

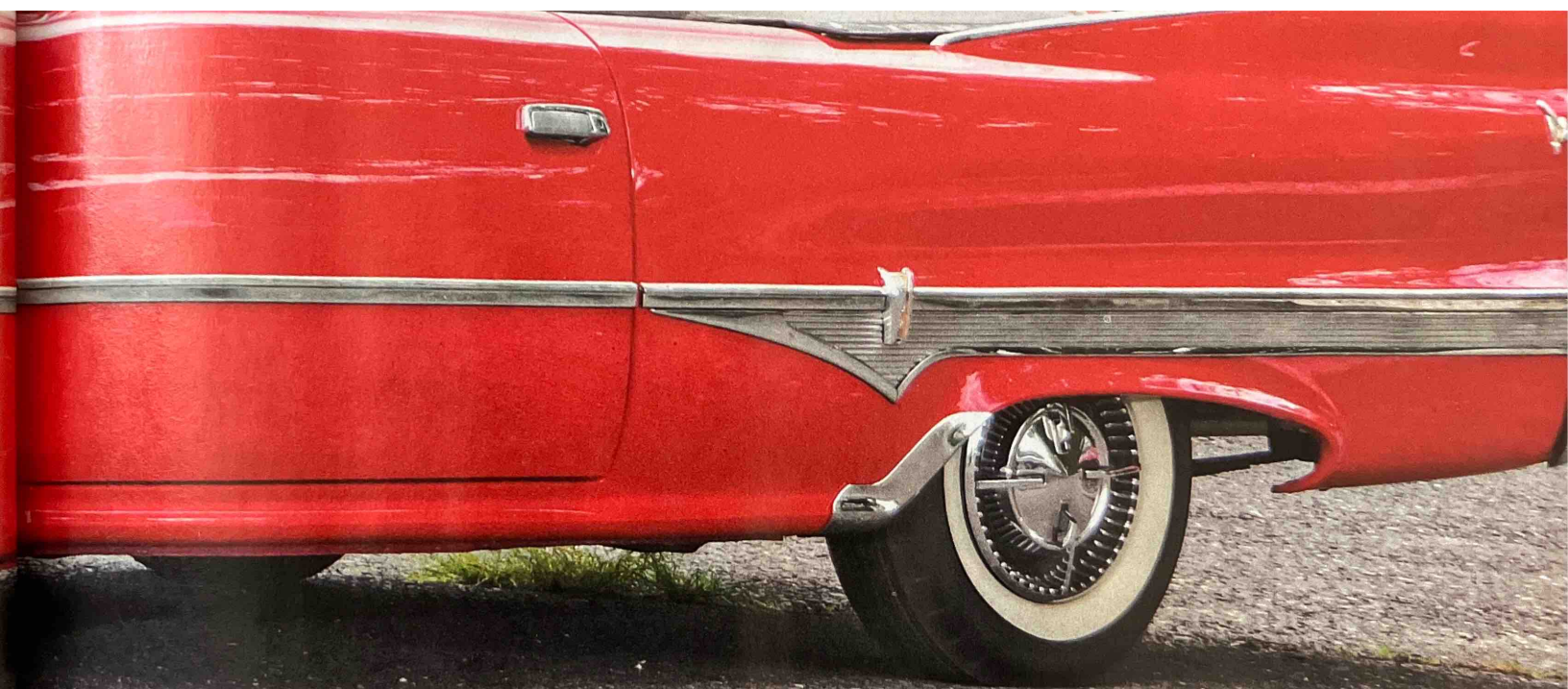


500 = 300

Suddenly it was 1960...again. Chrysler had leapfrogged its own styling for the 1957 model year with the tagline "Suddenly it's 1960." Chrysler cars were still wearing that styling in 1960, although a controversial change of aesthetic direction, displayed in the new Valiant compact, was on the horizon. The big change at Chrysler Corporation (Imperial excluded) was a shift from body-on-frame construction to complete unit-body construction. It made for a much roomier and quieter car that was billed as being stouter and more corrosion resistant, thanks to a seven-step, dip-and-

spray process. All these claims were critical, as Chrysler Corporation's reputation for build quality had taken a big hit for 1957 from which the company was still reeling.

The Dodge Dart was part of an industry-wide downsizing trend for 1960 spurred on by the recession of 1958, which had in turn led to Rambler sales successes that model year and uncovered a heretofore unnoticed desire in the American public for smaller cars. Studebaker was the first to grab onto that trend, lopping the overhangs off its full-size car to create the very successful Lark compact for 1959. For '60, Ford, General Motors,



The Chrysler Letter Cars are great, but the **1960 Dodge Dart D-500** might give them a run for the money

BY DAVID CONWILL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTTY LACHENAUER

and Chrysler Corporation all offered a variety of reduced-size models alongside their traditionally longer, lower, and wider full-size offerings: the Comet and Ford Falcon from FoMoCo; the Chevrolet Corvair from GM; and the Valiant and Dodge Dart.

The 1960 Dart was a revelation for Dodge dealers and probably the beginning of the decline of the Plymouth brand. Traditionally, Dodges were bigger than Plymouths, but shared drivetrain technology. Dodges were typically heavier, but then they sometimes got larger-displacement and more-powerful versions of the shared engine design. Model-year 1960 was an

exception, where the Dodge and Plymouths offered essentially the same engines rated for the same power output.

At Chrysler, the Valiant was sold through Plymouth dealers and Dodge dealers were given the Dart, which was "compact" in the sense that it was smaller than the larger (122-inch-wheelbase) Polara and Matador models but was in fact the same size as a full-size Plymouth car. To wit, a 1960 Plymouth Fury convertible is 209.4 inches long, rides a 118-inch wheelbase, and had a shipping weight of 3,630 pounds. A Dodge Dart Phoenix convertible like the one on these pages is $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch shorter, rides



the same wheelbase, and had a shipping weight just 30 pounds heavier than the Plymouth when both were equipped with the base 318-cu.in. V-8. Moreover, the Fury had a factory price of \$2,932 (under \$30,700 adjusted for inflation), while the Dart Phoenix listed for just \$56 more (a little over \$580 today).

Plymouths should have been, by default, a touch faster than Dodges in 1960, but the Dart meant that Dodge offered the same potential performance plus added Dodge prestige and luxury for virtually the same cost as Chrysler's "entry level" brand. The fact that the Dart wore a more conventional styling theme than the Plymouth cars that year meant it was a big sales success for Dodge dealers. For 1961, the Valiant officially became a Plymouth model, and Dodge received a badge-engineered Valiant model called Lancer, but the Dart persisted, thanks to its popularity in 1960. The name was even appropriated for the newly introduced Sweptline series of Dodge pickup trucks.

Given that history, any first-year Dodge Dart is a pretty significant find in itself. The base models hosted a new Slant Six engine, created for the low hoodline of the Valiant, though it was used across the corporation over the next decade. It replaced the outgoing 230-cu.in. flathead six-cylinder in full-size cars and was the sole engine offered in the new Valiant. The Valiant received a 170-cu.in. version, while the 230 was replaced by a tall-deck, 225-cu.in. version. The base V-8 was the 255-hp, 318-cu.in. A-series, with polyspherical combustion chambers derived from the "Poly" heads on non-hemi Mopar V-8 engines of the mid-1950s, but the real treats were the optional B-series V-8 engines displacing 361- and 383 cubic inches.

For those who just wanted additional torque, maybe for towing a boat or camper, the two-barrel, 295-hp Super Ram 361 was the quotidian version of the B. The top offerings in both displacements wore "ram induction"—the vaunted dual-four-



barrel setup using long, tuned-length cross-ram runners to boost torque right in the driving range. The cross-ram 361 was rated at 320 hp, while the 383 in D-500 form, as installed in this car, was rated at 340 hp and 460 lb-ft of torque.

Rene "Monsieur Hemi" Delisle, of Thetford Mines, Quebec, owner of this Dart, knows all about that torque and isn't afraid to show it off a bit, spinning the 750 x 14 Goodyear whitewalls as a demonstration while driving around the streets of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where we encountered his car at the Chryslers at Carlisle event. We were immediately taken by Rene's Vermillion convertible and sicced photographer Scotty Lachenauer on it to

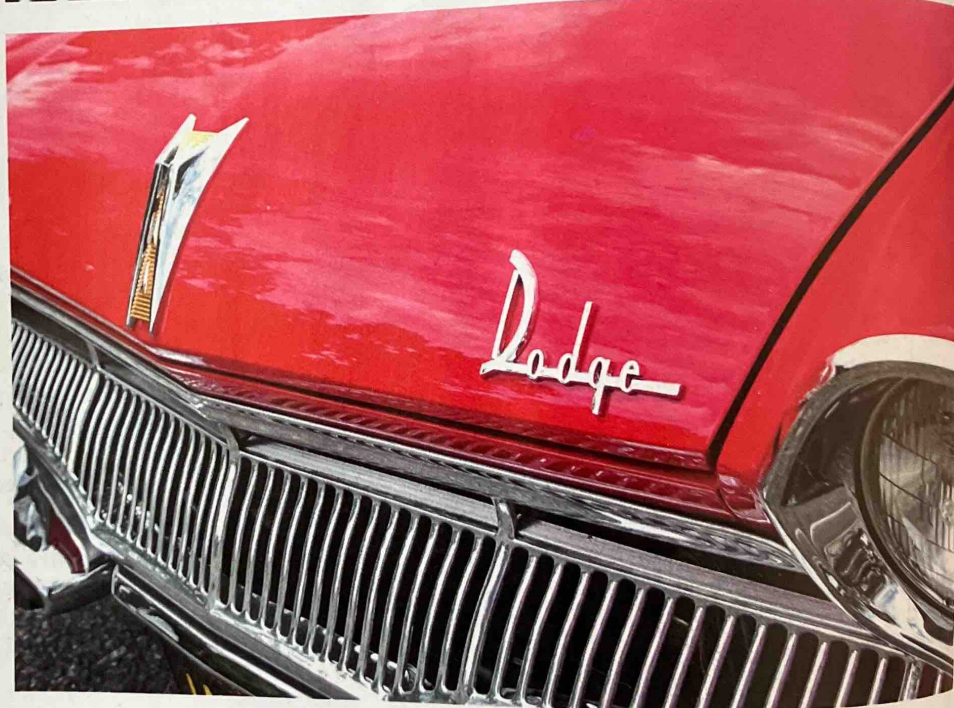
ab these images. While Rene loves to drive the Dart, Thetford Mines is a bit of a haul, so he had trailered it down and we weren't sure when we'd get to see it again.

Despite now living in Canada, this Dart is one of the 70,000-or-so produced for the domestic market for the 1960 model year. Rene found the car in Chicago some nine years before we encountered this past July and was impressed then by the rust-free condition of its body. He credits that survival to its residence in California for most of its life. He took it home and subjected it to a restoration. Since then, he's put over 1,250 miles on it.

The Dart was an appropriate restoration subject for Rene, as his infatuation with automobiles dates to 1960. He's a retired mechanic and a longtime Mopar enthusiast, having purchased a Hemi-powered 1970 Dodge Charger R/T in 1971 with only 18,000 miles on the odometer and kept it into the 21st century. Chrysler Corporation was between the Hemi eras in 1960, but the interim 383-, 413-, and 440-cu.in. "wedge" engines, as the B- and tall-deck RB-series big-blocks were known, built a performance legend of their own.

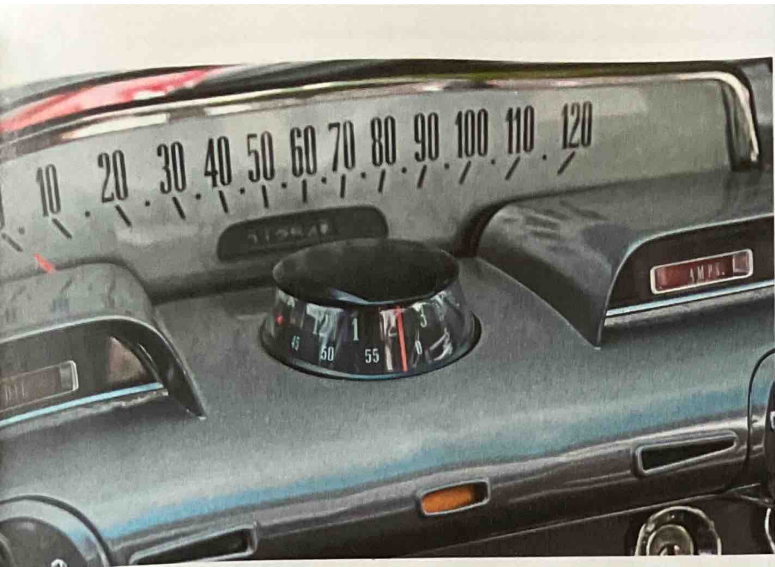
One aspect of that legend is the further-downsized Plymouth and Dodge cars of 1962-'63. Those Valiant-inspired, angular designs proved highly polarizing with the buying public, but were an amazing home for the powerful big-blocks. It's probably a 1962 Dodge Dart that Mike Love is singing about racing in his fuel-injected Corvette Sting Ray in the Beach Boys' 1963 hit "Shut Down." The other end of the legend are the Chrysler Letter Series cars of 1958-'65. The 1960 Dodge Dart makes an interesting comparison with its contemporary, the Chrysler 300F.

Motor Trend tested a 1960 Chrysler 300F two-door hardtop with a single-four-barrel, 375-hp, 413-cu.in. engine in its February issue, and *Motor Life* tested a D-500 cross-ram 340-hp, 383-powered Dodge Dart Phoenix four-door sedan that same year. Both cars used Torqueflite 727 three-speed automatic transmissions controlled with dashboard push-button gear selectors and 3.31:1 final drive ratios. The 300F accelerated from 0 to 60 mph in 7.1 seconds, while the Dart made the same dash in 7.8 seconds. With the 300F's 413 rated at 11.39 lb/hp and 10.34 lb/cu.in. versus the Dart 383's 10.62 lb/hp and 9.43 lb/cu.in. in a four-door sedan and 10.60 lb/hp and 9.41 lb/cu.in. in a two-door hardtop, it would seem that the performance figures are essentially equivalent, with variations attributable largely to the disproportionately heavy sedan body used





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in *Motor Life's* test along with driver and track variations.

Such performance credentials mesh well with the Dart's striking styling. All the Forward Look cars are handsome, but by 1960 it seems all the kinks had been worked out, leading to outstanding midcentury details throughout what is supposed to be one of the entry-level Dodge products. Note, for example, those complex wheel covers that extend so far out as to cover the rim itself and not just the wheel center; the Space Age D-500 badge on the tail panel and the hidden fuel filler in the bumper both suggest the burgeoning American fascination with the Space Race, which had begun with the one-two punches of Sputnik and then Telstar in 1957 and '58; and the squared-off steering wheel which, along with the swing-out, high-backed driver's seat, was praised by owners and period road testers for greatly improving ease of ingress and egress. Once you're seated, exotic high-tech pieces of futures now passed are everywhere: the power-steering log in the center of the wheel, the "Astrophonic" radio (which

displays Cold War CONELRAD markings—a reminder of how the shadow of a Soviet attack hung over the daily lives of Americans in the mid-20th century), and especially that exotic clock directly in front of the driver, with a dot-shaped second hand orbiting it like a tiny satellite.

Today, it's interesting to compare the relative values of the 1960 Plymouth Fury, 1960 Dodge Dart Phoenix, and 1960 Chrysler 300F convertibles. As of this writing, purchasing a car like the one on these pages will take in the neighborhood of \$50,000. Remarkably, a Fury convertible will seemingly be a pricier buy today, requiring \$60,000 or more. The 300F, meanwhile, remains the top of the heap, with an average value of convertibles at nearly \$130,000.

So, if you want Beach Boys-era performance, midcentury glamour, and a relative bargain, consider cross-shopping the Dodge Dart Phoenix against that 300F you've been dreaming of. After all, as Rene says, this car is a lot of fun to drive. 🚗