

Convertible Sales down; almost extinct

By James C. Jones
(Newsweek Feature Service)

DETROIT—What is it about a man who drives a convertible, that certain something that seems to set him apart from the pack? A suggestion of reckless adventure, perhaps? A hint of glamour? An air of clan?

Well, whatever it is now, within a very few years the only thing that will distinguish a convertible-owner from the more mundane motorist is his attachment to old, out-of-date and discredited automobiles.

For if present trends continue, the convertible—once the symbol of youth, style and dash—will soon be but a relic of a more innocent and carefree age.

The saga of the life and death of convertibles is told dramatically by statistics. Between 1950 and 1965, U. S. sales of convertibles fairly leaped: from 206,000 a year to 509,415. Then, suddenly, something happened. In 1966, sales dropped to 394,679; in 1967 to 335,310, in 1969 to 201,997.

Last year, American auto makers sold only 91,863 convertibles and estimates for total 1971 sales are even more dismal: about 75,000 cars altogether.

American Motors Corp., always the last in the sales race, was the first to detect the trend and act on it. It canceled its own convertible line in 1968. Now Chrysler says 1971 has seen the last of its rag-toppers.

Ford and General Motors are still pressing gallantly onward, but even the most enthusiastic of executives now concedes that it is futile to keep trying to sell people cars they don't want.

"It wasn't the manufacturer leading the demise, but the manufacturer following the consumer lead," says Donald Kopka, an executive director of Ford's product planning and styling staff and a self-confessed "ex-convertible owner and lover." "Sales just went to hell."

To a large extent, the convertible is a casualty of progress, and the collapse of the market coincided closely with the emergence of two elements of that progress: a realization of how hideously polluted is most of the air that circulates over major roadways and the growing concern for automotive safety.

"Driving on a crowded road with the top down," says one former aficionado who has since switched to a hardtop, air-conditioned fastback, "is about as pleasant as wrapping your mouth around the tailpipe of a bus and breathing deeply. Even if you don't get poisoned, your face is pelted with dirt and soot until you're so blind you may pile into the car in front of you."

By dint of their convertibility, convertibles have always been notoriously unsafe. In a roll-over, many convertibles—without reinforced steel roofs and sturdy supporting posts—were

death traps. When car makers tried to make up for this hazard by fashioning rugged, bottom-heavy bodies, they ran into nasty balance problems.

Recently, in order to conform to Federal safety standards, manufacturers have had to figure out a way to install shoulder harnesses in the topless cars, and the result for the driver has been a getup that is not only uncomfortable but distinctly unglamorous.

Then there is the indisputable fact that in the modern age of speed and efficiency, convertibles are terribly impractical.

At high speeds, the noise in a convertible is deafening and any dust that is tracked into the car is transformed into a storm of annoying missiles.

Many motorists have gladly switched to cars with sliding sun roofs, which may offer less of a sense of freedom but which invite less peril.

Convertible tops often leak, usually rattle or lose vital nuts and bolts, and always consume an inordinate amount of space when they are stowed away—space that would otherwise be available for luggage or increased rear-seat leg-room.

In all but the most benignly sunny of states, convertible owners have found that they are able to make use of the removable top on, at most, a few score days a year. One Northeastern driver has determined that he puts the top down only about 10 times in an average year.

Finally, convertibles are the

favorite—and very vulnerable—targets of rogues and vandals—both those who want to make off with the car or its contents and those who get their kicks from slashing canvas tops.

When that inevitable final day comes and the last convertible rolls off a U.S. assembly line, Detroit's motor moguls will be only too happy. Granted, convertibles draw higher prices, but they also cost more to make and are a design and manufacturing nuisance.

To several generations of Americans, however, the passing of the convertible will be a sad occasion, a time to reflect on lost youth and recall romantic interludes tooling along the open road with the whole sky shimmering above. It will also be a time to ponder anew the merits of this thing called progress.



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