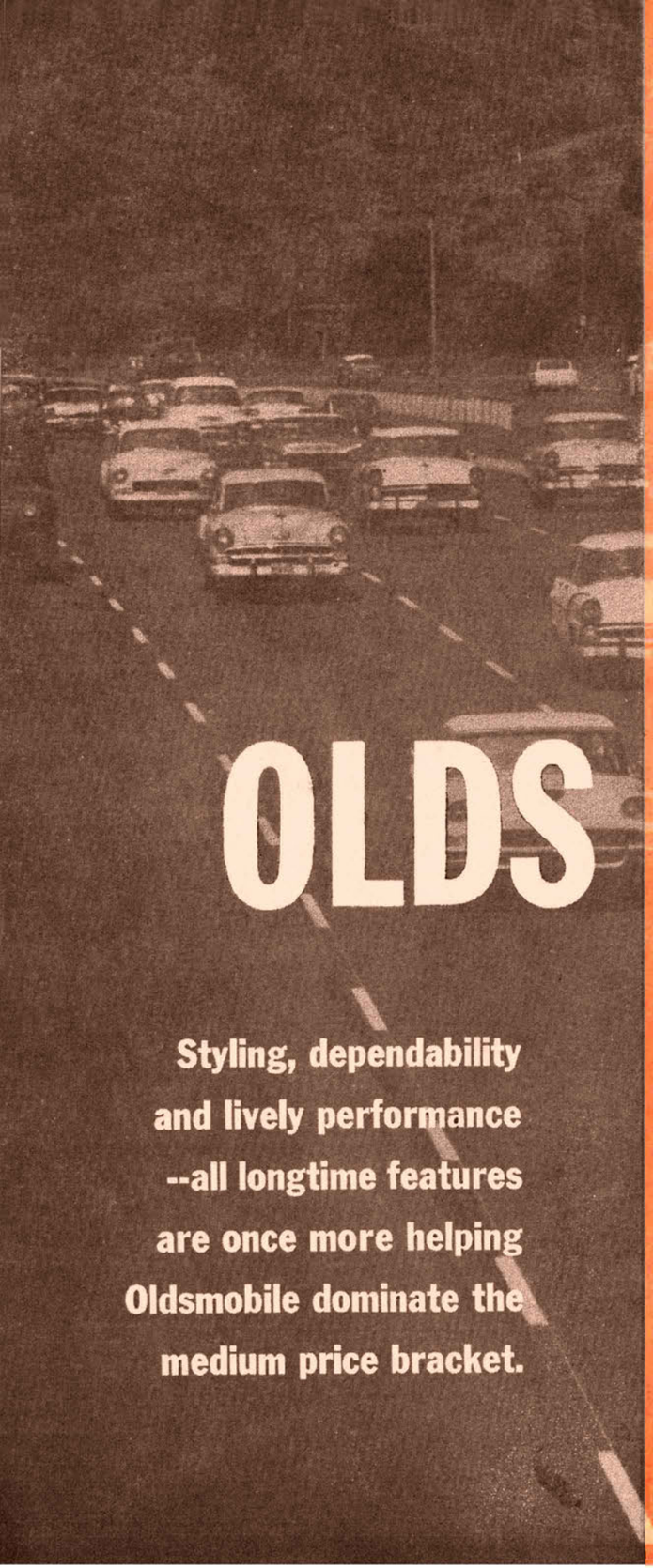


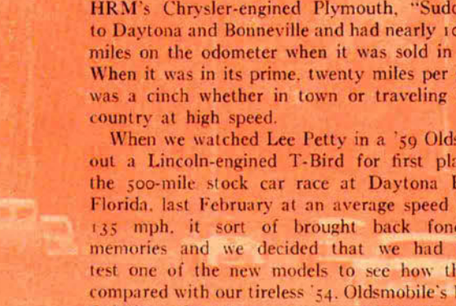
OLDS ...'59

Styling, dependability and lively performance --all longtime features are once more helping Oldsmobile dominate the medium price bracket.

We've had a soft spot in our heart for Oldsmobile ever since we bought one back in 1954. That was a real automobile! It was used as a parts car for the '54 Mexican road race, towed HRM's Chrysler-engined Plymouth, "Suddenly" to Daytona and Bonneville and had nearly 100,000 miles on the odometer when it was sold in 1958. When it was in its prime, twenty miles per gallon was a cinch whether in town or traveling cross-country at high speed.

When we watched Lee Petty in a '59 Olds edge out a Lincoln-engined T-Bird for first place in the 500-mile stock car race at Daytona Beach, Florida, last February at an average speed above 135 mph, it sort of brought back fond old memories and we decided that we had better test one of the new models to see how the '59 compared with our tireless '54. Oldsmobile's Public Relations department gave a go-ahead on our request for a test car but the only models they had available at the time were the heavier four-door sedans. We wanted the hottest version produced so thanked Olds PR and went to see our friends at the Yeakel Oldsmobile Agency in Los Angeles. We checked through all the demonstrators and finally ended up borrowing the car assigned to General Manager Phil Yeakel.

This car was a Super 88 hardtop coupe with the big engine, Hydra-Matic transmission, power steering, power brakes and nearly every extra made by Oldsmobile except air conditioning and air suspension. Phil had registered 7500 miles on the odometer which meant that the car was well broken-in. The car was also well tuned and ran smoothly.



BY RAY BROCK

Oldsmobiles are made under three different model names. The cheapest model is called Dynamic 88, next is the Super 88 and the top model of the three is the 98. The Dynamic 88 and Super 88 are the same basic car but with differences in engine and quality of trim. The 98 is also very nearly the same car but with a stretched wheelbase, more overall length and still higher trim quality. The 88 and Super 88 have a 123-inch wheelbase and an overall length of 218½ inches. The 98 has a 126.3-inch wheelbase and a 223-inch overall length. All three models use the same suspension components and have identical tread, 61 inches both front and rear. The '59 wide body shell that is used throughout the General Motors line of cars is shared by the three Olds models and gives an overall width of 80.8 inches across the bumper tips. The measurement through the center of the body at the door openings is only slightly less at 79 inches.

Our first experience with the wide GM body shell was last fall when we went to Detroit, picked up a new Pontiac and drove it home to California. The broad, flat hood was so large that we never did get used to it. Later, we tested the '59 Buick and Chevy's El Camino, two more cars using the same wide body and expansive hood. Same story—the hood on each car is too wide. Although the Olds uses the same body shell as the cars just mentioned, they have lowered the center portion of the hood to break up the monotony of so much flat sheet metal and we immediately noticed that the Olds hood does not seem quite so wide as the other cars although it certainly is.

Although we personally considered the hood design better than other GM cars, the front seat used in the Oldsmobile is no better than the others. Seating position is very low and to provide support beneath the thighs, the front edge of the seat cushion is raised much higher than the rear portion, resulting in a sharp angle between cushion and back. Once you get wedged into this angle between seat and back, you are there to stay. It's almost impossible to squirm around while driving to relieve the tensions of long rides. This is the price the passenger pays to permit the low body height of todays cars and it isn't restricted just to the GM line.

Interior finish of the Oldsmobile test car we used was excellent. Olds always managed to come up with an interesting, yet uncluttered instrument panel layout in the past and this year is no exception. A drum type speedometer is used for the first time by Olds and although we are unaccustomed to this type and have heard a number of people register disfavor toward it, we had absolutely no trouble reading the speed. Speeds registered on our test car were as nearly accurate as any car we have tested this year but this doesn't necessarily mean all Olds speedometers will be accurate.

Unlike so many of the late model cars, Olds has a king-sized glove compartment on the right side of the panel, one which will hold a number of miscellaneous items. Sure, we know that the glove compartment shouldn't be used as a catchall but we store all sorts of stuff in our own and know that a lot of other people do too.

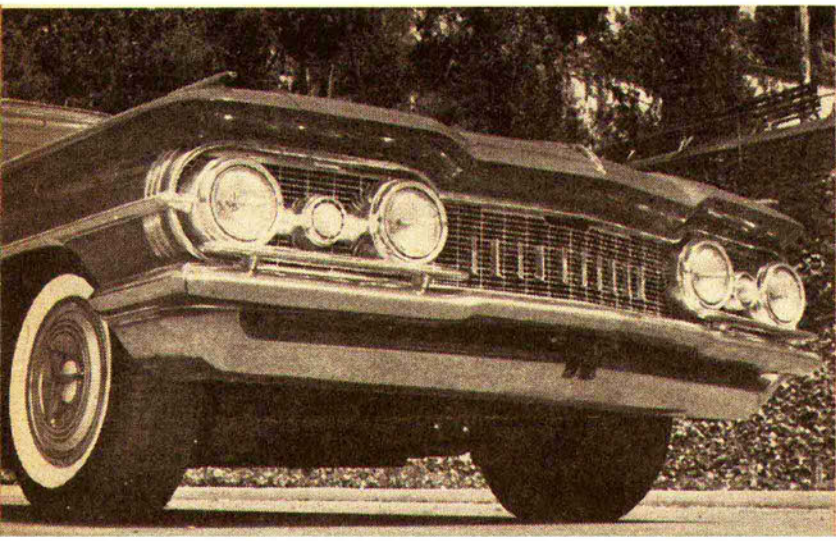
(*Continued on following page*)

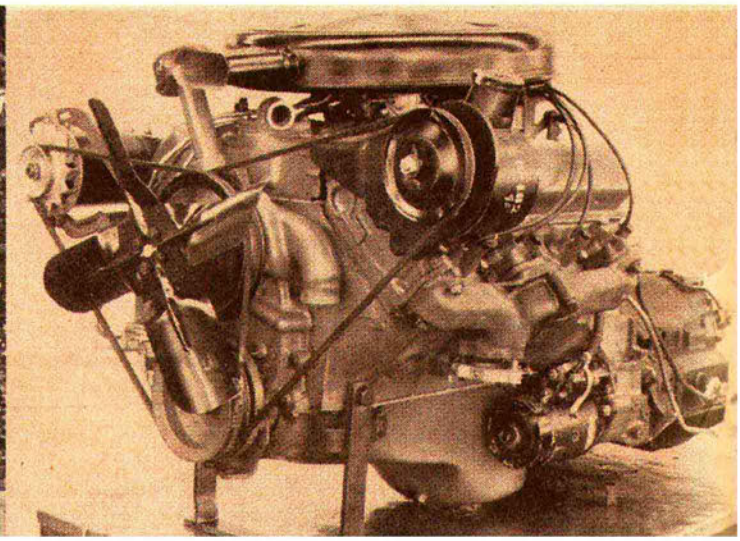
CLASS LEADER

RIGHT—Super 88 tested by Ray Brock was hardtop coupe model that was only 56 inches high. The deck lid handle and gas fill in the center of the bumper were liked.

LEFT—Natural habitat of the '59 Olds is cruising effortlessly along the turnpikes and freeways. The ride is smooth and the wind noise level low.

PHOTOS BY ERIC RICKMAN





LEFT—Spacing of quad headlights across the front of the Oldsmobile emphasizes the 80-inch width from bumper tip to tip. Indentation in the center of the hood extends all the way to the base of the windshield to break up the wide expanse of metal. RIGHT—For '59, two engine displacements are used, 371 and 394 cubic inches. Top power rating is 315 hp for the 394-inch V8, the standard engine for Super 88 and 98's. Only physical difference inside the two engines is an eighth-inch in cylinder bore.

'59 OLDS continued

so why not a glove compartment of decent proportions? One of the optional items with which our test car was equipped was a combination courtesy light and reading light in the top of the car. The courtesy light operates when the doors are opened and the reading light can be switched on at any time and adjusted a full 360° to read a map or let the wife check her knitting. The light is a spot type and keeps glare from the windshield when being used by passengers.

There were no complaints on the amount of door opening for entry and exit on our two-door test car although the experience we had when testing a four-door Buick a few months ago makes us certain that impossible conditions will exist when trying to get in and out of the rear seat of an Olds hardtop sedan. Both cars use the same body and the combination of narrow rear door plus deep seating arrangement requires a lot of straining to get out.

Luggage compartment room is ample for the average family off on a two-week vacation if properly packed, and the spare tire is mounted at a 45° angle on the right side where it is easy to get out. The lock for the trunk lid is located beneath the lip of the lid and requires a bit of stooping to get the key in place. A practical handle on the rear edge does help open or close the lid, something we have often wished for. The filler neck for the gas tank is located in the center of the rear bumper so that it is accessible from either side of the car. Also, being located in the bumper prevents body paint from being chipped by careless service station attendants who often jab the fuel nozzle into the fender.

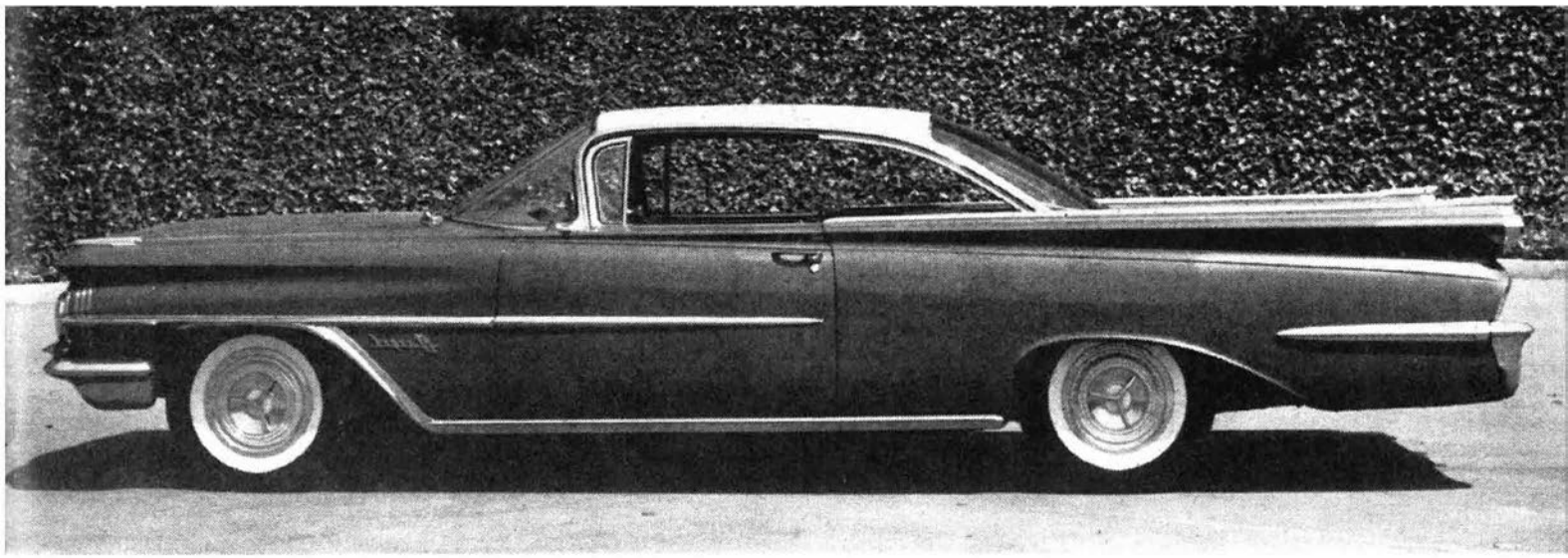
The undercarriage of the '59 Olds is quite similar in appearance to that of recent years but there have been a number of changes made to adapt the larger '59 body. The frame is a combination ladder type and X type and has been widened nine inches, lengthened ten inches over the same type frame used in 1958. Side rails are channel shaped with a husky X-member of I-beams anchored solidly through the center of the car as shown in the photo on page 25. The tubular center section of the X-member not only resists frame twist but also provides a sturdy mounting location for the bearing that supports the middle of the two-piece driveshaft.

The front suspension is, like all of our other American automobiles, of independent design with unequal control arms supporting the front wheel spindles. Coil springs are used as standard equipment but air springs are available as an option. We'll go into the air suspension system in just a few more paragraphs. The Olds front coils are definitely intended to provide a soft ride for the majority and will therefore bottom quite easily if subjected to dips at high speeds. The spring rate of 100 pounds per inch at the wheel is just three pounds more than the springs used by '59 Fords and a Super 88 weighs about 400 pounds more on the front wheels than does a Fairlane Ford. Like we said, though, this car was designed to provide a luxurious ride and if you plan to go road racing, you'll have to do like Lee Petty did at Daytona Beach, throw out the stock springs and stick in a pair about three times as strong. Front shock absorbers control the Olds adequately for the average driver but are too soft for high speed operation. We often wonder why some Detroit company does not offer a shock arrangement which can be adjusted by the driver as he encounters different types of roads and speeds. Some of our expensive models used the idea years ago and some high-priced foreign models still do. Even if it is offered as an option, many owners who do a lot of driving would willingly pay the difference when purchasing a new car to have a variable ride control.

The rear suspension is very similar to that used by Olds in past years with semi-elliptical leaf springs mounted parallel to the center line of the car and the rear axle housing bracketed to the springs ahead of their center point so that they will resist torque and braking forces. Olds is the only General Motors car still using the leaf springs as Cad, Pontiac and Chevy joined Buick in 1958 with coils at all four corners. Possibly one of the big reasons for the swing to coils is that an air spring unit will easily slip in place of a coil and much more work is required when installing air springs in place of a leaf spring.

Rear leaf spring rate for the '59 Olds is 115 pounds per inch at the wheel which is only slightly more than Ford's '59 rear spring rate of 107 pounds. Again, this comparison is made to emphasize the fact that Oldsmobile springs are designed for a soft ride and although the car is much heavier than a Ford, springs are practically the same. As at the front, Olds' rear shocks are designed for the easy ride and do not function well at high speeds.

Air suspension is optional on all '59 Oldsmobiles with air spring units replacing the conventional springs on all four wheels. When introduced in 1958, a lot of publicity was spread around about air sus-



Leader in the chrome department last year, Oldsmobile has made a complete about-face for '59, employing sculptured sheet metal to get the desired effect. Flashy wheel covers extend past the edge of the wheel rim and rest on the sidewall of tire. They are held in place with spring clips but squeak at slow speeds due to the flex of the tires.

pensions being the answer to a car owner's prayer but the cost and problems of the optional air ride were much more than the advantages. Actually, our experience with air suspension in 1958 revealed that the car did stay level despite the load but otherwise felt just like conventional steel springs. There were a lot of things that could and did go wrong with GM's air suspension which meant not only unhappy customers but also distraught service managers so that is probably the reason why you don't see ads pushing the air suspension for '59. One Buick service representative told us recently that half of Buick's '58 air suspension problems were solved for '59. They eliminated the units from the front wheels. He figured that taking them off the rear too would be a 100% solution. Air compressors, leveling valves, filters, tanks, air lines and air bags, all of which can give trouble and not improve the ride are a poor substitute for dependable steel springs.

Power steering is an optional item on both the 88 and Super 88, standard for the 98, but we recommend that anybody interested in a '59 Oldsmobile cough up the extra $100-plus dollars for the Saginaw power steering unit. This recommendation is based on the fact that like nearly all of the full sized cars in this country today, Oldsmobile too has had to slow the standard steering ratio to offset increased car weight and low pressure tires. The ratio has been slowed down so much, while at the same time wheelbase has been lengthened, that it is almost impossible to turn the wheel fast enough on twisting roads. The power steering ratio is 21.8 to 1 versus 29.4 to 1 for the standard steering gear, or 30% faster. The Saginaw power steering has been redesigned this year to require much less effort by the driver than ever before and is very nearly a full power unit. The steering responds as fast as the driver can turn the wheel, showing no tendency to bind due to hydraulic fluid lag as do some units. So, whether you like it or not, power steering is here to stay and we'll bet you'll like it once you try it.

Brakes have also undergone a modification for the '59 Olds. They are still of the same size as those used last year with 11-inch drums, 2½ inches wide on front and 2 inches on the rear but the drums have been changed to provide better cooling. The large cross section of modern tires and small wheels that completely shield the drums from cooling air added to the problem of increased car weight in recent years to give some of our late model cars borderline brakes. This problem has been attacked by all the companies and nearly all have come up with an effective solution. Oldsmobile is no exception, they have changed their drums to where they now have a wide, thin flange on the open edge. This flange not only speeds heat dissipation

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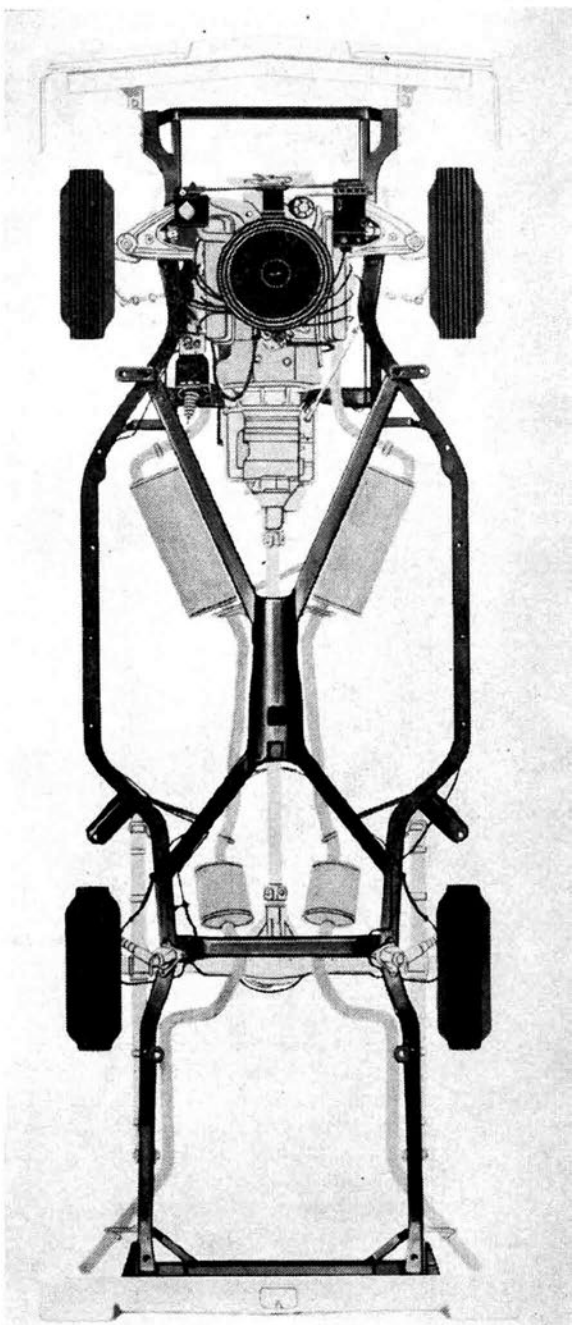


Wide-spread side frame rails provide room for step-down foot wells in the back seat. X-member with tubular center section prevents frame twist, also supports center driveshaft bearing. Optional dual exhaust uses resonator mufflers in the tailpipes.

'59 OLDS

continued from page 25

Newly designed brake drums for the '59 Olds have a wide flange around the open end to direct air flow over the drum and also to dissipate heat into the air flow.

to the air flow but also helps direct air back inside the wheel where it will cool the main part of the drum. An added feature is that the flange gives extra strength to the open side of the drum and prevents expansion which leads to erratic brakes and pull to one side or the other when hot. The area of the brake lining used totals 191.7 square inches for all four wheels but actual effective area is only 156.8 square inches since a groove down the length of each shoe in the middle of the lining nearly ½-inch wide helps direct air over the surrounding lining to aid cooling.

In our test driving, we experienced brake fade only after repeated high speed stops and even then there was plenty of advance warning as the foot pressure required on the brake pedal increased gradually. Even when the brakes had been well abused, all stops were made in a straight line with no steering correction required due to erratic brakes. For everyday use, the '59 Oldsmobile brakes are quite satisfactory.

Two engines are offered for '59 Oldsmobiles, a 371-cubic-inch V8 and a 394-inch V8. The engines are identical except for cylinder bore, one having a 4-inch bore and the larger version 4.125 inches. All parts are interchangeable except the pistons and rods. Slightly heavier rods are used in the small displacement engine to cancel the larger bore in the 394 engine and therefore make factory crankshaft balance the same for either engine. This Olds engine is, in outward appearances, very nearly the same engine that got everybody interested in the "Rockets" back in 1949. Early Olds V8's have been able to benefit from parts interchangeability in the past but this similarity has been gradually falling off in recent years and this year, very

few parts will fit early models. The cylinder heads for example will not work on earlier models while pre-'59 heads would fit engines all the way back to '49.

The '59 heads are still quite similar in appearance to the early heads but are made to use offset rocker arms so that the pushrod passages through the edge of the heads can be moved over enough to give more intake port room. One-eighth-inch larger intake valves (1.875) are used in the redesigned heads but the exhaust valve remains the same at 1.562 inches. For the first time, Olds has provided a four-port exhaust in their '59 cylinder heads. A four-port exhaust of course means absolutely nothing to the average Olds owner but will be welcomed by those hot rodders who consider tuned exhausts when modifying for power.

The crankshaft stroke has not been changed from '58, both using a 3.69-inch stroke but the diameter of both main bearings and rod journals has been increased ¼-inch for '59. This gives 3-inch main and 2.50-inch rod journals. Last month's HRM carried a report on modifying the '59 Pontiac engine which also uses a 3-inch main bearing. We experienced some bearing failure with the Pontiac on the engine dynamometer using the stock Pontiac babbit inserts. After replacing them with heavy-duty inserts and increasing clearances, we solved the problem. The '59 Olds uses the heavy-duty inserts as standard equipment for both rods and mains. These heavy-duty bearing inserts are called Moraine 400 and are steel backed aluminum with a thin babbit overlay.

Although there have been a number of dimensional changes made for the '59 engine as compared to the 371-inch V8 used in 1958, the newer engine doesn't really offer too much more than an extra 23 cubic inches of displacement. The compression ratio has been dropped from 10:1 to 9.75:1 for this year, the same '58 camshaft pattern is used and although a different carburetor model is used, the capacity is practically the same as that used last year.

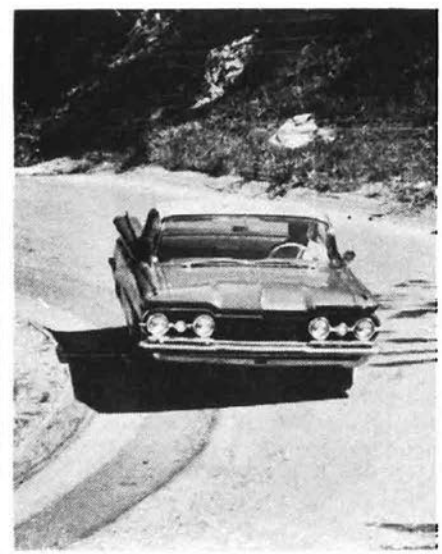
A single two-barrel Rochester carburetor is standard for the 371-inch 88 engine with a rating of 270 horsepower at 4600 rpm and 390 ft/lbs of torque. An optional Rochester four-barrel bumps the power rating to 300 at 4600 rpm and 410 ft/lbs of torque at 2800 rpm. The larger 394-inch displacement engine used with the Super 88 and 98 models is available only with a single Rochester four-barrel and is rated 315 hp at 4600 rpm, 435 ft/lbs of torque at 2800 rpm. The optional J-2 triple Rochester two-barrel carburetion available in 1957-'58 is not offered for the '59 models. This system offered little more power than the single large four-barrel and unless all three carburetors were brought into play occasionally, the secondary system had a bad habit of clogging with fuel additives.

(Continued on following page)

'59 OLDS continued

Two transmissions are used for Oldsmobiles, a standard shift three-speed and the latest version of the Hydra-Matic. The three-speed is standard equipment for both the 88 and Super 88. It has gear ratios of 2.15 in low, 1.37 in second and direct in third. A Corvette four-speed transmission has ratios of 2.20, 1.66, and 1.31 and direct which illustrates how the Olds standard transmission is very close to the first, third and fourth gears of Corvette's gearbox. Even with the 3.64 rear axle ratio used for stick shift Oldsmobiles, low gear ratio is too high to provide the proper gearing for a standing start. Since almost 100% of the Oldsmobiles purchased this year will be equipped with Hydra-Matic, though, there doesn't seem to be much cause for alarm here.

The Hydra-Matic, standard equipment for the 98 and optional for the other two,

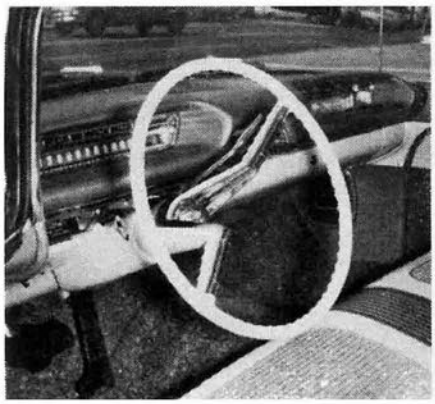


Narrow, sharp corners brought squealing protest from the tires even though speed was not too high. Inside rear wheel quickly loses traction in such a maneuver.

is a four-speed automatic with ratios of 3.96, 2.55, 1.55 and direct. A fluid coupling dumps and fills with oil to control the front planetary unit and provide smooth, almost imperceptible shifts in normal driving. The shift lever can be used to lock the transmission into second or third gears for high performance operation but automatic upshift devices prevent over-revving the engine. The car will automatically upshift from second to third at about 47 mph and from third to fourth at about 72 mph. One feature of the Hydra-Matic which we have always liked very much is that the transmission can be downshifted into third gear for added engine compression to assist in braking. This shift can be made at any speed but the downshift will not take place unless the car is operating under 72 mph.

Three axle ratios are used with the Hydra-Matic transmission, depending on

model. The 98 uses a 3.42 axle, the Super 88 a 3.23 and the 88 a 3.08 ratio. If you have kept up with gear ratios in recent years, you will immediately notice that Olds has the most old-fashioned ratios in the industry. The best cruising ratio stand-



Instrument panel has recessed cluster and is very clean in design. The steering wheel is deeply recessed with small horn buttons fitted into the two steering spokes.

ard with the strongest engine is a 3.23 ratio while competitive cars use ratios such as 2.69, 2.87, 2.92, etc. This reluctance to put a sensible cruising gear in their cars has been instrumental in Oldsmobile losing its reputation as an economical car to operate. We know this firsthand because we participated in the annual Mobilgas Economy Run for three years driving an Oldsmobile (1956-'57-'58) and watched the mileage get worse each year. We stayed out of this most recent run but the average of three 88's was 17.70 mpg and a pair of 98's averaged 17.33 mpg. This was with extremely careful driving and perfectly tuned cars. Olds has a strong engine and a good ratio spread in their four-speed Hydra-Matic; they could easily use a ratio of about 2.70 which could probably be responsible for 2 or 3 mpg more in an economy run.

Driving the '59 Olds is an easy chore. The engine is quiet, there is very little wind noise, throttle response is excellent, brakes are good, workmanship is good and after a few days, even the awkward front seat can start to feel OK. The car is no Ferrari on the tight curves—in fact it is probably about as well suited for road racing in stock form as is a Greyhound bus. The ride is soft and tight corners bring squealing protests from the tires as the car leans badly and pushes the front wheels. Strong crosswinds do not seem to affect the car much but high speeds over rolling desert roads will keep driver and passengers wide awake.

Performance figures for our test car were very good and the car was no lightweight, checking in at 4620 pounds full of fuel but minus driver. 54.8% of the weight or 2530 pounds rested on the front wheels and the other 2090 pounds were on the rear. We ran acceleration tests with a full

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'59 OLDS

continued

tank of fuel because we had trouble trying to get rear wheel traction on standing starts. The full load of fuel didn't help much either but we did get 0-30 mph acceleration times of 3.4 seconds, 8.4 seconds from 0-60 mph, 5.2 seconds from 30-60 mph using second and third gears, and 8.5 seconds for simulated passing from 50-80 mph. Elapsed time for the ¼-mile was 16.7 seconds and a speed of 83 mph was registered at the end of the quarter. The figures just given denote a pretty lively car and the axle ratio was 3.23 to 1. By virtue of size, weight and springing, it would seem that Oldsmobile is more interested in a luxury car than performance model, still yet, they keep the low gear in for acceleration.

Our test car delivered 13.4 miles per gallon in freeway driving around the Los Angeles area and 12.2 for slower city traffic but with more signals thrown in to keep the average down. Looking at the 17.70 mpg turned in by Olds 88's traveling from Los Angeles to Kansas City in Mobilgas' Economy Run, we would estimate our test car to be an average Olds in mileage producing ability under everyday conditions.

Comparing the '59 Olds to the '54 which served us so well is a little tough at this stage of the game. We haven't had the '54 for better than a year and a lot of changes were made between '54 and '59. The '59 Olds is a more luxurious car, is much larger, heavier, has softer springs and is slightly faster than was our '54. The early models certainly had the edge in mileage but the guy who buys one of our large American cars today isn't too concerned with mileage anyway. Let's face it, a lot of BTU's are needed to move a heavy car full of passengers and luggage at a good rate of speed. The foreign imports will cost less than half as much to operate but will only carry half the load.

"Then he said 'Man wait 'til you see the new fuel I've got.'"