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1954 Oldsmobile F-88 Convertible Coupe

Mysterious Ways: The Long, Strange Trip of the 1954 Oldsmobile F-88

by Michael Lamm

Throughout the Fifties, the grandest expressions of General Motors' visions of the automobile's future routinely went on display at the corporation's Motorama shows. But once out of the spotlight, GM's "dream cars" were supposed to be destroyed. This is the story of one that beat the odds—and its odyssey through the world of car collecting.

General Motors in the Eighties was awash in policies, plans, and projects as it tried to maintain its equilibrium in a rapidly changing industry. But with a management shake-up, divisional reorganization, costly nonautomotive acquisitions, and the start of the Saturn project capturing the attention of the business and automotive press, it was perhaps understandable when another new policy took hold with little notice.

In the Eighties, according to retired GM Design Staff executive Larry Faloon, corporate policy toward its advanced concept cars changed. For the past 20 years or so since, General Motors has made every effort to preserve its concept vehicles. The corporation now prefers to warehouse them for posterity and occasionally brings them out for special occasions.

Before then, General Motors long had a policy that handbuilt cars, including prototypes, "mules," show cars, concept vehicles and assorted one-offs, had to be rendered unusable and scrapped, usually within a year of their completion. Such cars are rarely engineered or tested for real-world driving conditions. GM reasoned that if its show cars were to fall into private hands, the corporation could be held legally liable if the vehicles were involved in accidents.

As a result, many GM show and concept cars ended up destroyed, including some that thrilled visitors to the famous Motorama exhibitions. Even so, a few did survive. The 1951 GM LeSabre (*CA*, February 2003) and Buick XP-300, the 1953 Buick Wildcat (*CA*, December 1988), three 1953 Cadillac Le Mans convertibles, and two 1954 Pontiac Bonnevilles were among those spared this fate. Several other dismantled Motorama specials were secreted in a wrecking yard near the General Motors Technical Center in Warren, Michigan.

The two-seat 1954 Oldsmobile F-88 is another of the fortunate survivors that belonged to this different era. Notes Faloon, "I think that Mr. Earl," meaning Harley J. Earl, the tough-minded boss of what was then called General Motors Styling Section, "was categorically opposed to destroying Motorama cars." Earl wielded tremendous power within the corporation and did pretty much what he wanted with "his" show cars. "In those days," notes Faloon, "I guess when Mr. Earl wanted to give a show car to somebody, he just did."

The F-88 left General Motors' Styling Section under mysterious circumstances. And when mystery overshadows history, as it surely does in this case, people tend to make up stories. The F-88's current owner, Seattle-area auto collector Gordon Apker, discovered soon after he bought the car that it came with nearly as many stories as the Empire State Building, some of them just as tall.

One tale gave the F-88 an identical twin. That part is true, but the twin, says a second story, burned while being loaded for transport between shows. Or did it catch fire at the home of Oldsmobile's chief engineer? Yet another account says there might have been a *third* F-88.

These stories are made more confusing by the fact that there actually were three distinct Oldsmobile F-88s [see sidebar]. The first F-88 built for the 1954 Motorama show circuit was followed in 1957 by the F-88 Mark II, which looked entirely different with its quad headlights and bladelike vertical tailfins. The final F-88, the Mark III, was shown in the 1959 GM Motoramas, and looked nothing like the earlier two.

Before we examine the myths, let's review what's known about the first Olds

Fiberglass-bodied and Corvette-sized, the F-88 was one of two "dream cars" Oldsmobile prepared for the 1954 Motorama shows. Some time later, it somehow it slipped out of General Motors' grasp. (Owner: Gordon Apker)


OLDSMOBILE
88

F-88. It was designed during 1952-53, around the same time as the first Motorama Corvette. Preliminary sketches might have come out of an experimental studio run by veteran designer Bill Lange. The final design, though, was most likely done in the main Oldsmobile studio under the direction of Art Ross. Ross was a gifted designer who'd conceived, among other things, the 1941 Cadillac's eggcrate "tombstone" grille (*CA*, December 1990), the World War II Wildcat tank destroyer, and the "rocket" beltline for the 1959 Oldsmobile (*CA*, February 1991). Oldsmobile interiors in the early Fifties were done under Jack Humbert, who later became Pontiac's chief designer. So it was a talented group that worked on that first F-88, always, of course, under the watchful direction of GM Styling vice president Harley Earl.

In terms of technical detail, the '54 Olds F-88 was built on the chassis of an early Chevrolet Corvette (*CA*, August 1998) and shared the Corvette's 102-inch wheelbase. Like the 'Vette, the F-88's body was made of fiberglass. Styling cues like an elliptical grille mouth, "hockey stick" side trim, and bullet taillights were purely period Oldsmobile, however.

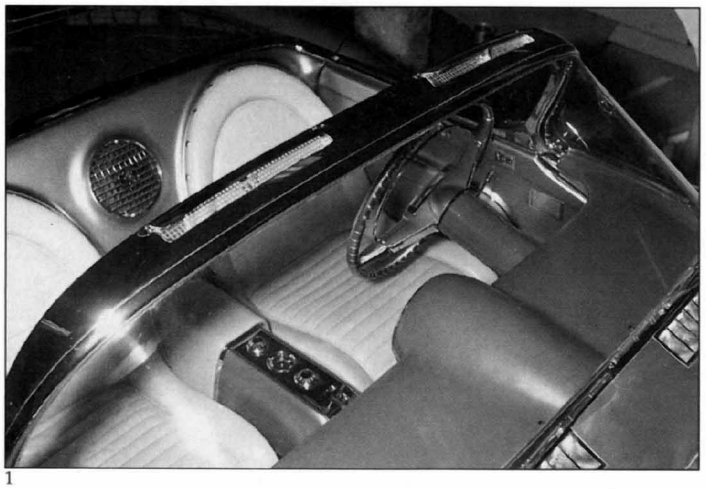
The F-88 was powered by a hopped-up 324-cid V-8 from the 1954 Oldsmobile Super 88 (*CA*, February 1996). The F-88 engine used a stock four-barrel carburetor with a tiny, flat air cleaner. The engine's 9.0:1 compression ratio plus additional—but unrecorded—modifications boosted the Super 88's 185 bhp to 250 horsepower and an undisclosed amount of torque.

Power flowed through a four-speed Hydra-Matic transmission to a 3.55:1 Corvette rear axle, which, despite its origins serving a humbler six-cylinder engine, had no trouble handling the Olds V-8's torque. The F-88's only other off-the-shelf components were its instruments. Humbert took these from a 1953 Oldsmobile (*CA*, August 2001), turned the speedometer into a combined speedo/tach, and gave the other three dials custom faces. (During its brief tenure as a Motorama showcar, the F-88 shared the stage with the Oldsmobile Cutlass fastback coupe. The Cutlass' instrument panel, set vertically in a central stack, was identical to the F-88's.)

The F-88, painted metallic gold with metallic green inside the fenderwells, had its first public showing at the General Motors Motorama on January 21, 1954, at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York. The vehicle display and musical revue ran for six days, after which the F-88 became part of a series of traveling Motorama shows that caravanned by bus and truck to Miami, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Chicago. Nearly 2 million people saw the five Motoramas that season.

In that day, after a show car had completed its Motorama duties, it was usually turned over to its sponsoring division. The division's top executives were then free to do with it what they wished. They were encouraged to eventually destroy it, and although they couldn't sell such vehicles, they could and often did give them away, usually to favored dealers, business friends, or relatives. That's how a lot of the survivors got out of General Motors. The crusher mandate was often ignored because America was a less litigious place in the early Fifties. These were GM's happy days, and divisional executives didn't concern themselves with getting sued.

So the F-88 apparently got trucked from GM Styling in downtown Detroit to Oldsmobile's engineering garage in Lansing, Michigan, sometime in late March or early April 1954. According to


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former GM show-car fabrication manager Richard Henderson, the golden F-88 contained a complete powertrain, but didn't run during its time on the Motorama circuit. However, Olds engineers soon got it going. Home movies taken in the summer of 1954 by a 15-year-old Lansing youth named Don Baron show the F-88 being driven by Shriners in a downtown parade.

After the golden F-88 was sent to Lansing, continues Henderson, Harley Earl apparently had second thoughts about having let it go, so he ordered another one built. The twin was painted red. "That red car became Mr. Earl's other daily driver," notes Henderson.

Earl still drove the 1951 LeSabre, but he now alternated between it and the F-88. The F-88 was a far simpler car than the LeSabre, making it easier to maintain. Earl's personal mechanic, Leonard McLay, always had his hands full keeping the LeSabre on the road. Not so the F-88. The F-88 was also considerably lighter than the LeSabre, and the modified Olds V-8 gave it performance that was probably better than the LeSabre's on gasoline. (The LeSabre had a second tank for methanol fuel, but methanol was rarely used, especially around town.)

"I remember taking the red F-88 to the opening of the New York Thruway," says Henderson. "I drove it there [from Detroit]. They had 125 miles of thruway open at that time, from about Utica to Rochester. I remember it so well because it was the first trip I took driving a show car. I was 20 years old. In front of me was Leonard McLay in the LeSabre.

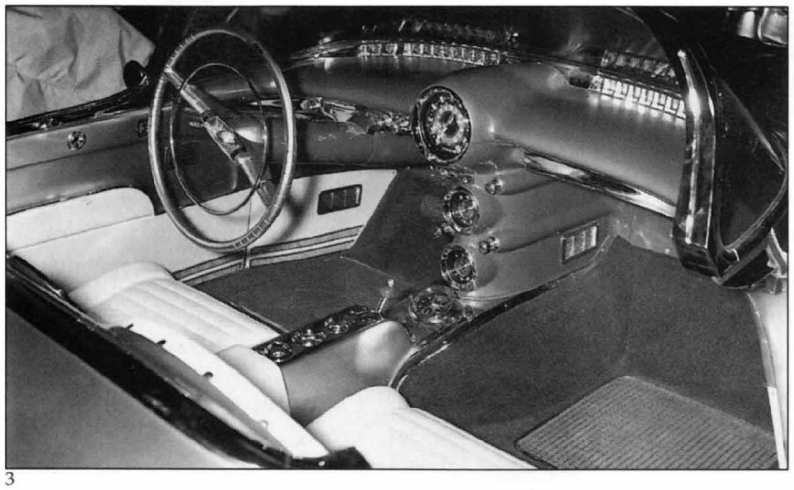
"We were coming out of Windsor, Ontario, and all of a sudden I heard a siren. The cop pulled me over. I thought, 'Oh, oh, I'm getting a ticket, and I'll get fired the first trip I ever took.' But the cop just wanted to see the car.

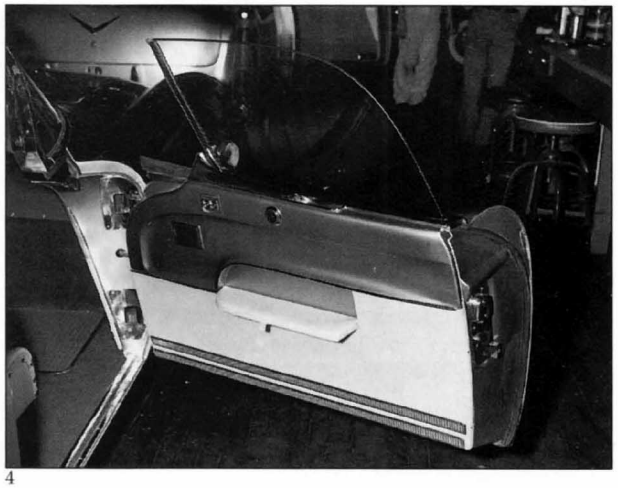
"The second event I remember with that car . . . I drove it to Wisconsin for the opening of the Road America race course. Mr. Harley Earl cut the ribbon. This was in 1955." The red F-88 also appeared at at least two Sports Car Club of America road races in 1954, one at Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland on May 2; the other at Atterbury Air Force Base near Columbus, Indiana, on May 30.

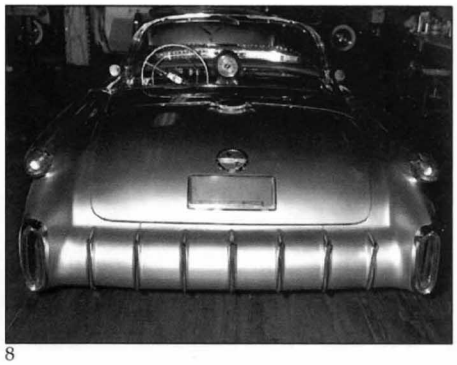
At the Andrews race, according to historian Jim Sitz, both the F-88 and the 1951 Buick XP-300 stood on display. During the Atterbury race, three-time Indianapolis 500 winner Mauri Rose, who in 1954 worked as an engineer for Chevrolet, babysat the F-88 (and presumably one or more Corvettes). When Harley Earl showed up to watch his son, Jerry, compete in the race with a new Austin-Healey, the elder Earl hopped into the F-88 and drove it around the base like a proud father, much to the delight of the race crowd.

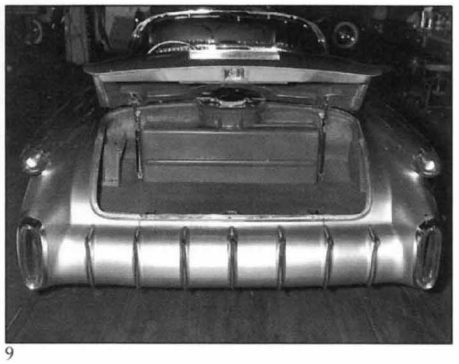
The F-88, as mentioned, now belongs to Gordon Apker, the car's 12th owner. (He and his wife, Janet, live on a seven-acre compound overlooking Puget Sound near Seattle.) Apker founded Monarch Foods Corporation, which bought out the Shakey's Pizza chain in 1983. Since selling both companies in 1989, he's been pursuing his passion for unusual and interesting automobiles. Apker currently owns a diverse collection of classics, special-interest cars, hot rods, customs, and

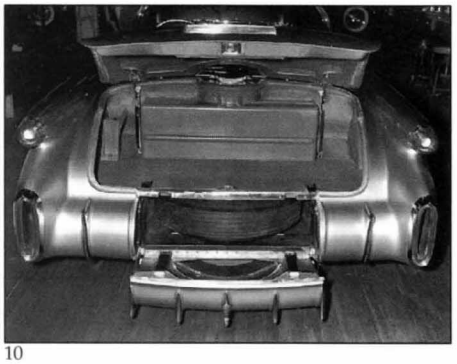
1-4. By December 23, 1953, when these pictures were taken, the two-seat F-88 looked ready to hit the Motorama circuit, which began about a month later in New York. *5, 6.* Just weeks earlier, on December 7, fabricators were still a long way from completing the car. *7.* Chromed parts adorned the F-88's 250-bhp Oldsmobile "Rocket" V-8. *8-10.* A central fuel filler on the deck and a hidden spare tire were among the car's distinctive details.


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exotics—some 25 in all. But it's the F-88 that comes wrapped up in questions.

First, did one of the 1954 F-88s burn? The story initially told to Apker was that as one of the two cars was being loaded onto a trailer, its engine caught fire. And because the handler didn't know how to open the hood, the car burned up. Yet, among the 20 or so former GM employees I talked with—including retired designers, engineers, and management personnel, many of whom were working at General Motors in 1954—none had ever heard of any Motorama car burning.

Another version of the underhood fire story says that Oldsmobile's chief engineer drove the golden F-88 from the Lansing engineering garage to his home, with his son as his passenger. When the chief engineer parked the car in his driveway, the engine caught fire, and that's how the golden car went up in smoke. Oldsmobile's chief engineer in 1954 was Harold N. Metzel, who currently lives in Scottsdale, Arizona. Although he's suffered a stroke and has difficulty enunciating his words, he told me in no uncertain terms no car ever caught fire in his driveway.

Still another story claims that the surviving F-88 escaped the crusher by being disassembled, crated, and shipped off to E. L. Cord's mansion in California. E. L. Cord? *The* E. L. Cord who simultaneously ran Auburn, Cord, and Duesenberg in their glory days? Yes, *that* Errett Lobban Cord. But the story didn't make sense. Why would the F-88 be taken apart for shipment to Cord? And which F-88 was it: the gold one or the red one?

Actually, there's good evidence for the truth of this story. After the 1954 Motorama tour ended, the golden F-88 apparently survived intact in Lansing for about a year. After that, it disappeared, and if GM policy had been carried out, the F-88 should have been destroyed.

Obviously the F-88 wasn't destroyed. In addition to the car, Apker has a set of full-sized engineering blueprints that he got when he bought the F-88, and, more important—in fact, the most important document of all—a shipping confirmation sheet dated March 21, 1955. This bill of lading, marked "Customer Copy," was clearly one of several such documents, because it was headed "Styling Section SS-532, continuation of SS-531."

The shipping list specifically mentioned that these were "surplus materials," and among the items detailed on this particular sheet were "obsolete parts and required engineering blueprints for the Oldsmobile XP-20" (XP-20 was GM Styling's internal designation for the F-88), two door strikers, two front-fender "88" medallions, two parking-lamp assemblies, two exhaust-port support assemblies, one front-end fiberglass skin, and two engineering drawings of the car's front surface.

The shipment was sent from GM's Styling Section, then headquartered in the Argonaut Building behind the General Motors Building in central Detroit, via Railway Express, and delivered collect to Mr. E. L. Cord, 500 Doheny Road, Beverly Hills, California. Cord died in 1974, but his grandson, Charles E. Cord, Jr., still lives in Los Angeles. Charles Cord, who was 16 years old in 1955, told me that he remembered a stack of large wooden crates in his grandfather's six-car Beverly Hills garage. Cord didn't know how long they stayed there, what eventually became of them, who at GM had shipped them to his grandfather, or why his grandfather had taken delivery in the first place.

He pointed out, though, that both E. L. Cord and Harley Earl owned homes in Palm Beach, Florida. He also mentioned that his grandfather owned and managed the Pan Pacific Auditorium in Los Angeles. GM rented the Pan Pacific each time it staged a Motorama show in Southern California.

So it's possible—even likely—that E. L. Cord saw the F-88 at the Pan Pacific in 1954. He might have mentioned to someone like Earl or Olds general manager Jack Wolfram that he admired the car, and it's conceivable that Earl, Wolfram, or one of their colleagues offered to send the F-88 to Cord after Oldsmobile had finished with it.

Possible? Yes. Proven? No.

Another question arises at this point: Why was the F-88 disassembled before shipment? Why wasn't it simply left together and trucked out to California intact? Dick Henderson mentioned that it would have made a lot more sense to ship the F-88 fully assembled, and the reason it was taken apart is still a mystery.

Gordon Apker told me yet another story that he'd gathered with this car: E. L. Cord might have planned to go back into the car business. Perhaps Cord envisioned the F-88 as the sort of car he hoped to produce. Or maybe he intended to simply put the F-88 back together so he could make it his daily driver, just as Earl had done with the red car. In either case, nothing like that ever happened.

Instead, what apparently did happen is that Cord ultimately—after an unrecorded length of time—sold the still-crated, still-disassembled F-88 to a man named Bill Barker, whose business involved renting obsolete military vehicles to movie studios. Barker subsequently sold the F-88 to Jim Brucker, owner of Movie World in Ventura, California, who also rented vehicles to movie studios.

Brucker thus became the F-88's fourth owner, and while he's no longer alive, his son James is. The younger Brucker told me that he, too, remembered the crates and that his father had paid $1000 for them.

The senior Brucker kept the F-88 for only six months before selling it to Leo Gephart, a classic-car dealer in Phoenix, Arizona. Gephart paid $3500 for the crates, and when I talked to him by telephone, he told me that when he owned it, the F-88 chassis arrived separately. The chassis, in fact, came with a Corvette Blue-Flame six-cylinder engine, he said, complete with three sidedraft carburetors.

Like the F-88 currently in collector Gordon Apker's collection, the Motorama car was painted gold. An elliptical grille opening and round parking lights built into the fenders provided the show car with some visual links to the look of Oldsmobile's mainstream production cars. Conical glass covers were placed over the headlights. The '54 Motorama tour took the F-88 to five cities, where it was seen by almost 2 million showgoers.

Gephart also said that after he'd owned the F-88 for a while, he traded it to an Oldsmobile dealer in Ohio for a brand-new GMC "dually" pickup. The dealer, whose name Gephart couldn't remember, intended to assemble the F-88 and use it to publicize his agency. This, though, didn't happen either, and the dealer soon sold the F-88, with Gephart's help, to Ed Lucas, of FEL Classics in Troy, Michigan. Lucas operates a restoration/sales facility and frequently participates in auto auctions. He's emceed a number of prestigious concours d'elegance, including Amelia Island and Meadow Brook. It was he who told me the story about the F-88 burning in the Olds chief engineer's driveway.

Lucas said he received the car as a rolling chassis with the fiberglass body

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Missing Marks: The Fates of the Other F-88s

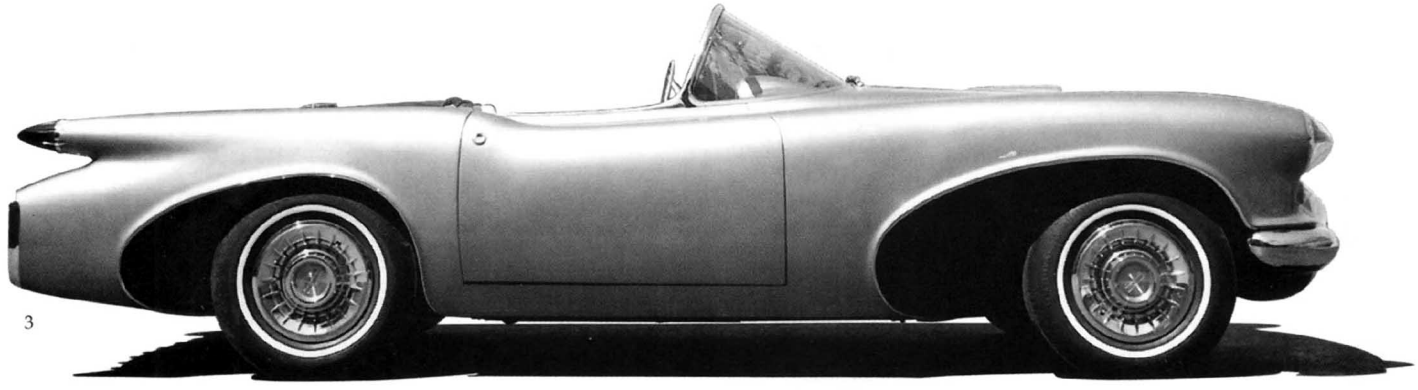
The 1954 Motorama was just the beginning of the F-88 saga at Oldsmobile. Before the end of the Fifties, two more cars bearing the name—but with different looks—would appear.

General Motors chose not to mount Motorama exhibitions for 1957, but that didn't prevent it from building show cars. Among them was the blue Oldsmobile F-88 Mark II, which was actually Harley Earl's red '54 F-88 copy with a new fiberglass body. Quad headlights and a protruding grille mouth characterized the front. A spearlike bulge sprouted from each bodyside, and short blade fins sat atop the rear quarters over the wheel wells. Vertically oriented elliptical taillights finished the design. Seats and door panels in the two-seat cabin were changed, but the instrument panel with its stacked gauges was retained mostly intact.

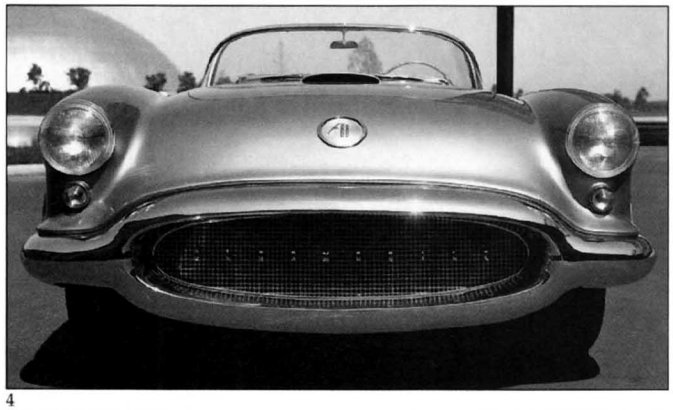
Ultimately, the Mark II was sent to Oldsmobile Division in Lansing, Michigan. Apparently Oldsmobile destroyed the car, because it was never seen again.

It wasn't until October 1958 that GM staged another Motorama, this to feature its '59 production cars and some new dream cars. Among the latter was the F-88 Mark III. Its salient features included an aluminum body, retractable stainless-steel hardtop, experimental Rochester fuel injection, and an experimental automatic transmission.

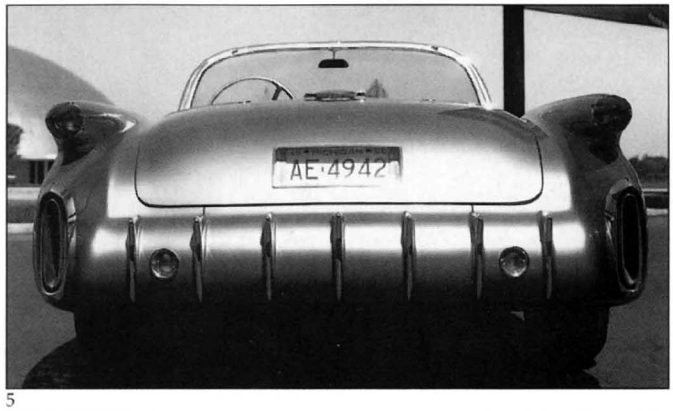
When Harley Earl retired as General Motors' styling vice president in December 1958, he was given the Mark III as a farewell gift. The Mark III was trucked down to Earl's home in Palm Beach, Florida, and he drove it for a short time, but the car kept



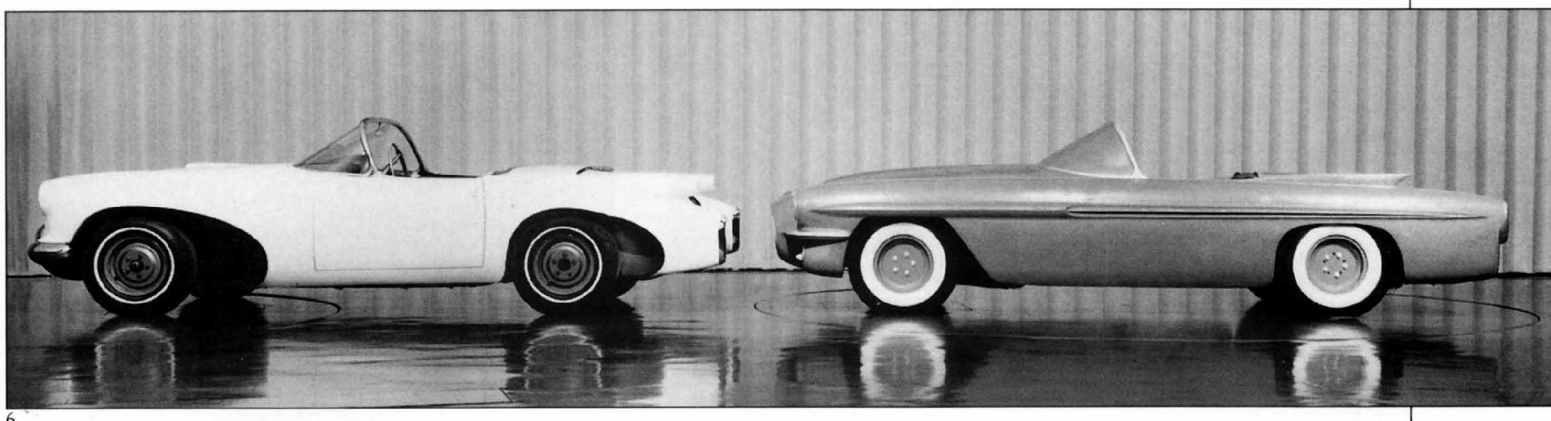
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breaking down. GM had arranged with a local Oldsmobile dealer to service the Mark III, but the dealer simply didn't have the expertise to work on the fuel injection and transmission.

In attempting the repairs, the Olds dealer had phoned GM Styling in Warren, Michigan, and the decision was made to bring the car back to Warren to replace the fuel injection with a conventional carburetor and the experimental transmission with a production Hydra-Matic.

GM Styling assigned Dick Henderson to drive down to Palm Beach in a brand-new 1959 Chevrolet station wagon with an enclosed trailer to bring the F-88 Mark III back for the conversion. Dick collected the car in Palm Beach and was heading north on a two-lane highway in Alabama when a bearing in one of the trailer's hubs seized and the station wagon suddenly ended up in a ditch. Dick was thrown out and sustained a broken back, pelvis, and leg, plus severe flesh wounds. The F-88 wasn't damaged, but, says Dick, "I almost died. I spent 40 days in the hospital in Ozark, Alabama."

The F-88 Mark III was eventually brought back to Warren and a carburetor and Hydra-Matic installed. The car was then returned to Florida, and Earl drove it until his death in 1969. After that, the car was turned over to the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) to be placed in a new museum. (Earl and NASCAR founder Bill France had been good friends.) Construction of the museum was delayed, however, and Earl's successor at GM, William L. Mitchell (*CA*, March 1985), asked NASCAR to return the F-88 Mark III. Soon after it came back to Warren, Mitchell had it destroyed.

Michael Lamm

1, 2. GM styling vice president Harley Earl had a second F-88 built for his personal use. This car, photographed at the then-new GM Technical Center in December '55, may be Earl's. *3-5.* What appears to be the same car as seen the following June. *6.* Earl's F-88 supposedly donated its chassis for a Mark II version (right), which was under development on February 1, 1957. *7-10.* It took just three months to go from clay model (7) to finished product (8-10). *11.* Earl retired to Florida in 1958 with this F-88 Mark III.



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set on it, but it hadn't been assembled or painted. The rest of the car came in crates. The fiberglass body was complete when Lucas got it, but the doors, hood, and decklid were separate, and the main body section wasn't trimmed. Yet the F-88 came with all its original hardware, plus an extra windshield—plus, for some reason, an unchromed grille for the 1954 Olds Cutlass Motorama fastback coupe.

"There were almost enough parts to do two F-88s," Lucas told me, "if you bought another chassis." Lucas says he did some of the assembly work, then traded the unfinished car back to Gephart for a collection of Duesenberg parts. Gephart went to Ed Lucas's shop in Michigan accompanied by Lon Krueger, a respected professional auto restorer who owns and operates Sun Valley Classics, in Tempe, Arizona. Krueger recalls that this trip took place in 1980, and he remembers seeing the partially assembled F-88, along with the crates, in Lucas's shop, but didn't think much about it at the time.

After some time, Krueger got a call from Gephart. Gephart asked if he might be interested in purchasing the F-88 so the car could finally be put together properly. Krueger pondered the offer and ultimately traded a car and cash for the F-88.

"When I got the car, it was very complete," says Krueger. "There was very little missing. But the car had been all taken apart. A lot of the stuff, including blueprints and copies of the parts list . . . were inside the wooden crates." Some of the crates measured 2.5×2.5×8.5 feet, notes Krueger, and all were addressed to E.L. Cord. "I have the end plate off of one of those crates at home," he continues. "When I uncrated this stuff, none of these other previous owners . . . had ever taken anything out of the packing straw.

"Okay, so now I owned the car, and I stored it at my home in Scottsdale, unrestored, in my garage. It sat there for probably six or seven years. I didn't start [working] on the car until 1988. I brought it down to my shop here in Tempe and began to restore it.

"As for the car having a six-cylinder engine . . . it definitely had a V-8. The motor mounts were set up for a V-8. . . . [T]here were some miscellaneous parts that were detailed on this list that either were not included or were lost or something of that nature. I don't remember the specifics, but there were all kinds of scraps of paper and blueprints down in the bottoms of those crates, all folded up. They'd been in there forever, because some of them were water-stained. The crates must have stood someplace where it was wet."



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1. The original F-88 on display. The placard beside the car describes it as "The Last Word in Convertibles!" *2.* When the car was restored in the late Eighties, the 324-cid V-8 engine did not have the chrome parts seen in the photos from late 1953. *3, 4.* What could have been: Photos of what might be Harley Earl's personal copy of the F-88 display two different bumper/grille styles. Or were they completely different cars? There have long been rumors of extra F-88s. *5.* An L-shaped piece of trim was a small-scale version of the "hockey-stick" brightwork on the side of regular '54 Olds 88s. Bullet taillights were another period touch.

The surviving F-88's chassis number suggests that the car was built on a 1954 Corvette frame (E54S003701), but vintage Corvette expert John Amgwert told me that it's probably not the original Motorama showcar frame. The number's last four digits, 3701, mean that the frame was number 2701 out of 3640 built for 1954. That puts the frame's manufacturing date quite late in the model year, especially since, according to Amgwert, fully a third of all 1954 Corvettes weren't sold until 1955.

As for the Oldsmobile engine, its number is V2470, which makes it the 1470th in the 1954 model run. The engine, therefore, probably is the one that was originally installed in the Motorama F-88.

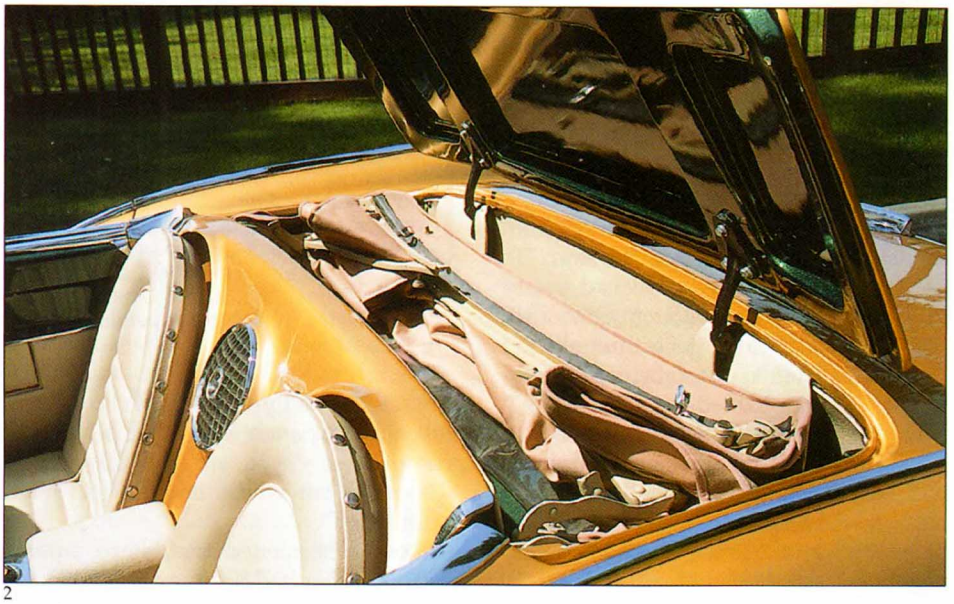
"So when I got the car," continues Krueger, "the body was on the chassis, it had the Olds V-8 in it, and it had remnants in these boxes of an interior." The door panels were made of fiberglass, but the original upholstery had deteriorated, so Krueger's staff had to completely reupholster the F-88. They reproduced all the original materials as faithfully as possible.

"The whole dashboard, the windshield frame, the grille, bumpers, all that stuff was all crated up. There's no way [anyone] could have made that stuff [from scratch]. It's just impossible," he says. "To the best of my memory, we had pretty much all the instrumentation. Obviously, the gauges had to be gone through. . . . [Y]ou don't want to put something together [not knowing] whether it works."

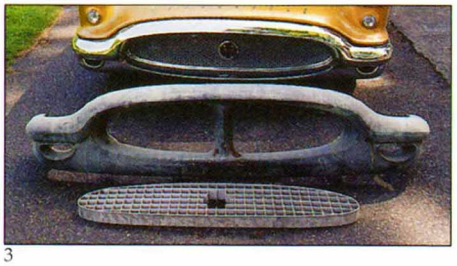
Krueger mentions that the F-88's side glass is curved. He recalls that his shop had to remake the headlight bubbles, because the originals were cracked. The blueprints and black-and-white factory photos of the F-88 helped immensely, he says. A fully labeled photo of the instrument panel was especially helpful, because, "Yeah, we have this part in the crate, but where does it go? What does it do?"

Now it happened that, since around 1981, Krueger had been restoring cars for

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The F-88 now owned by Gordon Apker once belonged to famed auto-industry figure E. L. Cord, who received it in dismantled form in 1955. It changed hands many times before assembly and restoration were finished in 1990. *1.* Restorer Lon Krueger's staff had to try to replicate the F-88's deteriorated upholstery to get the cabin up to snuff. *2.* The fabric top stows under a panel behind the seats. *3.* A spare grille and unchromed bumper with a vertical spar were among the spare parts crated up with the F-88.

Don Williams and Ken Behring at the Blackhawk Collection and Behring Auto Museum in Danville, California (*CA*, February 1998). Williams visited Krueger's shop regularly, and, around 1989, saw the F-88, recognized its potential, and bought it even before Krueger finished putting it together. Krueger delivered the car to Williams in December 1990, just in time for the 1991 Barrett-Jackson auction.

At the auction, the F-88 was sold to Bruce S. Lustman, a vintage racer and collector of competition Ferraris and Jaguars who now lives in Colorado after having retired from a large Connecticut surgical instrument firm. The F-88 remained in Lustman's possession for about six years, during which time he showed it in Chicago and at Pebble Beach.

In 1997, the F-88 went back to Don Williams on consignment, and Williams again placed it in his Blackhawk showroom. That year, Oldsmobile borrowed the car from Blackhawk to help celebrate the division's 100th anniversary. The car somehow was damaged in transit, and the transport company paid Sun Valley Classics to repair the broken fiberglass and repaint the car. Krueger returned the F-88 to Blackhawk, after which Don Williams sold it to Gordon Apker.

Several questions remain. First, which of the F-88s is this survivor? Is it the Motorama car or Harley Earl's duplicate?

It's definitely not the red car, says Dick Henderson, because sometime after 1955, GM Styling removed the 1954 body and redid it as the Mark II, using the same chassis and engine. This second-generation F-88 was painted a light metallic blue, according to Henderson. It eventually ended up with Oldsmobile Division, and Henderson has no idea what happened to it after that. He never saw it again.

So the F-88 that Apker owns today is probably the original golden Motorama showcar that ended up with Oldsmobile. Lon Krueger says that when he got the car, the main body shell was all put together, but the external surfaces weren't painted. However, the inner fenders and the bottom of the floorpan were: in metallic green, same as the Motorama F-88.

There is one other possibility. Henderson points out that the salvaged F-88 could be an entirely different car made up of backup parts and a third set of body panels. It would have been easy enough to pull one more complete fiberglass body off the existing female plaster molds. And it wasn't that unusual to make spare parts just in case something happened to the original show car. That could explain, too, why E. L. Cord got crates of parts and blueprints instead of an assembled car.

Lon Krueger told me that some of the parts in those crates had obviously been mounted on a car before, however. The F-88 emblems, for example, still had black dumdum on the retaining spikes. The windshield came with its rubber molding in place. And the body itself had obviously been assembled in a jig, because no one could have fitted the panels together so precisely and seamed the joints so neatly without one.

Another interesting point: Krueger says that while a few parts were missing and he had to make them from scratch, the crates contained more parts than were needed to finish the car. It seemed to him that whoever filled those crates put in not only the parts from a previously assembled car but some spare parts in addition. It looked like everything General Motors had for this car got boxed up and shipped out.

No one knows why an apparently complete F-88 got taken apart, but in my opinion, that's what happened. I believe the surviving F-88 is the golden Motorama car, which was taken apart and sent to E. L. Cord along with all the miscellaneous related parts GM had lying around. Disassembling the car and sending it to Cord may have seemed to Wolfram or Earl close enough to destroying it to satisfy GM's crusher edict.

Another question still lingers: Who actually authorized the crating and shipment of the F-88 to E. L. Cord? I don't believe we'll ever find a comfortable answer to that one. Even the very capable and cooperative Ed Stanchak of the Oldsmobile History Center in Lansing could not come up with any answers.

Some of the ex-GM people consulted for this article speculated that the shipping order might have originated with someone high up at Oldsmobile, like general manager Wolfram. Wolfram might have sent the car back to GM Styling and asked Earl to have it disassembled and shipped. But most of the people I interviewed felt that the shipping order most likely originated with Earl himself. Earl might have gotten the golden car back for some reason, and, since he was already driving the red car, had no need for it. Earl surely knew Cord, although they weren't really close friends. Still, their acquaintance was confirmed by Harley Earl's son, Jim, as well as Charles Cord.

Interestingly, the name requesting shipment on GM Styling Section packing sheet SS-532 is that of Ken Pickering. Retired since 1989, he'd trained as an engineer, albeit with a flair for design. He started at Fisher Body in 1949 and moved on to GM Styling in the autumn of 1952. Until 1954, he worked under Fred Walther in Styling's experimental engineering department. This was where the various show-car mechanisms, like convertible tops, windshields, door-hinge geometry, etc., were developed for fabrication. Ken recalled working on the F-88. But when I asked him why it was shipped to E. L. Cord, he responded that he'd searched his memory, even called some old friends, but finally said, "I just cannot imagine why we did that."

The F-88 has managed all these years to keep its secrets, and I have a feeling it always will. Unless records exist somewhere within GM Design Staff—and I didn't get a chance to search the library there—I doubt that anyone will ever know for sure which 1954 F-88 still exists, or who was responsible for letting it out of the corporation's grasp in the first place. Even with all we know, there's still an awful lot we don't. CA

Owners of the 1954 Oldsmobile F-88

1. Oldsmobile Division, General Motors Corporation, Lansing, Michigan
2. E.L. Cord, Beverly Hills, California
3. Bill Barker, Los Angeles, California
4. Jim Brucker, Ventura, California
5. Leo Gephart, Phoenix, Arizona
6. Oldsmobile new-car dealer, name unknown, Ohio
7. Ed Lucas, Troy, Michigan
8. Leo Gephart
9. Lon Krueger, Tempe, Arizona
10. Don Williams, Danville, California
11. Bruce Lustman, Aspen, Colorado
12. Gordon Apker, Seattle, Washington

Michael Lamm