

# Life at top was short, sweet for 1955-56 Crown Victoria

## From luxury vehicle to quintessential police car

BY BILL VANCE

The Crown Victoria is one of Ford's most respected nameplates, the darling of big-car lovers and police forces everywhere. It began life in 1955, but although it was a stalwart Ford nameplate, it took a 26-year hiatus from 1957 to '82.

The original Crown Victoria debuted in 1955 as the top option of Ford's Fairlane series. Ford's lineup consisted of the Mainline, Customline and Fairlane, the latter having replaced the Crestline as the premium model. The Fairlane name was inspired by Henry Ford's grand Fair Lane estate in Dearborn, Mich. The top Fairlane model was the Crown Victoria.

The Crown Vic, as it became known, was further differentiated: It came as the regular Crown Vic — with an all-steel roof — or the Crown Vic Skyliner, a carryover of the 1954 Crestline Skyliner, in which the front half of the roof was tinted transparent Plexiglas.

The regular Crown Vic outsold the Skyliner by more than 15 to one because it was soon discovered that, in an era before air conditioning was popular, the sun cooked those in the Skyliner's front seat.

In Canada, the Crown Victoria also came as a Meteor, a Ford clone, which, along with the Monarch — a Mercury clone — enabled Ford to have two dealer networks: One for Ford-Lincoln-Mercury and one for Meteor-Monarch.

The Crown Victoria was part of Ford's redesigned 1955 models. It got a wraparound windshield and was longer, lower and wider than the '54 model.

Ford of Canada also received the overhead-valve V8 that U.S. buyers got in 1954.

Crown Vics came as two-door models only. The "Crown" part of the name was inspired by a chromed metal strip running across the roof and down each of the forward slanted B-pillars.

The back of this strip had phony vents painted into its trailing edge. It was intended to give the Crown Vic a pillarless hardtop convertible look. Although it resembled a roll bar, it wasn't reinforced to serve as one.

The Crown Vic's roof was longer, lower and flatter than those of regular Fords, which gave it a sleeker appearance. A stylish chrome strip started at the tops of the hooded headlamps, ran along the fender tops and curved down along the doors and back up, creating a V-shaped dip before travelling straight to the tail lamps. Vestigial fins marked Ford's entry into the tailfin age.

All in all, the 1955 Crown Victoria was a handsome car, especially with its two-tone paint treatments in shades of white and pastels such as pink and green that were popular at the time.

Under the hood was Ford's corporate 272-cubic-inch, 162-horsepower, overhead-valve V8 or an



The original Crown Victoria debuted in 1955 as the top option of Ford's Fairlane series, but lasted just two years. Ford redesigned its line in 1957 and the Crown Vic was put on the back burner until 1982 when it was revived in a more modern form.

optional 292-cu.-in. V8. For U.S. buyers, the base engine was a 223-cu.-in., 120-hp, overhead-valve in-line six, an engine Canada wouldn't get until 1956.

In a somewhat unusual departure for the company that had popularized the V8, Ford began calling its engine a Y8 because the crankcase extended down past the centreline of the crankshaft, not to the centreline as was normal. Ford said the engine resembled a Y rather than a V and claimed it provided a more rigid cylinder block. The Y description soon disappeared.

A more significant feature was the three-speed automatic transmission. Under normal driving conditions, the car launched in

second gear and automatically shifted to high. But Ford engineered it so drivers wanting quicker acceleration could get a low-gear start by flooring the accelerator. The transmission then went through its normal automatic second and high shifts.

The standard transmission was a column-shift three-speed manual with optional overdrive.

The Crown Vic was carried over into 1956 with only minor alterations, including a change from round to horizontal parking light/turn signals. The plastic-topped Skyliner was dropped soon after the start of the model year due to poor sales.

That year — 1956 — was the same one in which Ford tried to

sell safety, including seat belts, padded instrument panels and sun visors, stronger door latches and deep-dish steering wheels. Unfortunately, the public was not yet ready to accept them.

Fords were completely redesigned for 1957. They were again longer, lower and wider and sported real tailfins. The Crown Vic was replaced by the Fairlane 500 as the top model.

This short-lived but imaginative car in Ford's 1950s history is now a popular collectible. Crown Victoria was too good a name to lose and it was revived in 1982. With its rugged rear-wheel drive and large interior, it became the quintessential police car.

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