

Eldorado Extravaganza

— a Retrospective, 1953-1966

Eldorado enthusiasts prove that Cadillac's limited-production, rear-wheel drive "Gilded Ones" are the brand's most highly sought models



Words by Mark J. McCourt

Photography by Mark J. McCourt and Dan Reed

General Motors was in a celebratory mood in 1953. Not only was its flagship brand celebrating its 50th anniversary, commemorating the first production Cadillac built back in March of 1903, but so was Buick, which was incorporated in May of that same

year. Oldsmobile, GM's oldest division with its first automobiles built before the turn of the century, was also given the opportunity to kick up its heels. The results of this merriment were a trio of new Special sports convertibles, with the most impressive being the ultra-luxurious Cadillac Eldorado.

The rear-wheel drive Eldorado would morph from a nearly hand-built special to a regular production model sharing sheetmetal with other Cadillacs, but the entire run that predated the advanced, front-drive 1967 coupes would remain low-production, high-powered luxury models for the discerning few. The Potomac Region of the Cadillac & La Salle Club celebrated these Eldorados during its annual car show at Capitol Cadillac in Greenbelt, Maryland, on October 22, 2006. The show was called 'Eldorado Extravaganza: 1953-1966,' and the club hoped to have at least one example from every year on hand. A record turnout brought more than 100 cars, and although 1963 and 1965 model year Eldorados weren't represented, there were other Cadillacs of those vintages to take their place.

1953 Eldorado

Number built: 532

Owners: Bart and Beth Mitchell

Price new: \$7,465

Brooklandville, Maryland

Chevrolet's Corvette was not GM's only seminal convertible in 1953: The new Eldorado introduced the wraparound windshield and featured cut-down doors, spoke wheels and an exclusive interior, as well as a 210hp, 4-bbl.-carbureted 331-cu.in. V-8 and Hydra-Matic drive. "A friend of my parents had a new one when I was a kid and that car always stayed with me," explains Bart Mitchell. "I found this car about 10 minutes from my home." The body of his Eldorado, body number 43, was nearly junked by one previous owner, and while the car ran when he bought it, it was far from perfect. "I drove it home, and it was a hold-your-breath ride," he laughs. It took two restorers and many years to bring the car to its current state; "The response that we've gotten has been incredibly gratifying; it received a Second Junior from the AACA its first time out. The people in the CLC Potomac Region have been an incredible help, and they and Mike Jones, who manages my car collection, illustrate the best part of this hobby."



Cadillac Eldorado

Design Timeline



1953

Like its Buick Skylark and Oldsmobile Fiesta brethren, the Eldorado features modified doors, a curved windshield and special interior materials, and it tops them with GM's most powerful V-8.

Although it shared its body with "ordinary" Cadillac convertibles, 1954 Eldorados feature upgraded interiors, three-piece hardtop covers, gold badges and ribbed aluminum lower body trim.

1954





1954 Eldorado

Number built: 2,150

Owner: Richard Sisson

Price new: \$5,738

Potomac, Maryland

"The 1954 Eldorado was a standard 62 Series convertible, glooped up with chrome," laughs owner Richard Sisson, as he explains that while the Eldorado didn't have exclusive sheetmetal this year, it was greatly reduced in price from its predecessor. Richard's black over red convertible features standard chromed wire wheels, gold badges, fluted aluminum quarter-panel trim and engraved plates on the doors with the original owner's initials: EB. The 331-cu.in. V-8 gained 20hp for a total of 230, and a 12-volt electrical system was new that year. "Seventy-two percent of 1954 Eldorados were white," Richard adds. "So I was very attracted to my car and, even though it has that extra trim, I think it's very clean and even conservative. Other 1950s Eldorados are a little flamboyant for me, although other people may say the same of my car!"

1955 Eldorado

Number built: 3,950

Owner: Bob Crimmins

Price new: \$6,286

Manalapan, New Jersey

When Bob Crimmins bought his Eldorado 11 years ago, it was a bare hulk that required total restoration. "Most items were missing, and a countrywide search was necessary in pre-Internet days to find parts. *Hemmings Motor News* was a big help." His striking convertible demonstrates this exclusive styling for 1955, with sharply pointed tailfins, quad taillamps and cast aluminum Sabre wheels; its dual-4-bbl.-carbureted, 270hp V-8 was optional in lesser models. "My interest in Cadillacs goes back to a wealthy aunt who was a Cadillac owner," Bob explains. "After driving her 1953 Fleetwood, I was sold on Cadillac. Prior to the purchase of my Eldorado, I'd owned a 1955 Coupe and a 1955 Fleetwood. To me, this year was the best in styling, and was the last year for the perfected 331-cubic inch engine. The car looked like it was flying down the road while still sitting in the driveway... a true '50s rocket ship!"



1956 Eldorado Seville

Number built: 3,900

Owners: Sal and Donna Buffa

Price new: \$6,551

Liverpool, New York

Cadillac expanded the Eldorado line for 1956 by adding a hardtop coupe called the Seville; this car featured a Vicodec cloth-covered roof, fluted chrome door caps and an exclusive twin-fin hood ornament. The convertible Eldorado was titled Biarritz and it shared its 305hp, dual-4-bbl. carbureted 365-cu.in. V-8 with the Seville. In fact, a 1956 Biarritz has the distinction of being the 1,000,000th Cadillac built. Sal and Donna Buffa's 1956 Seville has been driven 29,000 miles from new, and it features the rare gold package with matching Sabre wheels. "I know the complete history of this car," Sal explains; "I first saw it back in 1972, and I saw it again in the spring of 2003. Donna suggested I buy it and restore it. It needed a lot of work, but there's a great deal of satisfaction seeing the car come back to the way it was when it was new. I like its high-powered engine and that it was a muscle car with a sports car look."



1955

Cadillac continues to explore the Jet Age theme in 1955 with air-intake trim on the rear fenders, ribbed chrome upper door trim and, new for this year, an exclusive tailfin and rear-end design.

An optional gold package brings special badges and gold-toned Sabre aluminum wheels that match the color of the grille, air cleaner and triple carburetors; the Seville hardtop is also new.

1956



1957

Sitting lower on a new X-member frame, the 1957 Eldorado is completely restyled and features angular bumpers with rubber-tipped "Dagmar" overriders, unique tailfins, and for Seville's, a reverse-curve C-pillar.

The new-for-'58 Eldorado is the 1958 Chevrolet's obvious inspiration, with its quad headlamps and combined bumper and grille; the numerous chrome decorations on Biarritz and Seville's are not shared with restrained Broughams.

1958





1957 Eldorado Biarritz

Number built: 1,800

Owner: John and James Spargo

Price new: \$7,286

Fairfax Station, Virginia

The 2006 Fourth of July parade in Bethany Beach, Delaware, proved a good first test for the 1957 Eldorado Biarritz belonging to John Spargo and his son James. "It was a four-hour-long parade in 90-degree heat, and while it did get hot, it didn't overheat," John recalls. He purchased the Biarritz as a summer driver. "If I get the urge to talk with strangers, I just open the garage door and back it outside, and without fail, people will come over and start up a conversation," he chuckles. His 1957 Eldorado features a completely new body design and X-member frame, as well as a 325hp, dual-4-bbl.-carbureted 365-cu.in. V-8. Mid-1950s Cadillacs aren't foreign to John, as he fondly recalls traveling from New York to Los Angeles in his parents' new 1955 Fleetwood sedan. "I didn't start out looking for an Eldorado, but I wanted to relive those fins. This car rides very nicely, and it's certainly an eye-catcher. I'll put some work into it, but I want to keep it a driver."



1958 Eldorado Biarritz

Number built: 815

Owners: Henry and Diane Ruby

Price new: \$7,500

Temple Hills, Maryland

Borrowing the quad headlamp treatment first seen on the exclusive Eldorado Brougham, Henry Ruby's 1958 Eldorado Biarritz also features chrome air scoops and vents, rear bumperettes and an exclusive rear fender and tailfin design. Powered by a 335hp, 365-cu.in. V-8 with triple 2-bbl. carburetors, this Biarritz does without the Brougham's air suspension. "I bought this car in 1985 from a friend who didn't have the resources to restore it. It was originally white," he explains. "I drove it until it was badly damaged in an accident in 1993; it took me three years to restore it. I chose to have it painted in a Ford red, which I like better than the reds Cadillac offered. We enjoy driving it each summer, and travel to the James Dean show in Indiana every year, a 670-mile trip one way." Henry does all the mechanical work on his car, and although it now has covered 200,000 miles, the engine hasn't been rebuilt. "I change the oil quite a bit — that helps!"



1958 Eldorado Brougham

Number built: 304

Owner: Stephen J. Kirkwood

Price new: \$13,074

Falls Church, Virginia

"After reading the history of the Eldorado Brougham, I began searching for one for sale," explains owner Stephen J. Kirkwood. "This car was built in January 1958 and shipped to Omaha, Nebraska, and apparently it had spent its entire life in that area. I was attracted to the car because it was rust-free and had been converted to springs, despite still having all its air-ride hardware (leveling valves, relays, lines, air compressor, tank, etc.). The car was complete, including its unique glass, except for the famous 'vanities,' and was one of only two Broughams painted Olympic White — paint code 90, not a standard Brougham color, but one available on 1958 Cadillacs and sometimes used on the Eldorado Seville and Biarritz." Stephen loves the originality and hand-built nature of his Brougham, and appreciates its mere existence. "This made no business sense and resulted in lots of red ink, but one can't help but love the men who would do such a thing."



1959

The largest automotive tailfins ever, with their distinctive bullet taillamps, are shared by all 1959 Cadillacs; multifaceted grilles front and rear add a dramatic touch, and an air ride suspension is standard on Eldorados.

Cadillac dials the Eldorado's styling back a notch for 1960 and, as with 1959, they share bodies with lesser Cadillacs, differing visually in their delicate stainless steel body side trim and badges.

1960



1961

The Eldorado is dramatically restyled along with other Cadillacs, and it is distinguished by special lower body trim, discreet badges and a luxuriously trimmed interior.

As is typical Cadillac styling practice, the 1962 Eldorado benefits from the typical second-year styling refinement for each design generation; its clear taillamps shine red on braking, and its interior materials are upgraded.

1962





1959 Eldorado Biarritz

Number built: 1,320

Owner: Mark Tuwiner

Price new: \$7,401

Annapolis, Maryland

The 1959 Cadillac Eldorado Biarritz and Seville have transcended mere metal and glass to become rolling icons; so prevalent are their images that it's surprising how few were actually built. Mark Tuwiner is an Eldorado specialist, and this is his second 1959 Biarritz. "I had a national show-winning black car, but I was afraid to take it anywhere," Mark stated. "I wanted a car I could leave in a grocery parking lot. I bought this one from the original owner in California, and it's an original black plate car with bucket seats and a 4-inch stack of receipts from new. The silver-on-silver color scheme really attracted me to it, too." Mark's Eldorado features the new-for-1959 345hp, triple 2-bbl.-carbureted 390-cu.in. V-8 engine. Sold alongside Mark's Biarritz when new were the second generation of exclusive Eldorado Broughams, which were designed and assembled in Italy by Pinin Farina, and forecasted styling later seen on 1961 Cadillacs.

1960 Eldorado Seville

Number built: 1,075

Owner: Francene Flesch

Price new: \$7,401

Guilford, Connecticut

"Lola" is the 1960 Eldorado Seville belonging to Francene Flesch, and she is a rare car. "There were about 1,000 built, and 35 are listed in the Cadillac & La Salle Club register, but none are Senior cars," Francene explains. "My husband and I attended an auction in Atlantic City, and I didn't know what I was looking for... I never thought about a Cadillac. I just kept coming back to her." Lola sports a 325hp, 390-cu.in. V-8 with a 4-bbl. carburetor and a power bench seat, and her delicate body-side trim is stainless steel. "I asked my husband to have her front end rechromed one Christmas, so he took it apart and had it all done. The engine has about 75,000 miles and has never been rebuilt, and it's pretty much all original — the air conditioning even works," she smiles. "We are going to the CLC Grand National in Savannah, Georgia next year, and we're driving her. It's good for the car, and it's good



1961 Eldorado Biarritz

Number built: 1,450

Owner: Bernie Cooney

Price new: \$6,477

South Bound Brook, New Jersey

What a difference a year makes. While the 1961 Eldorado Biarritz is roughly the same size as the 1960 model, it looks more svelte due to its updated styling. Bernie Cooney's Biarritz is powered by the carryover 325hp V-8, and it shows its distinctive rear quarter panel "skegs," or lower fins, to good effect. He bought his car in 2000 to participate in a Valley Forge Region Cadillac-La Salle Club national driving tour. Bernie told us: "It wasn't important that the car be an Eldorado, but it had to be a convertible. The year 1961 seemed ideal. The tail fins were perfect. The skeg fins accented the rocket-ship styling. The driving tour merely became a shake-down cruise, and the 1961 Eldorado showed me how to drive all over the East Coast in style. This car was originally triple Jade and, at some point, someone replaced the Jade interior with Sandalwood... this may have been for the better."



1963

The nautically inspired lower tailfin "skegs" of 1961-'62 disappear for 1963, leaving the Eldorado with a smoother appearance that is enhanced by exclusive lower body trim and badges.

Eldorado convertibles have a more athletic appearance in 1964 when they lose their rear-wheel-covering fender skirts. This will be the last appearance of separate tailfins on an Eldorado.

1964



1965

A dramatic restyling for 1965 brings back fender skirts and gives clean-sided Eldorado convertibles the appearance of even greater length. Rear lamps are enclosed in vertical chrome pods that are vestigial tailfins.

The last rear-wheel-drive Eldorado convertibles appear in 1966, and they represent a refinement of 1965 styling; rear lamp and bumper designs are smoothed, and stacked quad headlamps make their last appearance.

1966





1962 Eldorado Biarritz

Number built: 1,450

Owner: Steven M. Tuck

Price new: \$6,610

Midlothian, Virginia

Steven Tuck became a Cadillac enthusiast at an early age; "My father is a minister, and when I was 13, an old couple in his congregation bought a used 1969 Coupe De Ville — it was a dark cherry color. I told myself that they must be important people," he recalls. "We grew up never having a lot, but my grandfather always wanted a Cadillac, and never had one. As I grew older, I decided that I wanted one myself." Steven was attracted to the 1961-'62 models for their "outlandish" design cues, like the sculpted skags and clear taillamps, and he preferred the refined look and new features of 1962 Eldorados. He purchased this 1962 Biarritz, with its 325hp, 2-bbl. carbureted 390-cu.in. V-8, in 1999, and embarked on a concours restoration that would take seven years, two specialists and lots of money to complete. "I didn't get the car back until October 13, just one week before this show." The result of all that care and effort speaks for itself.

1963 Eldorado Biarritz

Number built: 1,825

Price new: \$6,609

Although it was basically a face-lifted version of the 1962 Eldorado, the 1963 Biarritz stepped into the '60s with a bold egg-crate grille and a longer hood and front fenders. Cadillac's trademark tailfins were starting to retreat, and the pronounced body side sculpting that marked the past two years was gone in favor of a clean appearance with discreet Eldorado lettering over a low-mounted stainless steel spear. Real wood veneer trimmed the interior, which could be upholstered in leather, wool or nylon. Although the horsepower and displacement remained constant, the 325hp, 4-bbl.-carbureted 390-cu.in. V-8 was fresh for 1963, a lighter and more compact unit than the one it replaced.



1964 Fleetwood Eldorado

Number built: 1,870

Owner: Larry and Ilene Lesiger

Price new: \$6,630

Haddonfield, New Jersey

Although they have owned this 1964 Eldorado for almost 30 years, Larry and Ilene Lesiger have added a mere 1,000 miles to the odometer. But this isn't for lack of interest; "I was driving a 1971 Eldorado when I bought this running car for \$500," he recalls. "I brought it to my mechanic's house, where it sat in his garage for 12 years. We sent it to Philadelphia to be painted, and got it back two years later. I then drove it for two years, but blew the engine on the way to Hershey. I bought another engine three years later, and brought it to be installed, getting the car back after another three years. The car has really never been driven!" he laughs. Larry's convertible features the enlarged-for-1964 429-cu.in. V-8 that makes 340hp with its 4-bbl. carburetor, as well as the new Turbo-HydraMatic transmission and Comfort Control automatic climate control system; this was one of many handsome 1964 Eldorados to be shown at this Eldorado Extravaganza.

1965 Fleetwood Eldorado

Number built: 2,125

Price new: \$6754

The Eldorado's position had shifted during the 1964 Cadillac lineup, where it became a sub-series of the premium Fleetwood; this designation continued in 1965. The Fleetwood Eldorado was new this year, and it featured a number of styling cues that would become Cadillac staples used for decades to come, including stacked quad headlamps and smooth rear fenders that integrated the taillamps into fin-like appendages. The plastic rear window in previous convertible tops was replaced by tempered glass, and a new fully boxed perimeter frame enhanced the car's comfortable ride. The Eldorado's 340hp, 429-cu.in. V-8 engine was carried over from 1964.



1966 Fleetwood Eldorado

Number built: 2,250

Owner: Richard Castiello

Price new: \$6,631

Potomac, Maryland

Not many Cadillac owners drive vehicles as diverse as Porsche 930 Turbos and Ford Model As, but Richard Castiello isn't a typical car enthusiast. "I thought about getting a 1975-'76 Fleetwood Brougham, because my father had one of them — you could roller skate inside," he laughs. "I talked with a Cadillac friend who advised me to avoid 1970s cars in favor of 1960s models. I attended this Capitol Cadillac show last year and found this car; I spoke with the owner about selling, and he eventually agreed. I've put money into restoring the mechanicals and, although it's straight, it's a long way from perfect — some of the cars here are better than when they rolled off the showroom

floor." Richard's Eldorado demonstrates 1966's new grille and subtler taillamp and rear-bumper design, along with its 340hp, 429-cu.in. V-8. It's one of the last rear-wheel-drive Cadillac convertibles, as the Eldorado's future lay in the razor-edged front-wheel-drive coupe on the horizon for 1967.