WHATEVER HAPPENED TO FUEL INJECTION

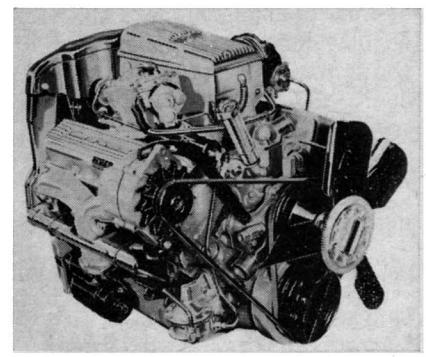
"IT'LL BE AS common as automatic transmissions in five years." That prediction was made early in 1958 by a major manufacturer of automobile fuel injection systems. At that time that particular fuel injection system had been on the market for standard production cars for nearly a year. By the end of 1958 every car manufacturer which offered injection was canceling plans for the new system.

Fuel injection had been touted since 1956 as the answer to autodom's horsepower and fuel economy problems. It was to deliver 5-15% better gasoline mileage than carburetion, provide good performance on low-octane fuel, eliminate almost all backfiring, icing and vapor lock, and start and warm up an engine faster. It did many of these things, but price was its main drawback; fuel injection options sold for approximately $500. American Motors Corp. offered one for its 1957 models at $395.

Fuel injection actually lasted less than two years as original equipment, but it survived nine years as an option for one U.S. production car—the Corvette. While auto firms recognized the need for fuel economy at that time, because the public was becoming more conscious of it, they took another direction instead. They improved their engines and carburetors. In 1958, Oldsmobile, for example, introduced its "88" engine with 20% better fuel economy and Chrysler adopted a new "Econo-Choke" system. The latter, combined with newly designed carburetors, reduced gas consumption by closely regulating fuel/air mixture during warmup periods.

While Chevrolet and Pontiac pioneered fuel injection on 1957 models, Chevrolet assembled only 2500 such cars that year. Pontiac and Rambler combined turned out roughly 500 units. Installations on other makes were infinitesimal in number.

Chevrolet made the unfortunate mistake of offering fuel injection with the Turboglide transmission on standard cars that year. Buyers who could afford it bought all the options that were made available on the car. The net result: A kid on a bicycle could virtually beat such a Chevrolet from a green light. The Turboglide acted exactly like a governor. The engine would pick up to 2800 rpm and just "hang" there. The engine rpm would not pick up again until the car hit 70 mph or so. "It was terrific at 90, though," recalls a Chevrolet aide.



AN OPTION for nine years, f.i. no longer is a Corvette item.

While the Chevrolet Corvette f.i. system was expensive ($538), it held an appeal for a certain, but a very small, segment of buyers. Last year before it was finally dropped, only 6% of Corvette purchasers specified injection, compared with 14% the previous year. At one time fuel injection was installed on 22% of all Corvettes, but as the price increased, the number of buyers decreased.

The Chevrolet injection system, made by Rochester Products, underwent many refinements between 1957 and 1965. Whereas the original system was susceptible to nozzle clogging, which created lean mixture problems, this difficulty was virtually eliminated on later systems. The carburetor seems here to stay.

—Ed Janicki

TOUTED AS the answer to bhp/economy problems, injection was expensive and ineffective, and was superseded by better-engineered carburetors.