

# 1955 Chevrolet

STORY AND PHOTO BY BILL VANCE

Every once in a while a car company produces a model that seems to have everything: styling, performance, durability, etc. Chevrolet achieved this with its 1955 model, and old-car enthusiasts have rewarded it by recognizing the '55 Chevy as a modern classic. Chevrolet production began in 1911, and after getting out from under the all conquering shadow of the Model T Ford, it went on to become very popular. It built a reputation as a durable, dependable car that was easy and economical to repair, and had good residual value when the time came to trade. Chevrolet didn't emphasize sparkling performance or outstanding styling, but by cultivating an image of solid virtues it established its position as North America's most popular car year after year. That somewhat staid image was about to change in 1955. Although it would retain all of those solid virtues, Chevrolet would add outstanding styling and scintillating performance. It proved to be a winning combination. Work began on the all-new 1955 Chevrolet in June 1952. The engineering was under the direction of Chevrolet chief engineer Edward Cole, while the styling was guided by GM's legendary styling guru Harley Earl.

In addition to its traditional overhead valve, "Blue Flame" inline six, the new Chevrolet was also to have an overhead valve V-8 engine, its first V-8 since it offered one briefly in 1917-18. Cole was no stranger to V-8s, having started his engineering career with Cadillac, a marque that had used vee-type engines since 1915. He was Cadillac's chief engineer when it brought out the trend-setting 1949 short-stroke, overhead valve V-8.

In designing the new Chevrolet V-8, Cole and crew applied the latest in engine engineering. They decided on a displacement of 4.3 litres (265 cu in.), which was achieved with an over-square bore and stroke of 95.25 X 76.2 mm. (3.75 X 3.00 in.)

The sturdy forged steel crankshaft turned in five main bearings, and light, aluminum, skirtless "slipper" type pistons contributed to a free-revving engine. The valve rockers pivoted on ball studs rather than the traditional rocker shaft.

Careful attention was paid to weight control, and through compact design and thin-wall casting techniques, the new V-8 weighed only 243 kg (535 lb), which was 18 kg (40 lb) lighter than the Chevrolet six, and 23 kg (50 lb) lighter than the 4.5 litre (272 cu in.) Ford V-8.

This compact, lightweight Chevrolet V-8 developed 162 horsepower in standard form, and could be had in any Chevrolet. Also available was an optional 180 horsepower Power Pack version which included a four-barrel carburetor and dual exhausts.

The Chevy "small block" engine, as it became known, would prove to be an extremely durable design. Displacement was raised to 4.6 litres (283 cu in.) in 1957, and later would undergo increases to 5.4 litres (327 cu in.) and 5.7 (350). It became a GM stalwart, and its derivative is still with us, now in its fourth generation.

Other technical developments for 1955 included a 12-volt electrical system, up from 6-volt, ball-joint front suspension replacing kingpins, and an open Hotchkiss driveshaft instead of the torque-tube type long used by Chevrolet. In addition to its sensational new engine, Chevrolet got equally sensational new styling for 1955. Dubbed the "Motoramic" Chevrolet, it featured a vertical-pillar wraparound windshield, hooded headlamps, a canted egg-crate grille, and raised taillights that evoked images of Cadillac. It was a bold and beautifully integrated design. The 1955 Chevrolet came in three series: One-Fifty, Two-Ten, and Bel Air. There were two- and four-door sedans, two- and four- door wagons, and a two-door convertible. In addition to the regular stations wagons, Chevrolet offered a specialty two-door Nomad station wagon. It was expensive, and sold in small numbers, but it soon became one of those rarities: a collectible wagon.

Although it looked longer, lower and wider, the '55 Chevy's dimensions were little changed from 1954. It had the same 2,921 mm (115 in.) wheelbase, and its 4,968 mm (195 in.) length was actually slightly shorter than the '54. A flatter roof profile made it 63 mm (2.5 in) lower.

But the '55 Chevrolet was more than just a glamorous body with a new engine; it was a real performer too. Road & Track (2/55) tested one with the 180 horsepower Power Pack V-8 and three-speed-plus-overdrive transmission. With the overdrive, Chevrolet fitted a low 4.11:1 rear axle (it was 2.88:1 overall with the overdrive), which gave it outstanding acceleration.

R & T's testers recorded zero to 96 km/h (60 mph) in a quick 9.7 seconds for the 1,538 kg (3,390 lb) two-door sedan. Top speed was 168 km/h (104.7 mph), achieved in high gear rather than in overdrive. The '55 Chevy had brought scorching performance to the low priced field, and not surprisingly, was chosen to pace the 1955 Indy 500. Chevrolet was quite justified in advertising it as "The Hot One."

This wonderful engineering, styling and performance was a hit with customers. The '55 Chevy outsold the '54 by 1.64 million to 1.15 million, and helped push the North American auto industry to the highest sales it had ever enjoyed. The 1955 Chevrolet, and the derivative 1956 and '57 models, are now very popular collectibles.

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