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# Roll

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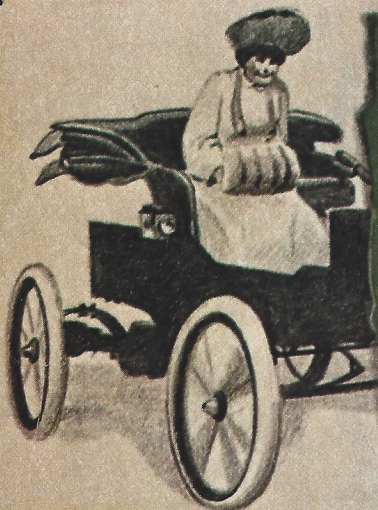
**SPECIAL: THE FILMS  
OF RONALD  
REAGAN**





## 'Dreamtop' Con Hit of Futurific

AMERICAN



66  
**Job**

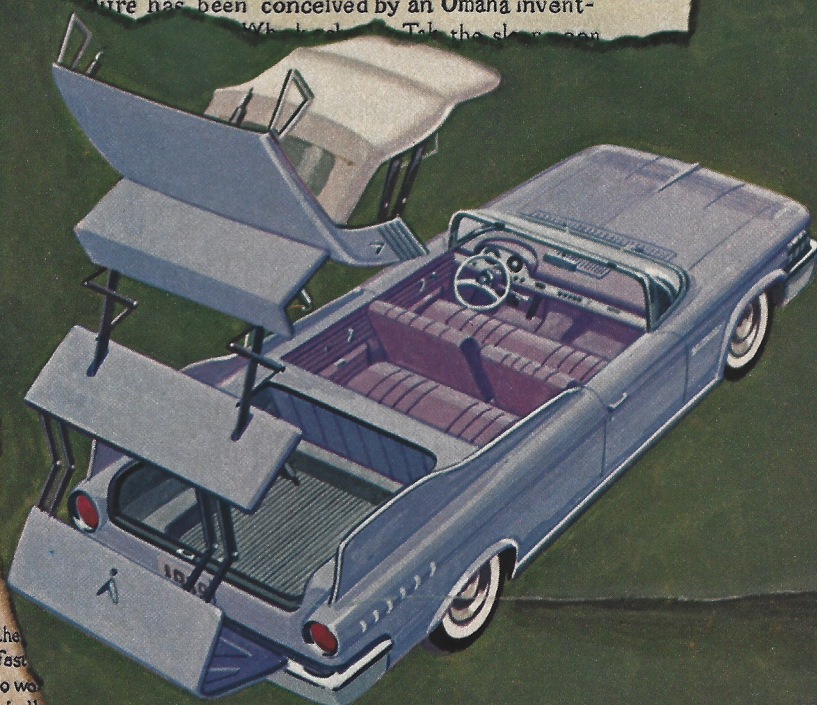
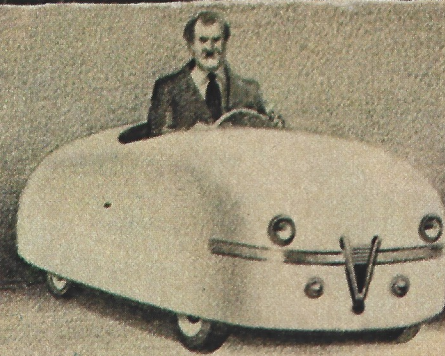
High grade social personages insist upon the approved by Rajahs, big business moguls, and fast cheap vehicles tip over, causing broken necks. No w magnetic wheel rims clamp the Pundit to the road, allo

Our new 24 H.P. 3 cylinder roofless tou open air prevents cancer, lumbago, so

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## Nebraska Man Plans Postwar 'Konvertibout' Made of Wax

AN INGENIOUS approach to the auto of the future has been conceived by an Omaha invent-  
Wh... Take the slow... on



PRRRRESTO! MA

1959, BELCH... INTRODUCES THE M

# THE AMERICAN CONVERTIBLE

## HOW A VANISHING BREED VANISHED

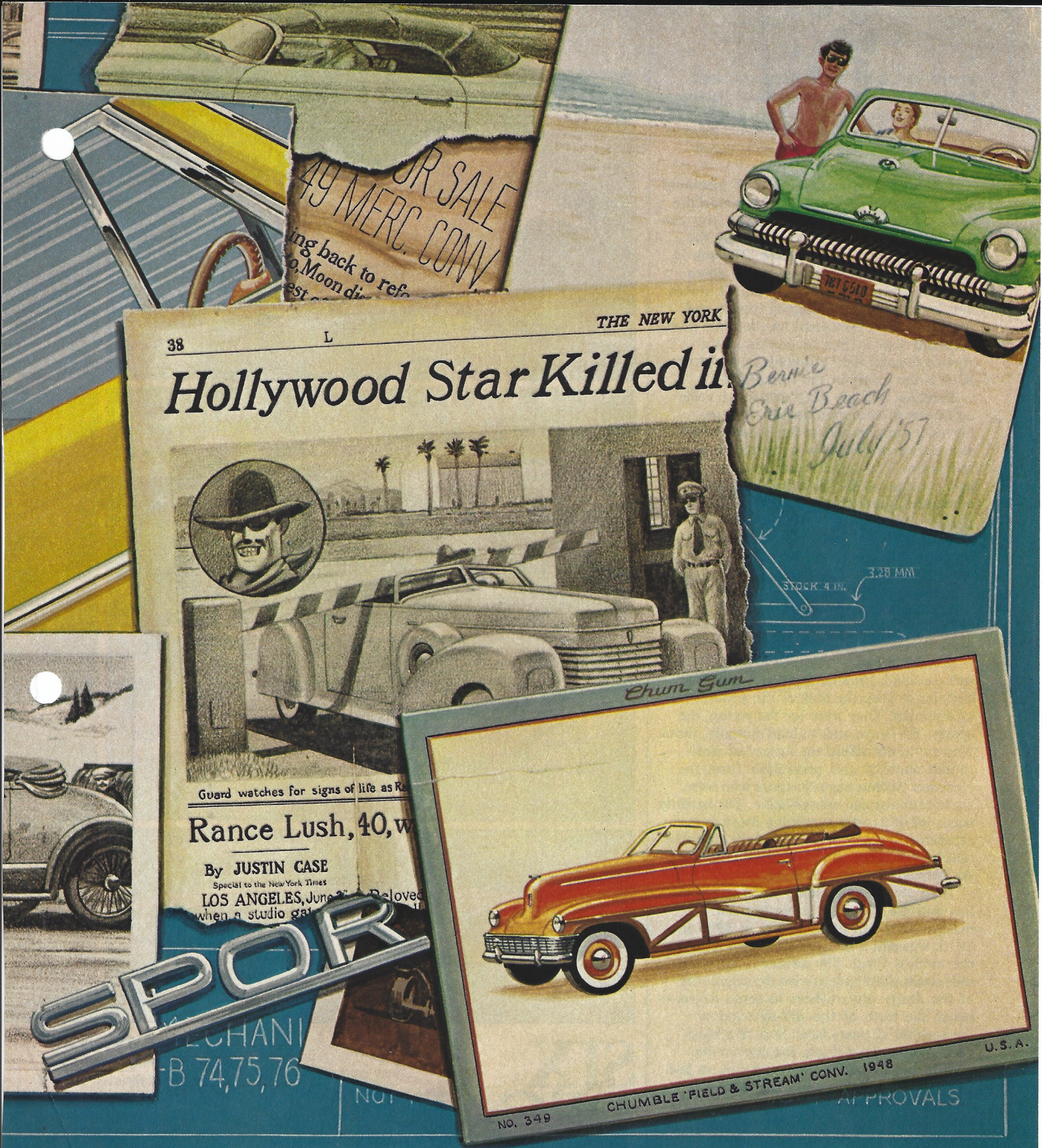
Illustration by Bruce McCall

## ARTICLE BY GARY WITZENBURG

It's deep summer 1962. The weather is sweaty and oppressive. The sun is sinking fast, but heat hangs in the air like a huge wool blanket. The people on the road are in foul states of mind, hurrying home this sticky Sunday evening to sit







by their fans and watch Ed Sullivan in living black and white. Air conditioning in cars and even in homes is still pretty much for the privileged. But you could care less because your air is conditioned by your motion through it. Your canvas top is neatly folded and concealed beneath a red-vinyl boot behind the rear seat, and your big Chevy, a 1960 model,

is pushing its way through the muggy air and tossing it back just hard enough to rumple the wave in your hair. This great white whale of a car parts the air with a wide and handsome tubular grill, flanked by dual head lamps, and terminates in proud, swooping horizontal fins overlooking classic Chevy triple-round tail-lights. The body is a big improvement

over the garish Flash Gordon delta-finned abomination of the year before, and it spells pure sex to the 19-year-old eye. A quartet of greasers in a battered 1958 tri-power Pontiac challenges you at a stop light. You've got the dynamite 348 tri-carbed mill under your own long, white hood, and you know you could dust off the smartasses in second gear if the spirit



moved you, but the last thing you need tonight is a hassle with the fuzz, because you're on your way to pick up a very special date and you're going to the passion pit. No use wasting the car on a bunch of snotty, street-racing punks.

This great iron machine is both manhood and freedom; it's what you've been working and waiting for almost as long as you can remember. It's a place to have fun in the sun and get laid in the shade. The top is rarely up in the summer and goes down at the slightest hint of winter sun. It makes you the envy of metal-topped friends and strangers alike. Pubescent lovelies take numbers and wait in line for a ride and a chance to snarl their ponytails in the breeze. Such is the magic of the convertible.

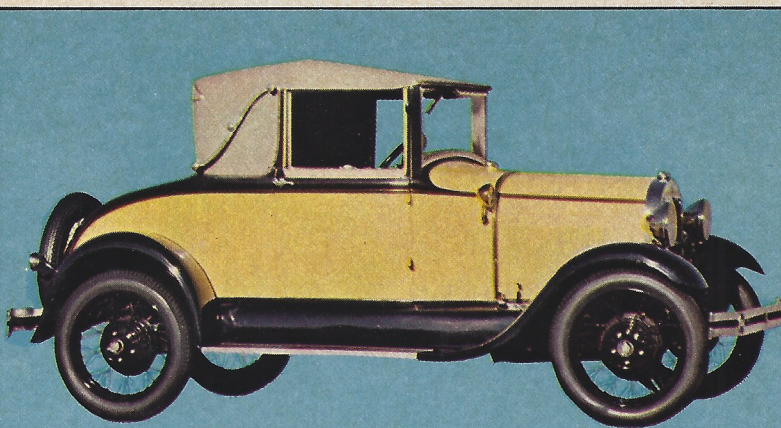
Strolling through Harrah's remarkable collection of auto memorabilia in Reno, Nevada, one can review the history of the convertible motorcar in a matter of a few hours. The earliest cars, one discovers, had no tops at all. The first enclosed motorcars didn't come into existence until shortly after the turn of the century and most of these had clumsy, drafty, cloth tops that did little more than keep the sun off one's back. The 1908 Franklin two-seater brougham had permanent metal enclosures, however, and soon the line was firmly drawn: There were roadsters and there were sedans.

Roadsters had retractable or removable soft tops and, usually, some sort of side curtains to keep the bulk of the weather out of one's lap. They were for the young, the sporty, the brave and, at least initially, those who could not afford the luxury of steel-roofed comfort and protection from the elements. Sedans were for those who were more cautious and conservative. The hardtop was a bit of a status symbol in those days, separating the man who owned one from the masses and from all the unpleasantness in the surrounding environment.

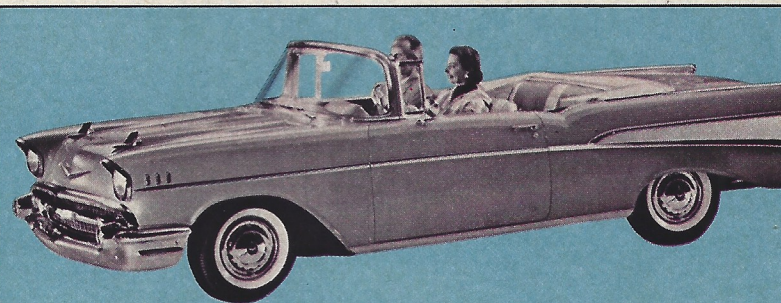
Then along came Henry Ford's assembly line and the Model T, a hardtop for the masses, although the T sedan, at \$975 in 1915, was still a heftier investment than the roofless Ford. The advent of the affordable sedan must have eroded the popularity of the drafty old roadster to some degree—hence the birth of the roll-up-window convertible 12 years later. Sort of a have-your-cake-and-eat-it car, the convertible with its top and windows down was no less sporty and sexy than the roadster, yet it was less windy, wet and cold in foul weather.

According to Jim Edwards of Harrah's, the first real convertible was the 1926 Kissel Model 55, although the Nash Advanced Six Roadster had sliding-glass side curtains that year and the French-built Renault type NN cabriolet two-seater had roll-up windows the year before that. The Kissel sold new for \$1895 and had a 61-hp engine.

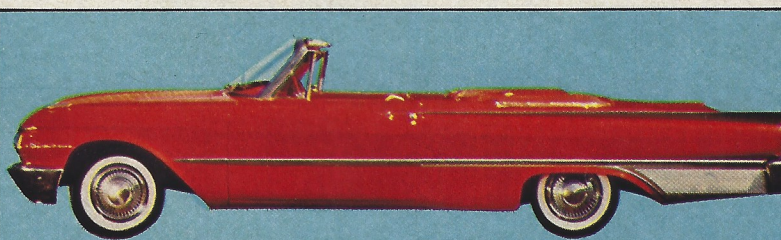
The convertible quickly gained in popularity. It appealed to the young and the adventuresome (Continued on page 110)



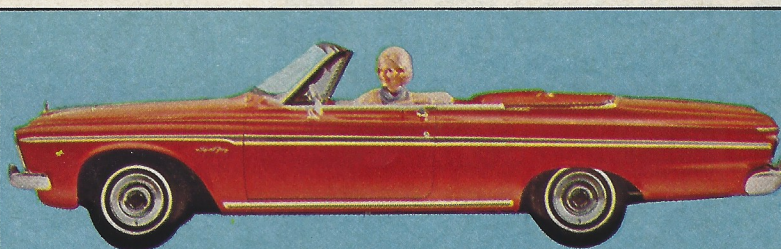
1. 1929 Ford cabriolet



4. 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air convertible



7. 1957 Ford Sunliner hardtop convertible



9. 1963 Plymouth Sport Fury convertible

# SIX DECADES WITH THE TOP DOWN

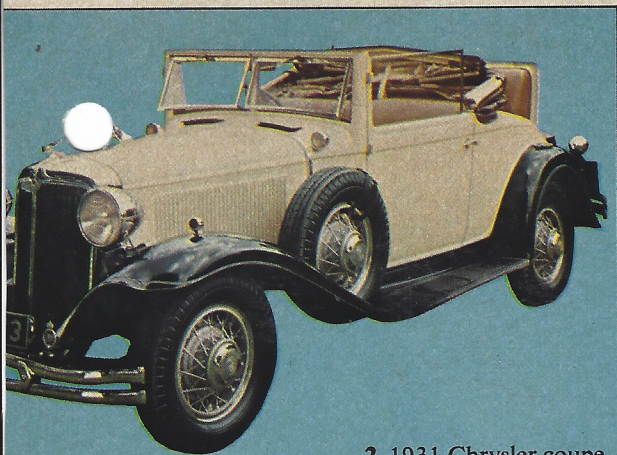
A GALLERY  
OF SOME OF THE GREAT ONES

1. In 1929, \$670 would buy the top-of-the-line Ford convertible, the cabriolet, a fancy version of the Model A. Each had a 40-horse mill under the hood, but the cabriolet came in colors other than black.

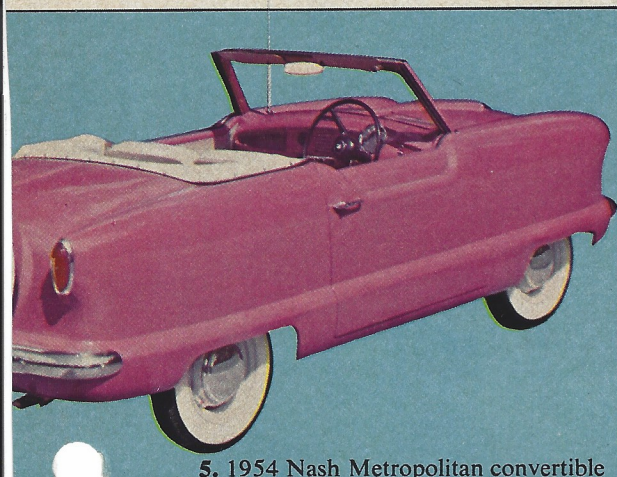
2. Chrysler was one of the first manufacturers to offer a really luxurious convertible. The 1931 coupe was fast, weatherproof and very sleek for its day.

3. The 1940 Buick convertible was the ultimate in streamlining, and with a 320-cubic-inch





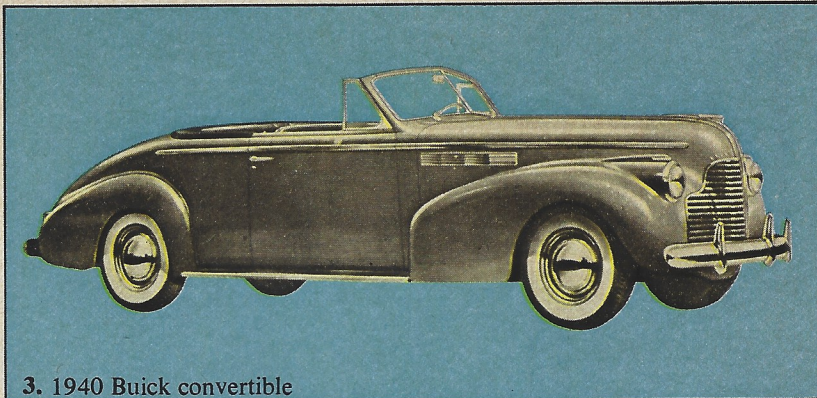
2. 1931 Chrysler coupe



5. 1954 Nash Metropolitan convertible



10. 1976 Volkswagen convertible



3. 1940 Buick convertible



6. 1955 Cadillac convertible



8. 1957 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz convertible



11. 1976 Cadillac Fleetwood Eldorado convertible

engine, it was a real bullet. A two-passenger dream-car version was also available.

4. The 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air convertible was and is the ultimate hot rod. Ask Fonzie fans; they'll tell you: "Chevy should have had the same respect for 1957 that Volkswagen had for 1942."

5. In 1954, American Motors built the Nash Metropolitan minicar at an English plant. The design was virtually unchanged during the

seven years the three-passenger car was made.

6. Cadillac introduced tail fins in 1948 and they remained tasteful little appendages until 1955, as shown. To fill up the Caddy gas tank, you pushed a round reflector button and the fin flipped up, exposing the gas cap underneath.

7. The Ford Sunliner retractable-hardtop convertible was a noble experiment that lasted from 1957 to 1959. The trouble was that the hardtop took up

the whole trunk. Surviving Sunliners are the world's only slashproof convertibles.

8. The 1957 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz remains one of the sexiest convertible designs of all time. Paul Newman drove a pink one in *Hud*.

9. The Plymouth was pretty much a family car until the Sixties, when the Sport Fury was introduced. A prototype of the muscle car, this Plymouth was popular with the fast crowd at the sweet shoppe.

10. If Volkswagen goes ahead with its plan for plants in the U. S., the Beetle ragtop could be the new American convertible. Then again, nobody knows how long the Beetle will remain in production anywhere.

11. The last American convertible made was the 1976 Cadillac Fleetwood Eldorado. Dealers guess that this car, which sells for about \$12,000, will trade in for about \$15,000 in 1977. Not a bad investment, considering that normal cars depreciate. ■



**THE AMERICAN CONVERTIBLE** *Wind in the hair became most fashionable during the fun-loving Fifties. Convertible models evolved to the top of the line, often at higher prices than plush sedans.*

(Continued from page 80) who were fond of roadsters, but it also won some family types away from the sedan. Mr. Ford, always eager to capitalize on a good thing, came up with his own Model A convert at a paltry \$550, followed by a fancier cabriolet version that listed for \$670—each powered by a 40-hp four-cylinder engine. In 1929, it was still possible to buy the slightly cheaper roadster, but the convertible had clearly taken over. Side curtains survived on production European sports cars well into the Sixties, when even the stubborn British phased roll-up windows into their MGBs, Triumph TR4s and the like. Today you can still find side curtains on various kit cars and dune buggies. But you can't find them on stock cars; side curtains just aren't standard equipment anymore.

By 1929, the convertible could be had in a grand variety of sizes and prices. Examples include a \$1725 Elcar landau (8 cylinders, 70 hp), from the Elcar Motor Company in Elkhart, Indiana; an \$18,500 Isotta-Fraschini cabriolet (8 cylinders, 145 hp), from Milan, Italy; a \$1795 Chrysler Model 75 (6 cylinders, 75 hp), from Chrysler Corporation in Detroit; and a \$13,500 Duesenberg Model J (8 cylinders, 265 hp), from Duesenberg Motor Company in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Scores of car manufacturers went under in the Thirties, and the total number of autos in use in the U.S.

declined from more than 23,000,000 in 1929 to 20,600,000 in 1933, but the convertible survived and even prospered. One thing about bad times is that people who are doing well like to flaunt it, and some of the most spectacular cars ever built came out of the Depression years. While the unhappy masses were starving in the streets, the gentry were motoring about in massive Bentleys and Bugattis from abroad and sleek Cadillacs and Cords from the home plants. The stunning 1931 Lancia Dillambda victoria at Harrah's carried a \$6750 price tag in its day and the 1933 Alfa Romeo 8C2900B (Italian) sold for \$9580. Not to mention the \$13,000 Bentley 8-litre and the \$8000 16-cylinder 1933 Cadillac all-weather phaeton (a four-door convertible).

There were some normal people's cars available with more reasonable price tags and there were some convertibles among them. The \$650 Chevrolet Independence Series phaeton of 1931 and the 1932 Pontiac convertible coupe at \$795 were two that made it through in spite of the hard times.

But once the Depression eased and people were back to work, the auto industry was off and running, and so was the convertible. There were big convertibles, like the 1940 Lincoln Zephyr Continental cabriolet (which sold for \$2840), and tiny convertibles,

like the 1940 American Bantam (\$520) and the 1941 Crosley (\$299). And there were superluxurious imported convertibles, like the \$10,000 Mercedes 540K cabriolet. Every major car builder offered at least one convertible model and many offered a choice in size and price.

Then came the big war, when American industry turned to less-frivolous activity than screwing together motorcars, followed by 20 years of relatively carefree prosperity. There was a job for nearly everyone who wanted one, and "Two cars in every garage" became the battle cry in Detroit, where most of the surviving car makers were entrenched. Flashy convertibles rolled off the assembly lines and onto the streets by the hundreds of thousands. Convertible meant debonair and devil-may-care.

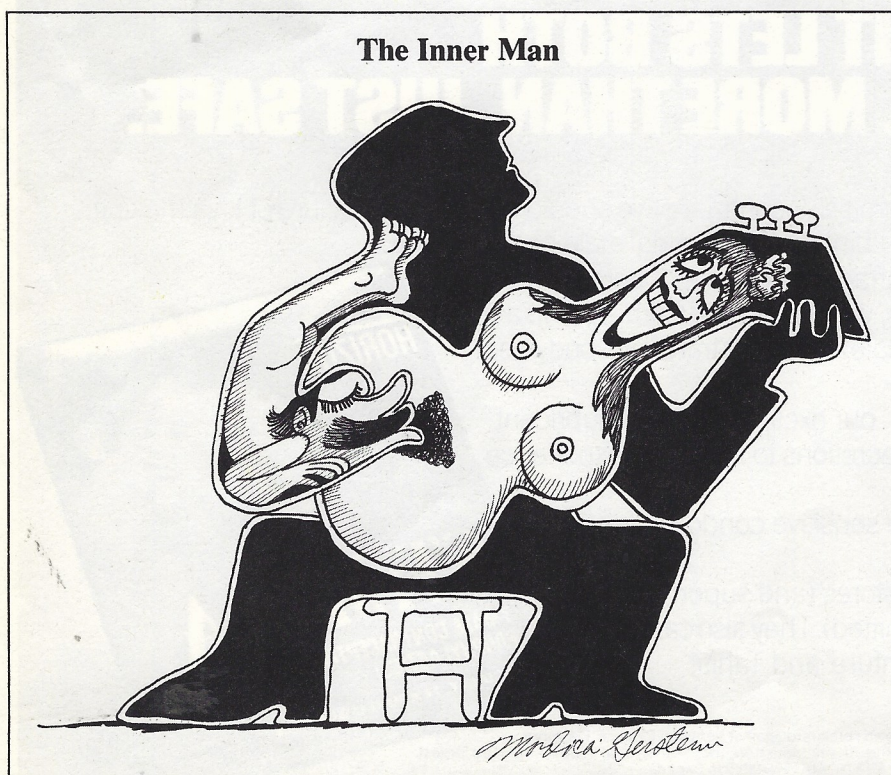
Wind in the hair became most desirable and fashionable during the fun-loving Fifties. Convertible models evolved to the top of the line, often at higher prices than the plushiest sedans. Movie stars were seldom seen in public without one and much of the automotive advertising of the period featured joyful young couples standing next to or burning up the highway in their fancy ragtops.

Convertibles were still noisy; they still leaked; with tops up, they still restricted visibility; with tops down, they still tangled hairdos; the tops tore and faded; the rear windows turned opaque and had to be replaced periodically. But no matter, convertibles were "in" as never before, and they spoke loudly and descriptively about their owners.

Every kid alive grew up wanting a convertible. A Caddy was the ultimate, but a Ford or a Chevy would do. If you were too poor to own one, or too young to drive, or both, you spent countless hours harassing your old man to get one. If you could catch him in the right frame of mind (like his second childhood) and convince him that he could stand a bit of image enhancement, he just might break down and buy one. If he didn't, you could always be a gas-pump jockey and earn the cash for a slightly used model yourself.

The happy times carried over into the sexy Sixties and America's love for the convertible grew and grew. But then, around the middle of the decade, something happened. People noticed that the air wasn't very clean anymore, and automobile air conditioning was perfected. In 1962, only 11 percent of

### The Inner Man





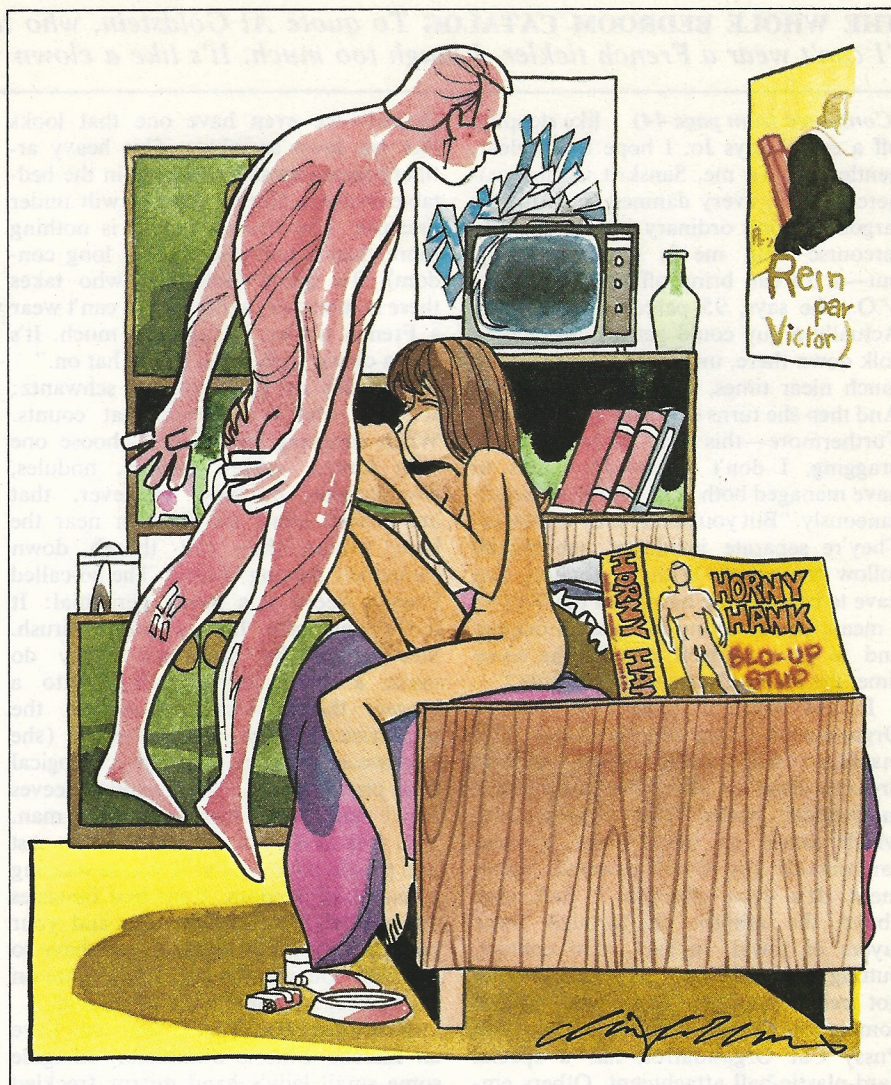
the cars built in the United States were air conditioned; by 1966, the percentage was almost 30 and just three years later, some 55 percent of all U.S. cars had factory air.

At the same time, the popularity of FM and stereo-tape players in cars skyrocketed, and music lovers soon discovered that they couldn't hear very well in convertibles, especially with the top down, and they couldn't count on keeping their stereos (or anything else) if they left a convertible parked unattended for any length of time. Quiet and security began to seem more important than wind in the hair, particularly as the hair got longer and the wind got dirtier.

Then came the Feds with their safety regs, and while there is still no law outlawing convertibles, manufacturers thought they saw the beginning of the end and quietly started phasing the ragtops out of their line-ups. The small cars went first, Chevy Novas, Ford Falcons, Plymouth Valiants and the like, disappearing in the late Sixties. American Motors dropped all its ragtops in 1969 and G.M. phased out its Camaro and Firebird softtops the following year. Chrysler eliminated all but the Barracuda and the Challenger convertibles with the 1971 model year, and then dropped those last two a year later. By 1973, the only remaining Ford Motor Company convertibles were the Mustang and the Cougar, which lasted just one year longer before fading away. Meanwhile, G.M. had dropped its extrabig Buick, Olds and Cadillac converts in 1971, and the intermediate Chevelle, Le Mans, Cutlass and Skylark softtops died in 1973.

So, almost before anyone realized what was going on, the only remaining U.S.-built convertibles were the luxury front-drive Cadillac Eldorado, the Chevy Corvette two-seater and the gargantuan full-size G.M. cars—the Chevy Caprice, Pontiac Bonneville brougham, Olds Delta 88 and Buick LeSabre. This year, they are all gone but the \$12,000 Eldorado, and that went out of production in April. Cadillac nearly doubled Eldo-convertible production this year and has pumped out about 14,000 1976s to satisfy the last-minute demand (the cars are instant collector's items). It may already be too late to get one even if you do have a few extra grand lying around, but it might be worth a try. The value of the car is going to increase, not decrease, over the years. Normally, a car isn't such a good investment.

Imported softtops have also gotten scarcer in the past few years. VW's Karmann Ghia is gone and the Beetle may not have many more years to live. None of the Japanese makes has had



a ragtop since the Datsun 2000 was discontinued in favor of the 240 Z in 1970. The classic Jag XK-E, the closest thing to a four-wheeled phallus ever built, was replaced last fall by the four-seater XJ-S. Alfa Romeo's Spider will pass away in 1976, but Fiat's 124 Spider and British Leyland's MG and Triumph are still around—yet the newest models (the Fiat 131 and Triumph TR7) are all steel roofed. The Mercedes 450 SL two-seat convertible (about \$20,000) is still available.

The once-mighty convertible has been superseded by the sun roof and the removable hatch (not to mention the motorcycle) for fresh air, and by mag wheels, custom paint and fancy vans for sex and status. The convertible peaked out in 1965 at over 500,000 U.S. sales, sagged to barely over 90,000 in 1970 and has scored less than 30,000 a year for the past two seasons. This year, the count will be some 14,000 Eldorados and next year the count will be zero. The great American convertible, beset by crime, pollution, air conditioning, stereo, the motor-

cycle boom and Americans' growing passion for peace and quiet, comfort, convenience and safety, is finally and, perhaps, irretrievably dead. May it rest in peace.

If you're under 25, chances are you've never even experienced a convertible; instead, you probably grew up aspiring to Charger Daytonas, Firebird Trans Ams and Japanese bikes. That's a shame, because everyone should know the magic of the convertible. Those who grew up loving the ragtop and all it stood for know that all the sun roofs and removable hatches in Detroit are little more than poor substitutes for the real thing.

Perhaps some day in the future, a smart manufacturer will resurrect the softtop on a reasonably priced car. Surely there's still a market out there sizable enough to make the exercise worth while. Of course, it's easier to get laid in a carpeted van with a bed in the back, a fully equipped bar and curtains all around. But maybe it's a little too easy. Anyway, automotive love will never be the same. ■