

THE FINAL PHAETON

BY GRIFF BORGESON

The Chrysler Newport was a styling milestone—a monument to the end of an old era and the start of a new one

ABOUT a year ago I was cruising along the Sunset Strip in Los Angeles when something as rare as a living dinosaur caught my eye. It was sitting in a sparsely stocked used-car lot, green, graceful, unbelievably pristine.

I came to a screaming stop, grabbed my camera and located the surly citizen who was in charge of the lot.

"That old car," I said, deciding to play it cool. "What is it and how much is it worth?"

"It's a custom with a '49 Cad engine in it. Price is . . ." he paused, eyed me, and tried to think of a sufficiently atrocious figure, ". . . 3500 bucks."

"Well, it sure looks good," I said. "I do work for magazines, and I'd like to take some pictures of it. Could we get it away from the other cars and take some shots?"

"Naah," he growled. "Forget it. I thought you was buyin'."

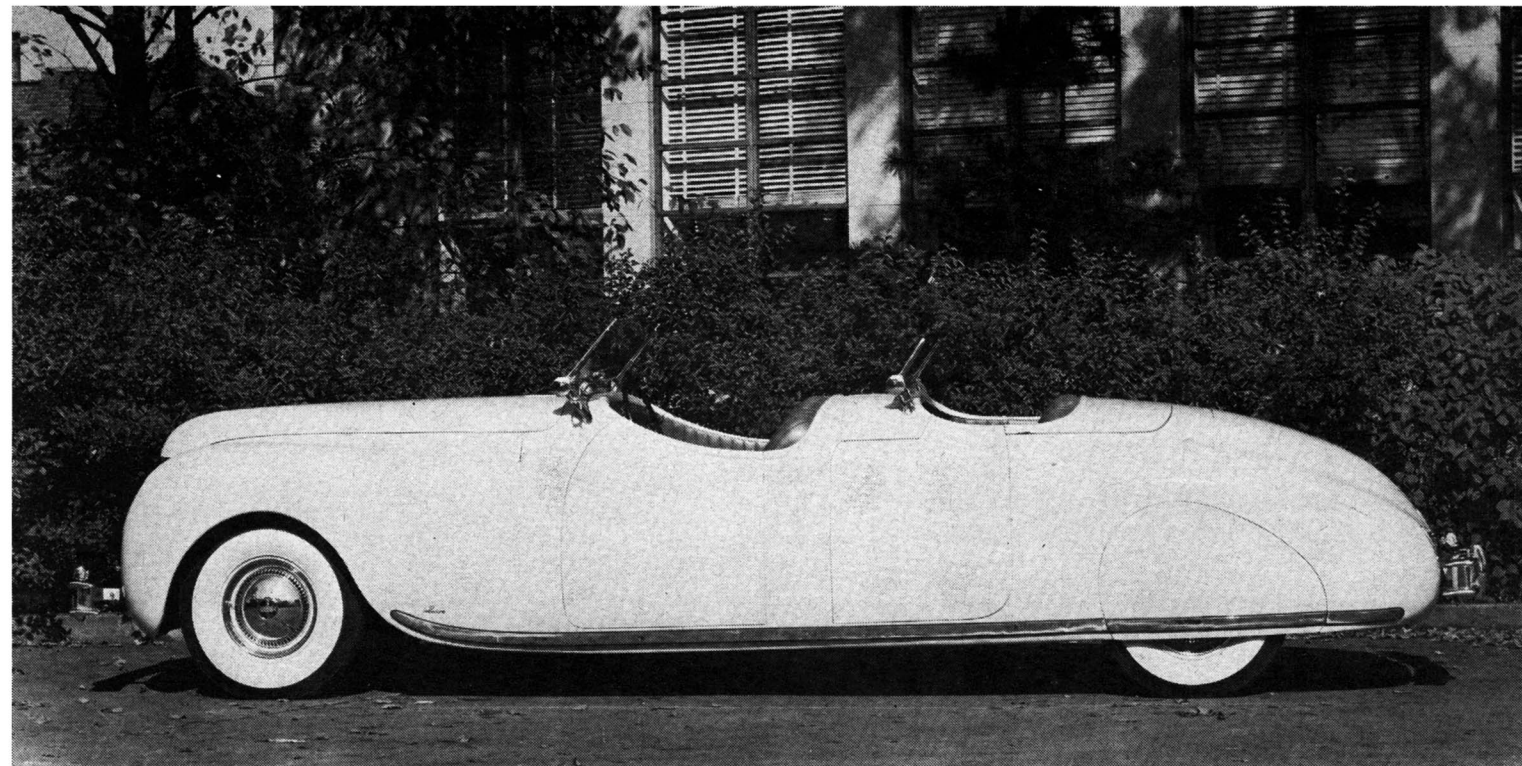
I didn't bother to inform this somewhat indifferent salesman that what he had was actually worth \$3500—maybe more—to quite a few people. Instead I dropped a line to the boys at Chrysler Engineering, telling them where they could, if they wanted, pick up what might be the only Chrysler Newport still in existence.

The Newport was one of the most lavish, luxurious cars of its time—a "dream car" in the full sense of the word. The concept of the dream car was not born with GM's Motorama. Actually, it's as old as the auto industry itself. Manufacturers have always known that specially designed, gorgeously finished exhibition cars could be counted on to

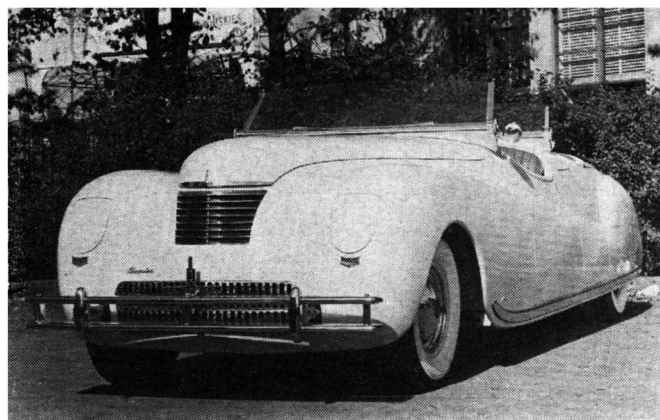
stop the crowds at auto shows and get plenty of free newspaper publicity. But there has been a difference during the last decade. Today's dream cars almost never become the property of private citizens. Before World War II, however, when profits were less easily come by than they are now, dream cars were cheerfully sold just as soon as their news value had been thoroughly milked. That's why at least one Chrysler Newport—the last of the true phaetons—could appear on a used car lot and probably survives somewhere today.

The four or five Newports built by the Chrysler Corporation were born in 1940. K.T. Keller, president of the company, had been keeping a canny eye on General Motors' traveling show technique for introducing the new year's models. The idea was sound, Keller thought, but maybe it could be improved upon. Like the present-day Motorama, GM's shows got the products before the people but didn't necessarily get the people into GM showrooms. Keller's notion was a traveling show that would run simultaneously in several parts of the country and would take place in the showrooms of Chrysler dealers, thus putting potential customers at the immediate mercy of eager Chrysler salesmen. The new 1941 models were about to be introduced. The bait to draw the crowds to look at them, Keller decided, would be a pair of exciting dream cars.

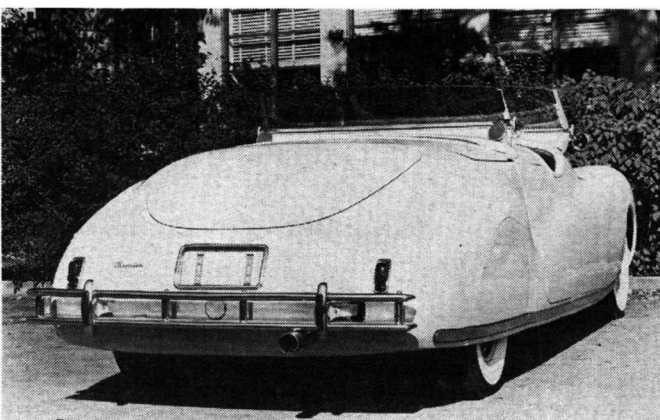
He commissioned Ralph Roberts of the Le Baron coachbuilding firm to design two special bodies—bodies that would, like the radical Chrysler Airflow of 1934, be milestones in aerodynamic design. Roberts came up with a con-



Newport had a full-width body at a time when narrow bodies, runningboards and space-wasting fenders were in style.



Straight eight 323-cubic-inch engine was cooled by special radiator core to compensate for small air intake area. Car's lines were refined in Michigan University's wind tunnel.



Front and rear windshields folded flat, while pushbuttons operated doors and the rear tonneau cowl. Side curtains, rather than roll-up windows, made it a true phaeton.

vertible coupe and a phaeton that filled the requirements. The coupe was called the Thunderbolt and it has a story of its own. The phaeton was the Newport.

In 1941 the Newport was in many ways a brilliant forecast of things to come. With hardly an exception, the passenger cars of the time were tired rehashes of ancient design features. Their exposed running boards automatically robbed the body of valuable payload width. Their traditional "outboard" fenders emphasized the waste of cargo space. Their hood profiles were far higher than the machinery they enclosed. And aerodynamically most of them were nowhere.

But 1940 was a year of decision for automotive streamlining on both sides of the Atlantic. In Italy radically experimental bodies were being built that presaged the present distinctive Italian school of body design. And in Detroit aerodynamics was becoming almost a fad with engineers and stylists. This was why Chrysler, which had been sorely wounded by its premature introduction of the Airflow, was willing to play the part of streamlining pioneer again.

The phaeton that took form on Ralph Roberts' drawing board was intended to set a new standard in functional design. Writers of Chrysler's ad copy were able to say, with confidence: "Take a good look at the Newport's basic design. A few

years from now you will find that it has had a profound influence on the future."

They were right. Within a few years the full-width body with faired-in fenders became universally accepted. The blending of front into rear fender came into wide use and is still to be seen on, for example, the Jaguar XK-120 and Mark VII. The lower hood profile was quickly and generally adopted.

So much for the Newport as a signpost to the future. To the student of automotive architecture, the car is at least equally as interesting for being one of the last true custom-built bodies made by a legitimate American coachbuilder, and almost certainly the last phaeton produced in the U.S. The Newport was not only the beginning of a new era, but the end of an old one.

Considered strictly as a phaeton, the body style most prized by classic fans, the Newport is again in a class apart. Its body was hand-formed, naturally, from aluminum sheet, and was extremely light. Everything was done to achieve the smoothest possible flow of body lines and to eliminate projections. Recessed headlights were covered in Cord 810 style. Concealed pushbuttons took the place of door handles. Even the tonneau apron or cowl that covered half the rear passenger space was raised hydraulically at the touch of a button.

Just behind the rear seat was a panel which raised to receive a very good-looking, very low top of fine English-made Burbank cloth. The top was braced with all-metal bows—coach-builders term the type an "umbrella top." When tailored side-curtains were snapped in place the all-weather protection was complete.

The Newport bodies rode on the 1911 Crown Imperial chassis, which had a 145.5 inch wheelbase and a smooth 323.5 cubic inch straight-eight power plant with nine main bearings. The first Newport completed had bone-white paint and pleated leather upholstery in bright red. Ralph Roberts recalls that when the Newports had served their promotional destiny they were given an \$8500 price tag and sold. He also remembers what Chrysler paid the Le Baron firm for the bodies alone: a hefty \$12,000 each!

"The Newports were lovely things to ride in," Roberts says. "They moved with the swift, solid, stately comfort of a Pullman car. Of course they weren't sports cars in any sense involving competition. True, we tested models in the University of Michigan's wind tunnel and made a number of changes to get the smoothest air flow possible. But performance wasn't a consideration on that project. The Newport was designed to be used as a basis for prediction—and as a beautiful thing to look at and enjoy." ●