

# 1958-60 Ford Thunderbird: Misunderstood Masterpiece

Long neglected because of the "classic" two-seaters that came before, the "Squarebird" has come of age as a collectible automobile. Here's the intriguing story behind the first of the four-seat Birds, the pioneer of personal-luxury.

By Tim Howley

Like a certain well-known soft drink, the "Squarebird" has always been misunderstood. For most of the quarter-century since its introduction, Ford's first-generation luxury four-seater has been chastised by collectors as either a crass business decision that doomed the "classic" two-seat Bird to premature extinction, and/or as the overblown late-Fifties cruiser that set the unhappy precedent for the even more overblown Birds of the Sixties and Seventies. But times change and, with them, perspective. Today, the 1958-60 has at last been given the recognition it deserves as a collectible automobile. As Richard M. Langworth so astutely observes in *Personal-Luxury: The Thunderbird Story*: "...all that stuff about forsaking the sports car, substituting glitter for function, adding the hated back seat...misses the point. The point is that the 1958 Thunderbird was a masterpiece of design...[perhaps] the outstanding American automotive breakthrough of the decade. It achieved this rank without recourse to the technological dead ends of an era: air suspension, fuel injection, supercharging, retractable hardtops. All of these were considered on the way to the '58 Bird. All were rejected." We should also not forget that the "Squarebird" was a

resounding sales success in a dismal year for the industry as a whole, and the pioneer of a concept that would prove so enormously popular that it's still with us.

That concept had been well established at Ford and elsewhere long before the "Squarebird" appeared. The main design elements were a closely coupled four/five-passenger cockpit with bucket-type front seats, plush appointments, and a control console atop the transmission tunnel, all wrapped up in a compact envelope with dramatic low-silhouette styling. The first evidence of Ford's thinking along these lines was the Continental X, a fully driveable one-off exercise shown publicly in early February 1952 and later renamed Ford X-100. Besides the aforementioned items, this two-door hardtop-convertible boasted a steel and aluminum body with a novel roof treatment featuring a leather-covered rear "canopy" into which the forward roof section could be electrically retracted. The X-100

This handsome pair of 1959 Thunderbird ragtops belongs to enthusiasts Ted Davidson and Herb Rothman of Yorba Linda, California. Accessory continental kit was a dealer-installed item but seldom ordered. Ford built 10,261 of these convertibles for the model year, a considerable jump over the 2134 total for the delayed '58s.

