

## HISTORY OF THE FORD THUNDERBIRD 1955-2005

By Bill Rothermel, SAH

By the beginning of the 1950's, Ford was searching for a new style. Henry Ford II, now in charge of the company after the passing of his father, freed the company of its conservative influence. A brilliant stylist who had gained his experience under the tutelage of the famous Harley Earl while at General Motors was hired to update the look of the forthcoming Ford models. His name was Franklin Q. Hershey. He and his small team of assistants had the idea to build something other than a family sedan and were given the opportunity to do so. By the spring of 1952, Ford was well aware of the fact that General Motors was also designing its own sportscar, much like those imported from England. Nonetheless, Chevrolet beat Ford to the punch when it introduced the Corvette at GM's Motorama at New York's Waldorf Astoria in January 1953. Ford's designers were headed in a different direction and their coming-out party would not be until one year later at the February 20, 1954, Detroit Auto Show. That car was named Thunderbird. Rather than a sportscar, it was a "personal luxury car." Conflicting stories exist as to how the name was actually developed for the car with, although more than 5,000 names were given consideration. One story tells it that a young Ford stylist, Alden "Gib" Giberson, was given \$95.00 and a pair of pants from Saks Fifth Avenue for suggesting the name. Another says that the name (according to Palm Springs Life magazine) came from an exclusive 1950's housing development called "Thunderbird Heights." Yet another story says it was adapted from Native American mythology describing a giant bird that through the beating of its wings caused thunder and wind as lightning erupted from the blinking of its eyes.

The first production car rolled off the line on September 9, 1954. When enough cars were produced, Ford introduced the car to the public on October 22 of that same year. Reportedly, dealers received 4,000 deposits prompting the company to revise its sales estimates upward. Thunderbird established the personal luxury car segment in America which years later, would spawn many competitors. Standard were power steering, brakes, windows and four-way seat. Available was a radio, heater, and choice of three-speed manual or Ford-O-Matic automatic transmission. With a V-8 under the hood, the power to effortlessly cruise the new Interstates of America was available from the standard 292cid engine producing 193hp with manual transmission and 198hp with automatic. Thunderbird was available in five colors, Thunderbird Blue, Raven Black, Snowshoe White, Goldenrod Yellow and Torch Red.

Like many of the European cars of the era, Thunderbird had a unique chassis and bodystyle which hid its "off-the-shelf" parts many of which came from Ford's Mainline and Fairlane sedan models. The crisply styled steel body was available as an open roadster with an optional lift-off hardtop roof. The wraparound windshield, hooded headlights, hood scoop and hint of tailfins were typical of the day. The car, however, was not. Despite being only a two-seater, it was quite large at 185 inches long, and heavy at nearly 3,400 pounds, placing it in a vastly different market sector than the Corvette or the sports cars from Europe. The original two-seat Thunderbird handily outsold the Corvette as a result of its clean styling, creature comforts, and V-8 engine; as opposed to the Corvette's novel fiberglass construction, anemic 6-cylinder engine and sportscar basics. Thunderbird trounced the Corvette in first-year production totaling 16,155 units to the Corvette's 700. Ford Division General Manager Lewis Crusoe saw the T-bird as a "halo" car that generated good press and lured prospective buyers into the showroom; hopefully to buy its more pedestrian cars rather than its competitor's vehicles. He never saw the car as a volume seller and recognized that the company lost money on each one it sold. Robert S. MacNamara (who would later become U.S. Secretary of Defense) in line to take over Crusoe's job, saw things differently. Being pragmatic, he rose to his success at Ford by watching the company's bottom-line. He felt

every project the company developed would have to carry its own weight . . . or it was gone! MacNamara ultimately won and shortly after the first cars hit the road, a four-seat Thunderbird was under development. Had Chevrolet offered the initial Corvette in 1953 with a V-8, for Thunderbird, things might have been vastly different. Chevrolet offered its first Corvette V-8 with manual transmission in 1955 giving its two-seat car the personality it lacked. In 1956 the Corvette received a bold and dramatic re-style giving it even more punch in the marketplace. Suffice it to say, both cars likely kept the other from fading into oblivion, despite the fact that the two would end up headed in entirely different directions.

At a base price of \$3,151.00, the 1956 Thunderbird offered minimal changes from the previous year. Most notable included a new rear bumper, a winged badge on the nose, new taillights, front fender vents to keep the passenger compartment cooler, new interior seat and door panels and new exterior colors. Like the Corvette, Ford would learn that more power would equate to more sales and the standard 292cid engine would get a horsepower boost. Optional would be a 312cid V-8 producing 215hp with manual transmission and 225hp with Ford-O-Matic. Perhaps the most notable changes were the addition of portholes in the optional hardtop to improve visibility and the decorative mounting of the spare tire on the rear of the car outside the trunk. Reportedly, Henry Ford II complained that in his personal Thunderbird, the trunk wasn't large enough to carry a set of golf clubs without taking out the spare tire. Somewhat simultaneous was the introduction of the Lincoln Continental Mark II which featured a vestigial hump in the rear decklid to conceal its spare tire. Thus goes the legend of how the "Continental kit" was born.

Ford introduced its 1957 models on October 1, 1956, including the new Thunderbird which was 6.1" longer and featured updated styling with features like canted fins to make it look more like the rest of the Ford lineup. The lengthening allowed Ford designers to return the spare tire to the trunk. The car received 14-inch wheels and 7.50x15 tires to give it a lower riding stance. A choice of ten colors was available along with the owner's option to special-order other colors of their choosing. The interior received a new dash and updated upholstery treatments. Other updates included a Volumatic radio that rose in volume as the car's speed increased. Also new was Dial-O-Matic power seat that returned to its rearmost position when the ignition was turned off allowing for easier entry and exit, then returning to its pre-set position when the ignition was started. Standard engine was a 292cid V-8 now rated at 212hp. Base price was \$3,408, though most cars with options were well over \$4,000.00.

The turbine-style wheel covers and wide whitewall tires were popular options for 1957. New for 1957 were four available engine choices including the base 292 and optional 312 V-8's in three versions. The D-Code car produced 245hp from its 312 cubic inches while it breathed through a low-profile Holley four-barrel carburetor. The E-code car produced 275hp through a modified Holley twin four-barrel setup borrowed from the 1956 Lincoln. Finally, the F-code was an all-out racing variant. It used a belt-driven McCullough/Paxton supercharger producing 340hp at an extra cost of \$500. Just 15 of these were produced making them the rarest of the original two-seat Thunderbirds.

In addition to the new-for-1957 styling, the big news that really caught buyer's attention were the upgraded powerplants. But power would take a back seat (no pun intended) in future Thunderbirds despite the horsepower-hungry public clamoring for more. Congress began to hold hearings to investigate the growth of more powerful and faster cars and how this was endangering the safety of the American public. To head off potential Federal regulations, the Automobile Manufacturers Association decided in May of 1957 that its companies get out of racing. Ford's MacNamara to no surprise, was the first to sign the ban giving him an excuse to stop spending money on what he considered a waste of time and corporate funds.

Ford management realized that the all-new '58 Thunderbird would not be ready in time for its September 1957 introduction. In order to keep the car in the public eye, it kept the '57 in production so as to keep supplies available until after the beginning of the year when the 1958 model would be introduced. The late-production cars offered five exterior colors from the 1958 full-size Ford line and bits and pieces of the 1958 models would be used as the stock of parts from the 1957 models would be depleted. The final '57

was produced on December 13 of that year. Arguably the most attractive of the original 55-57 two-seat Thunderbirds, the face-lifted 1957 was also the most numerous, largely due to the extended production run.

The Ford Design Studio, headed by Bill Boyer had been working on a four-seat Thunderbird since mid-'55. MacNamara was convinced the numbers would not add up as building the Little Birds required parts from a full-size Ford body that had been replaced for 1957. It made good business sense to move Thunderbird production from Ford's overcrowded River Rouge plant to an all-new facility shared with the Lincoln and Continental in Wixom, Michigan. Though a model of efficiency, the new unibody 4-seat Thunderbird consumed \$40 million in capital during its gestation, a fraction, however, of the budget proposed for the Edsel which was introduced that same year. With a wheelbase a full five inches shorter and a height four inches lower than the full-size Ford, the Thunderbird lost only a quarter inch of ground clearance and rear-seat headroom. To do this, engineers sat passengers down low between high doorsills and a massive driveline tunnel. Cleverly, Boyer hid the driveline tunnel inside an aircraft console – a fresh idea in 1958. Despite the clever packaging, the new car was nearly two feet longer and a half foot wider than the car it replaced. In addition to being the first available hardtop Thunderbird, the car offered the bucket seats and console interior theme that was to become a benchmark of the personal luxury car concept. On convertibles, the top disappeared into the trunk, leaving no visible trace . . . but, only 4 cubic feet of luggage space when lowered.

History reminds us that MacNamara was right. In its first year, the new four-seat Thunderbird sold 37,892 units (even though coupe production did not begin until January and convertible production until the following June). Another 67,456 were sold in 1959 and 92,843 in 1960, nearly five times that of Thunderbird's previous best sales year. 1959 addressed the other complaint of critics . . . more power! In addition to the standard 352cid V-8 with 300hp, optional was a new 430cid V-8 offering 350hp.

1960 marked the third and final year of the four-seat Thunderbird, nicknamed the "Squarebird" because of its boxy lines and a wide-pillar roof on coupes. This roofline would become a Ford trademark as it was applied to other Ford models from Galaxies to Falcons in the early 60's as well as Chryslers of the mid-to-late '60's. In coupes, the 1960 offered the country's first sliding steel sunroof at a cost of \$242.00 of which 2,536 were so equipped.

Introduced in 1961, the third generation T-bird used the previous chassis, while the torpedo-shaped styling was all-new and ride and handling were improved. The bodysell featured a severely pointed prow (known today as the "Bullet Birds"), modest fins above exaggerated taillights and softer roof contours on hardtops. Convertibles offered a unique, trunk-storing top which it shared with the also-new Lincoln Continental 4-door Convertible. Great attention was paid to quality control making it the most comfortable and quiet Thunderbird to-date. 62,535 coupes were produced in 1961 and all Thunderbirds came equipped with Ford's robust 390 cid V-8 and Cruise-O-Matic automatic transmission. Gone was the previously optional Lincoln 430cid V-8. The standard 390cid powerplant produced 300hp with optional versions producing 375 and 401hp.

1962 marked the introduction of an unusual Swing-Away steering wheel making entry and exit much easier. In addition, two new models were added to the Thunderbird lineup, the Landau Hardtop with its standard vinyl roof and simulated top irons and the Sports Roadster convertible. The Sports Roadster was an attempt to satisfy buyers who still longed for a two-seat Thunderbird. It boasted a fiberglass tonneau cover which was fit over the rear seat area of the car giving it the appearance of a long rear deck. Molded headrests covered the forward edge of the front bucket seats and the rear fender skirts were deleted so as not to interfere with the knock-off centers of the standard Kelsey-Hayes chrome-plated wire wheels. Just 1,427 Sports Roadsters were produced for the model year at a base price new of \$5,439.00.

For 1963, the Sports Roadster once again made an appearance at the top of the Thunderbird lineup. At \$5,563 it was also the most expensive T-bird available that year. There were minimal changes in styling as this was the final year of the third generation styling first introduced in 1961. And Thunderbird . . . at last began to have a bit of competition with the Pontiac Grand Prix introduced in 1962, the new Studebaker Avanti, and Buick's sensational new Riviera, both in 1963. As a result, sales dropped nearly twenty per cent from the year before. Just 455 Sports Roadsters of a total of 63,133 Thunderbirds were produced.

Following its typical three-year design cycle, Thunderbird styling was all-new for 1964 with busy bodyside sculpting and sharper lines bringing it more into line with other Ford models, yet retaining a unique Thunderbird identity. Quiet, refined luxury was becoming the premier emphasis even though the fourth generation car maintained its cockpit-style passenger compartment. Also appearing were full-width taillight housings, including backup lights. T-bird kept its 103" wheelbase and 390cid 300hp V-8 engine. Sales improved 32 percent to 92,465 units. Even though the Sports Roadster was officially dropped as a separate model, the tonneau cover remained a \$269 option. Just 45 were known to be factory-equipped that year.

Making headlines for Ford in 1965 was the introduction of the Mustang smashing all sales records of any car its first year on the market. The Mustang's father, Lee Iacocca, was named Vice-President of the Ford Motor Company Car and Truck Group that same year having previously succeeded MacNamara in 1960. Eventually, he would become the first non-Ford family member to ascend to the Presidency of Ford Motor Company. Thunderbird received only trim and detail changes to differentiate it from the previous model year. Mesmerizing sequential rear turn signals appeared for the first time, much to the chagrin of Ford service personnel. All T-birds came equipped with a 300hp 390 cid V-8, bucket seats and console. Front disc brakes arrived as standard equipment.. Ads hailed, "The Private World of the Thunderbird For 1965," leaving no doubt that personal luxury had become the predominant theme. Production dropped 19% for 1965, of which 6,846 convertibles were produced at a base price of \$4,953.

For 1966, Thunderbird faced increasing competition from the Buick Riviera and Oldsmobile's striking new Toronado, pressuring Ford to take the T-bird line a bit more up-market. As such, the new Town Hardtop and Town Landau models were introduced with formal vinyl roofs covering the rear quarter windows, landau bars, and interior overhead consoles. Exterior styling was modified taking cues from the overwhelmingly popular Mustang. A rare option on 1966's was a NASCAR-inspired 428cid V-8 offering over 345hp.

In 1967, Thunderbird was redesigned yet again, this time as a full-out luxury car. For the first time, a 4-door model became available, and the convertible, a fixture in the lineup from day one, was no longer offered. Wheelbase on the 2-door hardtop was up 1.5 inches to 114.7 while the four-door hardtop was built on a longer 117.2 inch wheelbase with Lincoln-like suicide rear doors. Despite cries of horror from the T-bird faithful, sales increased 12.7 percent over 1966. Like all T-birds for 1967, the car was offered with only one engine, Ford's big-block 429cid V-8 producing 340hp. In addition to two- and four-door models, buyers could also choose from front buckets or a bench seat for the first time.

Automatic climate control was a new option for 1968 and lamp monitors, a novel accessory, took advantage of another new technology, fiber optics. Production of Thunderbirds was expanded to Ford's Los Angeles facility in addition to its Wixom plant.

Styling changes were minimal for 1969. Ads described the '69 as "Unique in all the world," a tag line the company had used since 1961. Bucket seats were now ordered on just 34 percent of cars, further indicating the emphasis on luxury, rather than sport.

For 1970 (and 1971), the previous year's body was stretched nearly 6 inches, though wheelbase and powertrains remained the same. Two-door cars received "SportsRoof" fastback styling and all models had a pronounced beak grafted to the nose. Ads used the slogan, "More Thunderbird Than Ever," an apt

description referencing the size to which the car had grown. The relatively unpopular four-door model was largely carryover and production of it would end after the 1971 model year.

The seventh generation Thunderbird appeared for 1972. Ford would offer only one body style, a two-door coupe and it would grow in size responding to market pressures. Master marketer Lee Iacocca's vision of the car was to make it larger and more comfortable and to share a chassis and much under-the-skin equipment with the Lincoln Mark IV. The car was over 10 feet in length and a Lincoln 460cid V-8 became optional. Extra equipment could easily take the Thunderbird base price of \$5,293.00 to well over \$8,500.00 for a fully-loaded car. A milestone was reached when Ford produced its millionth Thunderbird on June 22, 1972 at its Los Angeles facility. Neiman Marcus offered special "His and Hers" 1972 Thunderbirds in its 1971 Christmas catalog.

Throughout its tenure (1972-1976), the seventh generation Thunderbird received only minor modifications. In 1973 Federal law required the front bumper to withstand a 5 mile-per-hour impact. A new bumper was affixed adding 2.9 inches to the car's massive length. A 5 mile-per-hour rear bumper appeared in 1974 as did standard opera windows in the sail panel; and for the first time in Thunderbird history, bucket seats and a console were dropped from the option list. The really big news, however, in 1974 were rapidly increasing inflation and the first energy crisis. Long lines at the pumps and gas prices rising from about 30 cents to \$1.20 per gallon made large cars unfavorable and expensive to operate. Ford responded with special option and paint packages 'til a new Thunderbird could be brought to market. Four-wheel disc brakes became available for the first time on a Ford product in 1975 as did an electrically heated windshield and rear window. Unleaded fuel was required as all T-bird's now featured a catalytic converter to handle emissions and improve driveability and gas mileage. Thunderbird now weighed 4,893 pounds in standard trim making it the heaviest T-bird ever produced. Big news for 1976 was the availability of a Quadraphonic Stereo System, just in time to listen to Saturday Night Fever soundtrack in one's car!

Generation eight arrived for the 1977 model year and would last through 1979 with minimal changes. After years of trying to expand market share, Ford finally got it right. Thunderbird became a car for the masses and sales skyrocketed to six figures and beyond. The smaller Thunderbird now used a 114-inch wheelbase with length reduced by 10.7 inches, width by 1.5 inches and weight reduced 900 pounds to a base weight of 3,907 pounds. Ford's 302cid V-8 was now standard and the chassis was shared with Ford's LTD II and Mercury's Cougar to save costs. Features that were previously standard became optional slashing the model's base price, though well over forty items were still available as upgrades. The most memorable Thunderbird of the period was the Diamond Jubilee Edition, loaded with special features in celebration of Ford's 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. Over 18,000 buyers said "yes" to the \$10,106 model, the most expensive car to-date to wear the Ford blue oval.

In an attempt to comply with fuel economy regulations and the downsizing so fashionable in the late 70's, Thunderbird was put on yet another diet for 1980 sharing its chassis with the lowly Fairmont. Wheelbase was reduced to 108.4 inches and weight was cut a further 700 pounds to 3,300. And, for the first time in Thunderbird history, a six-cylinder engine was available; without question, a sign of the times. Top engine choice was Ford's venerable 302cid V-8. Thunderbird celebrated its Silver Anniversary in 1980 with a special edition model. Styling and features of the 9<sup>th</sup> generation of Thunderbird changed little during the production years from 1980-1982.

Generation ten, built for 1982-1986, was easily the most radical re-design the car had yet undergone. Money was tight at Ford so bits and pieced from other products were combined to meet budget requirements, including the Fox (Mustang) platform's front stamping and the rear from the Lincoln Continental. The car was referred to as the "AeroBird" targeting a drag coefficient of .35. This enabled designers to work with more rounded and sloped lines including aircraft-style doors that wrapped into the roof and a ducktail spoiler on the rear decklid. Bucket seats and console returned as standard equipment. A new Turbo Coupe model (with 4-cylinder power) and 5-speed manual transmission became available, while a 3.8 litre V-6 was standard and a 302cid V-8 was optional throughout the rest of the line. At the top of the Thunderbird hierarchy was the Heritage model, renamed the Elan starting with the 1984 model year. Also added to the lineup was a FILA edition, taking interior and exterior styling cues from the European

sportswear manufacturer. 1985 marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Thunderbird so a special edition coupe in Regatta Blue was offered.

The 1987 and 1988 models were facelifted and improved version of the 10<sup>th</sup> generation cars and the Turbo Coupe would take a more pronounced direction in styling from the other models. In addition, the standard model was now referred to as Thunderbird Sport and the Elan was called the LX. Motor Trend magazine crowned the revised Turbo Coupe its Car of the Year for 1986. The final Turbo Coupe would be offered for the 1986 model year, ending eight years of production as the sportiest of Thunderbirds.

The next “new” Thunderbird would appear for the 1989 model year, this time with a supercharged V-6 at its heart. Supercharging would help deal with the turbo lag and high operating temperatures of the previous Turbo Coupe. The new engine would appear in a top-of-the-line model dubbed Super Coupe with an emphasis on performance as well as luxury. Interiors of the new model were ten percent larger than the former Thunderbird. The car would be awarded the coveted Motor Trend Car of the Year in 1989, its third such honor. A 35<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Super Coupe model was offered for the 1990 model year. A V-8 engine, absent at the introduction of the 1989 model year returned for 1991 and badges on the front fenders marked its return. Alas, the Super Coupe would become history after the 1995 model year and Thunderbird would become Ford’s longest lasting nameplate. Changes throughout the models run would be subtle although the Thunderbird remained in the public’s eye due to its continued success on the NASCAR circuit. The car went out with a bang by claiming its third NASCAR manufacturer’s championship and Ford’s twelfth. The final Thunderbird, a Laser Red LX Coupe, was produced at Ford’s Lorain, Ohio plant on Friday, September 9, 1997.

History now tells us that 1997 was, in fact, this was not the end for Thunderbird . . . almost! On January 3, 1999, Jacques Nassar, then-President of Ford Motor Company’s automotive operations presented to the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, a new two-seat Thunderbird concept car harkening back to the original. Ford announced that it would build the car for the 2002 model year. The car made its production debut on January 8, 2001, once again, at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit. Based on a Lincoln LS chassis and 3.9 litre V8 running gear, it featured the classic styling of the original Thunderbird, updated by one of today’s top designers, J. Mays. Again, retailer Neiman-Marcus would offer a special edition of the car for 2001 in its Christmas 2000 Wish Book. All 200 of the \$42,000 black and silver cars would be spoken for the first day! The new Thunderbird would also receive the Motor Trend magazine Car of the Year.

Thunderbird celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary on October 22, 2004 with over 1.2 million sold since its debut in 1955. Alas, Thunderbird would disappear once again. Failure to meet sales targets would once again befall the Thunderbird and the final retro-Bird rolled off the Wixom, Michigan assembly line July 25, 2005; a Platinum Silver car reportedly to a member of the Ford family in Maine.

When you reflect upon the journey the Thunderbird has traveled since its debut in 1955, Dennis Adler described it best in the June, 2005 issue of Car Collector magazine. “The Thunderbird has gone from a two-seat ‘personal luxury car’ to a four-seat ‘sporty’ car, a four door luxury car, a Continental-sized luxury car, two-door sport coupe, and at last once again to a two-seat sports car. And it only took 11 generations and 50 years to get back to where it all started, as a concept in the mind of legendary stylist Franklin Q. Hershey.” Is there another Thunderbird in the wings (pun intended)? One can only hope so.

#### **THUNDERBIRD PRODUCTION TOTALS\***

1955	16,155
1956	15,631
1957	21,380
1958	37,892
1959	67,456
1960	92,843
1961	73,051
1962	78,011

1963	63,313
1964	92,465
1965	74,972
1966	69,176
1967	77,976
1968	64,391
1969	49,272
1970	50,364
1971	36,055
1972	57,814
1973	87,269
1974	58,443
1975	42,685
1976	52,935
1977	318,140
1978	352,751
1979	284,141
1980	156,803
1981	86,693
1982	45,142
1983	121,999
1984	170,551
1985	151,852
1986	165,965
1987	128,135
1988	147,243
1989	122,909
1990	114,040
1991	84,719
1992	75,149
1993	130,750
1994	121,082
1995	115,397
1996	112,302
1997	85,276
2002	31,121
2003	14,506
2004	12,671
2005	9,220

\* Source: Thunderbird Fifty Years, Alan H. Tast and David Newhardt, Motorbooks International 2004