

1955 FORD THUNDERBIRD

1955 Ford Thunderbird Convertible, body/style 40B; 2-door

Owners: Bernie and Janice Taulborg Collection

Original cost: \$2,944.00

Number made: 16,156

Engine, etc.: 8 cyl. (40-B) 292 cu. in. 193 hp; 102 in. wheelbase; 2,980 lbs.

Stylists were experimenting with the concept of a two-seater car long before the mid-fifties but sports cars accounted for only 27% of the total U. S. car market. In January, 1953 GM introduced the Chevrolet Corvette and Ford was quick to respond. The Thunderbird was designed by Franklin Q. Hershey, formerly with General Motors, who was hired by Ford in early 1952. It was created as a "personal luxury" car rather than an a sports car.

Naming the Ford Thunderbird was a difficult process with over 5,000 entries submitted. A prize of \$250 was offered to anyone who could come up with a name ("Whizzer" as a name was strongly considered also.) The name "Thunderbird" was submitted by Alden Giberson and became official on Feb. 15, 1954. Giberson never claimed his prize though he did settle for a \$95 new suit and extra pair of trousers from Saks Fifth Avenue. The name was derived from southwest American Indian lore for a mythical bird responsible for thunder and lightning and a symbol of power, speed, and good fortune.

The all-new two-passenger Thunderbird was first shown to the public at the Detroit Auto Show on Feb. 20, 1954. Production started on Sept. 9 and the first vehicles were delivered to the public on Oct. 22, 1954. Over 4,000 orders were taken on the first day of sale. With European style and American convenience and power, it outsold the rival Corvette in the 1955 model year by a margin of 23 to 1.

A bright, high-spirited car, it came with the new overhead valve V-8, boosted to higher horsepower with a 4-barrel carburetor and dual exhausts. Ford used as many parts as possible from other Fords to keep costs and development to a minimum. The instrument panel had a tachometer and speedometer. The fiberglass removable top was standard with a fabric covered convertible top optional for \$290. The body was constructed of metal instead of fiberglass and suspension was comprised of ball-joints in front, offering a plusher ride. To save space in the trunk, the spare tire was mounted on the rear bumper – and the “Continental Kit” was brought into modern times.

Power steering, windows, seats, and brakes were options. A three-speed manual transmission was standard with overdrive and an automatic as options. The manual had a semi-centrifugal-type clutch, three-speed helical gears and synchronizers for 2nd and 3rd gears.

Road clearance was only 5 ½ inches, much less than other Fords made that year.

Ford’s production in 1954 was second only to 1923 when the Model T dominated the industry. Robert S. McNamara was vice-president and general manager of Ford Division, Ford Motor Company.

Sources: Standard Catalog of American Cars, 1946 – 1974. John Gunnell. Rev. 4th ed. Krause Publications, 2002.

<http://www.conceptcarz.com/vehicle/z1610/Ford-Thunderbird.aspx>

<http://www.classiccardatabase.com/specs.php?series=5175&year=1955&model=26381>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/04/automobiles/the-glorious-the-gaudy-5-decades-of-t-birds.html> (Spelling of Alden Giberson’s name)

http://www.oldcarbrochures.com/static/NA/Ford/1955_Ford/1955%20Ford%20Full%20Line%20Prestige%20Brochure/index1.html (Original 1955 brochure)