

SALUTE TO THE THUNDERBIRD

BY GRIFF BORGESON

It's more than just a matter of speed and styling—after nearly a year of solid success, it amounts to the acceptance of a genuinely new idea in cars that'll influence the shape of things to come

IN AN industry where conservative imitation is a rule that's rarely broken, the Ford Motor Company has come up with what can only be called a revolution in personal transportation. The product of this revolution is the Ford Thunderbird.

The Thunderbird is a new kind of car. It was not designed to appeal to the die-hard devotees of spartan, high-performance machinery, and it is a far cry from the traditional shake, rattle, and roll sports job. Instead, it has looks, luxury, and most of the conveniences of the bulky automotive palaces in the upper price bracket.

Still, few experts deny that in concept, performance and style, the T-Bird is in the sports car class. Even the purist fan magazines that specialize in the drawing of fine distinctions between sports and pseudo-sports machines agree that its claim to the adjective is legitimate. About the only authority that has *not* labelled the T-Bird a sports car is the Ford Motor Company itself.

Ford prefers to call it a "personal" car, and with good reason. In the first place, many of the dream cars

displayed to the public in recent years have also been called "sports" cars. The experts guffawed, but more important, most of the solid citizenry yawned. Furthermore, there is a vast body of American car-buyers that is convinced that sports cars are for eccentrics. Most of them wouldn't buy a Ferrari even if it cost as little as the Thunderbird. The "sports" label would not be likely to intrigue them. But a car that was "personal"—and therefore distinctive and desirable—would.

Ford's reasoning has been borne out by the results. Middle-aged matrons think the T-Bird is the cutest thing they've ever seen. The business executive whose boss might glower if he suddenly appeared in the cockpit of a hairy, all-out sports car, becomes no less respectable at the wheel of a Thunderbird. And ownership of a T-Bird is acutely craved by tens of thousands of Americans who want a spirited, precise, high-performance touring machine of nearly all-around utility.

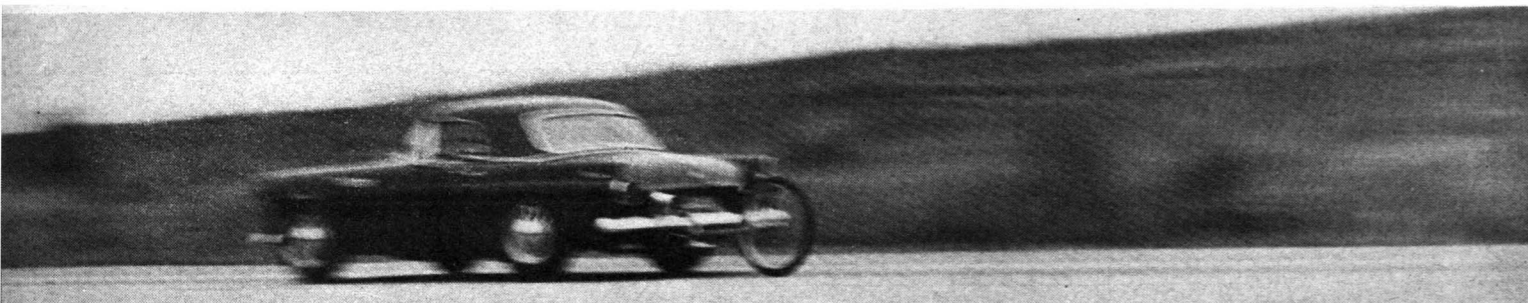
The Thunderbird is the first American car which has

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DRIVER'S REPORT

TWO SUPERCHARGED T-BIRDS



TWO of the most persistent rumors from Detroit concern the 1956 Ford Thunderbird; one says it will appear with fuel injection, the other maintains the McCulloch supercharger will be optional equipment. Either or both these reports may or may not be true. However, quite a number of Thunderbird owners are having the blowers installed on the 1955 models with performance results that are exceptionally interesting.

In view of all this, an invitation of Paxton Industries (the sales division of

McCulloch Motors) to test drive a compressor-equipped T-Bird was accepted. While the investigation did not assume the proportions of a comprehensive road test, a fifth wheel and Weston electric speedo was used to insure accuracy.

Two Thunderbirds were taken out on a straight stretch of pavement for acceleration tests. One had a Fordomatic transmission, the other carried the overdrive unit. Speedometer corrections were made first and disclosed the following: at indicated 30 mph, 45 mph and 60 mph, the respective actual speeds were 26 mph, 38 mph and 50 mph. Each of the cars, incidentally, were well broken in by thousands of road miles.

It required some experimenting with the supercharged versions to obtain the maximum benefits in acceleration without having the rear wheels spin. The experienced installers at Paxton's (who say 50 per cent of the blowers are currently going on T-Birds) advised making the gear changes from low to drive, with the Fordomatic, at 4700 rpm on the tachometer.

Slightly better times were recorded with the overdrive arrangement, except on the 0-45 mph times where time required for engaging the clutch and shifting gears reduced whatever benefits the system provided mechanically. The following are the best times in seconds obtained with each car:

	SUPERCHARGED	
	Fordomatic	Overdrive
0-30 mph	3	2.2
0-45 mph	5	5
0-60 mph	8	6.8

Comparison of these times with figures from three previously published reports on Thunderbird performance (all involving Fordomatic transmissions) provides interesting material for speculation:

	UNSUPERCHARGED		
	Test #1	Test #2	Test #3
0-30 mph	4	3.7	4.3
0-45 mph	—	—	—
0-60 mph	11	9.5	10.75

McCulloch supercharger installation on Thunderbird owned by Jane Russell of the movies. If the T-Bird gets fuel injection next year, as rumored, mounting the blower will be easier than ever, with under-hood gains in space and hood air scoop will vanish.

