

FORD THUNDERBIRD – AN AMERICAN ICON – CELEBRATES ITS 50TH ANNIVERSARY

- The Ford Thunderbird, an American classic, became available to customers on Oct. 22, 1954.
- In honor of the 50th Anniversary, Ford will commemorate the Thunderbird with a 50th anniversary fender chevron and special paint themes.

The Ford Thunderbird went on sale Oct. 22, 1954 – starting a legend that would grow with each generation of Thunderbird cars. Since then, the flight of the Thunderbird has included classic two-seaters, cherished roadsters, convertibles and four-door models, as well as exciting hardtops and sedans – more than 1.2 million of them. We've seen the "square" look, the "projectile" look, the jet aircraft look and the luxury look. Yet, through the years and through the many changes, Thunderbird's original uniqueness and individuality managed to etch itself permanently into the hearts and memories of the American motoring public.

The Beginning

Two men, Lewis D. Crusoe and George Walker, are credited by historians with being primarily responsible for the birth of the Thunderbird. Both were devoted to the automobile and its constant development and refinement. Both were recognized by their peers as "geniuses" in their field.

Crusoe, a millionaire lured out of retirement by Henry Ford II, was a businessman with a solid "feel" for the automobile market. As a Ford Vice President and Ford Division general manager, it was his responsibility to strengthen a young Ford Division — give it an automobile that breathed excitement — a car that would add prestige to the Ford name. Walker, later a Ford Vice President and chief stylist, is described by contemporaries as a "stylist with the soul of an artist burning in his heart."

It was October, 1951. Their mission in mind, the two men were walking along the aisles of the Grand Palais in Paris when Crusoe gestured toward one of the sportier automobiles on display, turned to Walker and asked: "Why can't we have something like that?"

"We have a job just like that in the works right now," was Walker's quick response. Indeed, it was so — as soon as Walker found it convenient to get to a telephone to phone his aides back in Dearborn. When Crusoe returned to the United States, there was a "job just like that" in the works.

In the months that followed, there was a lot of talk about a "true Ford sports car." Some preparations were made. "Paper sports cars" took shape in the design studios. All hands had been instructed to go to work on a completely new Ford car for the 1955-model year.

The initial concept called for a two-passenger, canvas-topped open car. Design objectives included a weight of 2,525 pounds, an Interceptor V-8 engine, balanced weight distribution, acceleration better than the competition and a top speed of more than 100 miles per hour.

With no time for scale-model studies, the first sports car styling suggestions were full-profile airbrush renderings on paper of five different cars, cut out and mounted so they could be viewed like automobiles on the highway. It was an effective, if unorthodox, technique. None of these proposals led directly to a final car, but each provided ideas for the full-size clay model that was taking shape.

While the clay model was being developed, other decisions were being made:

- The grille design would be a combination of the typically Ford arched upper shape and a Ferrari-style, egg-crate mesh.

- A handsome hood scoop was executed to cover a bulge that was created to house the air cleaner.

- "Bullet-shaped" insets at the end of the bumpers carried twin exhaust tips, then the latest in styling and, hence, a must for the new Ford.

On May 18, 1953, Crusoe saw a complete painted clay model for the first time. It closely corresponded to the shape of the first production Thunderbird.

The decision came in September 1953 when Crusoe – in Paris to view renowned sports cars of the world and measure them against the clay models back in Dearborn – decided the Ford car was right.

Although production wouldn't begin until the fall of 1954, making the new car a 1955 model, Ford was anxious to tell the world about it. Only one small detail remained – a name for the car.

Naming a Legend

It has been said that there were 5,000 names considered. Hep Cat, Beaver and Detroit were early, yet undistinguished, front-runners. Also suggested were Runabout, Arcturus, Savile, El Tigre and Coronado.

Crusoe was unimpressed with the suggestions in hand and offered a new \$250 suit to anyone who could do better.

A young Ford stylist, Alden "Gib" Giberson, submitted a list of names to his boss, including one that would quickly earn approval and eventually acclaim – Thunderbird. He thought of the name because he had once lived in the Southwest, where the legend of the Thunderbird was well known.

The name Thunderbird comes from the deserts of Arizona and New Mexico where, according to Native American legend, the Thunderbird was a divine helper of man. Its great flapping wings, invisible to the eyes of mortal man, created the winds and the thunder and gave the desert inhabitants water to live on in the unyielding dry wilderness where they had been flung by fate.

Chief stylist Frank Hersey, also a South-westerner and an enthusiast, spotted the name on Giberson's list and immediately picked it for the new car. But when it came time for Giberson to claim his prize, the modest young designer passed on what would have been the equivalent of a \$800-\$1,000 suit today and settled for a \$95 suit and an extra pair of trousers from Saks Fifth Avenue.

With the name settled and a couple of last-minute appearance changes made, the Ford Thunderbird was ready to go to market:

□ Its first public appearance was Feb. 20, 1954, at Detroit's first post-war auto show.

□ The first 1955 Thunderbird came off the line at Ford Motor Company's Dearborn Assembly Plant on Sept. 9, 1954.

□ Thunderbird went on sale Oct. 22, 1954 – starting a legend that would grow with each generation of Thunderbird cars.

The original Thunderbird was a racy two-seater with clean, crisp lines on a 102-inch wheelbase. Overall length was 175 inches, height was a low 52 inches, and the car was 70 inches wide. Standard curb weight was 3,180 pounds.

The base sticker price of \$2,695 included the removable hardtop, but not the soft top. Clock, tachometer, power-operated seats and a 292 CID V-8 engine also were standard equipment. However, practically none of the early Thunderbirds left the dealership without either overdrive or an automatic transmission and most of the power options. Prices of the 1955 models ranged from \$3,000 to \$4,000.

The 1955 Thunderbird was more of a personal car concept than a sports car, the result of a decision Crusoe made during the winter of 1953-54. The more luxurious direction created the personal luxury car segment of the automotive market, and Thunderbird would enjoy almost uninterrupted leadership in this segment for decades.

Thunderbird was an immediate smash hit. Buyers of all ages and all walks of life described the car in terms such as "wonderful," a "masterpiece," "advanced automobile" and a "morale builder that is real fun and sporty to drive." A European admirer asked his American relative to buy the 1955 Thunderbird and ship it to him in Europe.

Motor Trend magazine editor Walt Woron loudly proclaimed that "although the Ford Motor Co. is the first one to deny it, they have a sports car in the Thunderbird, and it's a good one...The more I drove it, the more I liked it," gushed Woron, praising the T-Bird's dashboard layout, as well as its straight-line performance. What Woron really liked was the way the Thunderbird handled: confidently, with no surprises, just as the engineers intended. "You can take any given curve," wrote Woron, "at 10 to 15 miles per hour more than the '55 Ford."

The public went for the Thunderbird in a big way, placing more than 3,500 orders in the first 10-day selling period. The planning volume for the entire model year was only 10,000 units. Ford had explored an uncharted market for unique transportation and came up with a winner.

A Porthole to the Future

With all of its popularity, the flight of the two-seater Thunderbird was to be a short one. There were changes almost immediately after the car was introduced. The original design presented some

problems. The cockpit needed better ventilation. Rear-quarter vision had to be improved. More trunk space was a necessity.

Design changes on 1956 models corrected these deficiencies. Flip-out side vents provided better ventilation; porthole windows enhanced rear vision and an outside tire carrier added trunk space. Standard equipment included energy-absorbing instrument panel padding, a concave safety steering wheel, safety door latches and a shatter-resistant mirror. Seat belts were optional.

Last-minute improvements, including the addition of the optional 312 CID V-8 engine, gave the second edition of the Thunderbird better handling and increased performance.

The 1957 Thunderbird was the first to have a fully padded dash surface. It featured optional Dial-O-Matic power seats and a radio that automatically adjusted the volume in proportion to the speed of the engine.

It would be the last of the two-seaters. With production of the 1958 models delayed, 1957 Thunderbird production continued for three extra months. The last one rolled off the assembly line Dec. 13, 1957. An era had ended.

Absolute evidence of the two-seat Thunderbird's impact on the motoring world came just four years after the last one was built when TV's Today Show host Dave Garroway referred to it as "an American classic." Generally, it takes decades for a car to receive such recognition.

The Classic Thunderbirds

Seldom in the history of the automobile industry has a company achieved the success Ford reached in creating the Thunderbird. The car stunned the automotive world, and the effect was a lasting one.

It gave America and the world a handsome car that was entirely in the American idiom – a practical and enjoyable car for daily transportation and long trips, and a stylish, yet unique sporting machine with excellent performance and intriguing pedigree.

Vic Take of Clayton, Mo., took the first steps toward establishing the first Thunderbird club. He was the club's first president. Today, Thunderbird clubs worldwide boast memberships in the thousands. Thunderbird acolytes long ago exhausted the search in garages, barns and junkyards all over North America and elsewhere for classic two-seat T-Birds to rebuild and refurbish. The remaining two-seaters are in the hands of collectors and restorers and on the pages of automotive history.

The Square Bird

Thunderbird's future for the next four decades belonged to the four-seaters. Certainly, the two-seater had given Ford Division the prestigious car it needed, and sales exceeded planning volumes in each of the three years it was on the market.

Economic realities of the times, the public's motoring needs and Ford's market share inhibited the potential of the car. Even as the two-seater was being designed, plans for a four-passenger personal car were on Ford's drawing board.

The decision to build a bigger 'bird was justified by subsequent marketing research that showed two-seaters were not being purchased by families with children as their primary vehicle. Seating capacity and price restricted Thunderbird ownership to upper-income families.

Ford Division ushered in 1958 by unveiling the four-passenger Thunderbird before a group of prominent Americans at a New Year's Eve Party at the exclusive Thunderbird Golf Club in Palm Springs, Calif. The public introduction was later in January.

The 1958 Thunderbird retained the classic lines of the original Thunderbird, plus some classic styling touches of its own, including the one-piece grille and bumper and clean contemporary rooflines that would set new styling standards for the industry. It was on a 113-inch wheelbase – 11 inches longer than the original – and its overall length of 205.4 inches was 30.4 inches longer. With an overall height of 52.5 inches, it still had a low-slung, relaxed, reverse wedge stance. Shipping weight was 3,799 pounds.

Another leading feature of the 1958 Thunderbird was unit frame construction, and the car boasted "more room per passenger than any luxury car." Front and rear headroom, according to the press releases, were "within a fraction of an inch of America's other prestige automobiles."

Motor Trend magazine handed the T-Bird its "Car of the Year Award" for 1958, noting Ford's totally new concept in interior packaging. The MT editors added that "the ride of the new Thunderbird is as comfortable as any American car today, regardless of size."

Horsepower also was close to that of the significantly bigger luxury cars. The 1958 Thunderbird engine was a 352 CID V-8 with a horsepower rating of 300. Other 1958 styling features included an anodized aluminum honeycomb-pattern grille, twin headlights deeply browed, with the brow line extending into the hood. Inside, there were individual bucket seats, and a console that housed controls for the heater, air conditioner and power windows, as well as a radio speaker and ash trays for front and rear passengers.

Classified as a "semi-luxury" car, the 1958 Thunderbird was square in design, with few concessions to rounded corners, fore or aft. It solidly established Ford Division in the luxury car market and was a sensation from the time it was introduced.

The standard two-door hardtop had a suggested retail price of \$3,330, but \$5,200 was considered an average delivery price. Sales totaled 48,482; almost matching two-seater deliveries for all of the three years the model was on the market.

1958

Two models, a hardtop and a convertible, were offered in 1958.

The unitized construction (unit frame) of the 1958 Thunderbird was a forerunner of this type of construction in the industry. The 1960 Thunderbird – last of the "Square Bird" designs – was the first American-built car to offer an optional sunroof.

Four or Two: It Matters to You!

Collectors in ever-growing numbers sought the 1958-60 "Square Birds." Despite the popularity of the two-seaters, "Square Bird" enthusiasts have as strong a following as two-seater worshippers. Certainly, there are more 1958-60 models to collect. Ford produced a total of 18,191 of the convertible and two-door Landau models. The Landau models with sunroofs are especially valuable since only a limited number – less than 500 – were built.

In the Ford Motor Company archives are various proposals of cars that weren't built. Most featured sportier but less distinctive rooflines, with jet-powered front- and rear- treatments that would have done justice to Emperor Ming's battle cruisers.

Projected in the '60s

Thunderbird styling was again changed in 1961. Ford introduced the "projectile" look, a design featuring full-length body sculpturing and an even thinner roof than previous models. Standard equipment included automatic transmission, power steering and brakes. A unique swing-away steering wheel – ordered by nearly 77 percent of all Thunderbird buyers – was optional.

The "projectile" styling continued through 1963, with the 1962 model offering more than 100 improvements. Two exciting new models, a two-seater roadster and a vinyl-covered hardtop Landau coupe were developed.

A Cherished Roadster

It's practically impossible to pinpoint the origin of the 1962 sports roadster. It was just "there" when the model year lineup was announced. It was a grand experiment, and the cult of Thunderbird sports roadster collectors quickly grew as the years passed.

It was an unusual car with molded fiberglass tonneau and padded headrests that transformed the four-seat convertible into a two-seater car.

The base roadster retail price was \$5,439. Some fully equipped models sold for more than \$7,000. After two years and a total production of 1,882, the sports roadster was discontinued.

End of the Beginning

The 1964 Thunderbird reverted partially to the square design theme. It was more angular than the 1961-63 models, yet not as square as the 1958-60 models. The new styling featured a longer hood, a shorter roofline and sculptured side panels. With the bumper and grille designed to provide a faster, more aerodynamic look, the overall styling continued Thunderbird's by-now traditional image of "swift-lined sleekness."

Though the design for the 4,760-pound car was essentially the same as 1964-65 models, the 1966 Thunderbird became a collector's favorite because it is regarded as the best of the four-seaters of the era. Ford discontinued the Thunderbird convertible after the 1966 model year. Not counting the two-

seaters 70,244 were produced. 1966 marked the end of Thunderbird's youth, but many of those young 'birds would live on tucked safely away in garages across America.

Into the '70s

The Thunderbird grew a little more when the 1967 models were designed. Overall length was 206.9 inches (1.9 inches more), and it seated six. The 1967 Thunderbird represented one of the most dramatic styling changes in industry history. It was a jet aircraft-like design featuring a long, thrusting hood and a short rear deck.

The front-end highlight was a crisp latticework grille deeply inset and outlined with thin, bright metal moldings on the top and sides. The grille was framed at the bottom by a new deep-sectioned bumper that blended into the sheet metal, and the headlights were concealed by the doors and the outboard edges of the grille.

From 1967-69, a four-door model was produced and rapidly gaining value in the collectors' market.

Hidden Agenda

The 1970 Thunderbird introduced new styling featuring a long hood treatment and a unique bumper/grille that made the bumper almost invisible.

Other exterior features included a new extruded-aluminum grille (the "poke-thru nose") flanked by dual headlights. A concealed radio antenna and hidden windshield wipers and cowl air vents provided a clean, "sweeping" line from the hood to the roof, and back-up lights were "concealed" in the center rear panel.

Ultra-luxurious appointments were on the inside. Included were a standard full-width front bench seat with individual bucket-style seat backs and a fold-down center armrest.

The powertrain for the 4,551-pound car was the 429 V-8 engine and Ford's Select-Shift Cruise-O-Matic transmission.

His-and-Her Thunderbirds

By 1971, Thunderbird – the name and the car – were so popular that the famed department store Neiman Marcus offered "His and Her" Thunderbirds in its catalog, which lists "gifts for the person who has everything." The twin Thunderbirds were equipped with telephones, tape recorders and other special equipment, and carried a price tag of \$25,000 for the pair.

'80s

The early '80s saw a completely different direction for the Thunderbird. It was smaller, more angular in styling and targeted to a more conservative, fuel-economy-conscious customer.

1983 took Thunderbird into a new design phase by introducing the "aero-style" Thunderbird that would lead Ford Motor Company and the industry in a new direction.

Thunderbird was all-new from the ground up in 1989, featuring an exterior design destined to further reshape the aero-styling trends of the '80s. It was a leader in technology transfer from racing to production and was among the first vehicles outfitted with Ford's next generation electronic engine control module developed by Ford's Formula One racing program.

Thunderbird first appeared in NASCAR in 1959, winning six races in the top division. The mid-sized Thunderbird is one of the most successful cars in racing history, attracting legions of fans to Ford. The restyled Thunderbird burst onto the NASCAR circuit in 1982 and went on to win more than 150 races in NASCAR's top division, including four victories in the Daytona 500.

Closing the Books...Temporarily

As the 20th century grew to a close, customers' tastes again shifted away from Thunderbird. Continuing sales declines led Ford to announce that the 1997 model would be the last – for a time.

Jacques Nasser, then president of Ford's automotive operations, let there be no mistake when he declared that, although the old platform was going away, the Thunderbird nameplate would see a bright future in a very familiar form.

On Jan. 3, 1999, Nasser unveiled a new two-seat Thunderbird concept car at the 1999 North American International Auto Show in Detroit.

In May 2000, Ford confirmed it would build a production version of the hit concept car as a 2002 model year – thus the Thunderbird legend lived on into the new millennium.

The Rebirth

The 2002 Ford Thunderbird was reborn on Jan. 8, 2001 when it made its regular production debut at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit and, on that same day, Ford officially opened the order banks.

The redesigned Thunderbird expressed a bold, confident and free feeling delivered in the form of a dramatically designed, two-seat, rear-wheel-drive V-8 powered convertible roadster – a modern throwback to another optimistic American era.

The 2002 Thunderbird used the visual cues from the classic cars with a modern interpretation that gave the new Thunderbird confidence and class. It came standard with a convertible and offered an optional removable hard-top with classic porthole windows, reflecting back on the car's romantic heritage.

In a class by itself, the Thunderbird was a 107.2-inch wheelbase rear-wheel drive roadster with a smooth free-breathing 3.9-liter V-8 engine. Combining the styling, performance, ride and handling of a true American classic, the 2002 Thunderbird was a world-class roadster.

The Golden Anniversary

On Oct. 22, 2004 the Ford Thunderbird proudly celebrates 50 years as an icon in American history. Through the decades the two-seater dream car has carried the classic design cues and the character of a true American sports car, making the Ford Thunderbird very popular amongst its buyers. So popular, that over the past 50 years over 1.2 million Ford Thunderbirds have been sold.

The 2005 Ford Thunderbird continues to deliver a unique combination of classic American "relaxed sportiness," offering balanced performance with touring comfort. Still attracting a new generation of buyers, all 2005 edition Thunderbirds features a 50th anniversary commemorative fender chevron.