following: at indicated 30 mph, 45 mph and 60 mph, the respective actual speeds were 26 mph, 38 mph and 50 mph. Each of the cars, incidentally, were well broken in by thousands of road miles.

It required some experimenting with the supercharged versions to obtain the maximum benefits in acceleration without having the rear wheels spin. The experienced installers at Paxton's (who say 50 per cent of the blowers are currently going on T-Birds) advised making the gear changes from low to drive, with the Fordomatic, at 4700 rpm on the tachometer.

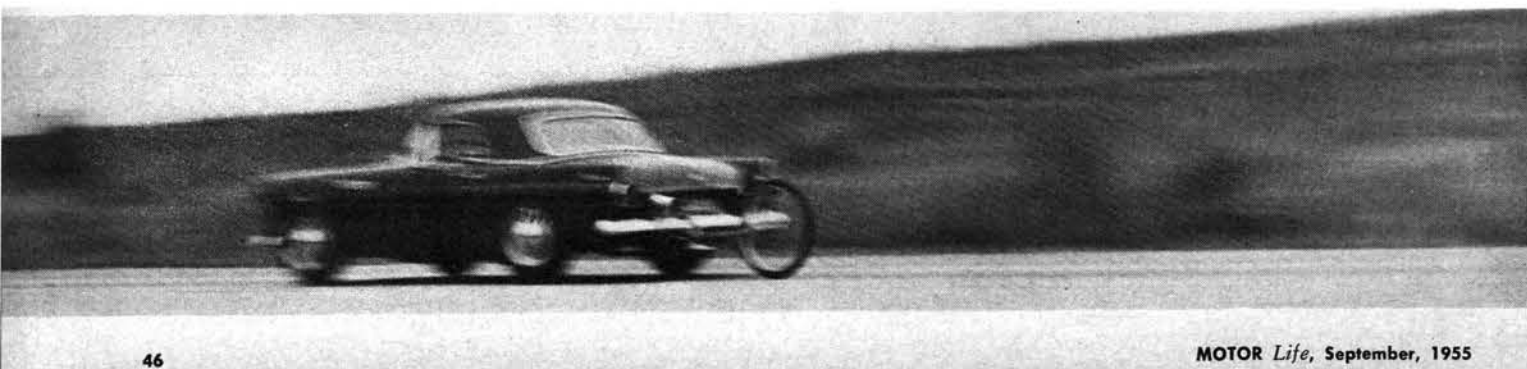
Slightly better times were recorded with the overdrive arrangement, except on the 0-45 mph times where time required for engaging the clutch and shifting gears reduced whatever benefits the system provided mechanically. The following are the best times in seconds obtained with each car:

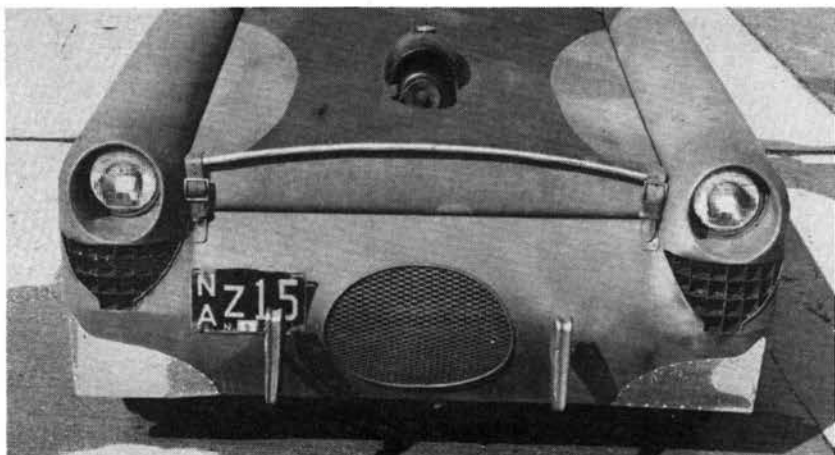
	SUPERCHARGED	
	Fordomatic	Overdrive
0-30 mph	3	2.2
0-45 mph	5	5
0-60 mph	8	6.8

Comparison of these times with figures from three previously published reports on Thunderbird performance (all involving Fordomatic transmissions) provides interesting material for speculation:

	UNSUPERCHARGED		
	Test #1	Test #2	Test #3
0-30 mph	4	3.7	4.3
0-45 mph	—	—	—
0-60 mph	11	9.5	10.75

McCulloch supercharger installation on Thunderbird owned by Jane Russell of the movies. If the T-Bird gets fuel injection next year, as rumored, mounting the blower will be easier than ever, with under-hood gains in space and hood air scoop will vanish.

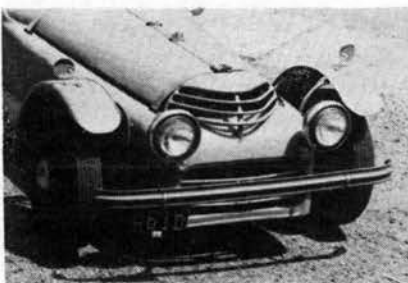




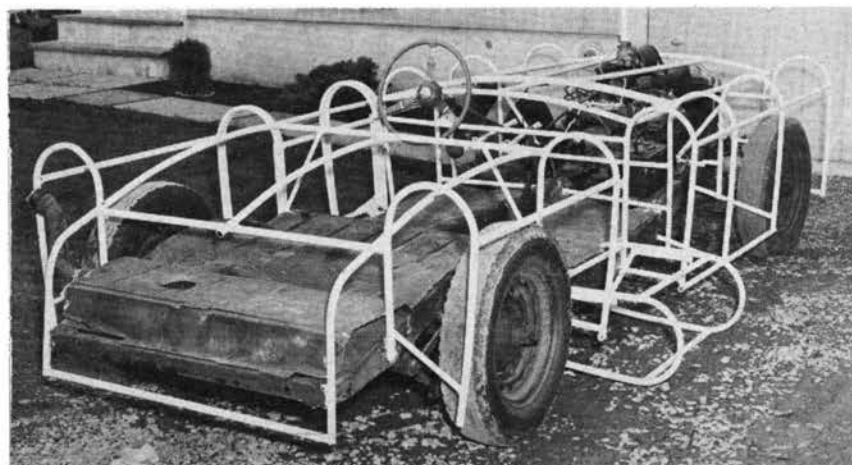
Unique body and frontal treatment has been achieved by forming skin from stock sheet metal around framework of steel tubing using self-locking method.

LOW-COST SPORTSTERS

THE FOUR completed cars shown here are part of a group of 15 owned by members of the "BW Sports Car Club" (named for its founder, Bob Whitehead). The club differs from most, since its basic purpose is the building of such cars. The sportsters also are notable, aside from their original appearance, because they have been constructed at a cost amounting to a few hundred, rather than thousands, of dollars. All the vehicles are reported to have good performance and handling qualities.



Stripped sportster shows typical framework of tubing on chassis. Usual basis for cars is 1932-40 Ford, which may be modified by shortening the wheelbase.



THE THUNDERBIRD

(Continued from Page 46)

deviated from the norm that has been wholeheartedly accepted by the postwar public. According to authoritative figures, at the end of 1954, a bare two-and-a-half months after its introduction, it had already sold more copies than its competitors with their considerably longer life spans. To date, about nine months since it hit the showrooms, roughly 11,000 T-Birds have been delivered, and in spite of a 65 car per day production rate, the supply is two-and-a-half months behind the demand.

The Thunderbird project began in 1949, the same year a few U.S. motorists discovered MG's. FMC's Product Planning department noted that a sports car boom seemed to be in the making. It's the business of Product Planning to predict what the public will be ready for in the years ahead, and they called the shot—a sports machine, but one suited to American requirements. There was another angle, too, one that seemed to fit in perfectly. The statistical experts discovered that in addition to the mounting interest in sports cars, a steadily increasing number of U.S. families owned two or more cars. So Market Research recommended that the company build a new kind of automobile that would have equally strong appeal in both the expanding sports car and "second-car" markets. Top brass OK'd the recommendation and passed it on to the Product Planning division, as follows:

1. The car must have really brilliant performance, good enough to permit it to hold its own in racing, although this would be a bonus feature and not a main objective. It must be able to out-perform anything an owner would be likely to meet on street or highway, including expensive foreign high-performance cars.

2. Cornering and handling qualities must closely approach those of all-out sports cars. The ride must be flat and firm, firmer than in standard U.S. passenger car practice, but not harsh.

3. The car had to be styled as a prestige vehicle, reflecting the best of good taste. It would have to look fleet and graceful, but at the same time avoid the clichés of European styling. Intended to appeal to the American mass market, it must have a purely American look.

4. Every aspect of passenger comfort and convenience had to be provided for. This would include a choice of manual-shift, OD, or automatic transmission and the availability of the whole range of power-assist devices. All-weather protection, leg room, hip room, head room, luggage space had to be up to accepted U.S. standards.

FMC executives tell me that all this planning took place in 1949 and early 1950, when stylists and engineers went to work figuring out the car's package size. Good handling qualities demanded a short wheelbase, and they selected one of 102

driver's report

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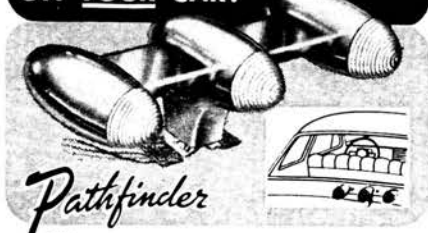
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inches. A high performance car demands a stiff frame, so they used a shortened version of the rugged Ford-convertible "X" frame. For good handling a car also has to have approximately equal distribution of weight between the front and the rear wheels, so the engineers put the engine a few inches farther aft in the frame than is the case in standard practice. The Bird's engine fan is about flush with the front wheel hubs.

Everyone agreed that a low profile would give the car dash and class. To get it, the engineers brought the hood down around the carburetor air cleaner.

Another problem the low profile posed, along with the farther-back engine location, was getting plenty of leg room for the passengers. This was solved by seating riders well back on the chassis. The arrangement left plenty of room for luggage space, but no room for the usual convertible top that can be stacked in a space-wasting horizontal recess. So the Bird has a top that stows vertically in a narrow recess behind the seat-back.

These details, and hundreds of others like them, were worked out by a couple of hundred technicians and engineers over a period of years. First, they'd lay a detail out on paper. Then they'd try it out on a wooden "body buck" big enough for the designers to get in and out of. After a whole series of body bucks had been evolved, approximations of the final Bird were cobbled from wood, clay and metal. Then a few actual prototypes were hand-built. And, at last, the dimensions and other specifications of the final Thunderbird were arrived at.

Almost exactly six years passed from the time Market Research turned its attention to sports car until Ford's "personal" car was introduced. The thousands of creative man-hours that were put into the project have been amply paid for by the public's solid acceptance of the car.

It isn't only the performance-minded "average" driver that craves the T-Bird. Last year Juan Manuel Fangio, world's champion of Grand Prix racing, told me that he considered the Thunderbird one of the most ideal automobiles built anywhere in the world—and he was panting to get one. He backed up his statement a few weeks later by buying a Bird. It takes a mighty versatile car to have as much appeal for a seasoned racing professional as it does for a housewife.

It is this sweeping acceptance of the Thunderbird that proves that it comes closest to being the American car that enthusiasts have demanded so loudly and so long. The Thunderbird successfully and obviously satisfies a need of American motorists, and is an inspired piece of shrewd and calculated planning.

The Thunderbird is the first of the new U. S. luxury cars, the pioneer, and a milestone in the postwar progress of the automobile. Watch its influence closely. It's the first of "tomorrow's" cars. •

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by Joe Hunt

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