

OLD CARS WEEKLY – 1975

Somewhere East or West of Laramie, there must be an Old Cars reader who remembers the first "hardtop." It wasn't, as younger collectors would like to believe, a '49 Buick Riviera, Olds Holiday 98 or Cadillac coupe de ville. Nor is it one of those very limited production 1946 Chrysler Town & Country's with steel tops affixed to convertible bodies. The Girl from Somewhere West of Laramie thinks it was the Chalmers Lucile sedan, which dates back to 1914. Old ads show that Chalmers built classy center door sedans with removable center-posts and disappearing windows from 1914 thru 1918. More than a dozen manufacturers offered this "all-year" type of body from 1915 thru 1918. Chandler, Maxwell, Haynes, Hudson, Cole, Wescott, Willys-Knight, Paige, Pierce-Arrow, Dodge, even Cadillac and Ford offered variations on a hardtop theme. Springfield Body Company built most of the bodies, under license from Fisher and others. These were not California tops, which were affixed to touring car bodies. The Springfield body was a single unit wooden body with removable center-posts. Windows either slid down into the frame or were stowed inboard. While no one is quite sure who offered this

body style first, Chalmers may have scooped the market, listing it in catalogues as early as 1914. Others followed in the 1915-1918 era.

The "convertible car," as it was called in trade publications of the period, may have been inspired by the center door sedan, a smart but never very popular body type. It was a real struggle entering and exiting thru the middle of the car, then squeezing in and out of the front seats.

It's really not surprising that Chalmers was one of the first to carry the body style one step beyond the others. Chalmers pioneered custom styled bodies on medium priced cars. Chalmers was one of the first to offer closed cars at popular prices.

Its competitors expected buyers to content themselves with drafty touring bodies. Chalmers was also one of the first to offer full crown fenders on anything but a custom car. Mercer had them, too, but at nowhere near the price. The smartness of the Chalmers is long forgotten.

Very few of these 1910-1922, '23 Detroit cars survive. You rarely see them at collector events, and they could easily be mistaken for Chandlers. But the Chalmers did, indeed, have its day, and the most unmistakable one of all is the Lucile sedan.

We have two of them here in the San Francisco Bay Area. They are the only two Chalmers hardtops known to exist anywhere in the country. El Sobrante collector, Claude Washburn owns both. His 1918 model is gone beyond hope of restoration. The 1915 model was almost gone when he found both of them in Oakland in 1970. Originally, a rancher in Marin County owned both cars. According to the story, he drove one and his wife drove the other. They were the original "his" and "hers" hardtops.

As late as 1955 both these cars were fully intact and still running around Marin County.

Then they were sold to an Oakland man who let them sit outside for another 15 years. Even California's mild climate is hardly kind to ancient wooden bodies left to neglect. Other collectors passed them by as hopeless. Washburn felt they were worth saving. "I wouldn't have even bothered restoring the 1915 if it wasn't such a rare body," says Washburn, himself, a professional body man. "Once I finished the 1915 body I realized the 1918 could never be saved. I'd never want to tackle another one of these again. I just didn't realize what I was getting into."

Washburn could find no technical data on the body. The old oak and

hickory frames were just barely salvageable for patterns. Of course, the running gear was standard Chalmers 30. But even Harrah's couldn't advise him on body reconstruction. The best piece of information he ever found on the car was a 1915 ad that read:
CHALMERS LUCILE SEDAN
\$1,780

(\$1925 San Francisco)

"A stroll down Fifth Avenue reveals myriads of unique closed car styles. Many border on the freakish, but just a few incorporate a departure from the stereotyped you have so long desired.

"Termed 'a sun parlor on pneumatics' by enthusiastic owners, the sedan is made to order for the man who drives his own car."

Almost entirely enclosed in glass, the sedan will appeal strongly to the increasing numbers of women drivers. At will, the front and door windows can be dropped into the body, cooling the interior effectively. If still more breeze is desired, it is a simple matter to remove the rear quarter windows and window pillars. They stow away in a special compartment back of the seats.

"The driver's seat is of the club type, an auxiliary seat swings out from the back of the driver's seat if accommodations for six passengers are necessary.

"All seats are upholstered with the

finest quality curled hair and covered with extra heavy Bedford cloth offered in either black or white or fancy buff. Ebonized interior moldings harmonize with refined appointments of the compartment.

"Choice of three body colors is available in Chalmers Meteor blue, Chalmers grey or coupe green.

(Incidentally, this unique body style was also available in a coupe.)

In practice, turning the car into a sun porch was not nearly as easy as the ads suggested. First, the operator unsnaps a strap allowing the center door window to drop into the door. Then he folds down two window guides completely concealing the recessed window. The huge rear quarter window is removed completely, and carefully set in a large tray concealed by the rear shelf. Front windows slide down same as the center door windows. Corner posts are unscrewed from the top and bottom, in much the same way one would detach the center posts from a four door convertible sedan. The posts are finally set in little velvet trays under the rear seat. The process is identical on both sides of the car. The entire operation of removal and reinstallation takes about 15 minutes provided you have two strong men to handle two rear windows. You don't have to be a glazier by trade to tackle the

job, but it helps. There is the ever-present danger of breaking a window or damaging the upholstery. I could only liken the task to changing the storm windows on a very old house.

So what happens if you're caught with your windows down and a thunderstorm comes up? Well, you utter a few choice words and work very swiftly, starting on the windward side. Bedford cloth and water don't mix

Those windows are really heavy," says Washburn. "I'll bet all the glass in that car weighs over 200 pounds. These are heavy automobiles due to both the glass and all the wood in the body. They don't have quite the snap of the touring models, but they're not top heavy"

At 50 miles an hour the car still hugs the road. Wind doesn't seem to be a problem. And, despite the lack of top support, the car is remarkably tight and quiet. The co-pilot's seat is not very comfortable. It's an un-sprung turret seat fixed to the body with a single steel tube. The seat comes right out for carrying cargo. The back seat is remarkably comfortable. As the ad says, you feel like you're riding in a sun parlor on pneumatics. Even with all the windows up vision is better than in most of today's cars. The sloping front windshield is a real boost to visibility, and another

feature you rarely see on anything but a custom car of this era. There are other nice custom car touches, too. Like vases, courtesy lights that work when you open the doors, and elegant sidelights just forward of the doors.

Looking at the Chalmers now, it's hard to believe that it was once a basket case. Claude points out that it represents four years of hard work. And he and his brother, Jerry, are no amateurs. Claude is not just a "slap'em out" body man. His shop does antiques as well as modern cars. His brother is a machinist by trade. "My only regret is that our sisters didn't marry a plater and an upholsterer," says Claude. "These are the toughest jobs to get done right." Claude shakes his head when he thinks back on the years of restoration on this one. The wheels were so bad, that half the wire spokes had to be replaced. Only one rear fender could be saved. The other three fenders were re-fabricated by California Metal Shaping in Los Angeles.

Parts were just impossible to find. Information on how to make the parts was even harder.

Outside of fairly detailed owner's manuals, specifications simply don't exist. When Chrysler took over Chalmers in 1923, all of the car's history was put in a Detroit warehouse, and it burned down years ago.

The Chalmers is one of America's truly lost automobiles. It's a shame. It was an important part of the early industry.

Hugh Chalmers got his start with National Cash Register. He rose from office boy to vice president and general manager. In 1907, he went over to Thomas-Detroit and promptly changed the name to Chalmers~Detroit.

In 1910, he dropped the name "Detroit." His first

Chalmers 30 appeared that same year. The model was redesigned several times, but was always known as the Chalmers 30.

The 30s were somewhat unique in that it had a one-piece engine block. Chalmers built all of their own engines. In fact, all of the running gear was made right in the factory. Chalmers even built their own axles.

Originally, the Model 30 was a four. A new high-speed six was introduced in 1915, and helped push sales to a record of 21,000 units for 1916. Only 9,800 units were built in 1915 ranking Chalmers 13th in sales. Right between Hupmobile and the Packard V-12. Things turned sour in 1917 and sales were down to 12,000 cars. Chalmers never got back on it's feet again, and in 1919 the plant was leased to Maxwell.

In 1920 Walter P. Chrysler stepped in to reorganize. 1922 was the last year of Chalmers production,

although a few cars were numbered as 1923 models. The Maxwell was phased out in 1925 when the new Chrysler really started taking off.

Washburn has no idea how many Lucile sedans were built, since the bodies were rather frail compared to solid center-post sedans, he theorizes that all the others vanished at a very early date. They may have been popular here in the West. California tops were a big attraction here during the same period. Certainly, the Lucile was no match for blustery Eastern and Midwestern winters.