

# CARS & PARTS®



## '35 FORD COUPE

*Rakish styling; flathead V-8*

- Pioneer hauler:  
1918 Dodge Brothers  
Business Sedan
- Hershey 'kissed'  
by weather gods
- Concours  
Extraordinaire:  
Pebble Beach &  
Meadow Brook



**1956  
Studebaker  
Hawk** Flying high  
in South Bend





# 1956 Studebaker Golden Hawk



## South Bend's high-flying hot rod

by Mike Mueller

Like all the other once-great independent automakers, Studebaker never really had a chance once the Big Three began gaining serious momentum during the years immediately after World War II. Simply put, money talks. And General Motors, Ford Motor Company and Chrysler Corporation had plenty of money, especially after fulfilling defense contract after defense contract during the conflicts with Hitler, Hirohito and Mussolini. All that hell-bent-for-leather wartime production of tanks, planes, guns and such also prepared Detroit's reigning trio to spit out cars like never before, an advantage that proved especially timely considering that Americans would soon be demanding cars like never before. Before his death in April 1945, Franklin Roosevelt had tried his darndest to guarantee a level playing field for all competitors, big and small, in the postwar manufacturing market. But not even he, nor his successor, Harry Truman, could keep a leash on the monster F.D.R.'s own war department had helped create.

Although Studebaker, Packard, Hudson, Willys, and Nash had also benefited from the wartime production boom, their gains were nowhere near as great as GM, Ford and Chrysler's. Guess you could say that World War II helped put the "Big" in "Big Three." Once the postwar car market really got rolling, the independents just couldn't keep up. Building a lot of cars was one thing, developing truly new cars and getting them into production again and again in short order proved to be the true measuring stick as the 1940s faded away into the '50s. By then "new" wasn't enough, it had to be "new and improved" as one-upping the competition became the annual norm around Detroit.

That's not to say that improvements and advancements weren't made by the independents. Studebaker was "first by far with a postwar car" in 1947. Indiana's aging firm (it would mark 100 years in business in 1952) also beat its independent brethren out of the door with a modern overhead-valve V-8 in 1951. And Raymond Loewy's classic

Starliner body in 1953 wowed the critics with a sense of style all but unrivaled in its day. Even design guru Harley Earl did a double-take from his perch high atop GM's ivory tower.

Clearly there was no shortage of fertile minds around South Bend, yet the economic realities of the progressing postwar market prevailed. Studebaker simply couldn't afford to retool as rapidly as the Big Three, and thus it couldn't keep more and more heads from turning toward Detroit even as so much automotive news was being made a few hours to the southwest. Modern engineering advances and cutting-edge design updates weren't enough, not when GM was able to make them seemingly every year. Studebaker, on the other hand, was forced to run with what it brung for far too long. Although the fabled "Loewy coupe" (which was actually the work of the Loewy studio's Robert Bourke) still stands as a postwar styling milestone, its basic form remained a Studebaker staple year in, year out, right up to the very end in December 1963. Again, this indepen-

**1**  
*Photos by the author*

**1.** Studebaker followed up its sporty President Speedster of 1955 with the Golden Hawk in 1956. This two-tone '56 Golden Hawk belongs to Frank Ambrogio, Casselberry, Florida.



2. An ornamental hood scoop was included as part of the Golden Hawk's basic package and it contributed to the car's sporty appeal.



3. Back-up lights were an option for the '56 Golden Hawk

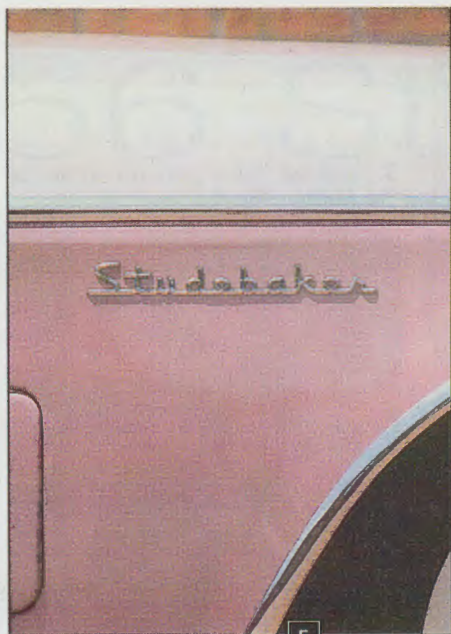


4. Golden Hawk production in 1956 was 4,071. Base price was \$3,061.





5. Studebaker was more than a century old when the Golden Hawk debuted in 1956. But the veteran firm, based in South Bend, Indiana, was not long for this world. It ceased American operations in December 1963.



5



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6. Typically, stylish full wheelcovers were standard for the top-shelf Golden Hawk in 1956.



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7. The same beautiful body penned by Robert Bourke in 1953 carried over year-in, year-out for Studebaker through the 1950s. All designers could do was toy with trim treatments to update things.

dent could not afford to try topping a modern classic.

The handwriting started showing up on the walls in South Bend even as critics were raving over the 1953 restyle. Company officials that year hoped for sales in the 350,000 range, but the final tally for both 1953 and '54 combined barely topped 270,000. Market share for 1954 fell below two percent, leaving little hope for the future from there. Packard then bought out Studebaker in a last ditch survival effort on both parts, but nothing was gained as one ailing automaking legend only helped drag down the other. Which did which depends upon your perspective.

Shrinking budgets, lagging resources and antiquated facilities all helped bring down Studebaker. Yet, somewhat amazingly, the company still managed to continually excite loyal customers in the 1950s, however few they were. At the time, high-performance pizzazz was just beginning to emerge as a sales tease, this after Chevrolet unveiled its two-seat Corvette in 1953 and Chrysler rolled out its luxuriously fast C-300 in 1955.

Bridging the gap between the two was Ford's Thunderbird, a "personal luxury" hot rod also introduced for 1955. Studebaker's response to these fun machines was the President Speedster, which was, in the long-time wagon-maker's own words, "designed to appeal particularly to owners who desire special sports-car styling and performance with traditional American car comfort."

Wearing outrageous triple-tone paint and sparkling wire wheel covers, the '55 President Speedster also featured a deluxe leather-appointed interior, a snazzy engine-turned instrument panel and full instrumentation. Beneath the hood was a 185-horsepower V-8 singing through dual exhausts. According to *Motor Life*, the sum of these parts looked "more like a sports car than any other hardtop." Indeed, the President Speedster represented a rare combination of Euro-style sportiness and American practicality. Too bad it was a one-year wonder.

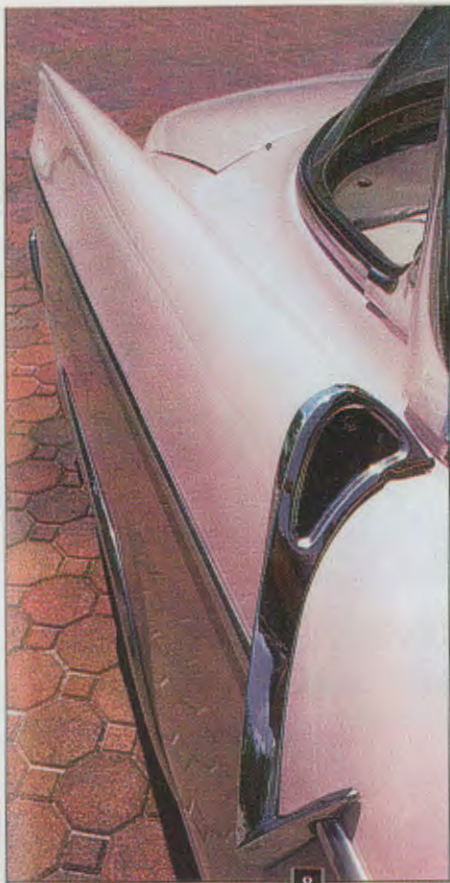
Fortunately, for both the Studebaker faithful and those in this country who preferred a little sporty flair with their

Yankee functionality, South Bend's ever optimistic idea-guys didn't give up there. In 1956, they replaced the President Speedster with the Golden Hawk, the flagship for a new line of models that served as a variation on the Loewy coupe theme. Below the top-line Golden Hawk was the entry-level Champion Fligh Hawk, the Commander Power Hawk and the President Sky Hawk. While six-cylinder power was standard for the low priced Flight Hawk, the top three Hawks all relied on V-8s. Studebaker supplied a 259-cube V-8 for the Power Hawk, while the Sky Hawk used the larger 289-cid powerplant.

A bird of an entirely different feather the Golden Hawk soared well above the Studebaker flock thanks to the addition of even more cubic inches. The company's highest level of performance was assured by wedging Packard's big 352 cid V-8 between the '56 Golden Hawk's fenders. Behind all that cast-iron wen either a three-speed manual with over drive or Packard's Twin Ultramatic automatic transmission.

With a single four-barrel carburetor handling fuel/air metering chores, the 352 V-8 produced 275 healthy horses more than enough muscle to help the Golden Hawk run right up with the Corvette and Thunderbird. Although comparisons between the larger Golden Hawk and Detroit's lithe two-seaters seemed a bit off line, the trio was grouped together nonetheless, and this image "rub-off" was just what Studebaker officials wanted. Ever though it more than doubled the Corvette and Thunderbird's passenger capacity





8. Fiberglass fins were added atop the Golden Hawk's rear quarter-panels to help set it apart from Studebaker's other Hawk models.



9. Like the President Speedster of 1955, the '56 Golden Hawk came standard with a leather-appointed interior and an attractive engine-turned dash plate. Full Stewart-Warner instrumentation was standard, too. There was room enough for three up front.

10. The center armrest arrangement in the Golden Hawk's backseat limited it to a five-passenger coupe.



the Golden Hawk still compared favorably as far as pure speed was concerned. Ultramatic Golden Hawks could run from rest to 60 mph in about nine seconds; standard-transmission models managed the same speed in eight ticks.

Curves were another story, however. While all that Packard power did make the Golden Hawk one of Detroit's fastest performers off the line in 1956, all that Packard V-8 weight – roughly 725 pounds – compromised the car's handling as a pronounced forward weight bias came along as part of the deal. At best, overall handling was above average compared to typical American cars. But road-worthiness came up a bit short in comparison with the truly agile (again from an American perspective) Corvette and reasonably spry Thunderbird.

How much this nose-heavy nature actually harmed Golden Hawk handling varied by account. According to *Speed Age's* Jimmy Reece, all those extra pounds on the front wheels helped create a "tremendous amount of body roll" in hard turns. *Auto Age's* critics agreed, yet they did so with a Yankee bias. The "Golden Hawk does lean when cornered hard," they wrote, "but less than any other five-passenger American automobile."

All that weight up forward also enhanced a distinct understeer tendency, as well as an inherent ability to spin the rear tires into oblivion whenever the throttle was mashed with authority.

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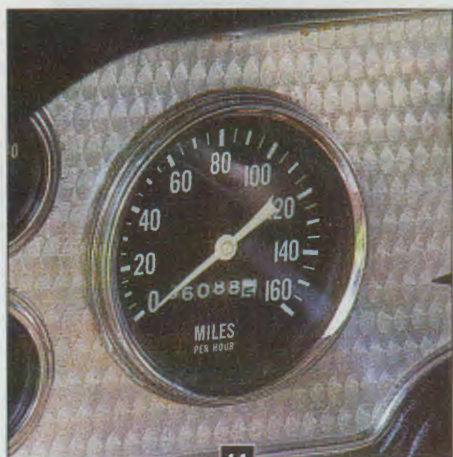
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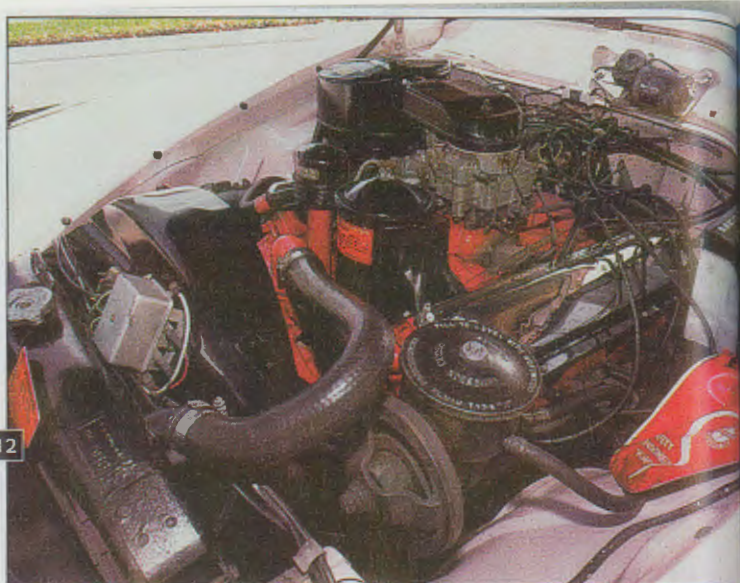
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11. An optimistic 160-mph Stewart-Warner speedometer was a part of the Golden Hawk's standard instrumentation package.



11



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12. Packard's 352-cubic-inch V-8 gave the Golden Hawk its punch. Output was 275 horsepower. A Carter WCFB four-barrel carburetor fed the fuel, compression was 9.5:1 and dual exhaust was standard.

#### SPECIFICATIONS 1956 STUDEBAKER GOLDEN HAWK

##### GENERAL DATA

Body style: Hardtop coupe  
Passenger capacity: 5  
Base price: \$3,061  
Price as equipped: n/a  
Optional equipment on feature car: power steering, pushbutton radio with internally controlled wind-up antenna, back-up lights, windshield washers and seat belts.

##### BASIC SPECIFICATIONS

Wheelbase: 120.5"  
Length: 203.9"  
Width: 70.4"  
Height: 56.3"  
Weight: 3,360 lbs.  
Front tread: 56.7"  
Rear tread: 55.7"

##### INTERIOR

##### SPECIFICATIONS

Headroom: 35.6"  
Legroom (front): 43.7"  
Hip room: 59.5"  
Shoulder room: 55"

##### ENGINE

Type: 90-degree Packard V-8, cast-iron block and heads

Displacement: 352 cu. in.  
HP @ RPM: 275 @ 4,600  
Torque @ RPM: 380 lbs.-ft. @ 2,800  
Compression ratio: 9.5:1  
Bore x stroke: 4 x 3.5"  
Induction system: Single Carter 4-bbl. carburetor

Ignition system: 12 volt  
Fuel: Premium leaded  
Exhaust: Dual  
Valve configuration: Overhead

Main bearings: 5

##### TRANSMISSION

Type: Twin Ultramatic automatic

##### SUSPENSION

Front: Independent, coil springs, link stabilizer  
Rear: Rigid axle, semi-elliptic springs  
Shock absorbers: Direct acting

##### FRAME

Type: Channel iron with X-member  
Body construction: All steel

##### STEERING

Type: Cam and single lever roller stud  
Ratio: 22.0 gear, 24.5 overall  
Turning circle: 41'  
Turns, lock to lock: 5.25

##### BRAKES

Type: 4-wheel hydraulic drum  
Effective swept area: 195.2 sq. in.

##### TIRES

Size: 7.10 x 15"  
Type: Tubeless bias-ply

##### CAPACITIES

Cooling system: 26.5 qts. w/heater  
Gasoline tank: 18 gals.  
Engine oil: 5 qts.

##### CALCULATED DATA

HP/CID: 0.78  
LBS/HP: 12.22  
LBS/CID: 9.55

##### PERFORMANCE\*

Acceleration: 0-60 mph ... 9 sec.  
Top speed: 115 mph

\*Source: *Auto Age*, March 1956

After melting the rubber beneath a Golden Hawk during acceleration runs, *Mechanix Illustrated's* Tom McCahill explained, "If I'd shoved 200 or 300 pounds of sand in the trunk to equalize the weight distribution, my times would have been considerably better."

All that aside, Studebaker's first Golden Hawk still represented a unique performance machine for its day. Although not nearly as obvious as its Speedster forerunner, the '56 Golden Hawk did, nonetheless, portray a Euro-style sporty image in fine fashion, most of that fashion coming inside. Picking up where the Speedster left off, the Golden Hawk also featured a bright engine-

turned instrument panel with full Stewart-Warner instrumentation, including a 6000-rpm tachometer and a vacuum gauge. Comfortable room for five also carried over from the President Speedster. Exclusivity was announced on the outside by various trim baubles, the most notable being a pair of add-on fiberglass fins mounted atop Bob Bourke's beautiful rear quarters. In conclusion, McCahill called the '56 Golden Hawk "a good-looking car [that was] extremely pleasant to drive."

South Bend engineers made that drive even more pleasant, from a performance fan's viewpoint, in 1957 by replacing the big, heavy Packard V-8 with a super-

charged version of Studebaker's much lighter 289-cid V-8. The 352 Packard engine went out of production anyway, leaving those engineers nothing to do but make the best of the situation. By adding a McCulloch blower atop the 289 - which weighed 100 pounds less than the 352 - they managed to preserve the Golden Hawk's 275-horse rating. And thanks to its better balanced chassis, the '57 Golden Hawk "cut a pretty fancy corner without any of the front end 'wash out' displayed by the '56," according to a *Hot Rod* magazine road test. *HRM's* editors went even further, claiming the second-edition Golden Hawk was "as far removed from its '56 namesake as it is from a Sherman tank."

Another supercharged Golden Hawk appeared for 1958 before the South Bend firm let the legacy die. Production was 4,356 for 1957, a mere 878 for 1958. Studebaker-Packard sold 4,071 normally aspirated Golden Hawks in 1956, including the Mocha/Doeskin two-tone example shown here, owned by Frank Ambrogio, Casselberry, Florida. Ambrogio is the third owner of the car, which is fitted with the Twin Ultramatic automatic transmission. Options include power steering, pushbutton radio, internally controlled wind-up antenna, windshield washers, seat belts and back-up lights. Base price in 1956 was \$3,061.

After buying his Golden Hawk in 1983, Ambrogio carefully performed the restoration with its completion finally coming in 1989. Today, the car stands as a proud representative of what might have been. Euro-style sport sedans are everywhere today, and most owners of these trendy machines have no clue that it was Studebaker that first tried testing those market waters in America.

Independent automakers may not have had a chance after World War II, but that didn't stop some of them from making a splash or two.