



off-beat Detroit

The latest on its "small" cars and its big turbines

SMALL cars for sure . . . Top news in Detroit is still the small car, but the chatter is much less speculative. The reason, of course, is that the Big Three are finally committed to a \$300 million gamble premised in large part on the startling sales gains (160 and 180%, respectively) posted so far by Rambler and Studebaker's Lark (Road & Track, March).

These decisions move timetables up to possibly a summer's end introduction for Chevrolet, followed by Ford in early fall and, surprisingly, Chrysler before the snows come. Way behind some months ago, Chrysler is now speedily tooling at damn the cost to catch up. The car will have integrated body construction like the others, a front-mounted overhead-valve 6 that very likely will be made of aluminum, and a conservatively styled, finless body mounted on a wheelbase of about 110 inches. The only change since the last report on Ford's version is that the odds now are that it will be called, of all things—the Edsel.

And maybe turbines . . .

After two years of silence, George Huebner's crew of Chrysler turbine experts has scored a major breakthrough with a peppy, Plymouth-mounted unit that averages 19.39 miles per gallon on public highways.

Rewards came from patient, detail design changes that boosted burner efficiency almost to the point of complete combustion at all speeds. It can now be made without esoteric materials like cobalt and weighs 400 pounds less than a typical cast-iron V-8.

The significance of the advance is that mass production of turbine-powered autos could be very, very close. Yet their advent may forever be stalled by the terrific risks involved. Cost-cutting volume can only be achieved by making these engines standard in, say, the Plymouth. But what if the public didn't go for them? Chrysler Corporation would be in deep trouble overnight.

GM and Ford are still talking the less risky alternative of leaving turbines to trucks, buses and tractors. This theory, though it may be a cover-up for temporarily lagging technologies, could also keep turbines sitting on shelves for years. Each commercial vehicle so powered would have to be sold at a loss to compete in price with diesels.

The timing, therefore, is more a matter of economics than of engineering. As to the latter, Huebner says: "The remaining technical and development problems do not appear nearly as difficult or complex as they did even two years ago. There is no doubt that we are close to the time when automotive manufacturers can choose between reciprocating engines and gas turbines."

What he means is that automotive research staffs are just

as interested in advancing the piston engine. How much these will be improved over the next few years will also have a strong bearing on whether or not the turbine will ever be a mass-produced reality.

A stylist on style . . . Industrial designer Carl Sundberg of Sundberg-Ferar, Inc., doesn't like most Detroit-made cars and isn't afraid to say so, perhaps because he makes his living fashioning everything but cars. The comments on the '59s follow:

Buick: "The best next to Thunderbird."

Cadillac: "It has degenerated into a symbol of vulgar ostentation. Its appearance is ridiculous. We fail to see how anybody of taste could buy this year's model."

Imperial: "We like this design. Chrysler should be congratulated for resisting the temptation to 'gorp' it up."

Thunderbird: "Last year's Thunderbird was unquestionably the freshest new design. The '59 is . . . the same car."

A designer on obsolescence . . . Walter Dorwin Teague, famed for his Marmion 16 and countless other projects, recently got pages and pages of deserved publicity in *Printers' Ink*. Here are his thoughts on new models, although he was not necessarily referring to cars:


"Legitimate obsolescence is based on technological advance and progressive companies are constantly working to improve the functional

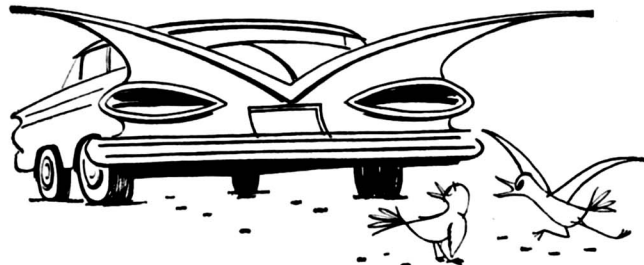
characteristics of their product. Technological developments come so rapidly that you can offer, often enough, a new product superior to anything before . . .

"Eastman Kodak and Polaroid and National Cash Register and many others devote tremendous energy to research, all the time, to improve their products. There is opportunity for the manufacturer who bases his production and sales schedule, as they do, not on an *annual* show, but on his ability to offer the public something that's really an advance. If he would concentrate on that I feel he would have a resounding success."

A president on obsolescence . . . GM's president James F. Gordon, on the other hand, looks at this present day phenomenon like this:

"If it had not been for the annual model change, the automobile as we know it today would not be produced in volume and would be priced so that relatively few could afford one. Our customers would have no incentive or reason to buy a new car until their old one wore out . . ."

Tailpiece . . . Even auto companies sometimes sound off at each other. Across our desk the other day came an unmarked, unsigned but obviously mass-produced book of cartoons. After looking at the sample here, can you guess the author? 



"Holy smoke, there goes Mother!"