

CARS

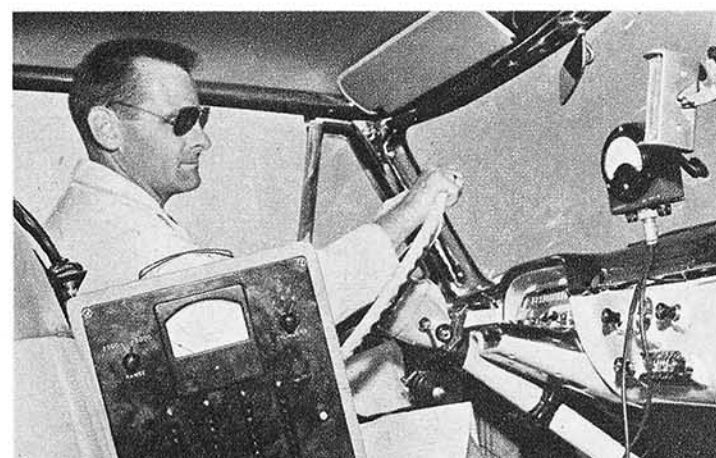
Tests the 1954 Mercurys

Take a new engine and front suspension, add extensive face lifting, and you've got "one of the most tempting morsels set before the new car buyer in a great many years"

By Griff Borgeson

CARS tester Griff Borgeson, right, sits beside electronic counter which translates fifth-wheel revolutions into feet moved. Car is set up for brake testing. In middle, Griff checks battery of stop watches and fifth-wheel-driven electric speedometer before making acceleration tests. Fuel consumption is measured by means of big burette, far right.

CARS photos by Joseph Farkas

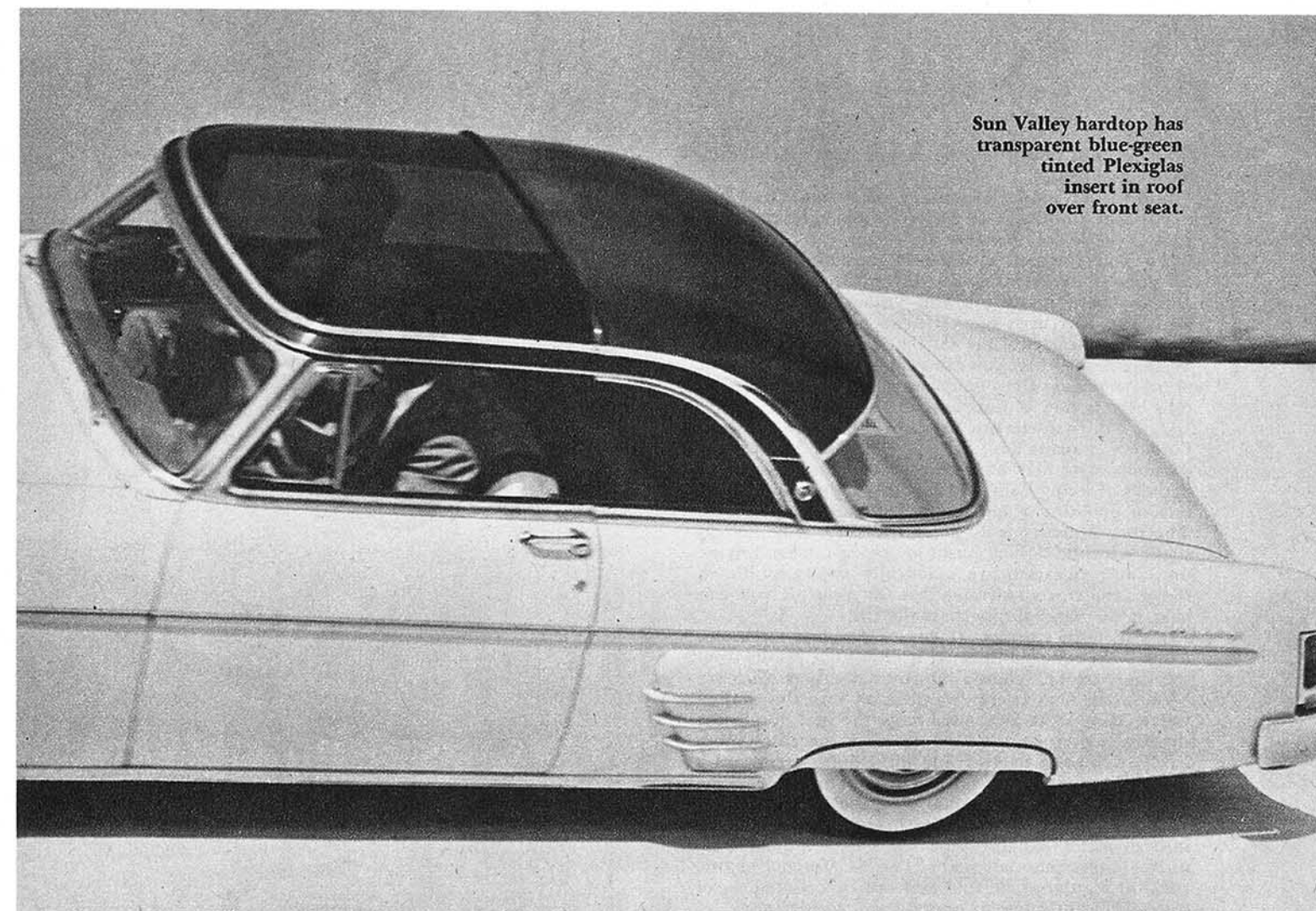
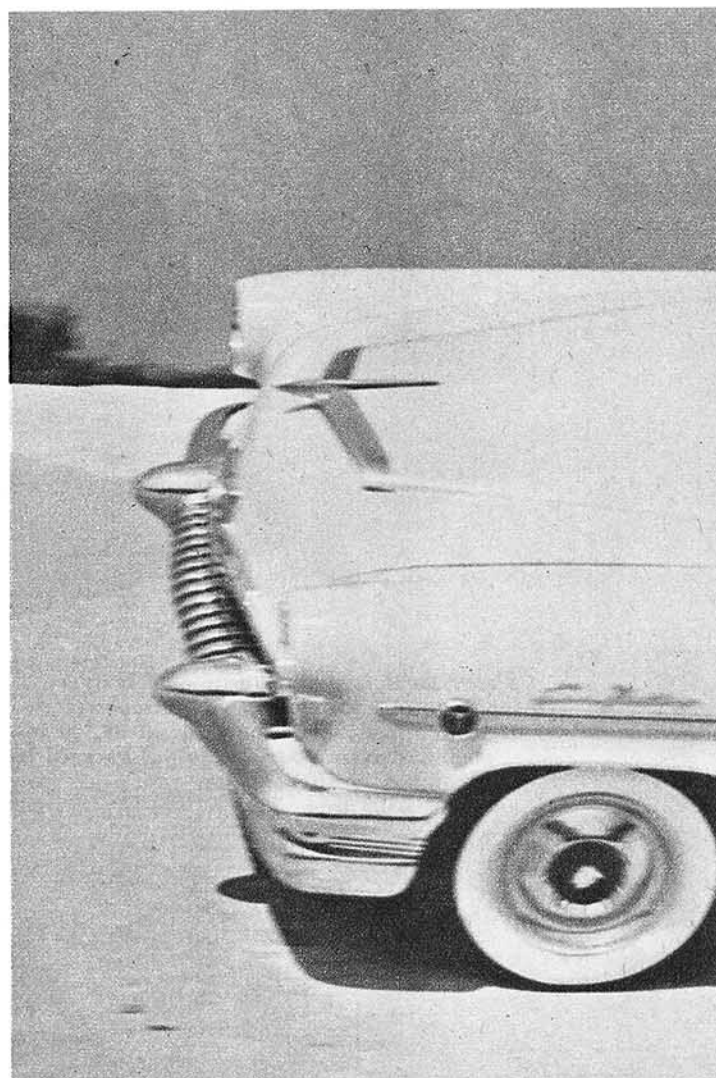


I checked into the Ford proving ground ten weeks before the '54 Mercury was to be unveiled. CARS only wanted the moon: to roadtest the car and get all the most important facts. That I was able to come away not only with the bacon but a good deal of the hog was as much a shock to many company officials as it was to me.

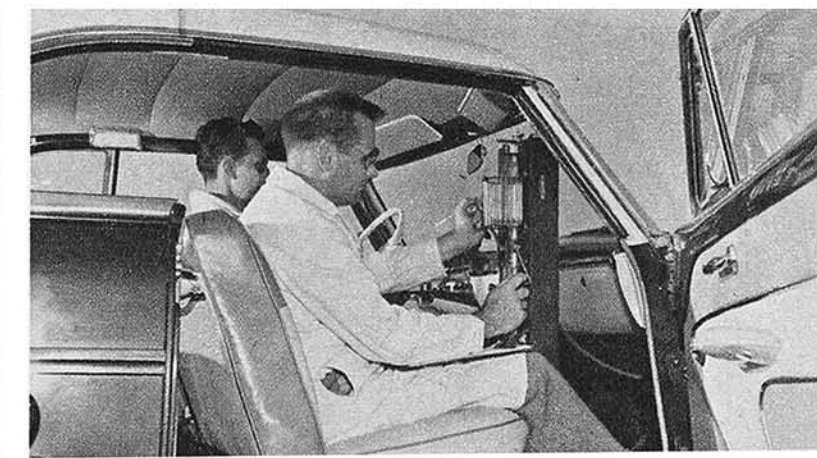
When you go to Detroit to shake down a car that has already been introduced to the public, things run smoothly. You make known your legitimate desires to the proper authority and the well-tuned corporation machinery begins to whirl. You can take your pick of test cars and do everything but drive them through the Board Room. The answers

to any questions you care to ask usually have already been phrased, officially cleared and published. The company is geared 100 per cent to live and work with its current model. But go there and ask for unhindered use of a secret prototype together with hundreds of jealously guarded facts, and corporate organization crumbles. The serene confidence of the soldier acting under orders-from-above vanishes and each question or request becomes a special case. Security must be maintained because there is an important relationship between surprise and sales, to say nothing of the good that countless bits of information can do other manufacturers, right up to the moment a new car is introduced.

If you want one of the spanking-new darlings to bash around the proving ground, you are faced with a mountain of obstacles. Unless you wait until new models start coming off the production line just a few days before introduction, you have an impossible time finding a suitable car. The ones that are set up perfectly are all on test somewhere in the Southwest desert, and they're camouflaged by last years' bodies. The ones that look good are just display models; it never mattered if they ran or not. The ones that run well are being used for engine tests and have never been checked out for proper handling. And the ones that handle perfectly may be powered by an engine that was retired



Sun Valley hardtop has transparent blue-green tinted Plexiglas insert in roof over front seat.



from the test bench two years ago. Everyone admits it's a madhouse.

Still, I got what CARS sent me after, thanks to splendid cooperation . . . and an occasional refusal on my part to settle for negative answers.

To get a cross-section of the '54 Mercury I spent time in three different cars—a convertible, a four-door, and the new, plastic-top Sun Valley. The engine is Ford and Mercury's biggest news in 22 years and it was that vital part of the car that came under the first and closest scrutiny. You can read a detailed discussion of the overhead valve engine on page 32. What we'll go into here is how it functions in the car.

The old, characteristic throb of the side-valve Merc-Ford power plant has vanished from the '54 Mercury. As fond as we may have become of it in a couple of decades of living with this faithful engine, new standards of smoothness and silence have become accepted. The new Mercury is as smooth as they come and as silent as a solid-tappet, pushrod engine can be. Engine noise and vibration are practically imperceptible in the passenger compartment; at 70 mph all you can hear is the wind sliding past the car.

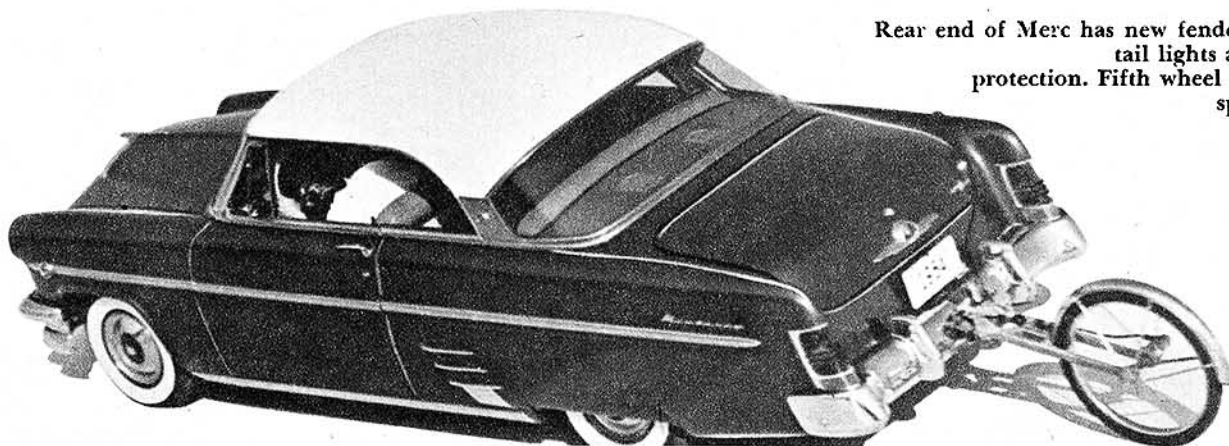
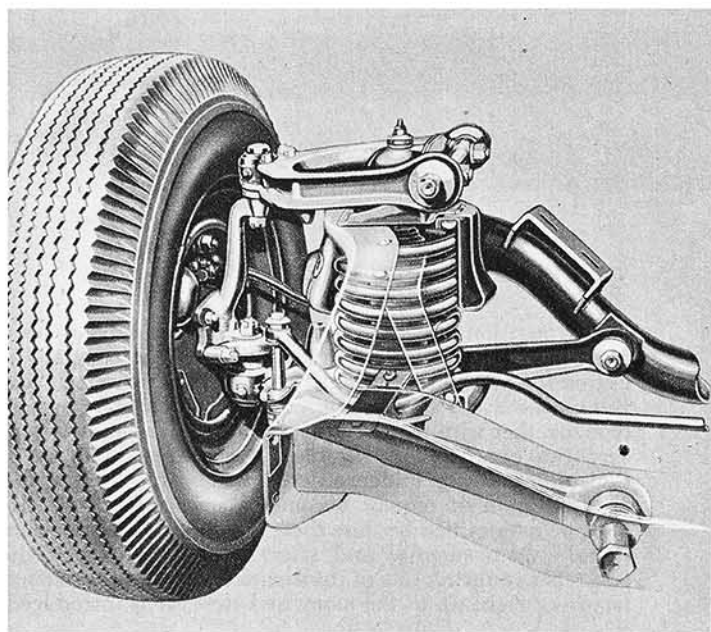
It's a more economical engine for many reasons. There's the reduced internal friction that results from the short stroke. There's improved thermal efficiency because less heat energy wanders off into the cooling water. More work is wrested from the fuel due to the slightly higher compression ratio. It breathes more freely, thanks to its very fine induction system and a completely redesigned exhaust system. In place of the old, three-port exhaust manifolds, the new manifolds provide an exhaust outlet for every cylinder. A two-inch diameter exhaust pipe leads to a muffler nine inches longer than last year's. The '54 Mercury engine runs on regular-grade fuel and can be counted on to cost significantly less to operate and maintain.

These same features that make the '54 car a better investment penny-wise give the engine nine per cent more torque and 28 per cent more horsepower, with no significant increase in displacement.

Although the overhead valve engine hogs the lime-light, it is far from being Mercury's only news for '54. Other big changes are the completely new front suspension; the first four-Venturi carburetor available for a standard transmission car; a brand-new, radical body style; an extensive facelift for the entire line of bodies; a bold new line of colors for exteriors, and colors plus fabrics for interiors. These and a bevy of less obvious changes and improvements make the new Merc a tempting morsel to set before the new car buyer. The fact that Mercury's resale value tops its price class adds quite a bit to its appeal.

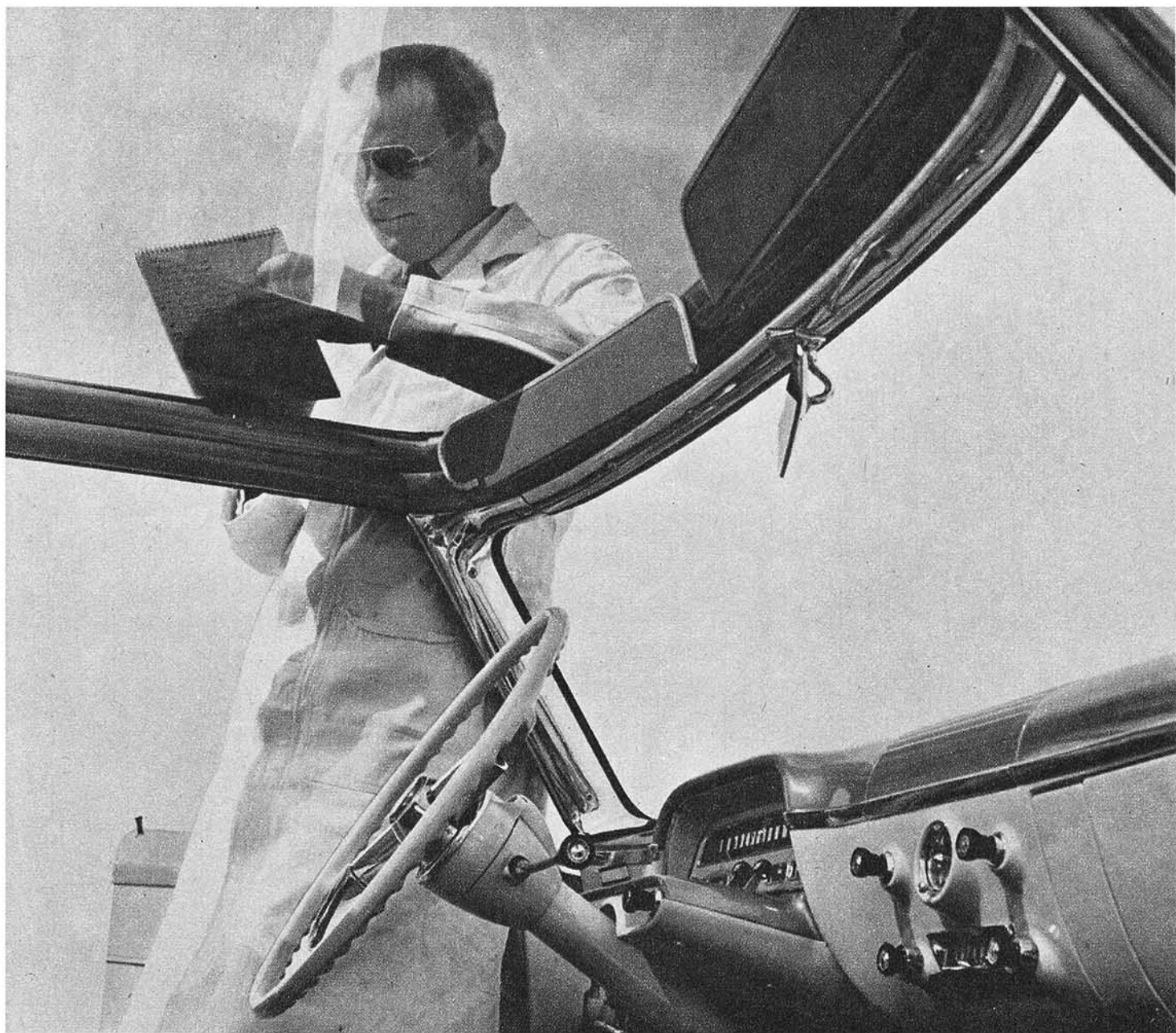
Mercury offers eight body styles in '54. They are three hardtops, two four-doors, a two-door, convertible

Trunk dimensions on the new Merc are huge: opening is four feet wide, interior about four feet deep, below. Ball-joint front-end suspension, bottom, is basically Lincoln's.



Rear end of Merc has new fender treatment, new tail lights and more bumper protection. Fifth wheel was used to make special CARS tests.

Leaning on the ¼-inch-thick Plexiglas hardtop, Griff makes note of the redesigned instrument panel and beefed-up steering column. Non-moveable plastic top goes back 35 inches from the top of the windshield and covers front seat compartment.



and a station wagon. The plastic-topped Sun Valley interested me most.

My first thought about the Sun Valley was for the passengers who would be done to a turn riding in it under a hot sun. But, I was assured that before the company gave serious consideration to the new body style, prototypes were tested in the sunniest and hottest portions of our country. A standard test was to let a steel-top car and the plastic-top job stand in the sun for equal lengths of time and then seat blindfolded people in them both. The difference in inside temperature proved not to be perceptible, although instruments would show differences of a few degrees. It's the tint of the acrylic resin plastic that does it. This plastic was originally developed for use in military aircraft and the ability to filter out heat rays was one of its basic specifications.

I drove one of these Sun Valley models around the proving grounds for several hours. Nature cooperated by staging a late autumn heat wave (temperature 91 degrees) and I was able to get a good idea of the plastic's heat-insulating qualities, which are quite adequate. However, a quickly detachable sunshade lining is available to Sun Valley owners who wish additional shielding in the hottest, sunniest weather.

The Sun Valley is an unusually pleasant car to drive. Paint jobs for this model are chosen to match the tinted plastic so that it is barely noticeable from the street. From within, the sensation is one of spaciousness and light. It's not like having no top at all because the light is subdued. I was never bothered by glare and found the unusual glow of light within the car distinctly cheerful. I like the Sun Valley, but I would like to [Continued on page 66]