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GM: The Mitchell Years
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1978 Camaro—featuring six great

CORVETTES

**Bill Mitchell's
Early Years**

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Bill Mitchell's Early Years

For a young designer in the Thirties, there could be no better place to start than at GM Art & Colour. . .

Bill Mitchell grew up in Greenville, Pennsylvania, where his father, appropriately enough, was the local Buick dealer. Mitchell Senior, like all fathers, wanted his son to join the family company and eventually take it over. But young Bill was more interested in magazine advertising and illustration. Before he settled down to be a smalltown Buick dealer, he was determined to try his luck in the big city. Mitchell came to New York in the spring of 1933. He enrolled in a summer illustration course at Carnegie Tech, and that fall, signed up at the Art Student's League, on 57th Street.

In order to pay for his tuition, Mitchell got a part-time job with the famous Collier advertising agency. Barron Collier, Sr. had cornered the market on those advertising cards that still line the upper

reaches of buses and subway cars. Originally, he had merely rented space for advertisers to place their messages, but by the time Mitchell arrived at Collier, there was a full-scale copywriting and art department that could produce its own advertising cards.

Mitchell worked for Collier as an illustrator, not a designer. "I liked to do the art work and move it on to somebody else," he says. "I liked the creative end of it. I went through engraving plants and learned engraving, to help them get the most out of my illustrations. And I specialized in layouts." Mitchell still has a batch of illustrations from this period in his life, long, sleek watercolor profiles of contemporary Cadillacs and Packards, rendered in a tight, photographic style.

Barron Collier, Jr., the senior member

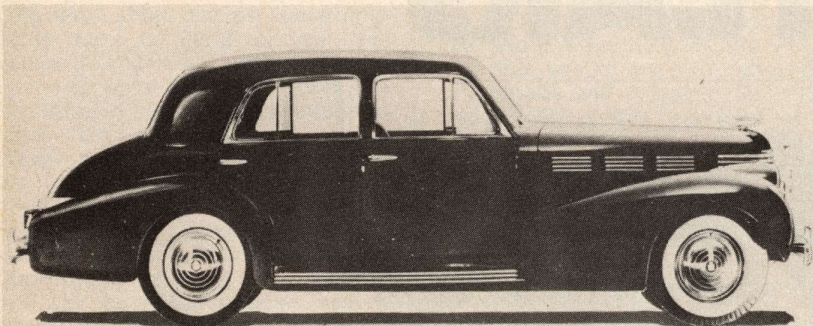
of the famous Collier Brothers—Sam and Miles were the younger two—met Mitchell at his father's office. Barron and Bill Mitchell were almost the same age, and they were both fascinated by cars. While Mitchell was drawing them, the Collier Brothers were racing them, primarily around the private roads of their father's posh Pocantico Hills estate. Barron, Miles, Sam and Mitchell were soon so involved that they formed the Automobile Racing Club of America, complete with a regular magazine, a club badge and a blazer patch for the members. Bill Mitchell, logically, designed the club logo, badge and patch, and served as art director of the *ARCA Journal*.

At the same time, Mitchell prepared a portfolio of fanciful automobile renderings, which he incorporated into fake advertisements and brought around to various advertising agencies, in an attempt to garner more automobile advertisements for Collier. A forgotten agency art director, a friend of Harley Earl's, told Mitchell he ought to prepare a portfolio and send it to GM Art and Colour: "He said, 'Did you ever think of designing a car?' I said, 'No.' He said, 'Send me all the pictures you've got, anyway.' And he showed them to Earl. Earl said, 'Let's see some of your ideas.' That was the summer of 1935."

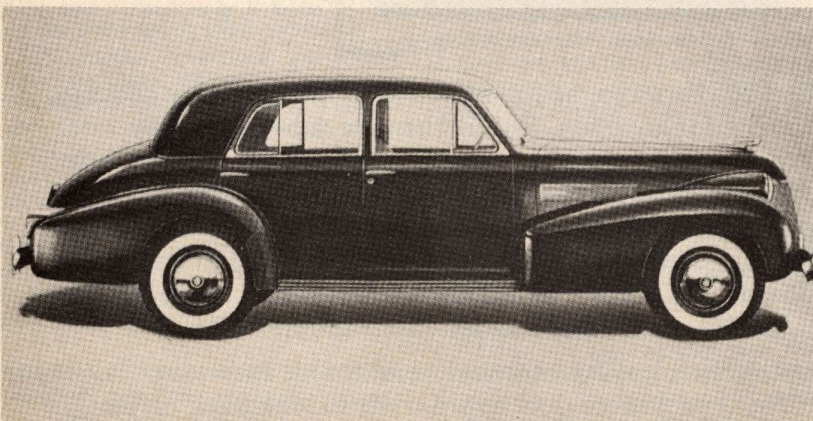
Mitchell sat down and worked up a series of chalk drawings, which he then mailed to Harley Earl. The best of them shows a futuristic, rear-engine car with a plexiglass bubble top and fluted chrome bumpers all the way around, like Walter Dreyfuss' famous Budd streamlined train. Mitchell's drawing is a high rear three-quarter, an unusual approach in an era when most designers worked strictly from straight side profiles. "That was the drawing that got me the job," says says Mitchell.

Bill Mitchell started at General Motors Art and Colour in December 1935. "There were only about a hundred people in the shops, total—the metal workers, the wood carvers, everybody. Now we have 1700 . . . there were only 14 stylists. I came here just before Christmas time and they were just wrapping up the 1937 models. I worked on a little bit of everything . . . the '37 LaSalle, the '37 Buick, the '37 Cadillac.

"In the summer of 1936, I did research with Charles F. Kettering on a two-cycle radial, rear-engine car that was called the Martia. The chief engineer was a man named Olle Schjolin. He was a Swede, and he tried to talk me into leaving GM and going with him to Volvo. [See *CAR CLASSICS*, August 1977.] I was smart enough to know I didn't want to do *that*. But he and Carl Lindblom, another Swedish engineer on the Martia project, took a bunch of my drawings back to Sweden with them. Chuck Jordan was over there a couple of years ago to visit a friend of his, one of Volvo's chief designers. And he still had one of those



The 1938 Cadillac Sixty-Special, Mitchell's first, launched his 40-year career.



Many critics hold the 1939 60 Special the best balanced of the 1938-41 series.

drawings of mine. It had been on the wall for 40 years. So Chuck talked him out of it, and I've got it back again.

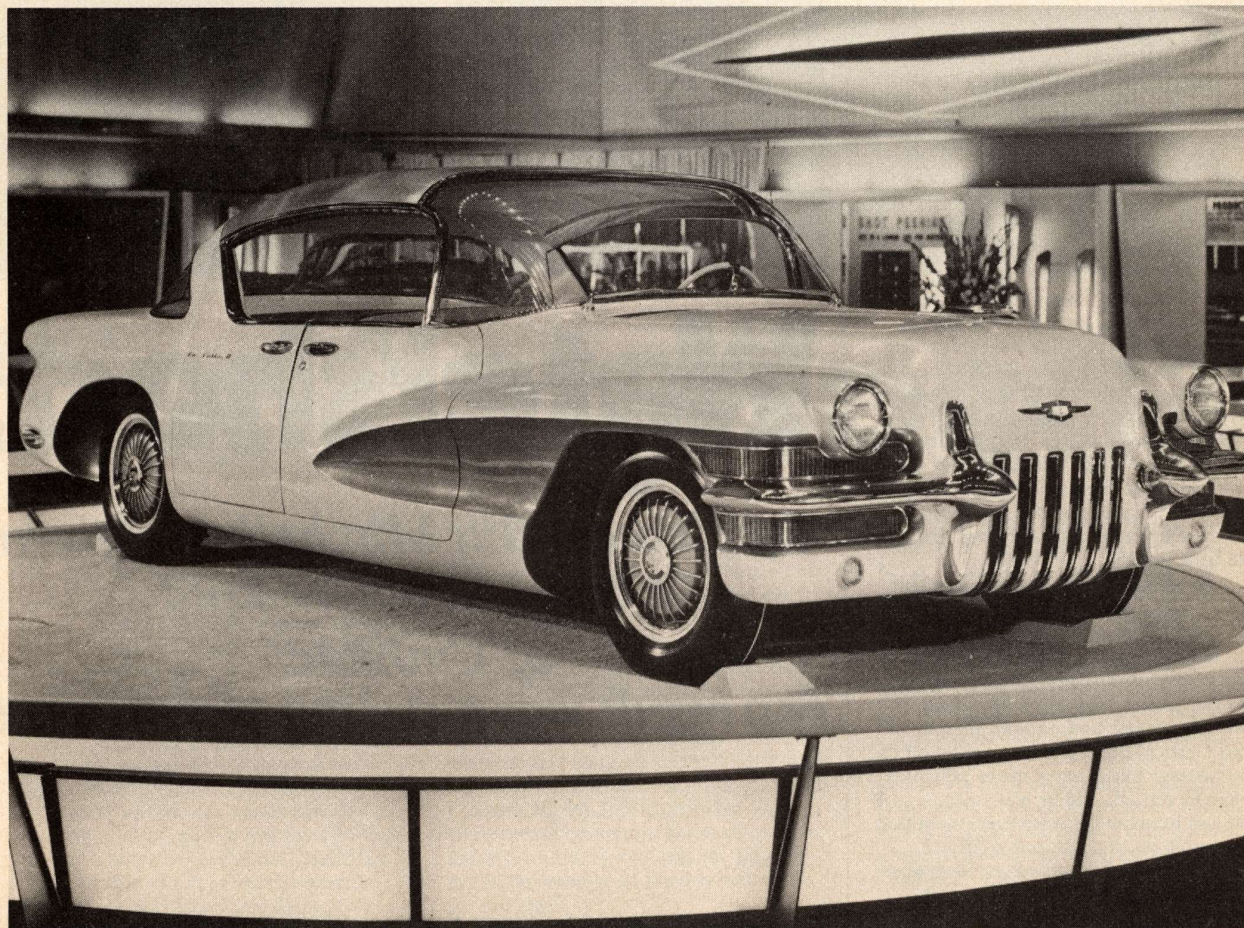
"That fall, the fall of '36, they took me off the Martia project and brought me back here. They built a studio for me, and set me up in competition with Frank Hershey, who drew Buicks. When I first came here, there were no studios, all the designers were in one room and all the cars were lined up in another room. But in the beginning of 1936, Earl set up individual studios for each of the different cars, with one guy in charge of each. Frank Hershey had Buick, and Virgil Exner had Pontiac.

"Anyway, Frank Hershey and I were fighting over Buick. My dad was a Buick dealer, and I wanted Buicks. But then Exner left to go work for Raymond Loewy on the Studebaker account. Harley Earl gave me Cadillac, which I didn't want. I still wanted Buick. But it was probably the biggest break of my life. Cadillac was Earl's special pet, and I got to work with him and with Red Curtice. In the agency business, the top man doesn't have much to do with the underlings, but this was completely different. Red Curtice would sit down on the bench and talk to me as I was working.

"I worked with George Snyder, who had come from the Rolls-Royce body



"Catwalk cooling", the routing of incoming air through side slots instead of grilles, is suggested by the stillborn 1941 LaSalle, above. Much later, GM Styling revived the general feeling of that design with the 1955 LaSalle II.



shop at Brewster, in Manhattan. Snyder was incredibly prolific, and a real professional designer. He did everything in clay, because he'd been trained at Brewster in the days when they didn't make sketches first. I learned a lot from Snyder. And from everybody else, too. They were all different, then. Earl was very dominating. He had definite ideas, and he knew what he wanted. He wasn't easy to get along with. But working on Cadillac, I saw a lot of Curtice, and in his nice way, he was the authority I had to please. And old man Knudsen was down-to-earth, too. I remember one day when Knudsen cut his thumb on a stylist's razor, and he just stuck it in the glue pot. He had started in the shops, and that's what they did there. But by then, he was head of Chevrolet.

"There was a stylist named Barry Shaw in LaSalle, but he soon left. Paul Meyer took his place. Meyer was a very good designer, very prolific, but he didn't get along very well with Earl. Earl got impatient with him about getting results. Meyer left and Earl gave me both Cadillac and LaSalle, which was too much. Finally, George Snyder took LaSalle. After the LaSalle was killed, I was given Cadillac and Buick and Frank Hershey got Chevrolet and Pontiac. And then the war came.

"I wanted an Army commission, but since I hadn't been called for active duty, it was tough to get. Earl took me to Washington and introduced me to some people at the Bureau of Aeronautics. I ended up with a commission in the Navy, and produced training manuals in Pensacola. The job I'm proudest of was the standard training manual for instrument flying. It was a good piece of work.

"When the war was over, I came back to Cadillac studio, and I ran that until 1949. But Harley Earl wanted to start a business with his sons, so I left GM in '49 and started an industrial design firm here in Detroit. I got the target program going, I established a stable of clients . . . I got some big name clients . . . and I did some good things. But the idea was that I was building this up for Earl's two sons, and neither one had any design talent at all. I did that for four years before Earl gave up on them and brought me back in 1953.

"I came back in '53 in a management position, directly under Earl. The tail end of the '55 Chevy program was going, so I got in on that a bit. Clare MacKichan was in charge of that studio. I whipped off the SR-2 Corvette for Jerry Earl, which we raced, and another version for Red Curtice. But I was into a little bit of everything. Earl wanted me to take over when he retired, and he was smart enough to make me learn everything that was going on, not just one studio. It worked. When Earl retired in December 1958, I was ready. I'd been there 23 years, after all. I was more than ready."●



Watershed:

*By chance, Bill Mitchell was given
a crack at a new kind
of Cadillac.
The result was a styling masterpiece.*

Bill Lanning's 1941 60S Brougham. Photos by the editor.



The Sixty Special

The 1938 Cadillac 60 Special was Bill Mitchell's first real car. Before that, he'd done only bits and pieces. But the 60 Special was his and his alone, from the horizontal grille bars to the effortlessly streamlined trunk. It was not a grand design, but it was surely an influential one. At GM, the 60 Special made Mitchell's name and led directly to a new era of smaller Cadillacs in which the emphasis was on style and grace rather than ponderous elegance.

Cadillac was Harley Earl's favorite marque, and because it was the GM line-leader, it was always the style leader as well. Working under Earl's close scrutiny, Mitchell enjoyed less design freedom than, say, Frank Hershey at Buick;

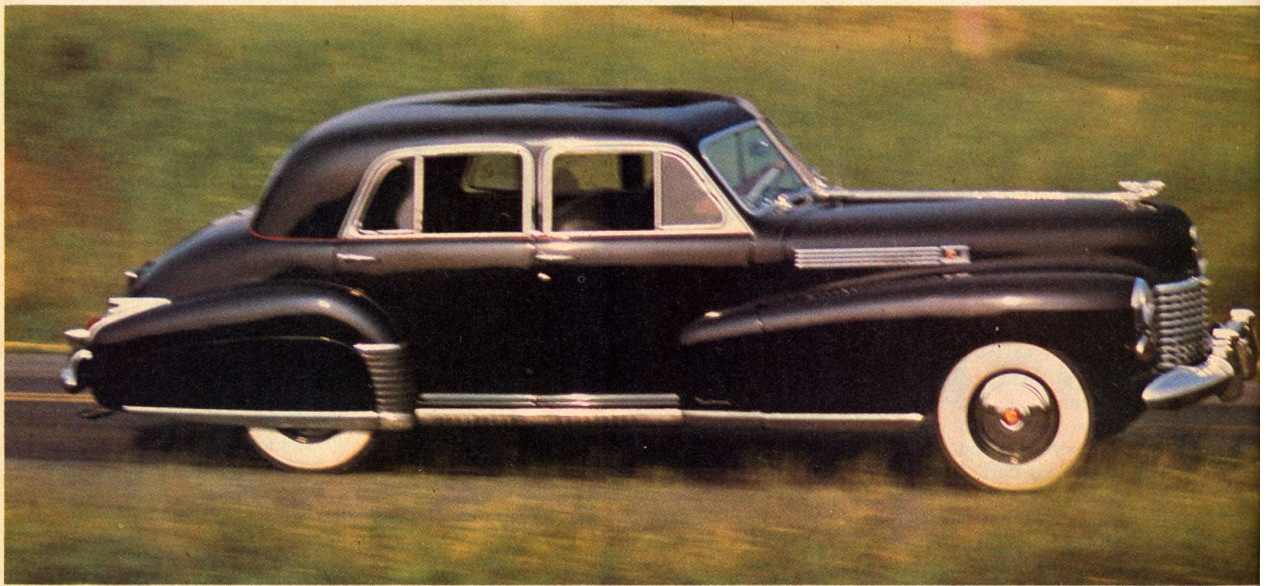
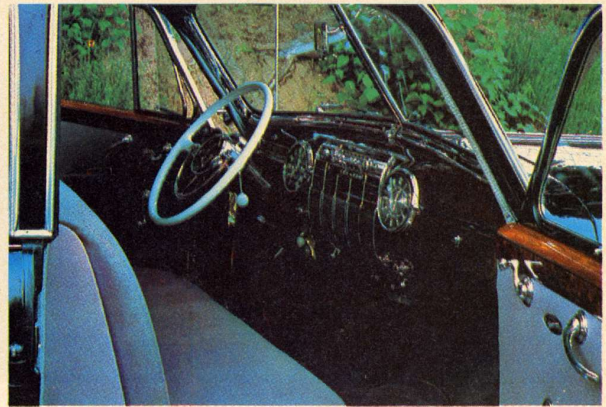
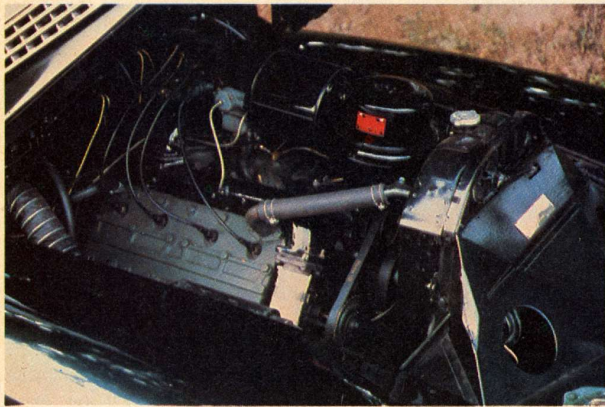
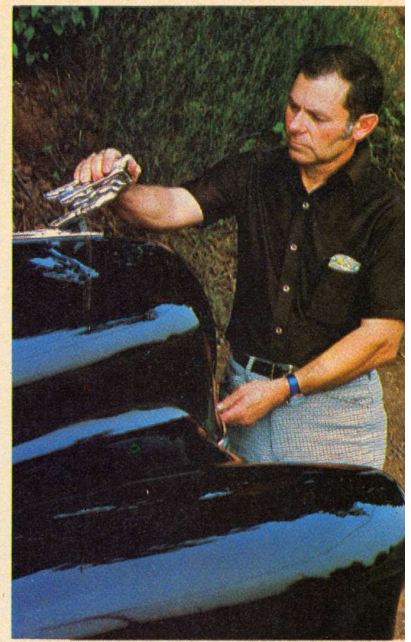
but the 60 Special was the passionate first attempt of a gifted young designer, and Earl was wise enough to let him have his head. The result, you must agree, certainly mitigated whatever doubts Harley Earl and Red Curtice may have had.

The styling for the 1938 Cadillac began in January 1936, when Mitchell was an apprentice designer who'd only been at GM a few weeks. And almost immediately, he was assigned to the Martia project, a radical engineering proposal which I'm sure Harley Earl considered lunacy and beneath contempt. Mitchell got the assignment because he was the most expendable member of the tiny Art and Colour staff.

The Martia project cooled off consider-

ably in the fall of 1936, at roughly the same time Virgil Exner left for Studebaker, bringing his clay modeler and chief assistant with him. This left Earl critically understaffed, with 1938 deadlines rapidly approaching. The best place for Mitchell was at Cadillac, where Earl could keep his eye on him. Veteran stylist George Snyder was assigned to help.

By the time Mitchell came into Cadillac, the big car lines—the series 65, 75 and 90—were basically done, except for detail work. The all-important LaSalle was in a separate studio. There is almost nothing that connects the LaSalle or the “full-size” Cadillacs with the “smaller” 60 Special. The big cars still used a conventional egg-crate grille, mounted well



forward, with horizontal cooling vents on the sides of the hood. And of course, dual sidemounts. The 60 Special was on a completely different styling wave length.

The 60 Special was a unique concept. It was a small car like the Series 60, but more elegant than the bigger Series 65 . . . and more modern than either. It was available only as a four-door; it was *not* a chauffeur's car, but an up-to-the-minute, owner-driver sedan. Mitchell saw the 60 Special as a test, as did Harley Earl. If he was in fact to be the fair-haired boy at Art and Colour, now was the time to produce.

Mitchell pulled out all the stops. More than any Cadillac between the 1933 World's Fair showcar and the Eldorado Brougham, the 60 Special exhibited brilliant styling ideas, ideas that were to be adopted not only by Cadillac and GM, but by stylists all over Detroit. There are so many clever touches, the observer doesn't know what to seize on first.

The grille—which the 60 Special shared, along with the entire nose and the chassis, with the Series 60—was the first of the heavily-chromed GM grilles, made up of stylized, horizontal bars rather than the traditional egg-crate mesh. The torpedo headlights, rather than being attached to the sides of the hood as on the big Cadillacs, were faired into the tops of the front fenders. There were no running boards, only three thin horizontal chrome bands of decoration. The rear doors hinged from the B-pillar, unlike almost all other sedans that still used rear-hinged suicide doors on the back.

But these are just the details. It was the basic shape of the 60 Special that caused such an uproar. For the first time at GM, the roof was visually made to work as a separate entity from the lower body. The trunk—which until that time had

retained the vestigial appearance of a separate, added-on unit—was now a gorgeously curving continuation of the body itself, terminating on a gently bulbous shape set between two harshly vertical rear fenders. The 60 Special was one of the first modern cars to look good from the rear three-quarter as well as the side and front. To emphasize the break between the greenhouse and body, there was no chrome belt molding. Nor was there any chrome decoration on the body at all.

The most distinctive feature of the car, however, was the window treatment.

Mitchell used a very simple, very elegant chrome-banded window shape that related very directly to earlier four-door convertibles. In the sense that the steel top was visually separate from the body and the windows were reminiscent of convertible windows, you can think of the 60 Special as the first "hardtop convertible," no matter that it had four doors instead of two.

The 60 Special was a brilliant artistic success. And 3703 were sold, making it also the best-selling model in the Cadillac line. Better still, for 1939 Mitchell was finally able to introduce his famous "cat-walk cooling" front end. The idea, he says, "came out of a 1936 competition between Frank Hershey and me over the Buick studio." The concept used the center "grille" only as a painted styling motif, while the cooling air came in the panels beneath the headlights. This idea probably derives from Mitchell's work on the rear-engine Martia project, which of course didn't need and didn't have a front grille.

The 1939 60 Special is actually one of the best looking sedans ever built. Detail changes in the chrome were the only other changes for 1939, and while 5506

60 Specials were sold, the revamped Series 61—now also designed by Mitchell—sold 5874. Significantly, Cadillac sold 13,581 cars in 1939, to just 9268 in 1938. It was evident to everyone that while Mitchell's styling was pretty—which was nice—it also sold cars. And sales is the name of the game.

By 1940, Mitchell had completely revamped the whole Cadillac line along the direction of the 60 Special. There was a new Series 62 torpedo sedan that used a similar body, except for its faired-in rear fenders and full fender skirts, as well as a derivative two-door coupe.

For 1941, the heavy egg-crate grille that became Cadillac's postwar trademark was introduced. The 60 Special now received fender skirts, heavy chrome moldings, headlights in the fenders and a longer hood that effectively ruined the exquisite proportions of the car.

The first front fenders that extended into the doors were introduced on the '41 60 Special, a styling breakthrough of monumental importance for later cars, though it hurt the clean-limbed good looks of the original. And by 1942, virtually every sedan in the country had borrowed something from Mitchell's seminal design. The 60 Special, which had seemed so advanced in 1938, blended right into the automotive landscape by 1942.

The 60 Special accomplished its purpose. Cadillac sales went up. The marque was once again acknowledged the style leader of the high-price class. Bill Mitchell proved himself worthy of Harley Earl's trust, and established himself as the man to watch at Art and Colour. And of course, 17,090 lucky owners got to buy the prettiest little sedan ever built by Cadillac. That in itself is something of inestimable value. Not bad for a 25-year-old kid, designing his first real car. ●

SIXTY SPECIAL DRIVING IMPRESSIONS

Alright, so the Cadillac Sixty Special is a great stylist's car—of that there is no doubt. But what's it like to drive? This was a question we determined to answer after Bill Lanning of Rigoes, New Jersey, kindly offered us the wheel of his 1941 formal sedan, for a quick tour over the winding country lanes of the Garden State's Sourland Mountains.

The "test car" couldn't have been better, because there's probably not a finer running Sixty Special in the country. Though Bill has won countless concours with his car, he also believes that even CCCA-recognized Classics should be used for the purpose they were intended, and he's not reluctant to drive his 60S on long hauls to distant meets or on a vacation trip. The engine was overhauled in 1970, at the 100,000 mark, and it runs as sweetly as a brand new one.

A special point of interest is the model—a rare one. Catalogue number 6019F

stood for the division window version, of which only 220 were built, against 3693 of the standard Model 6019 sedans. Both used the Cadillac 126-inch wheelbase.

The driving position is an imposing one. You sit high and look out over an immense bonnet topped with the instantly recognizable Cadillac goddess, which serves not only as a distinctive hood ornament but a latch handle as well. There's a great feeling of size and width, since the wide front fenders extend, pontoon-like, from the cockpit. The dash is informative, complete, readable, laden with brightwork—and built with the approximate integrity of a Mosler safe. The instrumentation consists of a full set of needle gauges, and the shift quadrant lays out the basic Hydra-Matic positions of N-Hi-Lo-R, the last serving also as the "park" position. There's a self-cancelling directional signal lever under the wheel in the usual place; its action is very positive,

feeling as if they tested it in a cage of gorillas for 4,783,954 activations. The radio emits deep, fat sounds typical of multi-tube units of the period, and its pushbuttons invoke nostalgia with labels like WIBX, WRVN, WKAL and other circa-1941 call letters. (Bill has cleverly hidden a modern tape deck under the dash, and has a special program of 1941 music for display purposes—a little unexpected bonus.)

The driver immediately notices huge amounts of space and good visibility. The big flathead V-8 moves the car out smartly and, except for the traditional Hydra-Matic "lurch" the whole overall impression is one of smooth, luxurious motion. It handles quite well for a car this size, too. For anything this big, the 60S is fun to drive and frankly we were surprised. Reports we've heard about Packard's superior smoothness are greatly exaggerated. . . .

MR

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