

Ford's Crown Victoria

For one brief moment there was Camelot... the Buck Rogers dream car come true.

By Tim Howley

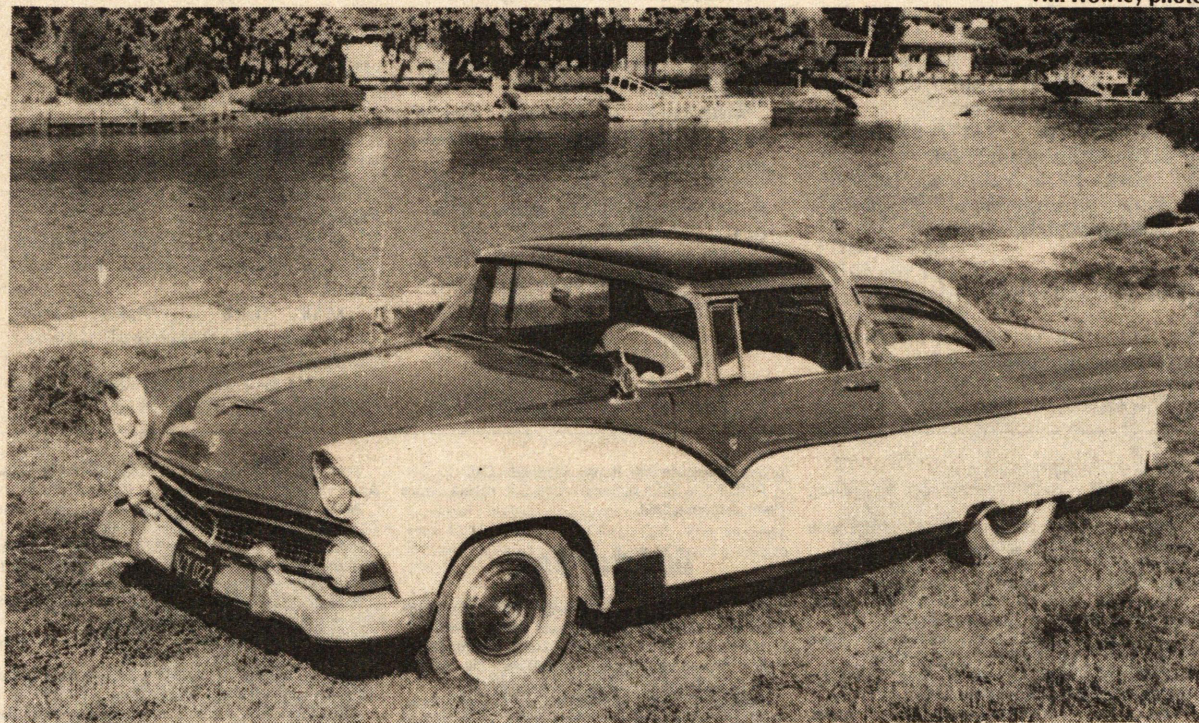
Back in the 40s, when Buick created a sensation with a hardtop convertible and Studebaker dared to put glass all around the rear quarter, it looked as though cars with all glass tops were not far away. We looked beyond the warmed over cars of the pre-World War II years, envisioning a day when the car of tomorrow would be parked in our driveway. It might sprout wings; it might even have radar. And, as we looked through the latest issue of *Popular Mechanics* or *Batman Comics*, we convinced ourselves that the post war world would be filled with Martian-looking cars with see-through tops humming around in cities covered with giant glass domes.

Somewhere back in the 50s the automobile slowly evolved into a form that followed its function. But for one brief moment there was Camelot with the 1955 and 1956 Ford Crown Victoria—the Buck Rogers dream car had come true.

However, when Americans saw it they apparently agreed that it looked better in the movies than on the streets. The Crown Victoria went over about as big as 3-D movies. The car of the future quickly sped off into the past. Unlike the Edsel, the Kaiser-Frazer or even the Crosley, there isn't a club or cult left to do the mourning. If it was a mistake, it wasn't even a good one.

The Ford Crown "Vic" is a fancy Ford 2-door made only in 1955 and 1956 and is distinguished by a stainless steel tiara across the top. Nobody is certain that Crown Victorias are rare (Ford has never released production figures), but those with the tinted plexiglass tops are considerably harder to find than those with the all steel tops. There are fewer '56 models around (in either version) than '55s as Ford realized its crowning folly and cut way back on production. One self-appointed California expert on Fords and Mercurys with "greenhouse" tops states emphatically that the '56 with the plexiglass top was taken out of production after only about 200 were built. Even Harrah's Automobile Collection in Reno, Nev., (generally the final authority on everything from antiques to oddballs), has little information on the collecting of Crown Victorias, although it does have a '55 with the plexi top tucked away in a warehouse.

However, the Crown Victoria does qualify as a Special Interest car. Back in the mid-50s, Bob Gottlieb, who wrote on Classics for *Motor Trend*,



Tim Howley photo

defined a special interest as a car (early or late) which did not fit the then established classifications such as antique, classic or custom. He felt that specials differed from classics in the number of outstanding elements on the latter. But such components as mechanical innovation, styling oddity, individuality and especially rarity could easily give any car Special Interest status.

Today, Special Interest is a fairly broad automotive subject. What's a Special Interest car to one person may not be to another, and vice versa. One thing, for certain, Special Interest is the most adaptable of all labels for unusual cars of the 50s—which may go down as the Special Interest era.

Crown Victorias deserve a little more respect. Sure, the crown was kind of a dingbat idea and the peek-a-boo top even dingier. But car collectibility should never be equated with sanity. Lincoln V-12s, Cords and Edsels were dogs, too. As a matter of fact, there was a time when the mighty Duesenberg was considered a rolling anachronism; you couldn't trade one even up for a good old Ford V8.

Crown Victorias do have their pedigree. In 1953, the Lincoln-Mercury Division exhibited an experimental futuristic model called the XL-500 which was less than 5 feet tall. Late at night, in a very dark alley, it might even be mistaken for a flying saucer. The XL-500 had a fiberglass body, 4 bucket seats, floor console and Edsel-type pushbutton automatic with the controls in the center of the steering wheel. Real Buck Rogers stuff. The most distinguishing features were the all plexiglass glare proof and heat resistant top and the crown of stainless steel.

The XL-500 was only a styling studio dreamboat, but the Ford

Division had a slightly more practical version known as the X-100. From the front and side, the X-100 looked like a messy accident between a '56 Lincoln Premiere and a '55 T-Bird. But from the rear it was unmistakably a pretty good looking '61 T-Bird. The X-100 had a clear plexiglass roof over the front compartment. Engineers called it a "rain cell." When the sun was out it remained neatly tucked under the rear portion of the roof, snug as a turtle's head. At the first drop of rain it would automatically move forward over the front compartment. It made quite an impression at auto shows and made an appearance in the 1954 movie *Woman's World*. Reportedly, this car, along with a number of other interesting experimental jobs of the period, was finally lost in the Ford Rotunda fire.

It's hard to say when Ford designers and stylists first got serious about plexiglass. Maybe it dated back to 1945 when an accessory manufacturer actually offered a plexi bubble top for the 1946-'48 Ford convertible. He got a lot of publicity, but was never able to lick the heat problem. Tinting the plexiglass helped a little, but not enough.

Still, Ford men were convinced the idea had some merit. In 1954, the plexi top reappeared as a factory option in Ford and Mercury hardtops. The Ford was called the *Skyliner* and the Mercury was the *Sun Valley*. These cars were no more than standard hardtops with green tinted plexiglass over the front compartment only. The plexiglass was a quarter-inch thick, with a tint a little lighter than sunglasses. Ford engineers claimed the plexiglass had 5 times the strength of plate glass and blocked out 50% of the sun's rays. Ford said the new

top only raised interior temperature about 1 degree. Besides, the buyer was furnished with a handy little curtain that would zip up to form a sun tight headliner if he couldn't take it. (Instant hardtop.)

By '55 the post-war 'dream designs were finally making their way into showrooms. Ford had an all new body, perhaps the best contemporary styling of all: Wrap-around windshields and a clean and simple, almost classic style. The seats were designed to look like buckets, but weren't. The whole interior was typical '50s superficialness. And at the top of the line was the Crown Victoria—the ultimate '55 Ford. It came in 2 versions—with the tinted plexiglass top over the front compartment, or with an all steel top. (Apparently designers weren't too sure about the idea.) Some of the colors were amazing, yet right in tune with the times—Cherry Pink and Apple Blossom White or Lavender Blue Dilly Dilly.

At first glance one might mistake a '55 Crown Vic for a hardtop. But the Crown Victoria had an entirely different top than the standard Vic which was a little longer to provide more back seat room. The crown was no afterthought. It is a permanent structural part of the body, welded on both sides of the body side panels and to the underside of the top.

I suppose that most any '56 Ford will soon have some collector appeal or its pioneer contributions to safety, because that year Ford was the first manufacturer to mount a safety campaign. All '56 Fords have crushable "deep-dish" steering wheels, shatterproof rear view mirrors, crashproof door latches that won't pop loose under sudden impact, extra strong front seat connections, recessed in-

strument panel controls and really outstanding brakes. Options included a fairly effective padded dash, padded visors and seat belts. Ford was quite sincere in its '56 safety efforts, but the campaign proved to be a real buyer turnoff and Ford, which almost overtook Chevrolet in sales in 1955, slipped back into a poor second in '56. The following year, Ford turned to a style and performance sales strategy and unseated Chevrolet in sales for the first time since 1935.

I came across a Crown Victoria in my city, San Rafael, Calif. The car was owned by an Eastern collector, who didn't think it was worth saving. It wound up in the hands of a Thunderbird collector in Mill Valley, Calif., who sold it recently to make room for more Thunderbirds. The car is now owned by Brian Nicholls, a men's hair stylist, who drives the car daily.

One ride in the car reminded me of the Vista Dome passenger trains so popular back in the late 40s and early 50s. The first noticeable thing is that the tinted plexiglass doesn't really block out most of the sun's rays. The front seat was uncomfortably warm for a sunny California day in December. The sun takes its toll on the plexiglass, too. Over the years, it develops a web of paper thin cracks at stress points.

From a mechanical standpoint the '55 Crown Vic is up to driving conditions of the 1970s, although the body is pretty much of a sham, even on a well kept piece. Ford bodies of that year have always been full of shakes, rattles and rain leaks and old age only compounds a serious factory defect.

As for the plexiglass tops, they were discontinued very early in the '56 model run on both the Ford and Mercury. After a little more than 2 years, Ford engineers finally decided it wasn't a better idea after all. Crown Victorias and peek-a-boo roofs were quickly forgotten in 1957, when Ford finally came out with the ultimate hardtop, a retractable steel top, which enjoyed limited popularity thru 1959.

But the poor Crown Victoria may have to wait for a new generation of collectors. It may never be a classic, but undoubtedly is a classic example of the better styling of the mid-50s. It's the car of the 70s from a 50s point of view.

There is hope because nobody paid much attention to Lincoln Zephyrs a few years ago, either, and Crown Victorias are considerably more rare. They're bound to make a comeback—if only for their styling oddities.