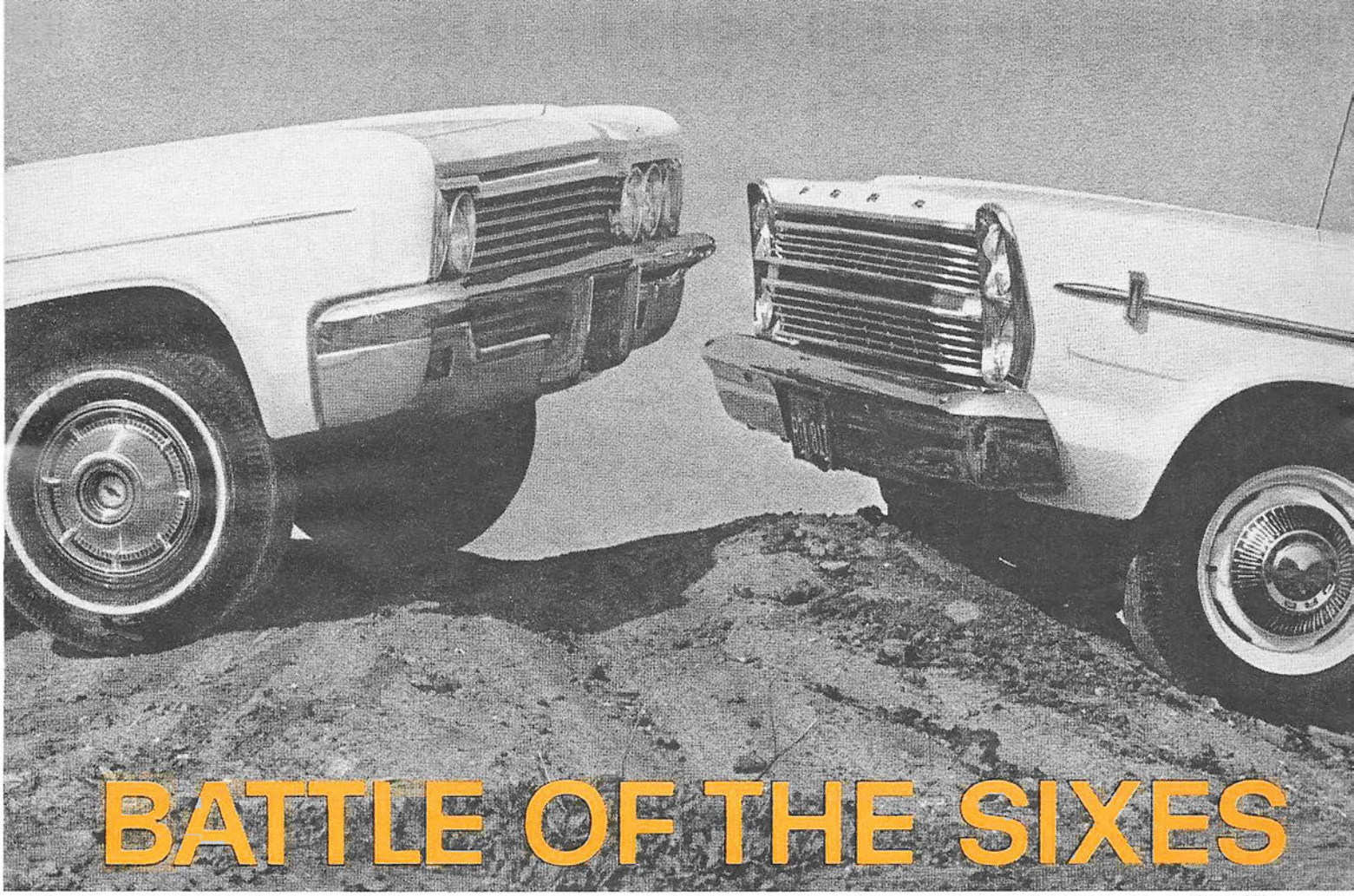


BATTLE OF THE SIXES

CHAN BUSH PHOTOS

CHEVROLET VS. FORD

TEST REPORTS for the so-called "standards of America" would seem to call for a format with check marks and paragraph headings labeled "Acceptable" and "Not Acceptable." The Chevrolet Bel Air Six and the Ford Custom 500 Six are cars of that type—dull and spiritless and easily ignored, though reliable and uncomplicated appliances. ("Go ahead and drive the Frigidaire to the test strip," said the boss, "and I'll meet you there in the Philco after I run a couple of errands.")

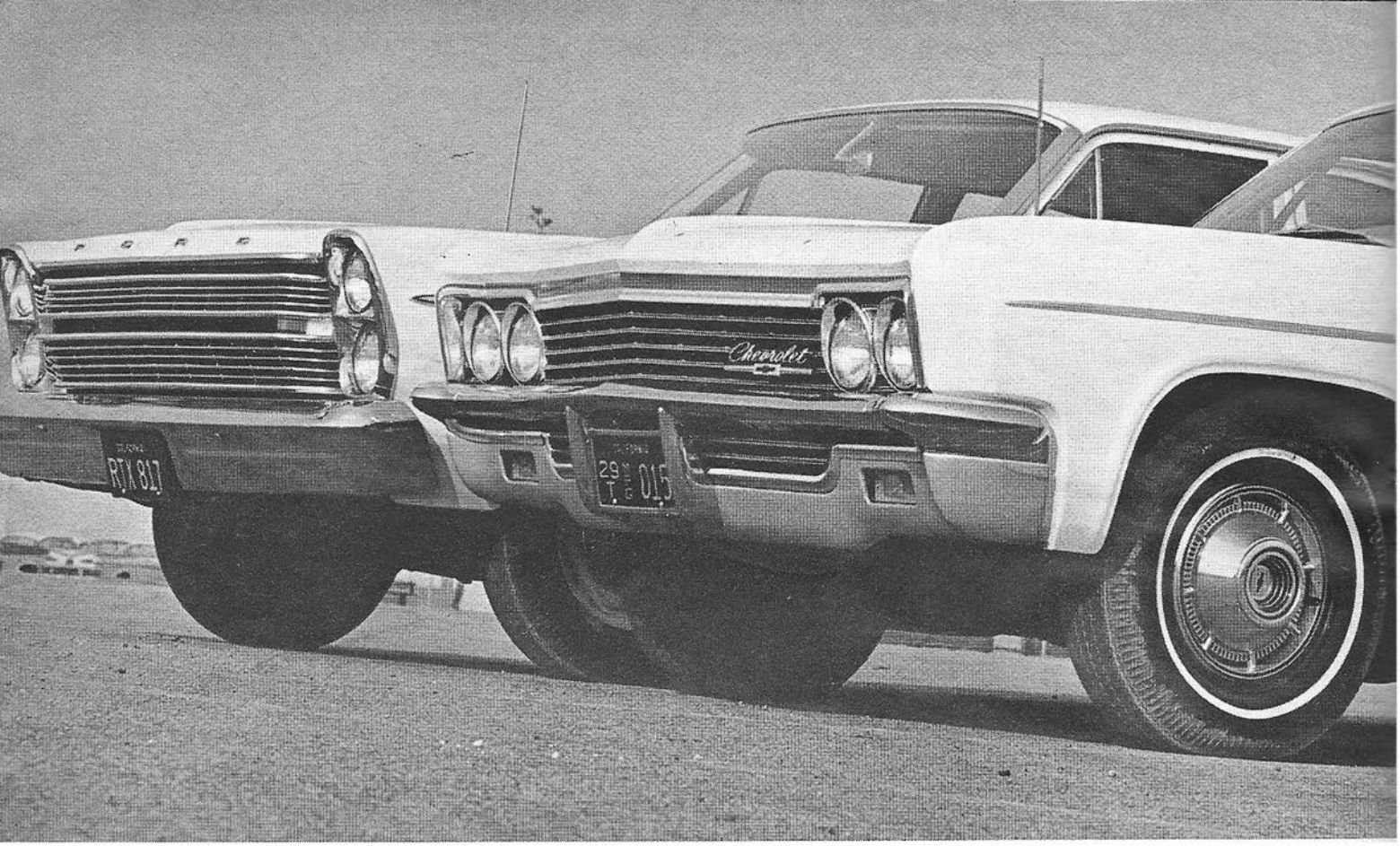
Both cars are basic transportation at its barest, standards in that there is little beneath them in their particular lines. Yet, they also show effects of growing consumer affluence in themselves having grown in size over the years. They no longer can be called standard in relation of automobile sizes; that criterion must now be accorded to cars that are widely referred to as intermediates. Nor are they standards in performance, a distinction denied by power-to-weight ratios that have deteriorated with growth in girth; that function, too, has been usurped by the so-called intermediates.

Both represent a lot of car for the money. They are the most generous in size and capacity—which some people equate with utility—at the same time remaining the least complex and therefore potentially less troublesome. It is their sheer bulk, their weight, their usurpation of road space which has multiplied over the years, although their basic engineering and technical concepts have hardly changed. From one point of view, it is as if 1955 Cadillacs and Lincolns were being built on the basic Chevrolet and Ford chassis and running gear of the same period. So it's true they are a *lot* of automobile for the *dollar*, even if they are *not* a lot of *automobile* for the dollar.

There is this interesting dichotomy involved with the two cars: While their size is a direct result of middlebrow American confusion of "More is Better," manufacturing economics correct this misconception in detailing and finish.

As the cheaper models, this pair had the least excess of ornamentation, the simplest of trim and wheel covers, the plainest of upholstery. It is this fact that causes them to seem the more pure examples of the basic stylist's art. It explains why, in general, the cheapest models of most car lines usually look the best, although they are probably the poorest investment.

In Detroit, some designers are honest enough to admit they actually build cars to be hot merchandise on the used car lots. The buyer of a 2- or 3-year old used car is attracted by lots of gaudiness, slatherings of ornamentation and an excess of added equipment: In short, loaded. There's not much sense, from an economic point of view, in regarding the 6-cyl. standard as an investment when its trade-in value is the lowest in the book. It is false economy. Yet, economy is the ▶



The Battle of the Sixes

great motivating force for the vast majority of 6-cyl. buyers.

Low initial price (relatively speaking) is an economy only on the face of it, although there are many who accept the face value. A secondary economy is that which usually is meant by the term—fuel mileage. Here there is a surprising disappointment from both test cars which highlights the underlying fallacy involved. Both returned unsatisfactory fuel economy figures over the test period, despite low axle ratios which might be expected to encourage better mileage. (The ratios apparently were dictated instead by the need to keep engine rpm as low as possible for noise-free cruising ability.) Moderate-sized V-8s probably would be just as miserly of fuel as were these Sixes—and give better performance to boot.

Still, it takes fistfuls of mpg to achieve any notable savings in cost per mile over anything less than long, long term usage. On a 1- to 2-year basis, the losses in depreciation compared with the V-8 will buy a lot of extra gallons of gasoline. Had the cars been able to eke out another 5 mpg each, there might be cause for an owner to retain his pride and dignity.

The conclusion can only be that the place for a Six is in a car sized for a Six. As a case in point, the Editor's Chevy II convertible Six with Powerglide has given 35,000 miles of troublefree service with a consistent 19 mpg average throughout. The reason is simple: The lighter, less bulky car allowed the 6-cyl. engine to operate less laboriously throughout the vehicle's life. Service was at the nominal 6000-mile recommendations of the factory and aside from bothersome front end alignments which all Chevrolet products seem to require regularly, there were no problems. Being a convertible, it was a form of luxury car for its price class, but the retail price was less than that of the Bel Air Six tested here and its resale value remains relatively better. It has provided inexpensive, trouble-free transportation. It is the type of car in which the Six lives up to its reputation.

ENGINES IN THE SIXTIES

Year	V-8	6-cyl.	other
1965*.....	6,481,500	2,361,100	n.a.
1964.....	5,339,600	2,240,100	485,300
1963.....	4,628,400	2,442,800	485,400
1962.....	3,836,200	2,605,900	496,600
1961.....	2,955,300	2,405,300	494,000
1960.....	3,424,000	2,641,400	511,100

*Production totals, not sales.

Repair and service on 6-cyl. engines, of course, usually is less time consuming and therefore less costly, because of the greater accessibility within the engine compartment, but the advantage here is reduced by the overall quality improvements in all domestic automotive engines during the past decade. Aside from normal tune-up service, engine work is rarely necessary before 50,000 miles. Improved metallurgy, better fuels, more advanced basic design have all contributed to declining justifications for pulling the pan or the valve covers. This blurs another distinction between Six and V-8 in practical application.

BUYERS INCREASINGLY are becoming sophisticated enough to recognize these factors. An accompanying chart shows that while Sixes are holding their own in numbers, more or less, V-8s record the production and sales increases. In a more graphic way, the decline in popularity of the Sixes can be seen in the industry-wide sales percentage over the past few years. From a 41.4% share of the market in 1962 (when the national recession finally had reversed itself), the Six's share of the market dropped to 36.5% in 1963, to 31.1% in '64, and then to 26.6% last year. An additional point to consider in this regard is that a large percentage of 6-cyl. business is in compacts—Mustang, Corvair, Valiant, Rambler. Cadillac, Chrysler, Lin-

coln and Mercury, on the other hand, don't even offer 6-cyl. power.

Similarly, in the full-size Chevrolet and Ford lines there has been dwindling demand for Sixes. Chevrolet definitely outsells Ford here, but its total for 1965 models was 304,791 or 18.5% of the total line. Ford sold 121,336 full-size Sixes last model year for a 12.4% of its line total. Both totals have been declining. Ford has maintained for the past few years that it needs only surpass Chevrolet in 6-cyl. sales to outsell the GM division for No. 1 position, the sales of V-8s being on a virtual head-to-head basis.

On the basis of the two test cars, it would seem that Ford might have some trouble achieving such a goal from the standpoint of those attributes which most often motivate buyers. In this market, Ford's greatest strength is its heightened quality standards in assembly details which are visible to the customer. ■

COMPARING THE SIXES

	Chevrolet	Ford
Wheelbase/overall length, in.	119/213.2	119/210
Bulk (box volume), cu. ft.	546	534
Engine bhp rating	155 @ 4200	150 @ 4000
Lb./bhp (curb weight)	22.9	23.3
Manual trans., forward ratios	2.85, 1.68, 1.00	2.79, 1.70, 1.00
synchromesh all forward gears?	yes	yes
Automatic trans., forward ratios	1.82, 1.00	2.46, 1.46, 1.00
torque converter stall ratio	2.10	2.10
Luggage capacity, cu. ft.	18.3	19.1
Interior, front hip room, in.	63.7	62.6
front head room	38.1	38.9
rear seat hip room	62.9	62.7
rear leg room	39.5	37.7
rear head room	37.3	37.7
Performance, standing ¼ mile, sec.	20.5	20.7
passing, 30–70 mph	16.2	19.0
acceleration, 0–60	15.5	16.3
Fuel consumption, test cond.	14.4	14.7
tank capacity	20.0	25.0
Brakes, front drum dia. x width, in.	11 x 2.75	11.03 x 2.5
total swept area, sq. in.	328.3	330.2
max. deceleration rates, ft./sec./sec.	26–22	26–26
List price, fob factory	$2519	$2533