

# Joe Bortz's Biscayne

**The Rebirth of a '50s Concept Car Destined for the Crusher Can Be a Slow But Rewarding Process**

by Deborah J. Myers

**M**OST OF US have a secret (or, perhaps, not-too-secret) fantasy of unearthing a truly uncommon vehicle...a car or truck where only one or two examples are known to exist. Like Noah and his menagerie we could proudly say, "Yup, mine are the only ones left on the planet."

Joe Bortz, a business owner in Highland Park, Illinois, takes it one step further. Along with the uncommon cars in his collection are vehicles that wouldn't exist...if their manufacturers' orders had been carried out. His penchant for rare and unique vehicles makes his Bortz Auto Collection famous.

## Test It & Crush It

Over the years, designers have built concept vehicles simply to test public reaction to new styling elements. Would people buy cars with curvy or straight lines? Bigger or smaller headlights? More chrome or less? To find out, they packed all their best ideas into cars meant more for form than actual function.

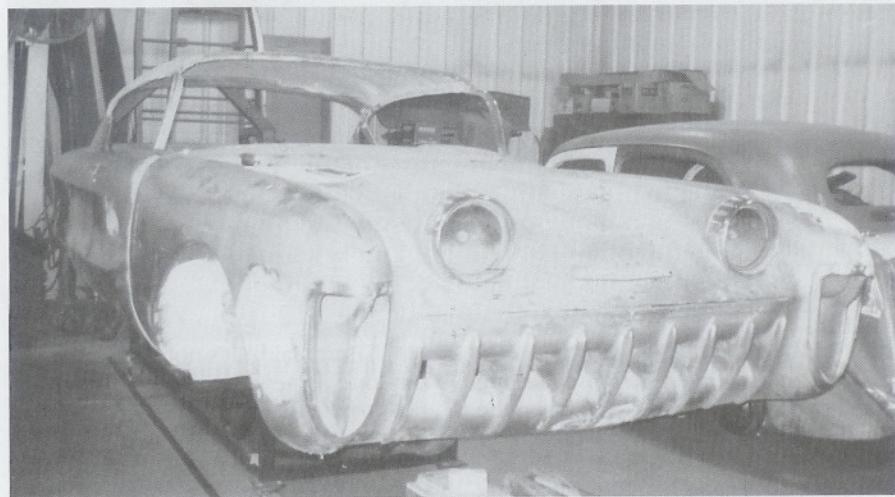
During the '50s and '60s, designers were so prolific that they could never mass-produce all the concept cars they created; however, the most appealing elements were integrated into future models.

One such example from Bortz's collection is a '55 Chevrolet Biscayne concept that is currently being rebuilt. Executives had slated the Biscayne for destruction, like many of the other '50s and '60s concept cars. They did not consider archiving the cars for future interest.

"They were considered non-roadworthy," Bortz says. "The lawyers considered them a liability because they weren't safe. When they made cars for the shows, they made them as beautiful as possible. The designers were let loose to make the most beautiful artwork they could."

Designers had the freedom to ignore safety requirements and, oftentimes, facades gave the impression of features such as taillights, headlights, signals, horns, windshield wipers, and radios that actually did not work at all. Over the years, many concept cars have been built without engines and in some instances, darkened glass hid the fact that the car didn't have a furnished interior.

Kerry Hopperstad, who is working on



JOE BORTZ PHOTOS

**The Biscayne project vehicle is still in a rough state but if it hadn't been for a GM representative's hurry to get home, there wouldn't be anything left to work on.**

the Biscayne at his shop, Hopperstad Customs in Belvidere, Illinois, believes that this car never had side window glass.

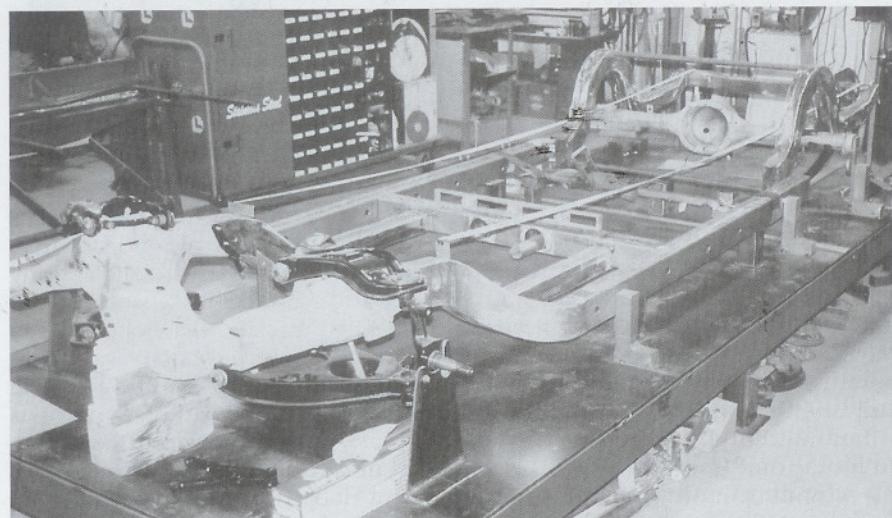
"There doesn't appear to be room enough for any of the glass," he says. "There was just the top of the switch to make it look like there were power windows and the windows were down."

## A Holiday Gift

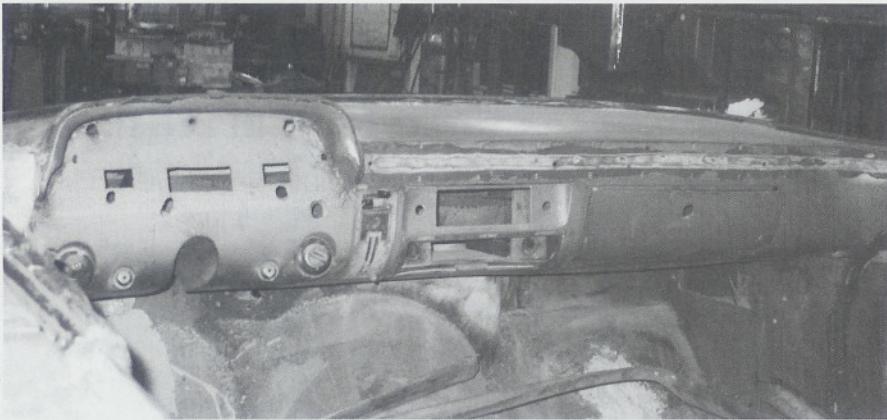
Because of their historic significance, it seems a shame that manufacturers disposed of so many concept cars, but con-

sidering the potential liability, it's easy to see why manufacturers felt edgy about saving them. But Bortz's Biscayne is one that slipped past the crusher.

As the story goes, GM sent the vehicle to Warhoops Auto and Truck Parts, a salvage yard in Sterling Heights, Michigan, shortly before Christmas. GM required the deliveryman to observe the car's destruction to ensure it was cut up and crushed. However, the man's wife was eager for him to come home for holiday festivities, so he left early. Then, instead



**The Biscayne's missing chassis is being pieced together with the help of some detailed photos made when the car was first built.**



It'll require a bit of work before the Biscayne's interior takes on the look of a show car once again.

of destroying the Biscayne, Warhoops hid it on their property.

## Buying the Biscayne

Bortz became interested in collecting concept cars in the early '80s, when the public notion was that there were almost no concept cars in the private domain.

"Someone called me and said they had a concept car," Bortz recalled. "I said it was hogwash. He eventually sent me a photo and I bought it. I thought I was the only one who had a concept car."

Bortz eventually learned that some designers and executives had occasionally hung onto the concept cars and that there were more in circulation than he had thought. Slowly, he began adding to his collection. After word got out that Joe Bortz wanted concept cars, owners began calling him. But some cars he only hears about second-hand.

"Sometimes I'd find a lead and it wasn't for sale and I'd have to watch a lead for 15 to 20 years," he said. "Some I'm still waiting on. I always ask writers to put at the end of the article that I'm still looking for them because I believe there are more out there."

When Bortz's son Mark read about the owner of the Biscayne, he urged his dad to contact him to check out his concept cars.

"I thought it was a waste of time," Bortz admitted.

Undaunted, Mark called about the cars and had the owner talk with Bortz.

"(The owner) said I should fly out there," Bortz recalled. "He said he had something that would be important to me, a '56 Cadillac Eldorado Brougham."

Bortz flew from Chicago to Michigan to see the car, but the owner refused to tell what the price was until Bortz was back home! The price turned out to be extremely high, and Bortz declined. Then the owner "remembered" he had three

other concept cars, the Biscayne, a '55 LaSalle sedan, and a '55 LaSalle roadster.

"It was a game, but I couldn't offend him," Bortz said. "It's not like I could go buy one somewhere else. You have to put up with (games) because you have to do what you have to do."

For all four cars together, the quoted price was right and Bortz snapped up the quartet. He delayed work on the Biscayne, however, because like a body without a skeleton, it had no chassis. It's unknown what happened to the chassis, but eventually, in 1998, Bortz forged ahead without it.

He had the body pieced together, but the project stalled until an acquaintance from GM sent him a big surprise package: vintage photos of the missing Biscayne chassis as it was being built.

"They are clear and from different angles," Bortz said. "You can even scale the dimensions. We are enthusiastic about making the chassis."

## Help From a Surprise Package

He believes that the Biscayne will be one of the most important vehicles in his 24-car collection because it was a GM Motorama car and its futuristic styling cues can be seen in the early '60s Corvette and the Corvair.

A marked departure from gleaming '50s cars, the Biscayne is chrome-free. Its low, sleek profile is well-proportioned, making it a welcomed addition to any collection for reasons beyond its rarity.

After contracting with Hopperstad to build the new chassis, Bortz was on his way to seeing the Biscayne finally whole again. Hopperstad had done previous work for Bortz and dove into the project.

"I'm used to doing challenging projects," Hopperstad said.

That's good. Because this isn't going to be easy, despite having in-progress photos of the chassis' construction.

From the cache of photos and information sent to Bortz, Hopperstad discerned some key elements regarding the chassis including the wheelbase, tire size and ground clearance.

He also figured out that part of a '55 Chevy frame would work for the front suspension because that's what the engineers originally used.

"You can tell they used that in the pictures," Hopperstad said, "and you can see where they cut it off and fabricated their own frame at that time. You could kind of see from the dirt and the overspray where it was attached."

At some point, the body had been placed on a steel tube frame and pieces of wood had been fiberglassed into it, which Hopperstad is cutting out from the fiberglass body.

He also is figuring out ways to support the shape of the body because the roof isn't strong enough and the windshield posts are mere trim. The doors even latch into the rocker panels because there are no doorposts. Hopperstad is fabricating pieces for inside the car to hold it together. Once he gets glass in place, that will help.

Bortz estimates it will take about two years to complete the car, but he does not want to rush it.

Furthermore, estimating the cost of the project is "a distraction," according to Bortz. "People who have a Rembrandt at a museum never ask what it's worth or what it costs to restore," he said. "Everything is an individualized cost for a one-off. These are rolling sculptures."

All of the concept cars in Bortz's private museum are driven for distances of five to ten miles, but any longer trips are taken in a trailer.

Although lauded for his exquisite collection, Bortz insists he doesn't own them.

"I'm just the caretaker of them to preserve history," he said. "Cars are very important. In 200 to 300 years, I think (these concept cars) will be held onto like Rembrandts."

And if anyone out there has an automotive Rembrandt stowed in a barn, garage or shed, Joe Bortz is waiting to hear from you.

To contact Joe Bortz about a concept car, e-mail [bortzcars@aol.com](mailto:bortzcars@aol.com) or call 847/443-7777 or 847/668-2004 (cell phone). His mailing address is P.O. Box 280, Highland Park, IL 60035. ■

## Resource

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