



The 1955 Mercury Sun Valley allowed its owners to see the sun and the stars above, but only 1,787 buyers did so.

# Double Bubble

Story and photos  
by Bill Rothermel

About the time of World War II, automotive styling took much of its inspiration from aircraft. The United States and the Soviet Union were entering the "space race," and our country's fascination with all things galactic not only influenced automobiles, but furniture, fashion and even our homes.

Automotive styling took cues, even names, from the world beyond. Pontiac had "Stratostreak" styling; Chevrolet had a "jet-smooth ride." Packard used the Clipper name on its lower-priced models. Propeller-nosed Fords and Studebakers appeared. Oldsmobile even used Rocket V-8s in its cars. And airplane-like hood ornaments appeared on virtually every automobile. Suddenly, everything was sprouting knobs and push buttons. America became hooked on gadgets, gizmos and gimmicks to start an affair that lives today.

Perhaps Cadillac, beginning with the all-new 1948 model, can lay claim to the most aeronautical of all the day's styl-

ing gimmicks. Inspired by the Lockheed P-38 Lightning aircraft used in World War II, legendary General Motors stylist Harley Earl grafted modest fins to the hindquarters of the luxury marque, starting a Cadillac trademark that lasted through 1964.

Simultaneous to the jet age and the burgeoning interest in space exploration was the development of many new man-made materials, such as Teflon, Orlon, polyester, Dacron and a proliferation of plastics — among them Plexiglas. Plexiglas was first developed in 1928 and was brought to market in 1933 by a German company, Rohm and Haas. Essentially a transparent plastic material, its lightweight, easy handling and low cost made it commercially viable beginning in 1936. It became widely used during World War II in submarine periscopes, as well as in windshields, canopies and gun turrets for airplanes. It was only a matter of time until it would become commonplace in automobiles.

## The aftermarket bubbles

Among those pioneering the use of

Ford and Mercury offered their own bubble tops

Plexiglas in automobiles were aftermarket manufacturers, including the Fabriform Corp. of Baysville, Ohio, which offered a transparent roof option that could be attached to an existing convertible body. A 1946 press release stated, "'Glass' tops for convertibles, similar to the 'blisters' and 'bubbles' made by the same company for war planes, have been introduced in Los Angeles. The tops fasten at the same points as regular canvas tops, and are easily removed for storage in the family garage. Although colorless at this time, a choice of 'tints' is planned for the future. The tops are said to be easy to clean, and that scratches on the surface of the quarter-inch Plexiglas can be removed by polishing with auto polish or wax." The transparent top enabled all the windows to roll up and down in the usual manner. Its cost: \$235. Whether it hastened the popularity of automotive air conditioning or failed to find success in the marketplace isn't rocket science (pun intended), but it's safe to assume it was toasty underneath that bubble in the California sun.

## Ford's fun in the sun

Ford, compared to the rest of Detroit, was a bit late to the party when it came to the styling excesses and the aeronautical influence so prevalent in the '50s. That's not to say that Ford was immune to the craziness altogether. One need only look to the Mercury Turnpike Cruiser, the Edsel and the late-'50s Lincolns for verification.

FoMoCo introduced its novel Crestline Skyliner two-door hardtop and Mercury the Monterey Sun Valley two-door hardtop (called the Monarch Lucerne in

Canada) for the 1954 model year. Inspiration came from the X-100 and X-500 showcars, which graced the cover of the company's 1953 50th anniversary book "Ford at Fifty." Both featured a tinted Plexiglas roof panel to tone down light, heat and glare. The intent was to boost Ford's image as a style leader. Ford first showed its version at the Rotunda in Dearborn, Mich., in January 1954; two were given away to visitors submitting the best "Worth More" features of the new Ford car line. The Mercury was introduced to the marketplace one month earlier.

Brochures called it, "Ford's Newest... the Ultra-Modern Skyliner." Copywriters showed unusual restraint, describing it simply, "...the maximum effect of open-air freedom available in a closed car today. The transparent top section adds overhead visibility to the broad outlook provided by the big one-piece, curved windshield — the car's wide, wraparound rear window — and the post-free sides. Transparent top section is a heavy, molded sheet of plastic tinted neutral blue-green to block out 60 percent of sun's heat rays and 72 percent of glare. Transparent panel covers entire front seat compartment..." Ads called it the "Glamour gal of the '54 season." The overall effect was more like a '50s-era Vista-Dome streamliner train than that of an airplane cockpit.

In addition to an all-new "Y-block" 256-cid overhead-valve V-8, Ford offered four-way power seats for its first time, along with power steering, brakes, windows and Fordomatic automatic transmission as options. Total Skyliner production for the model year totaled 13,444 units while Mercury built 9,761 Sun Valleys.

Both Ford and Mercury models received a handsome restyle for 1955. Both divisions moved their "bubble-tops" up-market; Mercury, as part of the new Montclair series first introduced at the Chicago Auto Show in January of 1955, and Ford at its new top-of-the-line Fairlane Crown Victoria series. The Crown Victoria featured a non-structural chrome roof band that was considered gaudy at the time, but this feature makes it among the most desired cars by today's collectors. Ford built just 1,999 Skyliners at a base cost of \$2,177 with the V-8 engine. Despite striking new styling (which looked more Lincoln than Ford),



The sun's rays could be blocked with a shade that filled the inside of the transparent top, shown here in the extended position.

Mercury produced 1,787 Sun Valleys and discontinued its version after the 1955 model year.

Styling was largely carryover for the final version of the Skyliner in 1956. Just 608 were produced before the model was discontinued.

### Rare Mercury 'bubble top'

Jim Ritorto is the owner of the rare and beautiful 1955 Sun Valley shown here. The car belonged to his late brother, Bill, who was in possession of the car for more than 30 years. Bill loved the car so much he named his business after it: Sun Valley Dental Associates. He first contacted Jason Wenig of the Creative Workshop in Dania Beach, Fla., about a nut-and-bolt restoration some years ago. Wenig initially thought he wasn't serious about moving forward, but a second visit one year later let him know that Bill was for real. Six months subsequent, he got up the nerve to make the commitment to move forward. Just getting the Sun Valley to the restorer was a big deal for Bill. Wenig notes he was extremely nervous about shipping the car.

"I laughed and said, 'Bill, what could happen? It gets scratched? Rained on? A rock hits it? What? Isn't it coming here for a complete redo?'" Bill quickly realized what he meant and the car was shipped to Wenig by flatbed about five years ago.

"The car was in average shape," said Wenig. "It was heavily patina'd (sic) and mechanically tired and worn out. We've seen a lot worse here."

Evidence of previous repairs were obvious when the vehicle was stripped. It showed signs of being hit square with a dented nose and warped hood, both making for a difficult repair. The rest of

the work went relatively smoothly.

"There were the usual un-obtainium parts, but nothing we haven't been through before," Wenig said. "The biggest *coup d'état* happened when Bill found a guy in Canada who was about to produce small run of reproduction plexi roofs — exact replicas of the originals."

Bill visited the car at least once every two weeks, developing a friendship with Wenig and his staff. Sadly, Bill was diagnosed with a terminal illness and the restorer was faced with the decision to continue at the client's wishes or encourage him to save his money for every possible medical treatment available.

"Bill didn't seem to care," said Wenig. So Wenig continued work on the car, albeit at a much slower pace, worried that Bill might not survive to see the car through to completion. Unfortunately, Bill's illness progressed quickly and he succumbed to cancer. Wenig completed the car in honor of his friend Bill, absorbing much of the cost of the restoration.

The car was restored to perfection with two slight alterations; its electrical system was changed to 12 volts, though 6-volt components were used and rebuilt with 12-volt guts, down to the battery which appears to be a 6-volt unit. Another concession was the substitution of leather for vinyl in the interior, although the woven tapestry inserts in the seats are of the original materials, colors, stitching and pattern.

Having been finished just days prior, the car debuted at the 2009 Boca Raton Concours d'Elegance where it received a first-in-class award in the American Collector Class (1946-1956), perhaps a most fitting tribute to a fine automobile and one man's dream.