

Market Street

Eric Lawrence is the editor of the *Black Book CPI Value Guide*, an industry standard reference for the values of collectible and exotic automobiles.



1957 Thunderbird (Photo Bill Erdman)

First-Generation Thunderbirds

How fares the Corvette-fighter?

BY ERIC LAWRENCE ■ THE THUNDERBIRD IS OFTEN REFERRED TO AS FORD'S RESPONSE TO THE CHEVROLET CORVETTE. I GUESS YOU COULD MAKE THAT ARGUMENT, SINCE THE CORVETTE WAS INTRODUCED IN 1953, AND THE THUNDERBIRD BOWED IN 1955.

From a production standpoint, however, the Thunderbird blew the Corvette away, selling more than 50,000 two-seaters between 1955 and 1957, compared to only 4,640 first-generation (1953-55) Corvettes. Even if you add in the single-headlight 1956-57 Corvettes, the Corvette's total only rises to 14,466, which still doesn't equal any single year of first-generation T-Bird production.

First-generation cars bear a close resemblance to their full-sized Ford siblings, and 1955 models are considered by many collectors to be the purest of the breed, having a very clean design when compared to the later years. Nice convertibles are currently trading hands for around \$30,000. Well-restored examples, or excellent originals, are up around \$50,000, with rough-around-the-edges cars currently clocking in around \$17,000. A very common accessory is the factory hardtop, which, in reality, was the standard roof configuration; the soft top was an extra-cost option. Expect to pay \$1,500 to \$3,500 extra for the hardtop, depending on condition. By the way, all 1955 hardtops are solid; the "porthole" was not introduced until 1956. You will see some cars advertised as "hardtop only." Although this is the way they came from the factory, you will need to deduct \$2,000 to \$3,000 from the convertible's value, since most buyers want the ability to put the top up and down without having to bolt on the roof. Nineteen fifty-five Fords still ran a six-volt electrical system, but many 1955 T-birds have been updated to 12 volts. That is fine, and even a good thing, for a driver, but isn't acceptable for a top-condition show car.

Nineteen fifty-six models were restyled to "correct" many of the teething problems discovered on the

initial models. As a result, they generally engender a very strong response – you either love 'em or hate 'em. They looked essentially the same as the 1955 models, with the biggest visual change being the spare tire mounted externally to free up trunk space, which was basically non-existent in the 1955 cars. The Continental kit added about 10 inches to the car's overall length and had a negative impact on handling. Wind wings were added to cut down on cockpit buffeting at speed, vents were added to the front fenders to help cool the foot wells, and the electrical systems were upgraded to 12 volts. The base engine was once again the 292ci V-8, with an optional 312ci engine available. The "porthole" hardtop was an option this year, and typically brings about \$500 more than the solid hardtop. All 1956 Fords were upgraded to a 12-volt electrical system. From a pricing standpoint, 1956 models are very similar to the 1955s, typically worth about a thousand more across the board, with most pricing differences coming down to a matter of personal taste.

Nineteen fifty-seven marked the first, and only, major restyle of the two-seat T-Bird. Ford decided the Thunderbird should update its look with redesigned chrome bumpers and the addition of

subtle tailfins. The rear deck/trunk area was enlarged, giving the car a longer, lower appearance, and allowing the spare tire to return to the trunk. The 1957 styling is the most popular of the first-generation cars, and generally trades hands for \$7,500-\$10,000 more than the earlier models. A few high-performance versions were offered in 1957, and they even have their own nicknames: the "E-Bird" and the "F-Bird." The E-Bird is essentially a Thunderbird with the 312ci engine with a dual Holley carburetor setup that is rated at 270 horsepower. E-Birds are generally worth about \$10,000 more than cars with the base engine. F-Birds are the big-ticket item in the Thunderbird universe and feature a 312ci V-8 assisted by a McCulloch supercharger, upping the horsepower to a very respectable 300. There were only 211 produced, so, as you can imagine, they are quite rare today. Expect to pay up to \$175,000 for a nice car.

The 1955-57 T-Birds are so popular among collectors that Ford produced an updated version of them between 2002 and 2005. They really do look a lot like the first-generation models, but have all of the creature comforts that today's drivers have grown accustomed to. Prices vary by year and condition, but you can generally find them for \$16,000-\$18,000 in good condition and up to \$25,000 if they have been pampered. ■

