

## RETROSPECT



# '57 CADILLAC ELDORADO BROUGHAM

**O**ccasionally, a great notion inspires the auto industry to forge ahead full-throttle against incredible odds. During the fearless '50s, Cadillac launched various flights of fancy, one of which went into production as the '57 Eldorado Brougham. Though it was by no means a financial success, the Brougham is a significant event in automotive history because it is *the* modern-day Duesenberg: the last cost-no-object, limited-production, largely handmade automobile produced in America for sale to the public.

General Motors warmed up for the Brougham production run with several dream cars. At the 1953 GM Motorama (where the Corvette was born), Cadillac presented the Orleans, the industry's first four-door hardtop. The public's interest in this exercise convinced GM's design boss, Harley Earl, that a spectacular four-seat four-door sedan was the way to go.

At the 1954 Motorama, Earl checked his hunch with a luxurious four-door called the Cadillac Park Avenue. Then, at the first stop of the 1955 Motorama in New York City, Cadillac rolled forth its Eldorado Brougham showpiece to more rave reviews. Two months later, when the Motorama stopped in San Francisco, Cadillac announced the Brougham would go on sale during the '56 model year.

Harley Earl's chutzpah wasn't the sole driving force be-

## WHEN A CADDY COST MORE THAN A ROLLS

by Don Sherman

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM FRENAK

hind the Brougham. In 1952, Ford commenced efforts to resuscitate the Lincoln Continental with hopes of unseating Cadillac as the luxury car king. The Continental Mark II was unveiled in the fall of 1955 with a pricetag of \$9517. Various delays beset the Brougham, but when it finally went on sale a year and a half later, its price was a heart-stopping \$13,074. A Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud cost \$12,700 in 1957.

Other than a 126-inch wheelbase and precious pricetags, the Lincoln Continental Mark II and the Cadillac Eldorado Brougham had little in common. While the Mark was a clean, classic reflection of prewar glories, the Brougham rocketed design aesthetics and engineering capabilities into the '60s.

Regular Cadillacs were growing larger each year, but the Brougham was, in Earl's words, "a compact, personalized automobile." It rode on a wheelbase 3.5 inches shorter than the standard model's and its roof was lower by some 4 inches. Every body panel was unique to this low-volume model. Standard Cadillac powertrain components, such as a 365-cubic-inch V-8 breathing through two four-barrel carburetors, went through a rigorous inspection and selection process to qualify for Brougham use.

The '57 Brougham's custom Fleetwood bodywork was rich-



ly adorned with every stylistic and technological advancement that could be mustered: a low front-hinged hood, quad headlamps, brushed stainless steel roof, narrow-whitewall low-profile tires on composite steel-and-aluminum wheels, air suspension, and a compound-curved windshield. Of course, there were power accessories galore. An electric motor raised and lowered the trunklid at the touch of a button. When a front door opened, the seat moved back and down for entry, then automatically returned to one of two memory positions. If the ignition key was on, the engine started automatically as soon as the shift lever was moved to the park or neutral position.

Shifting into gear locked the doors and disengaged the inside rear door handles. An "autronic" eye watched for oncoming headlamps before automatically selecting low beams.

Luxury touches graced the four-place interior. Sunvisors were laminated from clear and opaque plastic for a polarizing effect. A large glovebox was packed with amenities including six magnetized refreshment tumblers, cigarette case, com-

pact, and tissue dispenser. The fold-down rear armrest housed a notepad with mechanical pencil, beveled mirror, and a one-ounce atomizer of Arpège Extract de Lanvin perfume.

Glen Durmisevich, a member of the General Motors advanced design staff and resident of Rochester, Michigan, owns the Eldorado Brougham featured in this Retrospect. A mere toddler when the Brougham came to be, Durmisevich later discovered the Cadillac of his dreams in a vintage copy of *Popular Science* and purchased this car—actually, his second Brougham—in 1983.

Durmisevich is an excellent guide to the weird but wonderful delights of the Eldorado Brougham because he knows so well that cars *aren't* built this way today. The show begins with a four-horn fanfare loud enough to blast aside a Peterbilt. Durmisevich points out a cast-aluminum front bumper that makes Madonna seem flat-chested. He draws attention to the seamless prow, achieved by welding both front fenders to a finish panel above the grille.

The Brougham's door system is bizarre, to say the least. Suicide rear doors swing out and up on compound hinges. Both doors latch into a half-height B-pillar and seal against each other. Access to the two-place back seat is surprisingly good in spite of the short rear door opening and the two-door-hardtop roofline.

During a test drive granted by our gracious host, we listened for telltale signs of chassis flex. There are the usual old-car creaks and rattles, but the pillarless door system feels solid and secure. The air suspension helps this 35-year-old Cadillac glide over broken pavement with slightly less than the usual amount of impact harshness. Pitch-and-roll motion also feels more damped than in coil-sprung cars of this period. The steering is slow, over-assisted, and imprecise by today's standards, allowing the bias-ply front tires to follow pavement grooves and road crown instead of minding the driver's hands. High-angle visibility through the wrapover windshield is exemplary.

Flooring the accelerator opens eight hungry throttle bores. A polite moan from the engine room is accompanied by a methodical gain in momentum. With 5400 pounds of custom-crafted coachwork and power accessories to tote around, the 325-horsepower (gross rating) engine has its work cut out. Contrary to popular opinion, the fuel-level needle doesn't fall faster than the speedometer needle rises.

Cadillac built 400 Eldorado Broughams in 1957 and sold them to such celebrities and potentates as Bob Hope, Frank Sinatra, and David Rockefeller. Lincoln abandoned the ultra-luxury field at the end of that model year after building 4660 Mark IIs. In 1958, Cadillac sold 304 more Broughams, then handed body manufacturing over to Pinin Farina in Italy for another 200 greatly simplified '59-'60 models.

While the buying public capriciously shifted its attention to tiny European imports and America's first compacts, GM tallied its losses: approximately \$9 million for the Brougham affair or \$10,000 per car. Considering the fact that it bought absolute luxury-class supremacy, that was a mere pittance.





An "autronic" eye dims headlamps, and the hand-finished coachwork surrounds aluminum bumpers and quad headlamps. A pillarless construction challenged body engineers, while interior is crammed with luxurious amenities.



## From the Archives

"How It Feels To Ride in a \$13,500 Car" was *Motor Trend's* headline for the July '57 test of the Cadillac Eldorado Brougham. Bigger than a Tokyo apartment, and more luxuriously furnished, the Eldo Brougham amazed and delighted *MT's* staffers with its gilded upholstery and world-of-tomorrow gadgets.

"When you enter this semi-custom beauty, you find yourself enveloped in an aura of luxury," the description began. "The interior is distinctive and luxurious beyond any produc-



tion car made in this country."

On the road, the giant Brougham ran "smoothly and almost silently," but it was noted that "performance is not highest on the list." No acceleration runs were timed on the highly guarded test car *MT* drove, but in the June '57 issue, a full-boat Fleetwood 60 Special (weighing "only" 5100 pounds) registered 0-60 mph in 12.4 seconds. Figure about a second slower for the Eldo.

The land yacht's air-suspension was labeled as "super soft," but with "some road feel." In closing, *MT's* reporter effluviated that he'd "never before so much enjoyed an automobile ride."

—C. Van Tune

### SPECIFICATIONS

'57 Cadillac Eldorado Brougham  
(July '57)

Base price .....	\$13,074
Engine .....	365 ci V-8
Horsepower .....	325 (gross) @ 4800 rpm
Induction .....	Two 4-bbl carburetors
Transmission .....	3-speed auto.
Curb weight .....	5400 lb
0-60 mph .....	13.5 sec (est.)
Quarter mile .....	19.0 sec/75.0 mph (est.)