

Car of the Month

1955 Studebaker Speedster

By Bill Clark

Foreword by Steve White

Perhaps more than any other era, American cars of the 1950s accurately reflected the mood of the nation. Victory in WWII had instilled confidence and hope for the future. The mood was upbeat and the cars had charisma.

Studebaker was among the first car makers to restyle after the war. A sleek envelope body penned by Virgil Exner emerged in 1947. It was a handsome car despite jokes questioning whether it was coming or going. In 1950, a bullet-nose was added that evoked a fighter-plane image. Of course, by then Cadillac had already exploited the aviation theme with fins styled after the iconic P-38 fighter plane. A trend was set in motion.

In 1953, Studebaker stunned the motoring world with its sensational all-new Starliner Coupe. It was low to the ground, rakish, unadorned, and without any allusion to warbirds. It seemed like Europe had landed on our shores.

At the time, as a kid working part time at the local Studebaker dealer, the exposure was too much to resist. I fell head over heels in love with these cars. I couldn't afford one, so I bought a used 1951 Commander V8 coupe. In the late 1950s, I bought another Studebaker, but my lust for the Starliner Coupe was never satisfied to this day.

So, at the 2014 Rohr Car Show, I was awestruck by the 1955 Studebaker Speedster featured in the following article. The Speedster clearly evolved from the 1953 – 1954 Starliner, yet it adopted some very American 1950s styling cues, including a brilliant tri-tone paint scheme and chrome trim that would have made GM's Harley Earl proud.

The Studebaker design introduced in 1953 is commonly referred to as the Loewy Coupe, a beautiful car created by Raymond Loewy's chief designer Bob Bourke. At their introduction, the 1953 coupes won eighteen international styling and fashion awards, most notably from New York's Museum of Modern Art, which included the 1953 Studebaker as the only American car on their list of the world's ten most beautiful cars. Despite critical acclaim, the 1953 and 1954 Studebakers sales were poor and, as Studebaker's market share continued to fall, their sales and marketing people gained greater influence in the styling. Convinced that more chrome and stainless meant more sales, for 1955, they recommended changes to the grill, and added chrome and stainless to the bumpers, roof, fenders, tail lights, and quarter panels. The Speedster, a factory customized 1955 President hardtop, was intended to be a family sports car. In addition to the new bright work, the Speedster sported wire wheel covers, a more powerful V8 engine, leather interior and a special vacuum formed ABS dash with a machine turned inlay filled with Stewart Warner gauges. In 1956 Studebaker introduced the first of the Hawks and the Speedster name was dropped.

My Speedster, number 1901 of 2215, was built on August 22, 1955 in South Bend, Indiana in Gray/White/Gray two-tone, and was sold from the New York Zone. In 1974, the car was left in a shed in Afton, NY to rust. The car was rescued from storage by an old car wheeler-dealer who bought it for his brother who liked Studebakers. Soon aware that they would not be able to rebuild it, the Speedster was advertised at local cruise-ins and shows in 2001 where many of us got to see it. I first admired it with a group of friends at the Windsor, NY show and bought it in the fall.

Knowing nothing about Studebakers, I was immediately surprised by the local Studebaker support group and the abundant availability of parts. The help and encouragement of the local people kept me on track as I rebuilt this heap. This included rebuilding the stuck 259 cu.in. V8, rebuilding the transmission, replacing all of the floorboards, and fabricating from scratch the hog troughs under the floor boards.

Although the marquee color for Speedsters were green and yellow, about 150 of them were painted in a classic 1950's color combination of white, gray and pink, the colors chosen for this restoration. The leather interior was supplied by Phantom Auto Works and the car was painted by Keeslers Body Shop in Conklin, NY. After 1200 hours of my work, plus time in the shop, the car fell victim to the flood of 2006. After the shop was cleaned up, the car was sanded back to bare metal and it was paint-prepped again and finally painted. It was ready to show later at the big 2007 AACA Eastern Spring meet in Binghamton, NY that summer where it got its First Junior. Later that summer it won its class at the Studebaker Zone meet in Sturbridge, MA and took Best of Show when it returned to the show where I'd first seen it in Windsor, NY. It got its Senior tab at 2007 Hershey in the Fall. In the spring of 2008 it was shown at the Newport Concours d'Elegance in Newport, RI. The car was awarded an AACA Grand National Junior. In 2012 the car won its Grand National Senior in Shelbyville, Tennessee. During one of these shows, I was approached by a fellow who stood staring at the car and asked when I bought it. After a short discussion he turned and ran, telling me he had to get his brother. I then recognized him as the person I had bought it from. Except for yearly trips out to special shows, this beauty is on permanent display at the North East Classic Car Museum until May 2016.





