

The Car Of The Year Is Here!

CARS

THE HI-PERFORMANCE & CUSTOM MONTHLY **magazine**

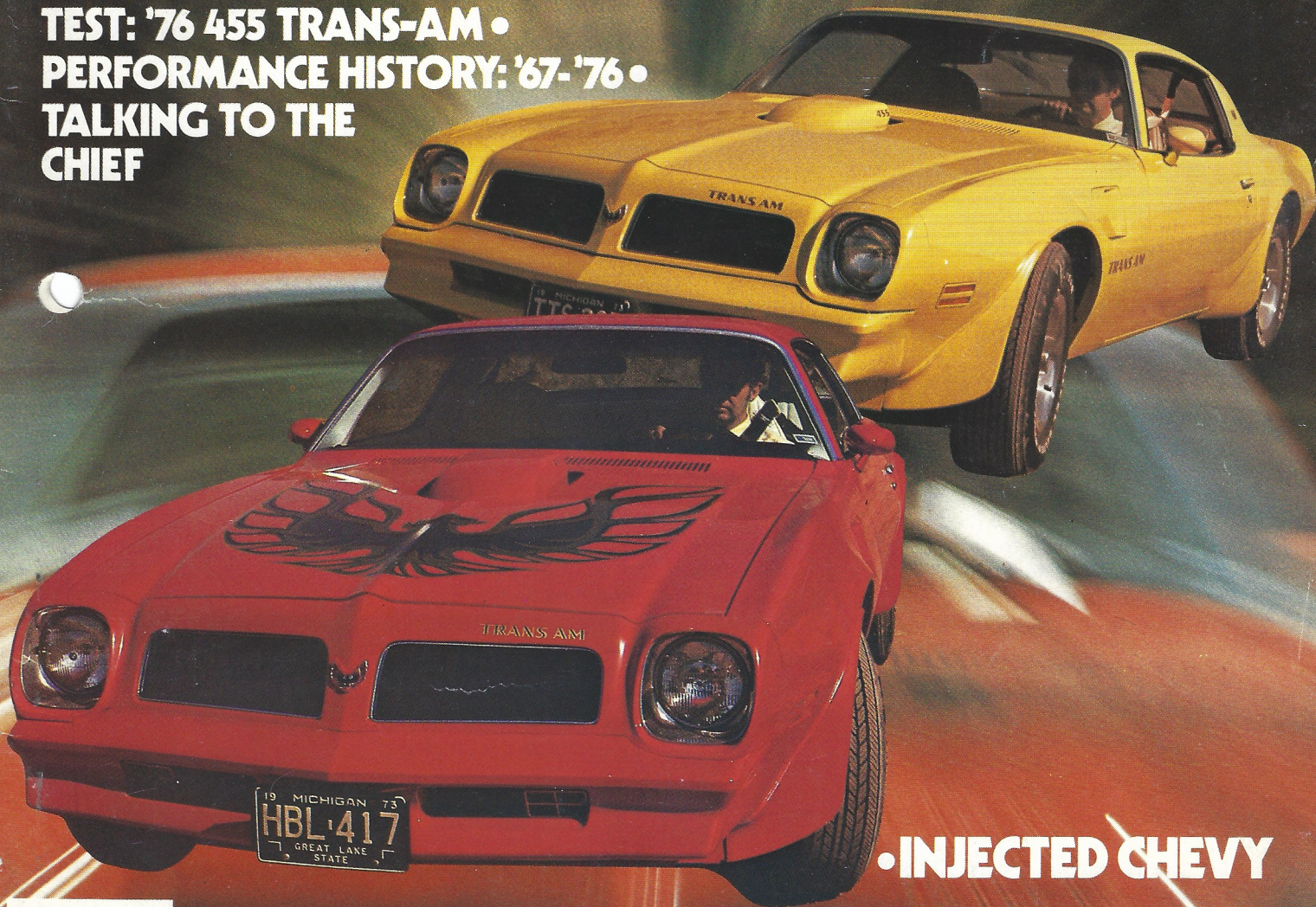
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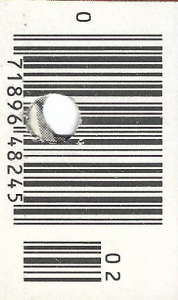
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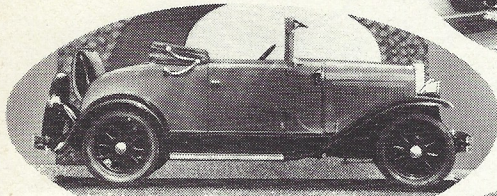
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• CUSTOM MONZA
• CON RODS: LONG OR SHORT?

• THE STREET HEMI IS STILL KING!

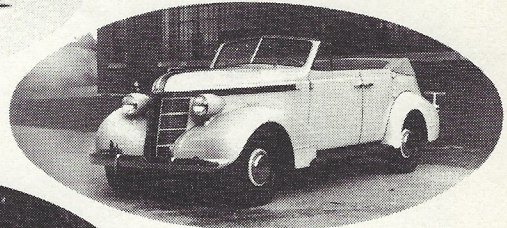




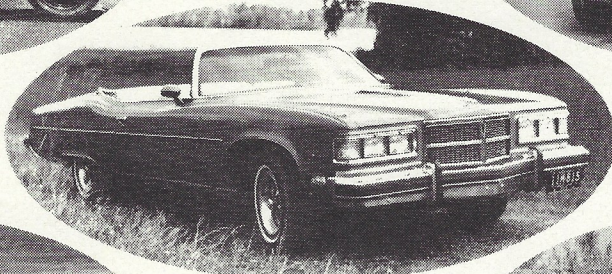
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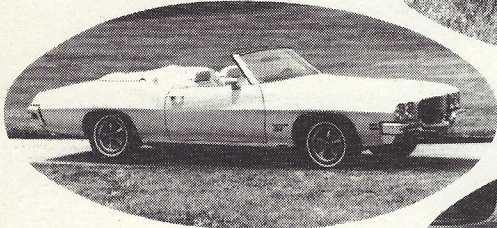
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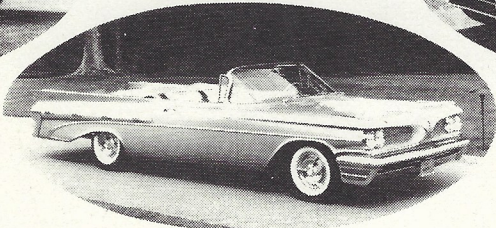
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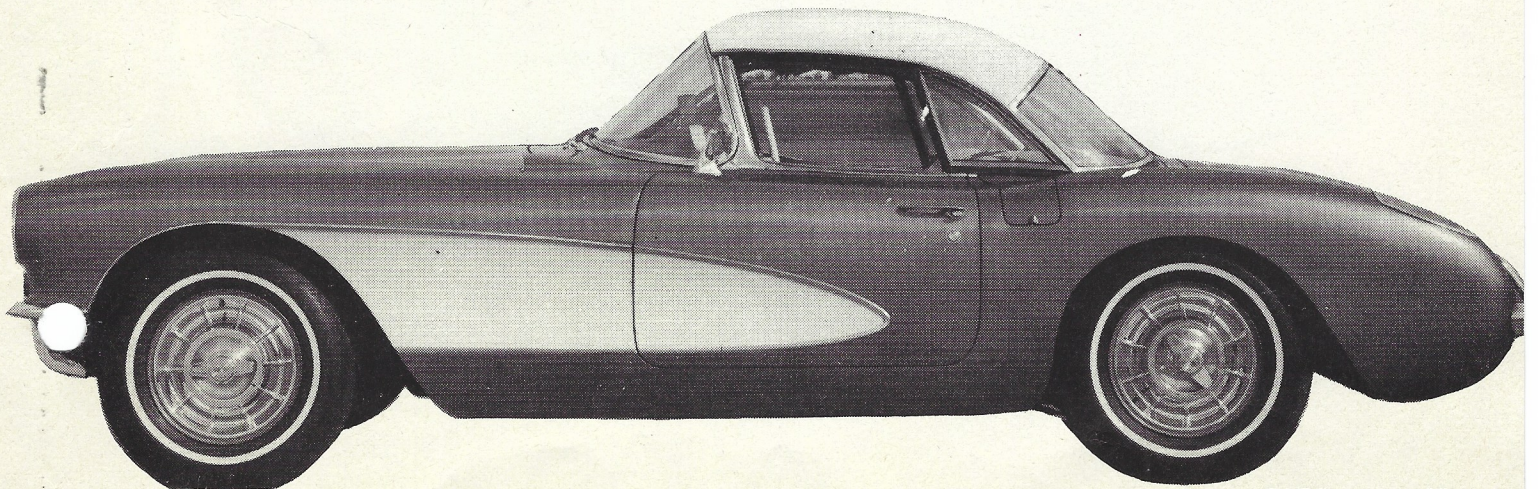
1959

SOFT-TOP SWAN SONG

The '76 Eldorado is the last American convertible. Here's one man's view of the passing of the ragtop

BY GARY WITZENBURG

NEARLY EVERYONE HAS OWNED a convertible at one time or another, or wishes he had. My first was a bright red MGA sports car, used of course and a little rusty. It had real wire wheels and spindly mirrors way out on the fenders that were always out of adjustment. It took a strong and clever man 15 minutes to erect the top, and many were the times I drove in the rain with it down just to avoid the chore of putting it up.



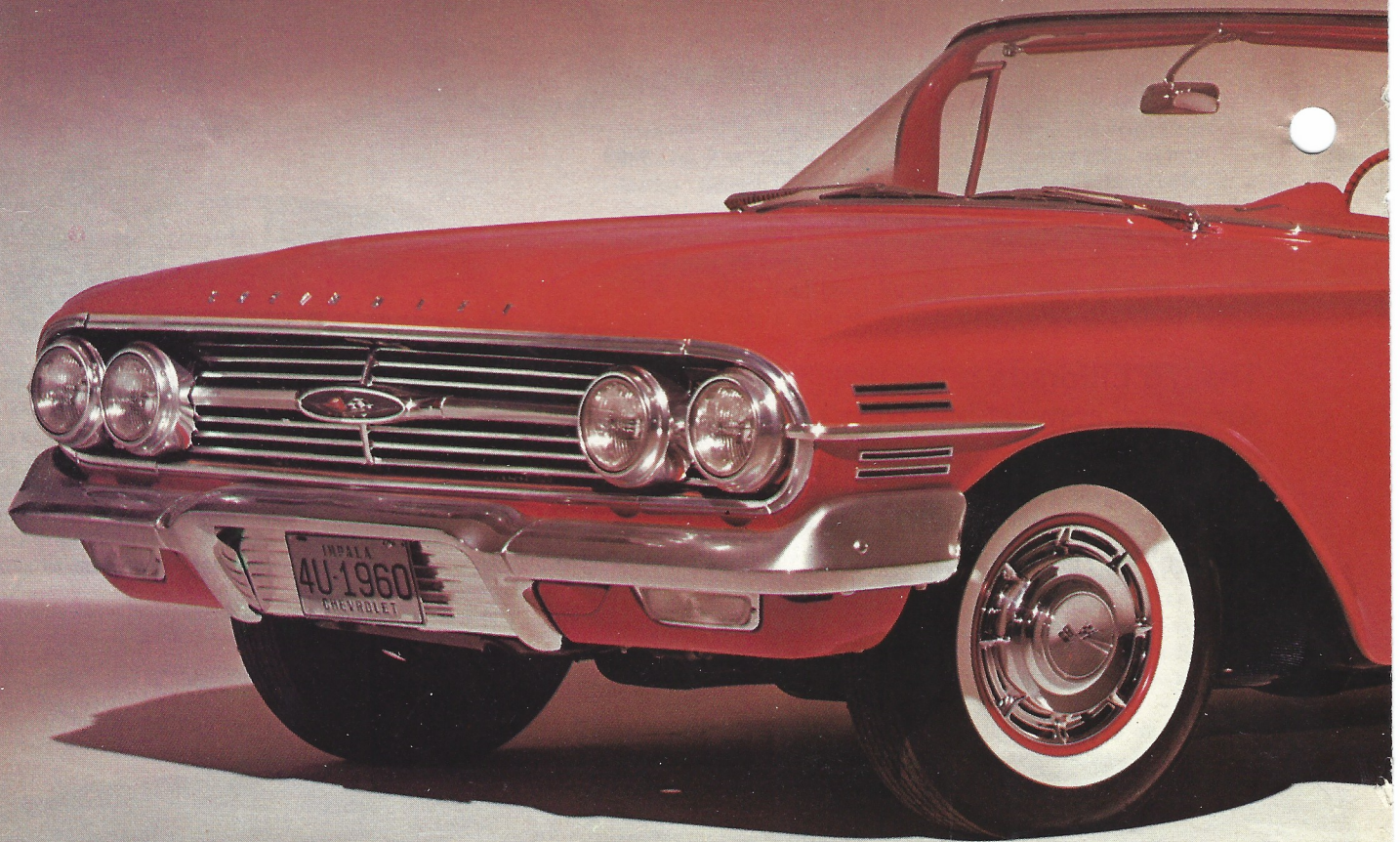
SOFT-TOP SWAN SONG

Then I graduated to a '57 Corvette, a sexy black beauty whose ebony surfaces were forever dirty, even just after I'd finished washing it. I foolishly "customized" the car in the manner of the times by removing all of the chrome and fibreglassing the tailpipes into the rear fenders. It also had wide whitewalls, "spun aluminum racing discs" and functional exhaust cutouts that broke off every time I crested the driveway.

I took to wearing a big, black cowboy hat (which was admittedly strange in Cleveland) because I thought that one shouldn't appear too sane or ordinary when driving such a car. My girlfriend Betsy despised the hat and nag-

ged me continually to get rid of it, which only served to strengthen my determination. It wasn't every high school senior who had a black Corvette, roadworn though it was. I pumped gas part time to support that car and I loved it and the image I thought went with it.

The convertible top became ragged, and I saved for months to buy a new one. When the big day finally came and I brought the car home with its new top all gleaming white, my Dad even offered to let me keep it in his garage for a while. And the only time I ever came close to garroting the family cat was the next morning when I discovered her indelible prints all over my brand new



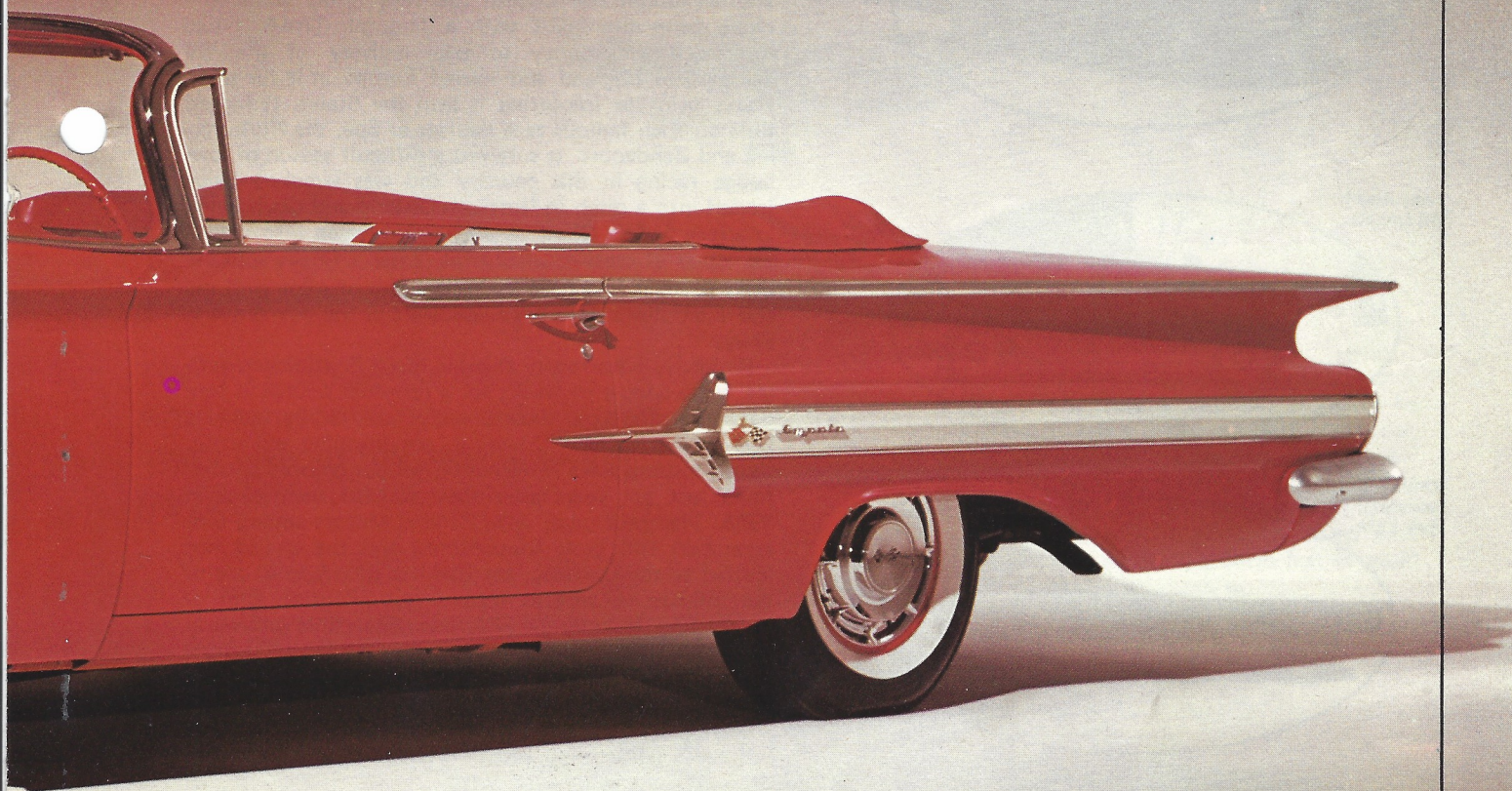
white top. Just for a moment, I could have flattened that that sweet little creature with a road grader and felt not the slightest twinge of remorse.

The custom fiberglass was just beginning to self-destruct when I sold the Vette to a local dealer who specialized in sports cars. He didn't look at it very carefully and offered a price which I thought amazingly fair. I hated to part with the little beauty, but I needed the money for college and accepted the offer. "I lost my shirt on that car," the dealer told me later. And so did the poor kid he sold it to, I suspect.

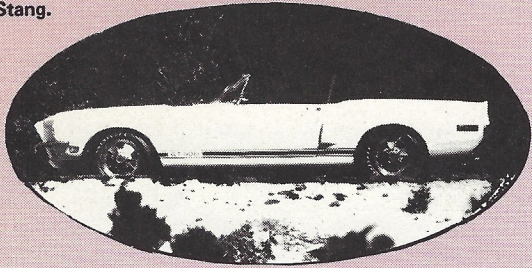
Next was a full-size '60 Chevy convert—white with a

red interior and a black top. It had the mucho-macho 348-cu. in. motor with triple carbs, and it leaked nearly as much gas as it burned through the classy clear plastic fuel lines I installed to jazz up the engine. In addition, it had a homemade floor shifter, courtesy of the previous owner, plus a set of gauges and a big tachometer that actually lit up at night.

I worked nights in a truck axle plant that summer and linked up with a lunatic named Joe, who had a beautiful red and white '55 Chevy convertible. Joe and I became the envy of the beer joints and drive-ins, and we would



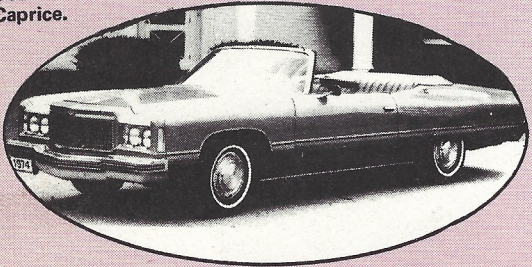
'68 Shelby
428 Stang.



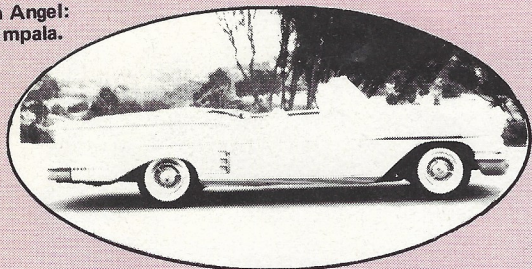
'68 Impala
SS 396.



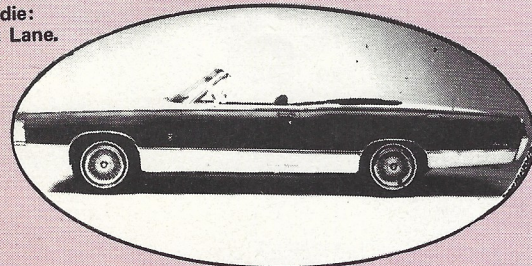
Big Boat:
'74 Caprice.



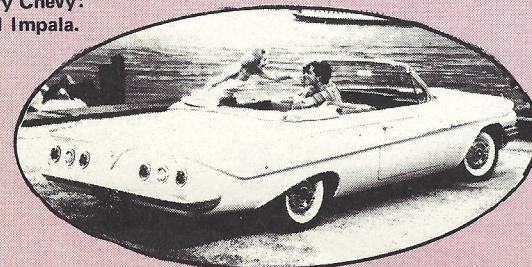
Teen Angel:
'58 Impala.



Vinyl
woodie:
Park Lane.



Heavy Chevy:
1961 Impala.



SOFT-TOP SWAN SONG

cruise in those cars till the sun came up after working most of the night.

But alas, my Chevy was terminally ill and took to laying down huge clouds of smoke whenever I punched it out. It finally took its own life late one autumn evening as I traveled through rural Virginia on my way to school. Perhaps it was a lucky break at that, since that car had gotten me arrested for various heinous driving crimes no less than five times in one short summer. I was beginning to think the cops were reading my mind down at the station, always seeming to know in advance what I would be doing and usually out there waiting when I did it.

Maturity and budget considerations cooled my passion for big engines, and my next proud possession was a Chevy II convertible, white with a red interior and fake wire wheels, 1963 style. It was a "six" with "three on the tree" but it started every morning, was cheap to run and absolutely the most reliable piece of automotive machinery I have ever owned. After two hard years and 60,000 miles of spirited usage, the Chevy II was just as tight and fresh as when it had rolled off the factory floor.

The next and, sadly, the last ragtop I owned was another bright red English roadster. I had come full-circle from the MGA with a Triumph TR4A. I had borrowed the money to take delivery of the '66 Triumph in England and toured Europe in it for three weeks prior to importing it into the States. It logged time on such famous race courses as Spa, the Nurburgring and Zandvoort. It survived a difficult season of low-budget racing in this country and was wrecked twice (rolled into a ditch in Northern Ontario and sandwiched in a race of Mid-Ohio) before being pressed into service for a pair of cross-country trips. When I finally sold the little devil, it had been through a hell of a lot with me and I let slip a couple of real tears as the guy drove it away.

Recently, I borrowed this big black Pontiac convertible for a couple of weeks for a refresher course in top-down transit. It is, unfortunately, one of the last of a near-extinct species. Crime, air conditioning and stereo sound systems have driven us out of our beloved convertibles just ten years after they reached their peak in 1965. This past year, only General Motors among U.S. carmakers still built convertibles, and the choice was limited to the Corvette, the Cadillac Eldorado or one of the full-size behemoths from Chevy, Pontiac, Olds or Buick. For '76, only the Eldorado convertible survives as an American-built ragtop; next year Cadillac will restyle its personal-luxury car and the convertible version will go down for the last time.

Driving this dinosaur of an automobile was at once nostalgic, exhilarating, revealing and depressing. The fenders are nearly out of visual range at the ends of enormous, gleaming expanses of sheet metal, and the interior is so ridiculously roomy that you have to lean uncomfortably to rest your arm on the door sill. And just one rush hour ordeal with the top down on a hot and humid summer day causes you to remember again why you and nearly everyone else quit buying such automobiles.

But there is still something inexplicably thrilling and indecently fun about cruising in a real ragtop one last time. And it's somehow sad and sobering to watch the genre pass into history.