

Coastal customs meet in the Midwest

By *Cindy Malcolm*

One of the newest genres of car collecting is historic customs. The focus is on rare and all but forgotten cars. A historic custom is a car that was customized shortly after it was new. Typically, one-of-a-kind cars were often used and abused shortly

after their debut, therefore, not many survived. Also, there were very few heavily modified custom cars, because it was expensive to do, making them a rarity today.

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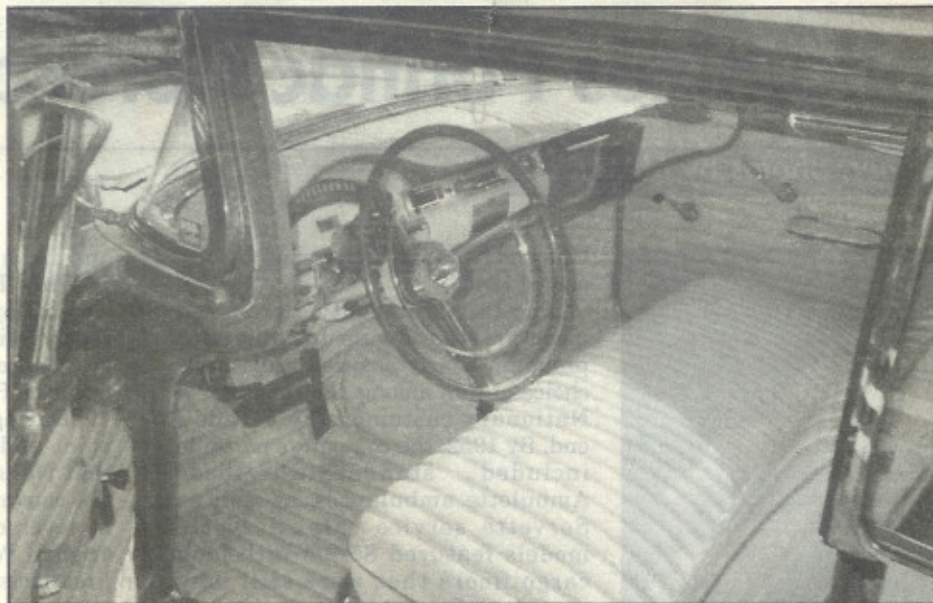
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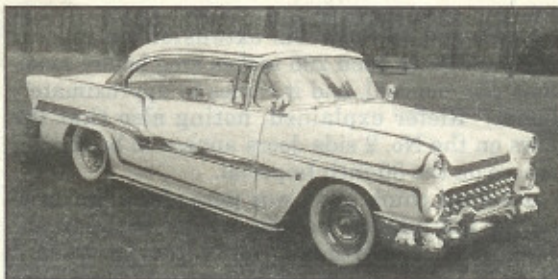
Well-known car collector Joe Bortz of Highland Park, Ill., is one of the top collectors of concept cars. He has been on the cutting-edge of collecting and preserving the most creative old cars ever designed by the factory.

Bortz has expanded his collection to include highly individualized custom cars. Part of this fascinating collection includes a 1955 Chevy and a 1957 Ford.

Without planning it, Bortz realized these two cars have come to represent the "East vs. West" of '50s historic customs. The '55 Chevy was originally owned by Jim Seaton, and customized by the famous George Barris of Hollywood, thus the west. And, the '57 Ford was bought and customized by East Coaster John North of Hartford, Conn.. Both Barris and North are still alive today.



The white Naughahyde tuck 'n' roll interior of the North Ford is so similar to the Seaton Chevy, that it's hard to tell them apart.



Seaton '55 Chevy customized by George Barris.

Customizing a car in the '50s was a creative endeavor that took vision and inventiveness to accomplish — unlike the order kits of today. Bortz asserts that the difference between a historic custom and some contemporary customs is like "comparing a Rembrandt with a paint-by-number." Bortz explained that modern customs are often built from pre-made parts and kits while historic customs

frequently used artisans to fabricate parts.

Despite being of competing makes, the similarities between the Seaton Chevy and the North Ford far outweigh the differences. Both cars are pearl-white (the Seaton is more metallic) and scalloped: the Seaton in red and the North in gold. Both are raked, nosed, and decked and have Lakes pipes.

Even the interiors are comparable,

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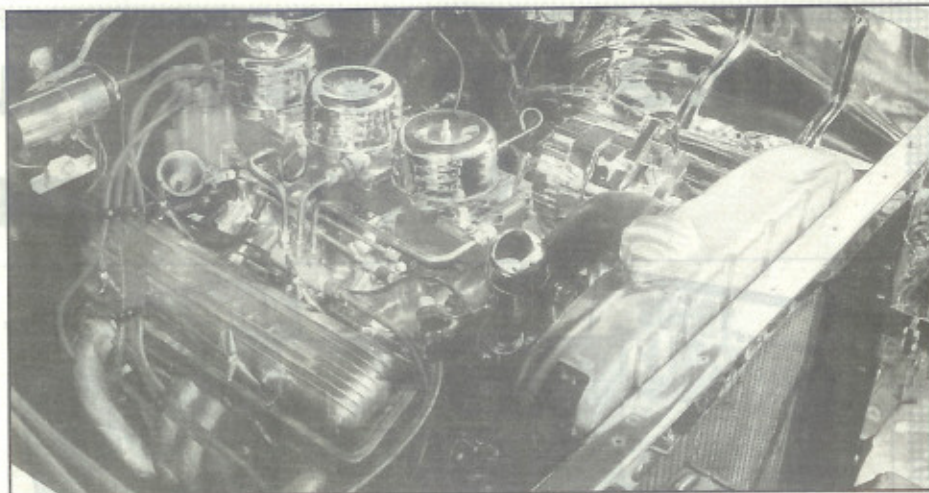
with white Naugahyde tuck 'n' roll features. Interestingly, they both have TV sets (remember, this is the '50s), in the Seaton Ford, the TV is positioned between the front bucket seats and, in the North Chevy, the TV can be found on the dashboard where the glove box is usually located.

Both cars are two-door hardtops. The North Ford is loaded with an E-code 312-cid V-8 with two four-barrel carbs and a three-speed manual on the floor.

The Seaton Chevy contains a 350-cid V-8 Chevy engine with three deuces and an automatic transmission. Its chromed-up engine is quite flashy.

The history of the North Ford is remarkable. North bought the car and started customizing it immediately, which was quite unusual in those days. Gene Pitney, the famous rock 'n' roll star of the '60s bought the car from North.

Pitney drove the car to concerts, but when the windows were shot-out during a concert in Kentucky, he decided to sell the car, because he



The chromed-up engine of the Seaton Chevy is just as showy as the exterior.

feared it was too flashy.

Bortz was initially uninterested in these cars when they were first mentioned to him. Although, the seed did take root, and he soon realized the historic and aesthetic qualities that make the cars worth preserving and collecting. The North Ford was in mint original condition and the Seaton Chevy had already been restored. When Bortz bought them, they were tuned, cleaned, and ready to go.

Bortz felt a connection with the cars because he grew up in that era. He doesn't view the cars as an investment.

"I don't think of the cars as money," he said. Rather, they are more like pieces of art and history that add to personal recognition.

The only problem with the cars are the raked front ends, which pose a problem with clearance when entering a driveway. But, they drive great on the highway. All of the Bortz cars are running and driveable.

Joe Bortz is still looking for more historic custom cars, if you have any information, you can reach him either by phone: 847-668-2004, or through his web site at www.bortzautocollection.com.



The flashy North Ford that was owned by rock 'n' roll star Gene Pitney.