

CAR OF THE QUARTER . . .

'58 Chrysler Imperial..... by Hugh Hemphill



The Imperial marque confuses even the most knowing car people. Was it a standalone brand, like DeSoto, or simple the top of the line version of Chrysler? The answer is both. The name was in use on Chryslers from 1924. For twenty years, 1955 – 1975, it was a standalone marque. It has reappeared, once or twice, most notably from 1981 – 1983, as a badge engineered Chrysler Cordoba. Quite recently, Automobile Magazine was speculating that the new LHS large sedan would be called Imperial. Now Chrysler is fully into retro styling.

1958 should have been a great year for Chrysler Corporation. In 1957, sales were up by 46% from the previous year, more than half of which was accounted for by Imperials. Led by president L.L. Colbert, the company had invested millions upon millions in new models across the entire range. With styling by Virgil Exner, innovations such as Torqueflite (3-speed) automatics, and the epitome of engine design, the Hemi. The company was very much in the lead on all fronts. Chevrolet was slipping badly. Its (now legendary) 1957 was a poor seller, being regarded as a last minute re-style job, the replacement for the '56 having been abandoned due to the financial crunch. Imperials outsold Lincoln in 1957. So, what went wrong?

Two factors, externally, despite our rosy views of the '50's, there was an economic depression in 1958. There were strikes, particularly in the steel industry. Internally, Chrysler ruined its own resurgence with lousy build quality. It paid no attention to rust control. Cars were virtually coming out of Highland Park with rust already showing. Some technical innovations were put into production before they were ready. The \$400 Bendix Fuel Injection option caused tuning problems and, also, the injectors clogged frequently. All cars so equipped

were retrofitted with dual quad carburetors.

In a customer survey, three out of four people who had switched to Mopars from elsewhere, expressed misgivings. By late 1958 only 10% said they would buy another Mopar.

The 1958 Imperial is all but indistinguishable from the 1957. Different bumpers are the most obvious clue. Mechanically, only the replacement of a two-barrel carburetor by a four-barrel, which raised horsepower from 325 to 350, is the only change.

"My" car was donated to the Texas Transportation Museum in 1984 by Leslie Tabor. Along with a 1957, of which no details or pictures exist, and a 1963 four door sedan, both of which were later disposed of. (I wish we'd kept the '57 for parts. It's the only donor car there is.) It is the bottom of the line Southampton, which means it only has power windows, power locks, power brakes, power antenna, power seats, and dual air conditioning. It only has a 392 Hemi V8 and a push button Torqueflite transmission. It is only 18 feet, 10 inches long (not including the bumpers, which add a good seven inches) and 6 feet, 9 inches wide. It is only good for about 120 mph. Rotten deal, huh? Makes you wonder, "Why bother?"

Kidding. It's the best ride in the club! It cruises at its best at 75 mph. It loses nothing on long hills, and has acceleration to spare under any circumstances. It is a driver's car. In comparison to the '63 Lincoln 4-door convertible I also drive that is floaty and vague, the '58 Imperial points, shoots, and reload in fine order. You have to be careful using the throttle when overtaking. At 70 mph you'll be at 90 mph and climbing, if you have the slightest heavy right foot. It's built for long distance high speed cruising. It just goes!

I "acquired" the rights to the car around

1994. It took me four years of hard labour to get it into roadworthy condition. It was not prepared at all for its ten-year rest stop.

Rust permeated the engine block. The brake system, never a strong point on this vintage of car, was inoperable. The brake fluid, which is hydroscopic, had the consistency of wet sugar.

The car is virtually all-original. Anything we took off has been fixed and replaced. Some missing trim pieces have been acquired. I know of two 'donor' cars, both of which were found after the bulk of the work done so far was complete. We'd take parts, such as window motors, deem them totally unusable, and put them away in a box simply for reference. Then when all other options failed, we'd take them back out and, with a heavy, sinking, feeling of wasting our time, begin tinkering. And, lo!, everything, I mean everything, is back on. Ironically, I now have many reference parts in the same box, unused, should our rebuilds fail. None have so far.

With my museum colleague, Tony Planas, much has been achieved. I debuted the car on the 1998 La Bahia Run. Ambitious as always, sure the brakes were squirrely, but I didn't hit anything! Sure, it looked awful, and still does, but I'm taking care of the mechanicals first. In another four or five years, maybe, it'll be finished. Did I mention we also have a 1973 Imperial? Just bought the Haynes manual. 'C' body heaven, here I come!

Last quarter's Car of the Quarter can be viewed at the following WEB site:
<http://www.comports.com/marks/mopar/carquar.htm>