

# 1957 FORD FAIRLANE 500 SKYLINER CONVERTIBLE

1957 Ford Fairlane 500 Skyliner Retractable hardtop convertible, Model 51A

Owners: Bernie and Janice Taulborg Collection

Original cost: \$2,942.00

Number made: 20,766

Engine, etc.: 8 cyl.; 291.3 cid; 118 in. wheelbase; 3,916 lbs.

The 1957 Fords were completely restyled. The new Fairlane model was five inches lower and had a slightly longer wheelbase and overall length. All models had 14" wheels for the first time as an aid in lowering them. They had the latest styling craze, tailfins, called "high-canted fenders" by Ford.

The big innovation for 1957 was introduction of the Skyliner, the only true hardtop convertible in the world. It was a sensation of the first order, so much so that even President Dwight D. Eisenhower, president in 1957, ordered one. The idea of a retractable hardtop didn't originate with Ford – the first one, a Peugeot, went on sale in France 23 years earlier. In an era of flamboyant styling and "gee-whiz" engineering features, Ford may have had the topper when it introduced the Skyliner retractable hardtop. Practically be damned; this was one for stopping the neighbors in their tracks.

The hardtop was raised and lowered by a combination of seven servo motors, ten relays, screw jacks, assorted flexible cables, springs, and pivoting arms. All of this was connected by 610 feet of wire. Putting the top up or down took less than a minute. Gil Spear, head of Ford's Advanced Design studio, is credited with the concept. Spear's model (called the "Roof-O-Matic") reached higher-ups at Ford and over \$2 million to develop the idea in 1953

Ben Smith from GM, was lured to Ford and put in charge of making the hardtop and having it ready for production in 18 months. He rejected an idea

that would have cut and hinged the top halfway through its length. Instead, to accommodate the size of the top, a separate front section about 10" long, called a "flipper", was used. It folded and tucked itself under the main part of the top when stowed. A scale-model working model provided a more dramatic demonstration than was intended. During a test, the model's decklid flew off its pivots and was caught by a couple of engineers. Approval was given for work to continue and final clay models were approved in 1954.

The 1957 Fords were offered in two wheelbase lengths with the Fairlane 500 the longer of the two by six inches. Since the retractable hardtop added nearly 500 lbs. to the car's weight, heavy-duty steel wheels with rims a half-inch wider than standard were used. Three V-8 engines ranging from 190 horsepower to 270 hp were available and needed for the two tons of weight. A special model with 300 hp and a supercharger could also be ordered.

A separate production line was set up for the Skyliner so workers could concentrate on the complicated alignment and adjustment process needed for the retractable roof. The reliability record of the retractable top in customer hands was better than one might think, however. The biggest drawback was lack of trunk space. Anything carried there had to fit into the square metal box in the trunk. If the owner suffered a flat tire, everything in the box had to be removed because the spare tire was under a wood panel beneath it.

The retractable hardtops were produced for just three years: 1957, 1958, and 1959.

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

<http://auto.howstuffworks.com/1957-1959-ford-fairlane-skyliner.htm>

See

also: [http://www.oldcarbrochures.com/static/NA/Ford/1957 Ford/1957 Ford Skyliner Brochure/dirindex.html](http://www.oldcarbrochures.com/static/NA/Ford/1957%20Ford/1957%20Ford%20Skyliner%20Brochure/dirindex.html) (Original 1957 brochure; pdf)