

50 years later ...

Still Special



Cadillac produced 12,550 Fleetwood Sixty Specials for 1959. Dave and Dora Forry of Manheim, Pa., own this one.

Few cars will ever match the glitz and glamour of the '59 Fleetwood Sixty Special

Story and photos by Bill Rothermel

It seems almost impossible that more than 60 years have passed since the first tailfin graced the hindquarters of the then-new 1948 Cadillac. Thanks to a General Motors stylist named Harley Earl, fins would become a Cadillac trademark through 1964. Earl gained his inspiration from World War II Lockheed P-38 Lightning aircraft whose rear wing the Cadillac would mimic.

As the '50s evolved, so did the tailfin. They became progressively larger with each passing year, but not until the arrival of Virgil Exner at Chrysler Corp. did things take on proportions of a grand magnitude. While Earl is credited for first using the tailfin as a design element, it was Exner who took things to extremes. Exner penned Chrysler's now legendary "Suddenly it's '60" styling for 1957, sending competitors back to the drawing boards. Quite literally overnight, Chrysler became Detroit's styling leader, causing everyone else to play catch-up.

General Motors, it is said, abandoned the designs its stylists were working on and sought immediately to gain styling superiority. If the 1958 Buick Limited is recognized as the hallmark of excessive chrome, the 1959 Cadillac, designed by Dave Holls, was the undisputed king of fins. According to the late Holls, the massive fins were the result of a directive from top management at Cadillac that the company was not to be outdone — by anyone! No single automotive design better symbolizes the flamboyant '50s than the 1959 Cadillac.

The Sixty Special name made its first appearance as part of Cadillac's 1938 model lineup. It was a derivative of the Series 60, the division's least expensive line of cars (moving upmarket in later years). The Bill Mitchell-designed four-door sedan was a styling masterpiece employing a new X-chassis that enabled the body to rest within the frame while providing the stiffest chassis on the market. In combination with a wheelbase three inches longer than the standard 60 Series cars, the Sixty Special was also three inches lower than its siblings. Running boards

were omitted, as was the typical beltline trim, giving the car a sleek appearance that made it appear even lower still. The Sixty Special remained a part of the Cadillac lineup through 1972 (eventually returning in 1987).

The Sixty Special always signified something unique and, well, special in the Cadillac lineup. That held true for 1959 as well. The Sixty Special was a sedan until 1957, when it adopted the hardtop sedan styling of the rest of the Cadillac line. However, it retained its own distinctive moldings and trim. For 1959, the unique Sixty Special trim included side-mounted dummy air scoops on the rear fenders along with a thin chrome bead from the front fender back to the rear bumper and then forward once again to the front wheel well. The fin-mounted taillights were chromed as compared to body color on lesser models. Cadillac produced 12,550 for the 1959 model year. Dave and Dora Forry of Manheim, Pa., are the lucky owners of one of those rare '59 Sixty Specials.

The Forrys' car sat for sale along Route 462 in south-central Pennsylvania for months, its owner having lost storage. Dave heard about the car, but had no interest in a four-door. Three months later, wife Dora passed by the Caddy only to tell Dave that it wasn't just an ordinary Cadillac sedan. Upon discovery that it was a Sixty Special (no less with air suspension), the couple further realized that the car was essentially rust-free and had an odometer reading of just 15,000 miles! Needless to say, they quickly made arrangements to purchase the car and arrange for delivery.

While Dora was signing the papers, Dave was doing necessary repairs — in the parking lot — to make the car road worthy for the trip home. When completed, Dave turned the key and the car turned right over, somewhat remarkably, rising from its resting position. Much to his surprise, the air suspension worked just fine. "The car felt great," he said.

What followed was a four-year restoration completed in August 2008. While working on the car, an owner's card was found with a Cumberland, Md., address on it. "Capitol Cadillac," the famous Washington, D.C. Cadillac dealer, was inscribed in pencil on top of the radio, leading the couple to believe that the car might have been originally sold there.

While the body was never removed from the frame, a comprehensive restoration included all chrome, glass, in-



terior, carpet and paint, with Dave doing all but the upholstery and a portion of the paintwork himself. Door panels are original, but the leather was dried out and cracked, necessitating replacement. The Ebony Black exterior perfectly complements the interior, a combination of white leather and black Colony cloth.

In addition to the air-suspension, a \$215 option when new, the car is loaded with extras, including power vent windows, power door locks, power trunk release and pull-down, Autronic Eye, cruise control, fog lamps, signal-seeking radio with floor foot switch and air conditioning, which was \$474 in 1959!

The expert restoration received its Senior badge and a first-place at the Cadillac-LaSalle Club Grand National meet in Cherry Hill, N.J., at its first showing, which came within hours after its restoration was complete. In addition, the car was given its AACA First Junior at Hershey, Pa., last fall, as well as the Best Restoration and Detailing Award at the Lancaster, Pa., Artistry in Motion Vintage Grand Tour and Show last May.

The Forrys are a Cadillac family — they also own an award-winning 1964 deVille convertible and are restoring a '59 Eldorado Biarritz. It too, has air suspension. "It's like restoring three cars, it's so complicated," Dave joked.

While he was standing back and admiring the car that first time he saw it over five years ago, Dave says a group of teenagers drove by, slowed down and yelled out, "That's the ugliest car we've ever seen."

They probably wouldn't think so if they saw it now.