

The "Squarebird" was really a mid-Fifties successor to the original Lincoln Continental, yet cost far less than the exclusive Mark II.

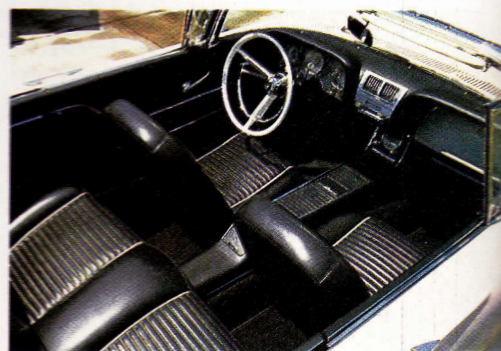
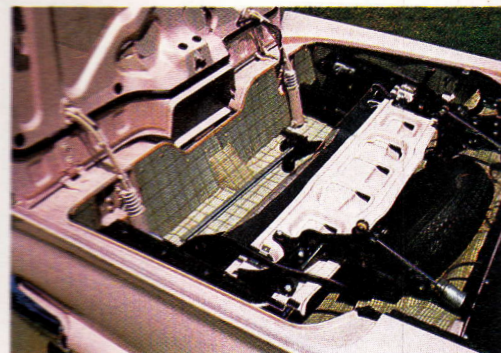
structural features of the new T-Bird: "Engineers began with a flat floorpan using the driveline tunnel as a stiffening member of the platform. Next, six-inch-deep siderails were set along the edges of the floor, creating a step-down effect. The cowl area and its built-in air intake became a massive stiffening member for the front, while the rear deck and quarter panels were stressed to further wiggle-proof the body. Finally, a Continental-inspired top was spot-welded to the body and windshield frame, completing one of the strongest units Ford has ever built."

Thanks to unit construction, the '58 Thunderbird emerged as one of the lowest cars in industry history—an unheard of 52.5 inches high overall—yet had unprecedented interior space for what was, in that day, a compact. The 113-inch wheelbase was also short for the times, yet there was at least as much head and leg room inside as in a big Ford Fairlane or even a contemporary Cadillac 62. And considering the low stance and dropped floor, the 5.8-inch ground clearance (versus 7.1 inches on the two-seater) was remarkable. The only problem was that tall driveshaft tunnel, an important structural member, but Boyer solved that one brilliantly by making

it into a center console for housing heater controls, radio speaker, and power window switches. It was a first for a modern production car, and it would be widely copied by rival manufacturers in the Sixties. Incidentally, Boyer's staff had planned to put all the minor switchgear on the console, but that proved prohibitively expensive. However, they were able to come up with bucket-like front seats—not true buckets—that afforded adequate comfort with three inches less depth than standard seats. Two other interior highlights were a fully molded crash pad atop the dash and molded door panels with combined crash pad and armrest.

Originally, both the "Squarebird" and the '58 Lincolns were scheduled to have MacPherson-strut front suspension, the now-commonplace geometry conceived in the late Forties by engineer Earle S. MacPherson. However, despite its low manufacturing costs, it was still too expensive for these cars, so the T-Bird ended up with conventional coil springs and unequal-length upper and lower A-arms. Coil springs were also used at the rear, where Ford fitted a complicated trailing-arm linkage to locate the live axle. This arrangement had been devised to accommodate Ford-Aire suspension, which was to have been an option. Like others of its type, this system proved unreliable (only 100 standard Fords were so equipped) and was scratched for the Bird at the last minute. For 1959, Ford reverted to ordinary leaf springs.

Under the new Bird's low beak sat a brand-new engine, a 352-cubic-inch V-8, one of Ford's new FE-series big-block family. It was conceived as the eventual replacement for the Y-block design, Ford Motor Company's first modern ohv V-8, introduced for 1952. The FE engines were characterized by high compression ratios, improved fuel induction, better manifold and valving, improved upper cylinder lubrication, more efficient cam profiles, and easier serviceability, thanks to items like a front-mount distributor. Rated at 300 horsepower, the 352 was the only engine offered for '58. Some thought was apparently given to the new Lincoln 430-cid V-8 as a Thunderbird option. Some sources list it, and at least one '58 prototype was so equipped, but it didn't materialize in production until



the following year. Transmission choices comprised standard three-speed manual with column shift and optional overdrive or three-speed Cruise-O-Matic automatic.

Several last-minute engineering problems postponed the start of 1958 Thunderbird production until quite late in the model year, Job 1 not coming off the Wixom line until January 13, 1958. The convertible arrived even later, production commencing April 15 and the first examples reaching dealer showrooms in June. Despite these delays, the new Thunderbird was a huge success, fully vindicating McNamara's faith in the four-seat concept. As noted, model year production zoomed to nearly 40,000 units, nearly double that of the extended 1957 season. Sports car devotees may have mourned the loss of the "little Bird," but Ford Division officials couldn't have been happier

"Squarebird" Model Year Production

	hardtop	convertible
1958	35,758	2,134
1959	57,195	10,261
1960	78,447*	11,860

*includes 2,536 sunroof models