

The 1942 - 1948 Chevrolet

By Rick Feibusch

The 1948 Chevy was a handsome car. It wasn't low slung and modern like the Studebaker, or have streamlined Zeppelin styling like a postwar Packard, but it certainly was handsome. This car was the last chapter in the history of a model line that started in mid-1941.

While the '42 Chevy appeared quite new with its low, wide grillwork and headlights smoothly blended into fenders that flowed Buick-like into the doors, the underpinnings were much as had come before.

Civilian auto production shut down to make room for war production in early February after less than 260,000 cars had been built. Between 1942 and 1945, a number of '42 models were held in storage for "High Priority" buyers by the Office of Price Administration and were slowly released after June 1943. These were all "blackout" models with painted brightwork. The rest of the folks drove old cars or took the bus. Enter, the car famine.

By 1946, America needed new cars. The old ones were worn out and replacement parts were in short supply. Most of the American manufacturers just started cranking out face lifted '42 models. Chevy installed a wider, less fussy grille and started selling all they could build. The '47 Chevrolets sported an even wider, much more attractive grille and some cleaner, more up-to-date side trim. Sales were booming. Chevy set an all-time convertible sales record when it produced 28,443 units.



But the Chevy started to look old by 1948. Not bad, just old. Nash, Packard, and Hudson had introduced their versions of Buck Rogers space rocket and GM wouldn't be ready to show its next generation of cars until 1949. The '48 was the last and the best of its line. Chevrolet's venerable 216 cu.in. six had finally been updated with precision-type main bearings instead of the old rough fit and reamers, and a vacuum assist for the three speed column mounted shifter. In total, 776,000 Chevys were built that year before the lines were shut down to retool for the 1949 models.

Drive Report: This is not my first time around the block in a '48 Chevy. In 1965, I bought a nifty Fleetline Aerosedan from the local butcher in Menlo Park, CA for \$75. Drove it to Woodside High and to visit my girlfriend, who had moved to this place called Milpitas, that was about 35 miles away. In the Chevy, with its maximum safe cruising speed of 50 MPH, it felt like a hundred miles. I used the hand throttle as a primitive cruise control and watched the VW vans fly past. My '48 might have been slow but it never once let me down.

A '48 Chevrolet somehow appears larger than it really is. It's high, the doors are big and heavy, and all of the styling components are large. The hood is big and so are the fenders if you count the part that is attached to the door. Still, if you park one next to a Chevy from the mid-'50s, the '48 looks like a compact. Quite an illusion.

This is one of those "armchair" cars that remind one of sitting in grandma's salon. I grabbed onto that bigger-than-life, white steering wheel, tugged the shifter into neutral and pressed my toe down on the floor mounted starter pedal. The little stovebolt hardly cranked, and ticked right over - just like my old fastback (damn, I wish I hadn't sold that car). The fully instrumented dash sprung to life, the little needles jumping to their appropriate places.

As I again found myself tugging at the shifter, I remembered that it was vacuum actuated. I'm not sure what the reasoning was for a gearchange that could be easily shifted with one finger - very slowly. If one tries to shift faster, even using a complete hand, the assist slows the process down, as shifting feels much like stirring well beaten whipped cream.

On the road, the car feels big and durable. It sits high, rides soft and smooth, and leans like a speedboat in the curves. You sit behind that really big wheel, shifting that easy but slow shifter while listening to the lethargic six moan through its low-end, torque-intensive power range. What it doesn't have in outright performance is made up for by a feeling of quiet strength - sort of the Gary Cooper of cars.

This was obviously the last incarnation of a prewar car. It was handsome, well fitted, and had benefited from the engineering and material advancements made since 1941. These cars were solid and hard to break - a testimony to a time in America when things were built a bit better and life was a lot slower. - a time before the interstates when a car trip was to be a comfortable adventure, rather than a high speed bore. A time many of us, down deep, would like to go back to - or at least visit for awhile.

