



RETROSPECT

1957 '58 '59

FORD SKYLINERS

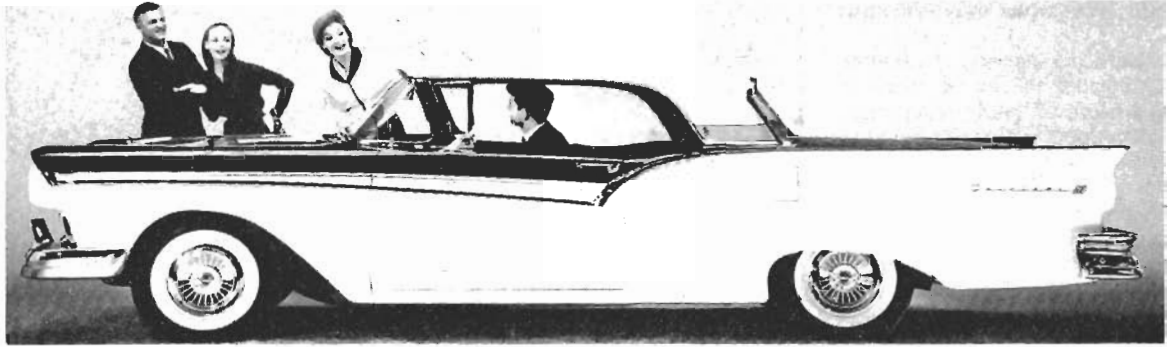
(from foreground)

Owned by Joseph Geswein,
T.E. Moon, Howard F. Voigt

Photographed for *Motor Trend*
by Roy Query



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The way we were. This photo sequence was part of the original Skyliner promo kit. See anyone you know?

1957 '58 '59 FORD SKYLINERS

"The Skyliner is the forerunner of tomorrow's automobile"

—Robert S. McNamara, General Manager, Ford Motor Company

by Bob Nagy

The year was 1957. By 1960, both McNamara and the Skyliner would be conspicuously absent from the automotive scene. The former went on to become secretary of defense under President Kennedy. The latter fell prey to the numbers game and passed over to that great auto museum in the sky.

To understand the rationale behind the Skyliner, one must consider the time frame in which it appeared. In the late 1950s, America stood on the threshold of the Space Age. We were im-

mersed in civilization's greatest period of technological advancement. This led to the rise of a collective fascination with anything that heralded our first few steps into a brave new world.

While the economy was enjoying one of its last periods of genuine prosperity, Madison Avenue was fostering levels of image consciousness and consumer demand that were equally unprecedented in history. Ford gambled \$20 million on the development of the Skyliner retractable, hoping that it would serve as a

touchstone for a new breed of techno chic status seeker. Shortly thereafter, millions of Americans did adopt a talisman that symbolized their allegiance to the future. Unfortunately for Ford, it was the transistor radio.

The Skyliner name first appeared in 1954. Back then it manifested itself as a Crestline coupe equipped with a tinted plexiglass moonroof. The following year it showed up as a Crown Victoria coupe, with a tinted plexi panel replacing the front portion of its hardtop. The

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final shot for this first-generation Skyliner came in 1956, when only 608 units were sold.

Ford's advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson, referred to the Skyliner at the time as a piece of "motivation engineering," a snappy little phrase that translated into "sales gimmick." When the gimmick got old, the moonroofed wonder was put out to pasture, but the Skyliner name was salvaged and given another chance to return as "... the most exciting idea in automobile design since Ford presented the first 2-door sedan in 1915."

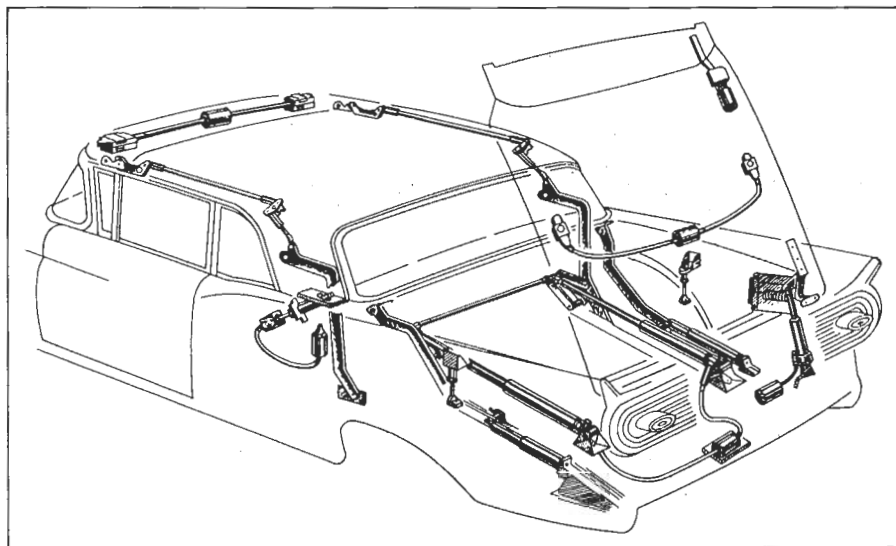
Life began auspiciously enough for the retractable hardtop. At pre-introduction showings in New York, Detroit and Chicago, the second-generation Skyliner played to rave reviews and flooded switchboards with inquiries about its availability. Ford touted the car as "... the beginning of a new era in automotive design," referring to it as safer, more comfortable, better looking and more practical than a conventional convertible. To further enhance the possibilities of widespread market acceptance, they established an artificially low base price for the Skyliner. At \$2945 it was by no means cheap, but it was considerably less than most of its canvas-topped contemporaries.

So what went wrong? Well, for all of the technological advances being made, this era was certainly no golden age of marketing research. Ford failed to consider the possibility that the public might continue to look upon the new Skyliner as nothing more than a clever gimmick—the perfect gift for the man who has everything. To those in the market for a \$3000 toy, it was heaven. To the rest of us, it was just something neat that we watched go through its paces in various advertisements.

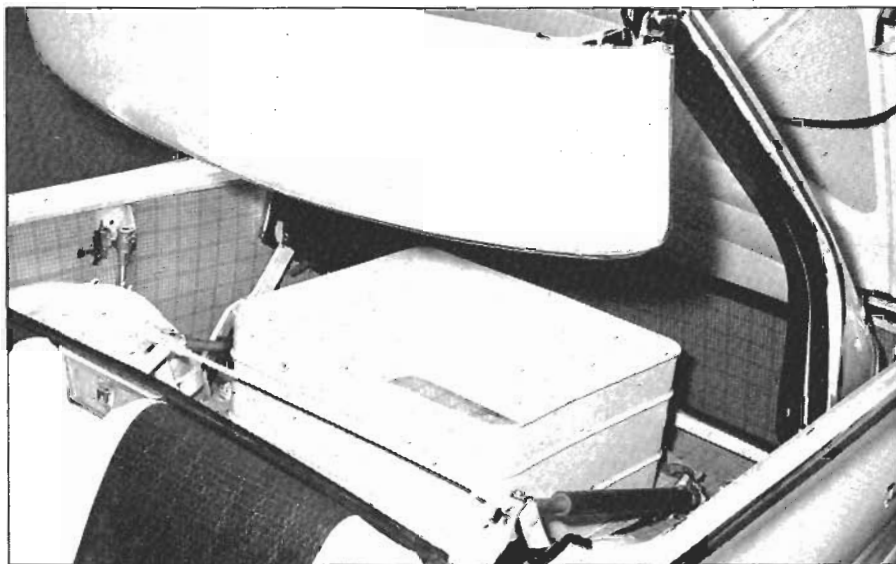
While it undeniably possessed a certain amount of corporate PR value, the Skyliner retractable still has to rank as one of the most incredibly costly and misguided exercises in Yankee ingenuity. Ford poured loads of cash and nearly a decade of top-secret research into creating and perfecting a fully automated albatross. They finally settled on a "safe, simple, swift, and secure" system that incorporated six electric motors, nine circuit breakers, 10 solenoids, and 203 yards of wiring in addition to the rest of the hardware involved. In the fall of 1957, they followed up this little coup by unleashing yet another better idea gone awry: the Edsel.

Surprisingly, the Skyliner actually lived up to its first-year sales projections, as 20,766 Americans toured the highways in the world's first retractable hardtop. From there on, it was *deja vu* time. In 1958, sales fell to 14,713 units. When they plummeted to 12,915 in 1959, the reborn Skyliner struck out, leaving the ball game for good.

The concept for a retractable hardtop originated with Gil Spear, a Ford em-



Cutaway view of a 1958 Skyliner showing the location of components in the top mechanism.



The top and retraction mechanism fitted snugly around a 6-cubic-foot storage tub.

ployee in the late 1940s. It was supposed to appear on the Continental Mark II, but the cost overruns grew so severe—Ford was losing about \$1000 per Mark II sold—that the idea had to be shelved until a more suitable candidate could be found. At the time, corporate investment in the project had already reached \$2.5 million. Under styling chief G.W. Walker, the Ford lineup was completely redesigned for 1957. Earlier, a decision had been made to introduce a retractable hardtop on the new Fairlane 500 line. Ben J. Smith, a former General Motors employee, was given the job of developing the Skyliner top mechanism as we know it.

A push/pull switch located beneath the right side of the dash activated the mechanism. The procedure was carefully sequenced, with each step ending before the next one began. To lower the top, one simply pushed the switch. This caused the automatic deck-lid retaining screws to unfasten, the lid to raise up and the body package tray to extend. The motor-driven hold-down screws in

the windshield header and rear quarters then undid themselves, and the top was lifted up and back. While this was happening, another motor caused the front 1/6 of the top, the "flipper," to tuck in underneath. The folded top then swung down into the rear compartment, the deck lid closed and the retaining screws locked themselves into position. Pulling out the switch reversed the process.

In real life, the procedure was hardly as straightforward as it sounds. The actuation of all functions was tied to a number of delay devices, and a fail-safe anti-jamming system would immediately halt all proceedings in the event of a problem. As a safety precaution, the transmission had to be in neutral before the system could be activated.

Prior to introducing its mobile tribute to Rube Goldberg, Ford conducted extensive cycling tests on the top mechanism that simulated 30 years of normal use. Each production Skyliner underwent a battery of 35 additional tests while on the assembly line and five post-production operating tests, plus

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1959



1957



1958

random spot checks. Although Ford claimed that the system was perfected, they nevertheless set up a special training program for their mechanics that included the use of a 40-page shop manual. They also assembled a group of retractable roadies—crack troubleshooters who roamed from dealer to dealer in search of the real problem children.

For all of its mechanical sophistication, the Skyliner system proved to be remarkably rugged. In many cases, the

top mechanism fared far better than the rest of the car. Normally, cycling time ran 45-60 seconds. In wetter climates, where the electric motors were prone to take on water, mechanical cycling sometimes became necessary. Although possible, this was a far longer and more laborious undertaking.

One of the most commonly held misconceptions about the Skyliner is that the top mechanism was operated by hydraulic rather than mechanical means.

In fact, everything was run by a system of gears, or cables that activated gears.

To save on tooling costs, all three model years used many of the same parts. At least 95% of the pieces were interchangeable; the main differences between the cars were that '58s and '59s had one less rear quarter motor, and the '59 used a slightly shorter flipper section than the earlier models.

The presence of the retractor mechanism required the Skyliner to use a special gas tank, which straddled the driveshaft. It had a cross-flow tube that siphoned fuel back and forth between the two wells. A heavy-duty battery was also part of the Skyliner package. Although 3 inches longer than the standard Fairlane 500, the Skyliner's trunk capacity was reduced from 22 to 6 cubic feet. All Skyliners except the earliest 1957s came with a lift-out storage tub that was designed to hold an optional 3-piece set of matching FoMoCo luggage. Today, only one set of this corporate baggage is known to exist.

The average price for a Skyliner in good condition currently runs in the \$3000-\$5000 range, although several finer examples have brought twice that amount. Among collectors, 1959s are the most popular, and the rust-prone '58s are the rarest. Several individual models bring premium rates. Especially desirable are the first 1957s, which carried no Skyliner designation on the top trim panel, and the pre-Galaxie '59s, which still had the Fairlane 500 chrome script on the rear fenders. First-year Skyliners equipped with the optional 300-horsepower supercharged V-8 are also worth plenty. The owner of a mint '57 with 56 original miles on it recently turned down \$20,000 for his retractable.

If the investment possibilities suddenly sound a bit more promising, be advised that the most valuable Skyliner ever made is still out there somewhere, just waiting to be discovered. In April 1957, retractable No. 1 was delivered to the White House, where it joined the presidential fleet. Details about this particular vehicle are extremely vague, but a number of years ago it mysteriously dropped out of sight. Some speculate that Ford has it tucked away somewhere in its corporate archives, but no one is certain of its whereabouts. Should you ever be examining a '57 Skyliner and come across any old golf balls imprinted with the words "I like Ike," buy the car.

There is a national organization dedicated to preserving the memory of the world's one and only retractable hard-top. The Ford Retractable Club has over 1200 members coast to coast and holds annual gatherings that bring together the best of the breed. Further information can be obtained from:

The Ford Retractable Club
c/o Mr. Ron Brenton, President
2530 Shakespeare Dr.
Indianapolis, IN 46227

