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Miracles

Do Happen Twice

The rebirth of the 1955 Chevy Biscayne

BY JOE BORTZ ■ IN 1955, CHEVROLET MOTOR DIVISION SENT THE BISCAYNE ON THE MOTORAMA CIRCUIT. IT WAS CONSIDERED ONE OF THE MOST DESIRABLE AND BEAUTIFUL CONCEPT CARS OF ALL TIMES. THE CAR HAD MANY UNIQUE FEATURES INCLUDING SUICIDE DOORS AND A WRAPAROUND WINDSHIELD THAT EXTENDED WELL UP INTO THE ROOF, AND IT WAS ALMOST A FOOT LOWER THAN THE CURRENT PRODUCTION '55 CHEVROLET. TO TOP ALL THIS OFF, THE CAR WAS PAINTED A VERY UNIQUE LIGHT METALLIC GREEN, A MOST UNUSUAL COLOR FOR A CONCEPT CAR. AS I WAS RESEARCHING THE BISCAYNE, SEVERAL OF THE OLD DESIGNERS AT GENERAL MOTORS TOLD ME ITS NICKNAME WAS THE MIRACLE CAR, BECAUSE AT THE 1955 MOTORAMA, IT DREW THE LARGEST CROWDS COMPARED TO OTHER GM 1955 CONCEPT CARS.

All Concept Cars at General Motors, and most other Detroit manufacturers, were scheduled to be destroyed after they fulfilled their duties as displays in the show circuits of that year. The reason for this destruction was company lawyers knew if the cars got into private hands, and an accident occurred, the companies could be sued for millions of dollars for untested features. Unique – but untested. The dark day for the 1955 Chevrolet Biscayne came just before Christmas, 1958, when the car was taken by a General Motors executive to the Warhoops Junkyard to be cut up and crushed.

As the story goes, the executive delivered the car to the junkyard, saw the body removed from the chassis and the chassis crushed.

At this point the process was moving slowly and, as it was only two days before Christmas Eve, the executive informed Harry Warhoops Sr. that he had to get home or his wife would kill him for his lack of help in preparing the holiday dinner and festivities.

As soon as the executive left, Harry Warhoop Sr., a fervent believer in the fact that General Motors was making a mistake by destroying

Concept Cars, retrieved all

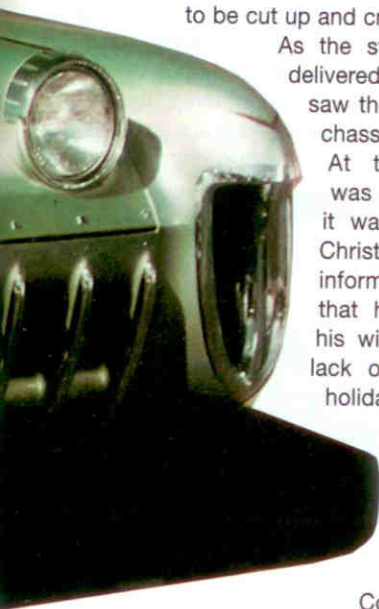
the pieces of the body and threw them on the top of a pile of some junk. It was his intention to save

the pieces with the hope that one day, the car could be revived. Why he didn't store these parts indoors he would never say, but Harry kept all the pieces. This included the sawed off doors and roof and various pieces of chrome trim – until that fateful day in 1989, when my son Marc Bortz called the Warhoops Junkyard to find out if it was really true that they had hoarded Concept Cars. Marc put me and Harry together on the phone and from there, the deal was made – the Bortz Auto Collection acquired the bits and pieces of what remained of the 1955 Biscayne.

This car remained in bits and pieces and the body remained dormant in a garage until one day, I met a gentleman who claimed he was quite the man with fiberglass, and asked for the opportunity to put everything together. Two years later, he presented me with a completed and assembled body with doors that swung open and closed and a roof that was fully attached. The body was now something I thought would never be more than a curiosity considering what remained of the '55 Chevrolet Biscayne. Regrettably, nothing was known of the unique design of the chassis.

Low and behold, in 2002, a package arrived from my friends at General Motors with a multitude of pictures of the completed Biscayne taken in 1954/1955. These photos were taken at the tech center where the Biscayne was built, *before* the completed Biscayne body was dropped on the chassis. At last, something was available to offer a possible ray of hope that the Biscayne might one day be a running car.

Fast forward to my introduction to a gentleman named Kerry Hopperstadt, a man well known to hot rodders as the premier custom chassis builder for big-buck hot rods built from scratch. When Kerry was shown the pictures, he indicated there was a faint possibility he could "scale"





from the pictures the dimensions for the chassis. And if he could do that, he was confident he could build an exact copy of the Biscayne's original chassis. Months later, Kerry indicated that while he thought he could build a chassis, he really was booked up for the next few years.

Unexpectedly, in January 2005, Kerry had a cancellation and we delivered the body to him. Part-time and full-time for the next nine months, Kerry worked on building the full chassis and all the running gear, steering gear, shifting

mechanisms, brake mechanisms, special gas tank, etc. Finally, the chassis was born as a fully running, fully drivable under structure for the car. A few days later, the body was dropped on the chassis. It aligned perfectly – and the car was taken out for a ride.

Kerry was very familiar with the "Miracle Car" nickname, and when I saw and heard it running, the words came out of my mouth without me even thinking about it: "Who says a miracle can't happen twice." First the Biscayne was born in 1955 as

the "Miracle Car" and, fifty years later, reborn from a heap of junk as the second miracle. Today the car is in the hands of a restorer who feels it will take another couple years to get everything fitted up for a high quality restoration.

When this car is completed, I'll feel like a person receiving an Oscar who knows he has so many people to thank for making such an impossible dream become a reality.

It must be remembered that all the old cars the collectors are saving today will be around for hundreds



Fresh from the dreams

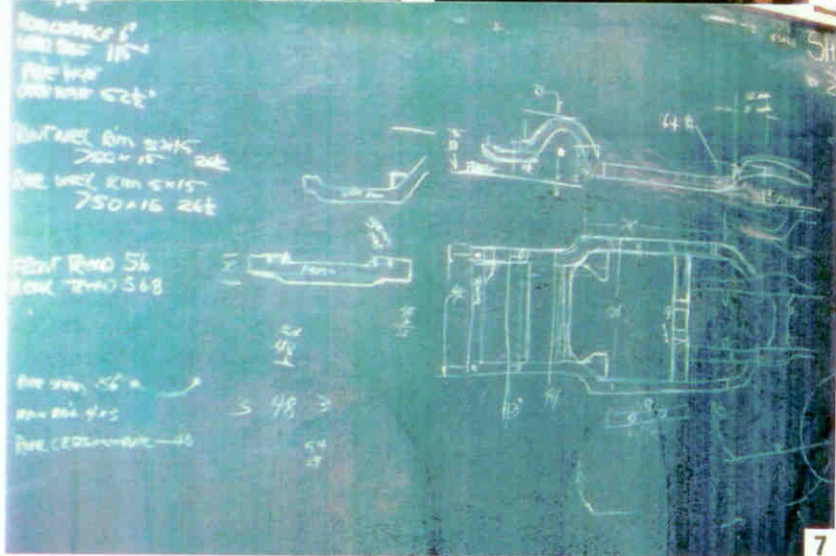
of America's foremost
automotive designers . . .

THE CHEVROLET

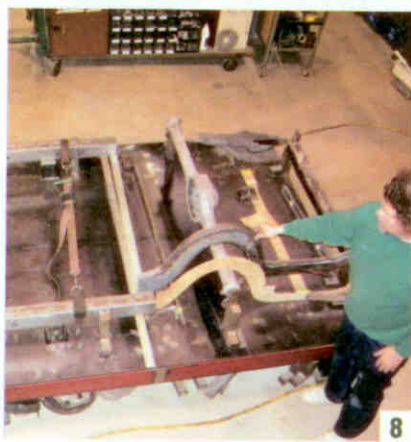


Biscayne

Here is an explosion in elegance—a superlatively low-slung passenger that illustrates an entirely new way of thinking and functionally compact, the Biscayne's classic wing of hood, overhead sweep of the Strataphoric windshield, no center pillar panel, the air-cooled grille that serves as a bumper. And under the preview of tomorrow's performance . . . a 215 horsepower V8



of years for future generations to appreciate. In reality, in no way do we own these cars. We've just been honored to be the caretakers of these important gems for the future generations. I hope the story of the Biscayne becomes an inspiration for all car collectors who – somewhere in the midst of restoring a car – become disillusioned that they may never be able to complete it because of unforeseen difficulties. Dream a little harder – be a little more patient – and your dream car restoration will be reborn!



1 The Biscayne's body, as found sitting in a junkyard in 1989. The chassis had been crushed and the roof and doors were cut off. Time had not been kind to the remaining components.

2 To an unappreciative eye, it still may not look like much. But to a true enthusiast of old cars, the Biscayne's rebirth is beginning to all come together.

3 With actual restoration still far in the Biscayne's future, the body, doors and roof were once again reunited.

4 More than just the exterior body and chassis are in dire need of TLC.

5 This GM photo, dated 12/2/54, was all Kerry Hopperstadt had to go on in order to recreate the Biscayne's unique chassis.

6 As the chassis was coming together, it was necessary to temporarily install a period-correct drivetrain to get the car up and running. More attention to accuracy will be given during the restoration process.

7 All dimensions were documented on a chalk board prior to any fabrication. The dimensions were then transferred to actual materials and the chassis was built from the chalkboard numbers.

8 GM had begun by modifying a production frame – Kerry did the same. In order to "scale" build the chassis from the photos. Kerry had to go by gut instinct and logical assumption in duplicating the Biscayne's frame. He was dead-on right.

FEATURES

Biscayne body is special shell of glass-fiber-reinforced plastic for light weight and impact resistance. Streamlined armshields sweep over driver's head to form part of roof. Tinted glass in upper portion. Unique new four-door design requires no center pillars. Projectile-type front fenders incorporate parking lamps. Grille forms part of front bumper. Concave panel on body sides permits use of thin profile, light covers. New rear end design completely eliminates hinders, permits simple aerodynamic form. Frame is built around outline of passenger compartment, allowing lower seats. Engine is experimental high-compression Chevrolet V8 of 215 H.P. with dual exhausts, four-barrel carburetor, high-lift cam. Transmission is Powerglide automatic. Special high-speed flywheel tires.

CHEVROLET MOTOR DIVISION, GENERAL MOTORS CORPORATION, DETROIT 2, MICHIGAN

FAR LEFT, CENTER & RIGHT: Chevrolet produced a special brochure for the Biscayne. Even though the images are artist's drawings, as opposed to actual photos, they are accurate and will provide valuable restoration information. As the drawings in the brochure show, the Biscayne had a rather elaborate interior, complete with swiveling seats. Reproducing everything to correct will be quite a challenge.