



THE 1949 TO 1954 "STEP-DOWN" HUDSON

by Rick Feibusch

Prior to the 2006 release of the Pixar/Disney film "Cars," in which a blue Hudson Hornet called "Doc Hudson" stars as a decidedly grumpy retired racecar from the past, many younger people viewed the Hudson motorcar as the extinct cousin to the Nash and yet another marque fatality of the 1950s. There are still many of us that remember this fine nameplate in its pre-AMC merger days, when high quality, solid build, pace setting performance, and technical innovation were Hudson hallmarks. Created with the idea to offer improved transportation at a reasonable cost, Hudson was successful almost from the start in serving the upper middle-class motorists of the day.

Unlike many pioneer automakers, the Hudson wasn't named for the man who created the car, but for the man who financed the company. The founders of this firm, veterans of the Olds Motor Works, were Roy D. Chapin, Howard Coffin, George Dunham and Roscoe Jackson. The honor of sharing his name with the new brand went to Joseph Hudson, owner of the giant department store, and an uncle to Mr. Jackson by marriage.

Prior to WWII, the Hudson line was considered a great example of independent auto making, one of the most respected names in American automobiles. From the streamlined little Terraplanes, competing well against contemporary Fords, Plymouths, and Chevys, to the big Super Eight Broughams which ventured off into big Buick territory, the Hudson had quite a following of folks that understood quality motorcars and dared to be a bit different.

By 1940, Hudson management had discontinued the lower line Terraplanes and replaced the 1930s art deco streamliner styling with an almost nautical-looking, contemporarily styled body featuring minimal running boards, a radical "V"-style windshield, and small wheel openings cut into large "pontoon"-style fenders. (See a picture of a 1940 Hudson sedan to the right)



gravity than previous models, and brand new coil spring independent front suspension. Performance was superb and this was shown to the public at the Bonneville Salt Flats when a standard 6-cylinder sedan set new AAA endurance record by traveling over 20,000 miles at an average speed of 70.5 MPH!

The Hudson line, save for some minor facelifts, remained pretty much the same until civilian production ceased in 1942. After producing weaponry and aircraft parts during the war, auto production resumed in late 1945.

With demand for new cars at a feverish level, Hudson joined most of the rest of the industry by mild restyles of 1942 designs. The factory cranked out as many Supers and Commodores as steel allotments would permit, until the new postwar designs were unveiled in late 1947.

For the 1948 model year, Hudson took their first really bold move into uncharted waters by bringing out an entirely new line with unitary construction, and added a significant design feature by enclosing the rear wheels within the frame rails. It was coined the Step-Down-Design because the floors were considerably lower than, and surrounded by, the structural sills that formed the integral framework. Because of the frame, only the lower portion of the rear wheels are visible

This project, though not considered a gamble in those days of fast and easy auto sales, had cost the company over sixteen million uninflated, postwar dollars. The new lower bodywork, when combined with the deep V of the windshield, low top and glass, visually nonexistent back tires, and acres of photographically processed wood grained interior metal, gave the Hudson a now unmistakable boat-like feeling. The top-of-the-line Commodore name was right at home on this vessel.

The line consisted of Supers and the upmarket Commodores in both six & eight cylinder versions. All models were available as a 2-door Brougham, a 4-door sedan and a club coupe. A classy-looking ragtop was added to the line in the fall of 1948. Under the hood, buyers had their choice of a 262 cid inline six, rated at 121 horses, or an inline 254 cid eight with 128 hp. Prices ranged from \$2,069 for the baseline coupe to \$2,836 for the convertible. The eight was offered only in the Club Coupe and Sedan for an extra \$35.

British-made Dinky Toys model of a 1950 Step-Down Hudson pictured at the top of this page.



1949 was the Hudson Motor Car Company's 40th anniversary and best sales year to date, with almost 160,000 cars sold that year.

As the 1950s dawned, Hudson decided to change its marketing tactics by offering an even less-expensive model, the new Pacemaker 500. This new step-down model sat on a shorter 119" wheelbase which took the bumper-to-bumper measurements down to 201.5", while the existing models got a bit longer to just under 208.25". Powering the Pacemaker 500 was a new smaller 232 cubic inch six with 112 horsepower.

This new series was offered in the same five body styles as the Super with a four-door sedan, two-door Brougham, Business and Club Coupes and stylish convertible Brougham. The Pacemaker models could be ordered in both base and Deluxe trim. Commodores were also marketed in two trim levels, base and Custom, while the Super line was only available in a single trim level.

In 1951, Hudson introduced the Hornet. It rode atop a modified version of the Super Six chassis and was outfitted with either a 262 cube side valve six, or a big, new and powerful 308 cubic inch six. In addition to higher performance, Hudson also added some higher style for 1951 by introducing a new Hollywood hardtop that was offered in all series on the 124" wheelbase.

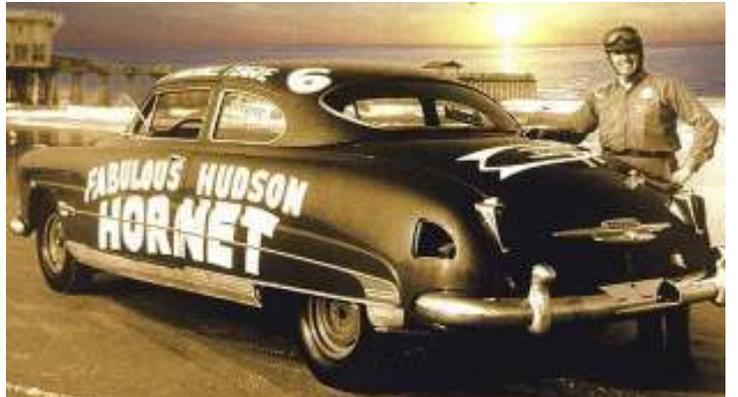
The Hudson marque dominated the NASCAR circuit in the early fifties. In a time when stock car racing was exactly that - stock cars racing on an oval track - the Hudson was king. The cars were purchased from the showroom and taken to the track and no manufacturer could boast a better record than the Hudson Company. Powered by their potent L-Head side-valve inline-six cylinder engines, they were virtually unbeatable.



It must have been somewhat embarrassing for the other manufacturers who showed up with engines that had two extra cylinders and nearly 100 cubic-inches larger in size, only to finish behind the Hudsons. In 1952, Hudson won 27 NASCAR Grand National races, 22 in 1953, and 17 in 1954. It finished first in 47 AAA and NASCAR events, amassing 36 victories in 42 starts.



A stock Hudson engine produced 145hp. After Marshall Teague and Hudson engineer Vince Piggins worked their magic, the engines became race worthy with a bigger bore, larger valves, modified combustion chambers, high-lift cams, dual exhausts, high compression heads, and the "Twin H-Power" carbs. The result was an increase by 75hp and increased torque. To accommodate this increase in power, the suspension, brakes and axles were beefed-up.



Despite the wins at the track, actual sales didn't pick up as fast as was hoped. Attempting to rebuild sales after a drop in 1950 to 121,405 units, a modest increase to 131,915 units were sold during the 1951 model year.



In 1952 Hudson limited changes to a minor face-lift. While the base Pacemaker series was downgraded in trim and appointments, a new and more powerful Pacemaker Wasp package was available, replacing the 112 hp, 232 cu. in. six with the 127 hp, 262 cube six, The Wasp package became a popular choice for many Hudson buyers. The Super series was deleted, leaving only the Commodore & Hornet lines.

Changes in trim and details were about all that Hudson could afford for the 1953 models because of the funds spent developing a new smaller Hudson, the Jet. The Hudson Jet ultimately failed in its attempt at being a Nash Rambler or Henry J-sized compact car. Jet development ate up precious engineering money that could have been used for updating the mainstream models. The Commodore name was retired in 1953, the Hornet now taking the flagship position

By 1954, Hudson was in deep trouble, so a lot of changes were made to the new models, starting with a square-lined makeover. While the "Step-down" Hudson had been a marvel when it debuted in 1948, they were getting long in the tooth. Hudson's straight-eight engine was easily outclassed by the newer OHV V8s, and while the Hornets dominated stock car racing early in the decade, by 1954 they were still only 6 cylinder cars, and their unitized "Monobilt" body was costly and difficult to update. Compounding this was the ill-fated Jet compact.



The Hornet convertible, Hudson's only remaining ragtop, was particularly attractive with the new bodywork, but at \$3,288 it was overpriced for a six-cylinder car in 1954, as were other Step-downs. As a result, sales fell again, dropping to just 36,436 for the model year

By the end of the 1954 model year, Hudson was looking for a partner, and found hope in the Nash-Kelvinator Corporation, headquartered in Kenosha, WI. The Hudson name continued on as badge-engineered Nashes. Three years later, Hudson was gone, a victim of too little change in fast-changing times (picture of a rare Jet convertible prototype is at bottom of this page).



DRIVING A 1950 HUDSON COMMODORE SIX

The first impression one gets, once behind the huge white wheel and the massive symmetrical simulated wood dash, is pure Chris-Craft, - more like 'On Golden Pond' than 'Driving Miss Daisy'. The gauges are all in the center, flanked by a small glove box on both the port and starboard sides. The windshield appears to be way out over the carburetor, but this is only an optical illusion. Though the top looks low on the outside, there is plenty of headroom in the limousine-sized interior.



Turn the key and hit the starter button and you're greeted by a lovely sports car-like burble. Put her in first, let out the clutch, and we're off smoothly and smartly. As I shift into second, I notice the smoothness of the clutch action and the owner reminds me that most Hudsons were equipped with "wet" clutches. This cork surfaced clutch disc is submerged in a fluid that makes rough gear changes and downshifts a thing of the past. Additional maintenance in the form of frequent fluid checks and changes is offset by super smooth operation without the slop and sluggishness of Chrysler's Fluid Drive.



The original 267 cube six is smooth and willing, even while hauling two tons of Commodore around with it, and the overdrive will turn a noisy 55 mph into a quiet 65 at the drop of a lever.

On the road the Commodore rides well and the unit construction produces little noise or vibration. The steering is slow and light and the body belies its nautical appearance by producing a solid wallow-free ride and much-better-than-average directional stability for a car of this vintage. The suspension smoothes the bumps without following them and freeway expansion strip noise doesn't resonate through the body.



I remember the glowing road tests of these Hudsons written by "Uncle" Tom McCahill and how I could not understand how this knowledgeable and opinionated man liked such an odd looking, six cylinder car that was not nearly as cool as a V8 Olds or Merc. Now that I'm probably as old as he was at the time, I can finally say, "Tom, wherever you are, you were right".

Possibly The World's Prettiest Step-Down Hudson - A Customized Cruiser From Australia

This sleek bronze-orange Hudson coupe is owned by Paul McKennariey and was built by Paul Kelly of Smooth Customs in Beenleigh, Queensland. Starting with a long-wheelbase, 1948 4-door sedan, Paul reworked almost every body panel to make this beautiful 2-door custom. The top has been chopped and shortened to a pleasing shape somewhere between a 2-door Brougham and a Club Coupe. The lights, bumpers and grille have been "frenched" into the bodywork making the car smooth from the front to the rear. The filled lower panels and scooped fender skirts add to the sleekness of line - it is a fantastic interpretation of the original Hudson design.

