

My 1955 Dodge Custom Royal Lancer

By Steve White

John and Horace Dodge opened their machine works in Detroit in 1900 to supply parts and major assemblies for early auto manufacturers. Success at this led them to start their own auto manufacturing business in 1914. It didn't take long for the Dodge Brothers brand to climb to third place in overall car sales. But after both brothers died in 1920, a leadership vacuum led to a sharp drop in sales and the sale of the company to Walter P. Chrysler in 1928.

By 1929, Chrysler's vision led to a hierarchy of cars designed to fit various income brackets: Plymouth was the entry-level car; Dodge was one step up; DeSoto was one up from there; and Chrysler was the corporate flagship. Under this plan, all Chrysler brands had definite family traits: Their appearance was nearly identical except for graduated size and distinctive trim, most notably the grilles. And they shared scaled mechanical features, with Plymouth getting the smallest engines and Chrysler getting the largest.

Known for excellent engineering, the Chrysler Corporation nonetheless was buffeted through the years by periodic sales slumps that threatened the company's existence. One such downturn was in the early 50s when their outdated and stodgy appearance caught up with them. By then, nearly all their competitors had broken away from prewar looks with striking new designs, many inspired by the latest in aeronautics.

Finally facing up to the challenge, Chrysler lured Virgil Exner away from Raymond Loewy. Closely associated with Studebaker, Loewy's firm had penned some of the great postwar designs. But it takes time for a new design to make its way from drawing board to the production line. In this case, the goal was to get the new designs to market by the 1955 model year. During that development period, a refrain heard throughout Chrysler's corporate offices was, *Stay Alive Til 55!*

All four brands did survive and thrive in 55...and beyond. The theme they shared was called, *The Forward Look*.

My car is a 1955 Dodge Custom Royal Lancer hardtop coupe. Like many cars of the *Forward Look*, it has a striking three-toned color combination. The top is Sapphire White, the middle Emerald Green, and the dominant bottom is Chiffon Green.

Virgil Exner hedged his bets on tail fins, which first appeared in 1948 on Cadillacs. But this was a trend that couldn't be resisted. Some first-year Forward Look cars, like mine, had vestiges of fins in the form of tail light housings bolted to the tops of the rear fenders. By 1956, fins would be smoothly integrated into an otherwise identical design. Exner *had* made up his mind!

Unlike its bodies, Chrysler had not dallied in the engine department. In 1951, the flagship Chrysler line offered a Hemi V8 called Firepower, the most powerful engine of the year at 180 horsepower. Next year, DeSoto introduced their smaller version of that design, called Firedome. Then in 1953, Dodge came along with their even smaller Red Ram Hemi V8. Each year or so saw an increase in displacement and power.

My 270 CID Super Red Ram engine is equipped with the Power-Pack option, which includes a 4-barrel carburetor and dual exhausts yielding 193 horsepower. Unfortunately, it has to waste much of that power slushing through a torque converter and two-speed automatic transmission called Powerflite. Three-on-the-tree standard shifts were available, but very few buyers opted for them.

Chrysler was not averse to gimmicks. The most notable gimmick for 1955 was the shift lever for the automatic being located on the dash to the right of the steering wheel. Oddly, this is less easy to use than the simple old lever on the tree. In 1956, they would trade in that dashboard lever for a pushbutton cluster located to the left of the steering wheel. This arrangement, too, was still not as easy to use as the lever on the tree. But the public liked it.

My car was sold new in Albuquerque New Mexico, and it remained there until I bought it in 2008. It has never been restored, but shows fairly well, especially from 10 feet away. I'm considering a repaint of at least the tarnished Emerald Green middle section. It could also use new upholstery and trim, but I'm a little less sure about doing that.

Mechanically the car is excellent. The purist in me hates to admit it, but the power steering and automatic transmission makes it the easiest of my old cars to drive. I guess this is why it's my favorite car to use on tours.





