



Rod ACTION

CUSTOMS: 1945 to 1960

GARAGE CARS:

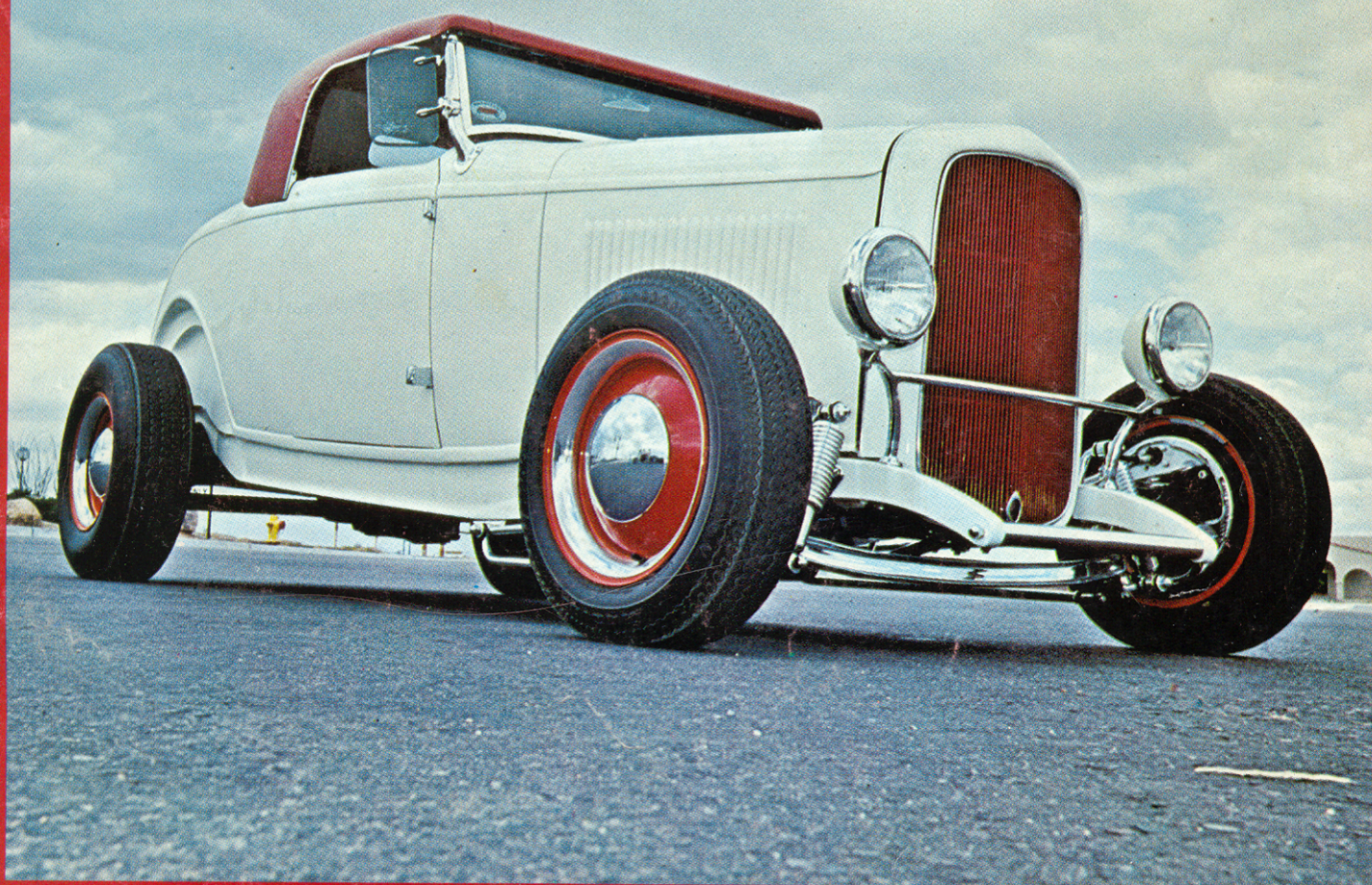
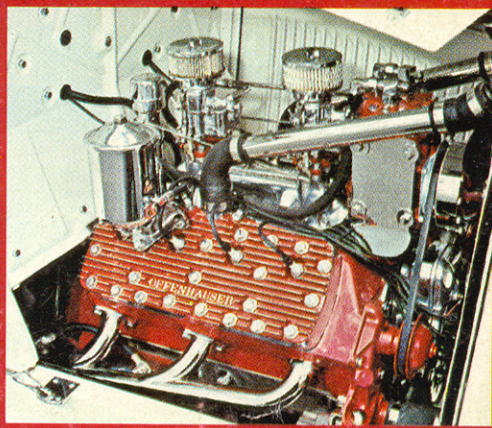
ONTARIO, TEXAS,
MINNESOTA,
KANSAS, NORTH
CAROLINA

HOW TO'S:

COIL SPRINGS
FOR RODS

X-MEMBER '29
AND '32 FRAMES

CHEVY IN
MODEL A SWAP



AYALA, BAILON, BARRIS BROS., Carson, Cerny, Emory, Fabry, Gaylord, Hagen, Jensen, Summers, Tipton, Vann, Winfield—names that spelled magic to custom car enthusiasts during the years after World War II and on through the Korean “police action.” They were worshipped by their customers and would-be customers; canonized by the hot rod/custom car magazine writers; praised and sometimes envied by their peers; ridiculed by the sports car crowd and many hot rodders; and generally misunderstood (and therefore unappreciated) by the general public.

Some were known particularly for some facet of customizing—chopping, channeling, sectioning, paint or interiors, and some had all-around shops that did everything. Regardless, they shared the distinction of contributing substantially to the Great American Art Form—automotive customizing. Some of these artisans claim to have influenced the American automobile industry, and while this may be true to a very small extent, I fear it is more wishful thinking than fact.

These innovators did help the sales of the many car magazines that came along about the same time such as *Hot Rod*, *Motor Trend*, *Hop Up* (later *Motor Life*), *Honk* (later *Car Craft*), *Rod & Custom*, *Rod Builder & Customizer*, *Custom Rodder*, *Speed Mechanics*, *Popular Hot Rodding*, and on and on and on.

Customizing was not new in those

post-war years, but the 15 years from 1945 to 1960 saw more of this highly specialized work being done than at any other time before or since, and it is very probable that we will never again see the vast effort and money spent on redesigning and rebuilding cars.

A combination of things—unsympathetic police, insurance companies unwilling to insure anything the least bit out of the ordinary, well-meaning but misguided bureaucrats demanding unrealistic safety in vehicles (don't misunderstand me, I'm for safety, but on a realistic and sensible basis) and, probably most important, a diminishing desire on the part of younger car enthusiasts to spend the necessary big bucks to create something that would—by its very nature—be of insufficient practical use to justify the investment (who says the younger generation is dumb?).

I, for one, think it's a pity that customizing didn't continue at that pace, even though I didn't like most of the custom cars created by the above-named customizers. The redesign, in many cases, was bizarre if not downright grotesque; too many were lowered so far they were virtually undriveable on anything but the smoothest of roads; lead and putty were often overused to the detriment of the finish after a few months on the road; some of the paint jobs, while superb in execution, displayed the most vulgar taste imaginable; but in spite of it all,

or maybe because of it all, these cars were the unique statement of the car owner and if the investment and result were satisfactory to him (or to her, in some cases), who has the right to deny the owner that satisfaction?

My own hangup was the chopped top that left the windows as little more than slits to peer through. A moderately chopped top could add a great deal of style to a car, but some were ridiculous. A far better way to reduce car height and bulk, in my opinion, although admittedly more difficult, more time consuming, and therefore more costly, was the removal of a horizontal section through the body.

Neil Emory and Clayton Jensen at Valley Custom were masters of this technique, and anyone who read car magazines or attended West Coast car shows in the early Fifties will remember Ron Dunn's '50 Ford Coupe, Jack Stewart's Olds 88 Holiday, and Ralph Jilek's '40 Ford convertible—all of which were sectioned by Valley Custom.

The first efforts at customizing by all of these specialists were relatively simple de-chroming operations, but as their skill improved, and customer demands for “something different” became greater, imagination seemed to be the only real limitation.

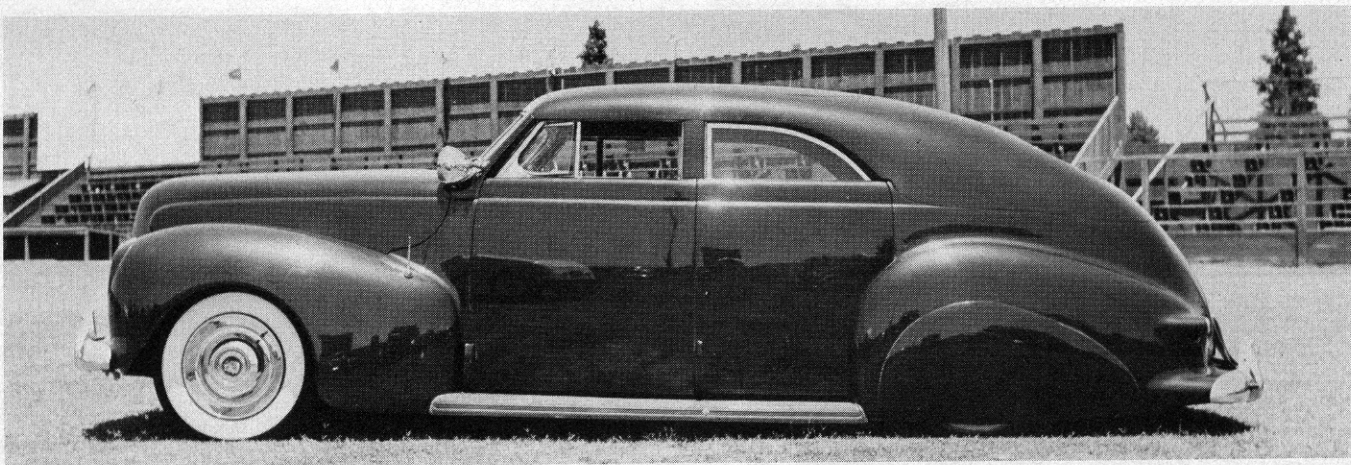
Money, of course, was a limiter to some, and others didn't want to “go the route” for various reasons, but to others there seemed to be no limit

CUSTOMS

circa 1945-1960

By Dean Batchelor

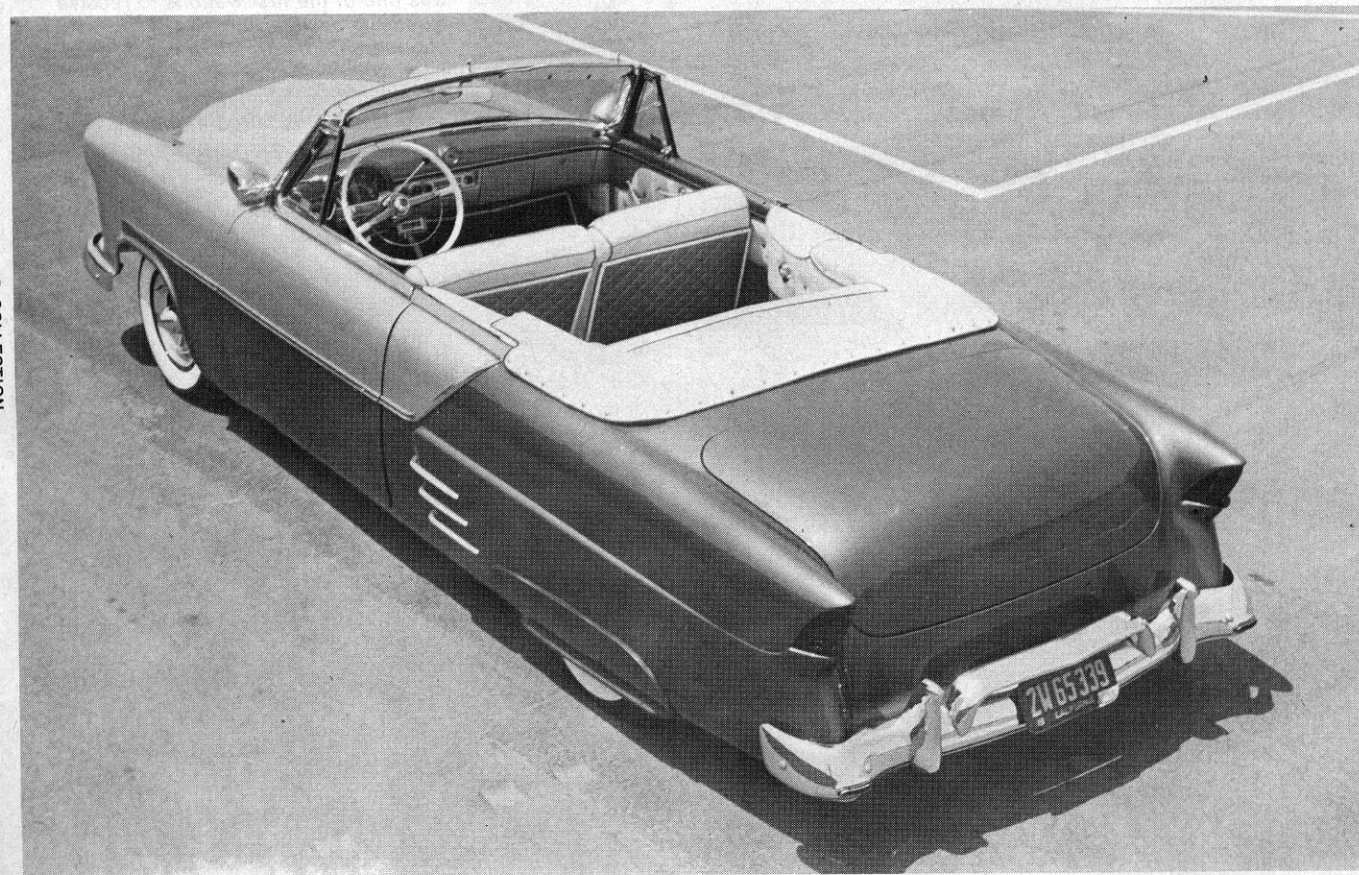
THE GREAT AMERICAN ART FORM (OR WAS IT?)

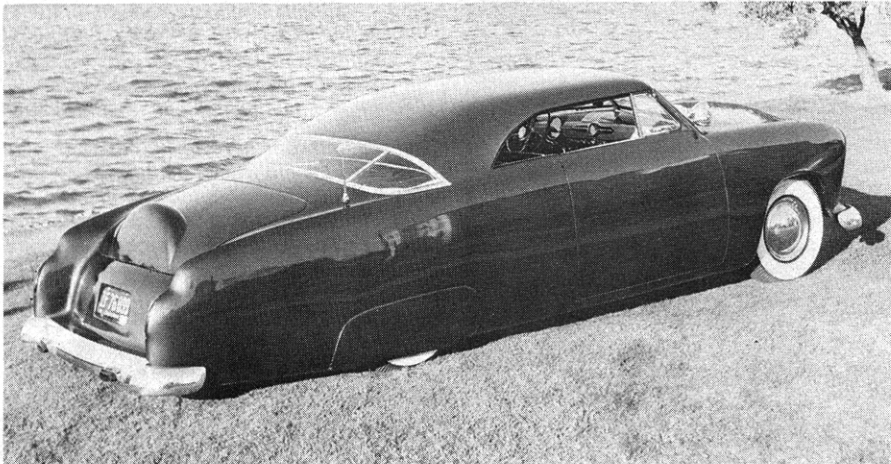
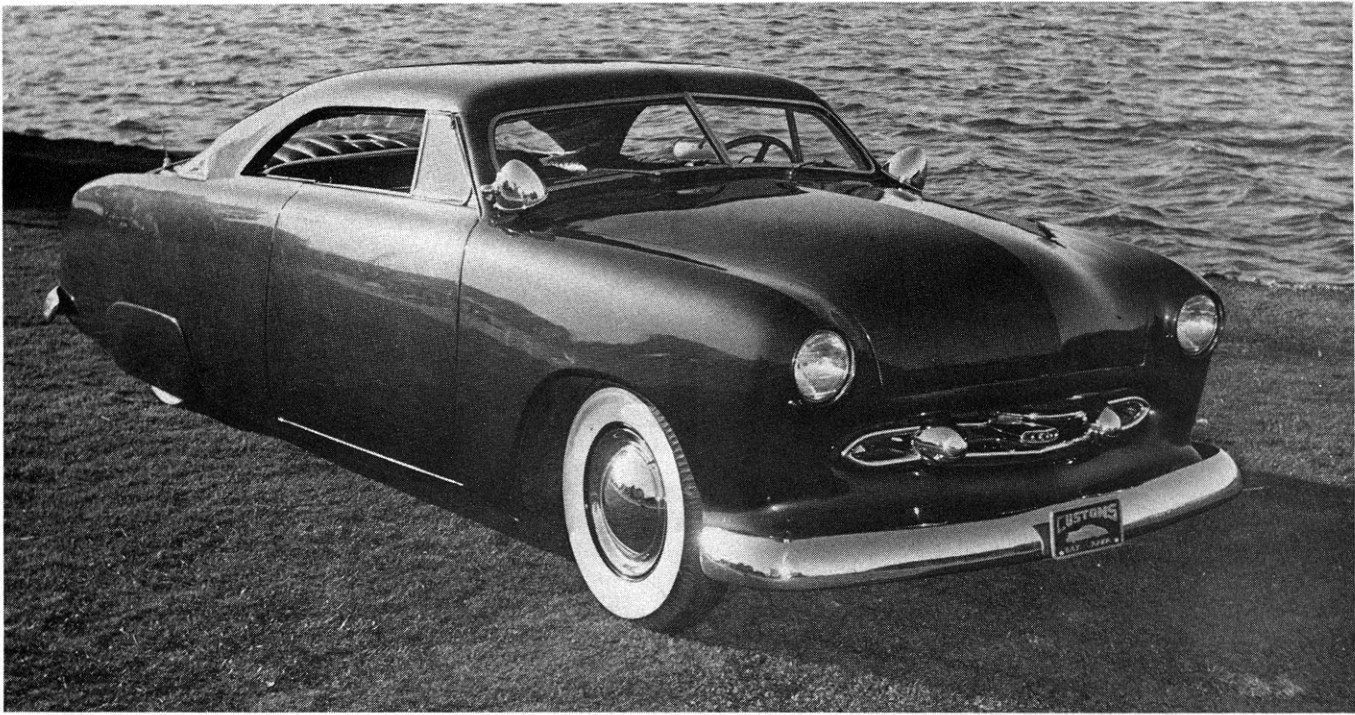


Merc convertible (1940) was lowered, de-chromed, and the taillights faired into the fenders, which had Buick skirts installed. Crowning glory was a removable hard top which faired nicely into back of body. See page 40.



The late Sam Barris reworked this 1955 Ford for his wife. Customizing is fairly extensive without looking like it. Grille, taillights and side trim panels are all handmade. Hood was de-chromed and had rounded corners, door handles were removed and two-tone paint (silver upper and blue lower) applied.





Elton Kantor's '50 Ford, by Joe Bailon, started life as a convertible. The windshield was chopped 4½ inches and a '51 Ford Victoria top was added. All body molding was removed and all seams filled. Rear fenders were extended and license plate recessed. Fake continental kit/deck lid preceded Continental Mark II by seven years.

Carl Cerny's chopped '49 Plymouth wagon, here seen at Bonneville in 1951, was one of the first wagons to receive extensive customizing. Top was chopped, front corners of hood rounded, headlights Frenched, special grille installed, door handles removed and special taillights faired into body.

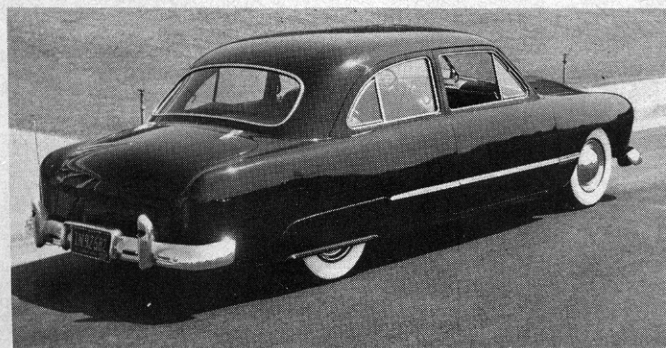
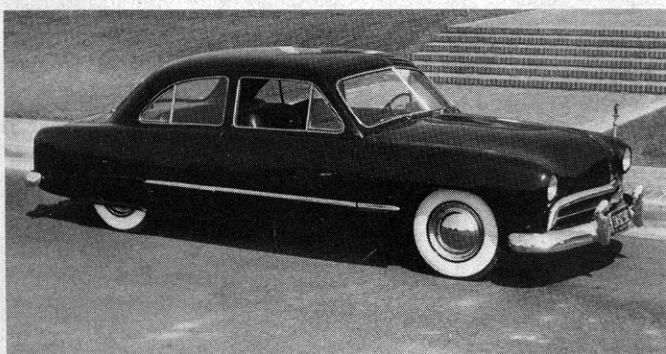




Jerry Brownstein's '53 Olds 98 by Gaylord was lowered three inches in front by cutting the coil springs, and four inches in back by X-ing the frame. The soft top is removable. The rear body has been extended 14 inches to go behind the continental kit.



Dana Boller's '49 Ford 2-door is example of thoughtful customizing. It was sectioned, hood and deck were de-chromed, headlights Frenched, parking and taillights set into bumper guards, door handles removed and a simple straight-bar grille added.





Jere Ehrich's '50 Ford coupe, by Joe Bailon, has fins from a '57 Stude Hawk, '59 Cad taillights, '54 Ford headlight rims, '50 Merc grille shell around grille made up from Olds and Merc pieces, and DeSoto side trim. Car is lowered four inches and painted Pagan Gold with candy apple trim.

of any kind. Many custom cars—Ford or Chevy-based—cost more than a new Cad or Lincoln and sometimes took months to finish, but each owner had a car like no other. Unfortunately, when the owner tired of his dream car, he usually found that his dream was someone else's nightmare and he "took a bath" in it when he tried to sell it. Today, many of these old customs are being restored and are bringing prices higher than either the original construction cost or resale price.

Most of these Fifties customs were built for show and not for go, and they spent their lives being washed, polished, and displayed—at drive-in restaurants, car shows, or any other place where a crowd could be assembled. In spite of the claim that car owners customized their cars simply to improve their appearance, there was a great deal of ego (hey, look at me) involved. I've judged custom car shows a couple of times and it has been some of the less happy experiences of my life. A custom car owner (or builder)

is like a mother at a baby contest.

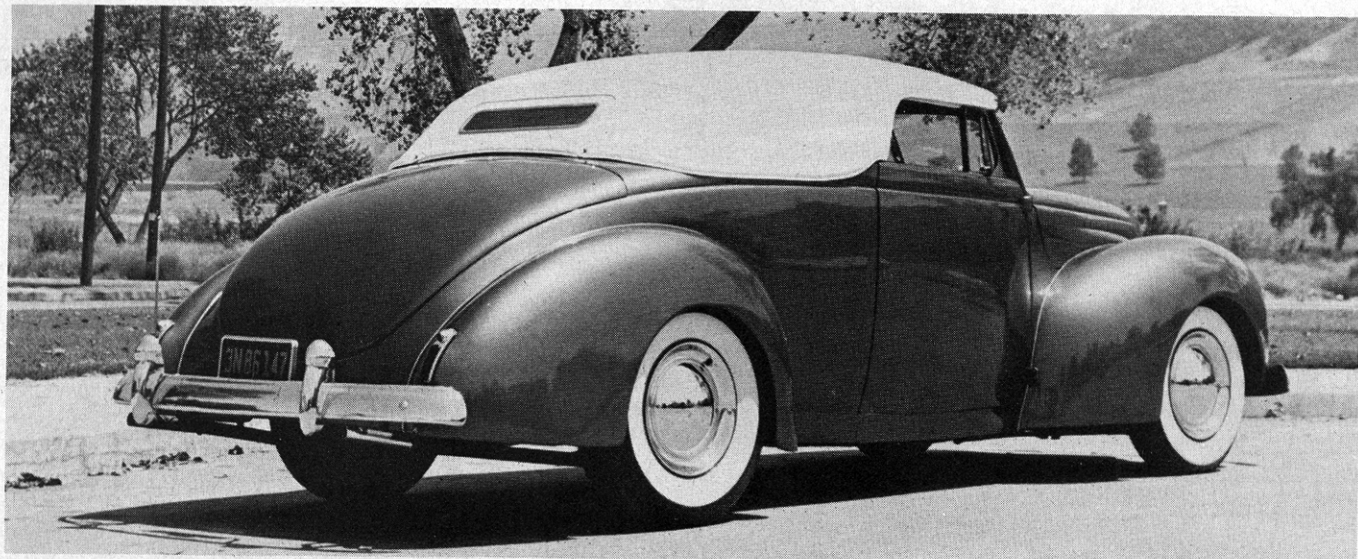
The late Sam Barris and his brother George, who is still very active, built some pretty fine cars during their joint partnership in Barris Brothers Customs but, like anyone who is both creative and prolific, they didn't always hit it just right. Dale Runyon and I were judging the custom class at one of Petersen's early Motorama shows in Los Angeles (about 1950), and as we came around a corner of the auditorium there was one of Barris' less happy creations (I can't remember now which one) and Dale said, "Now there's a real monument to bad taste," which I thought was a classic comment on customizing in general during that period. But the craftsmanship was beautiful and the owner liked his car, so who's to judge?

Those who didn't like custom cars often referred to them as "low and slow." This term had some justification because with few exceptions the money spent "improving" the car went almost entirely into the visual side (why worry about it if people can't

see it?) and virtually nothing—effort or money—was spent for handling.

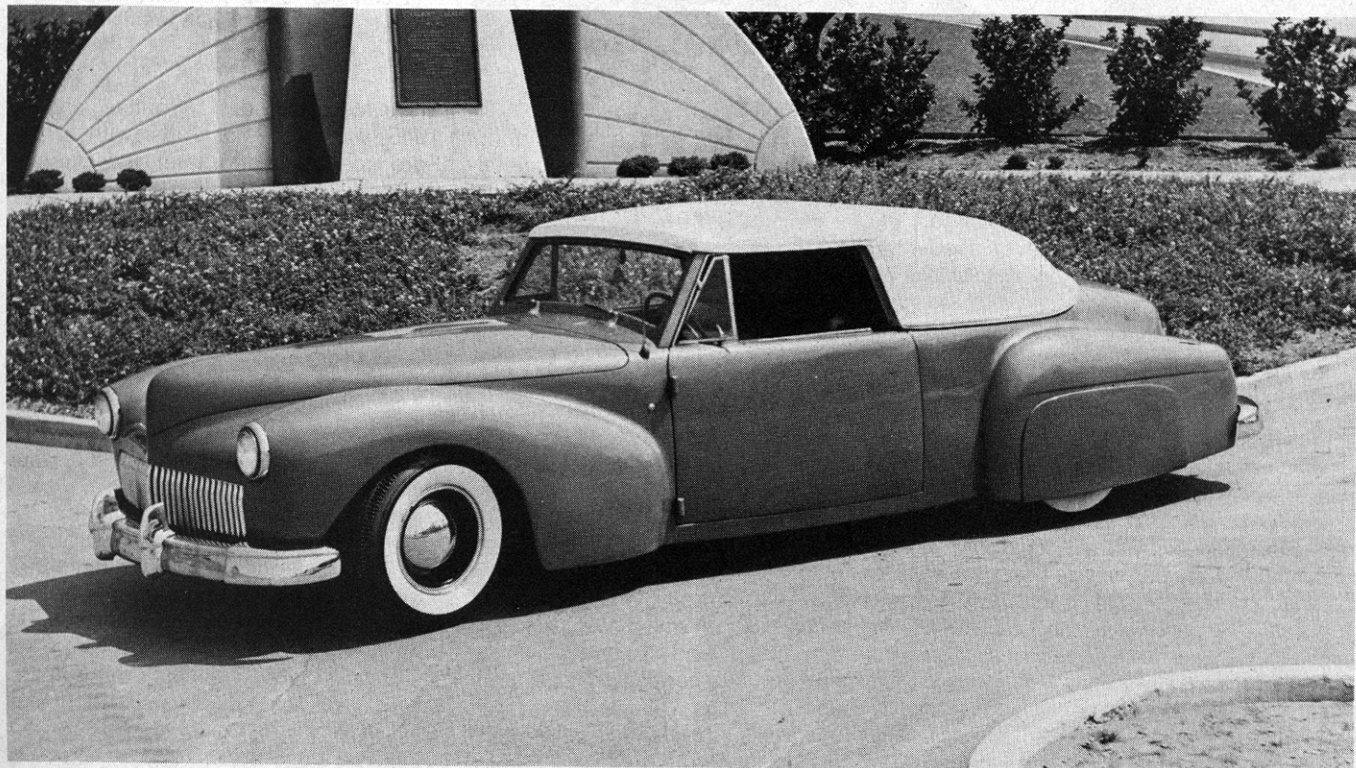
I've seen customers at Valley Custom, where I worked for a short spell once, spend \$2500 on bodywork, paint and upholstery and then insist that they lower the car by heating the springs. This was bad enough on the rear of a car with semi-elliptics, but it just destroyed any semblance of handling on the front of cars with independent suspension. On cross-spring Fords, it just made them ride rough when the springs were heated, but I remember trying long shackles on my '39 Merc. It was a simple and cheap way to lower a Ford, but I removed them when two passengers in the back seat got carsick on a trip to Lake Arrowhead. And in spite of my personal experience, I was unable to talk some of these guys out of doing the same thing. They just couldn't, or wouldn't, understand what they were doing to their cars.

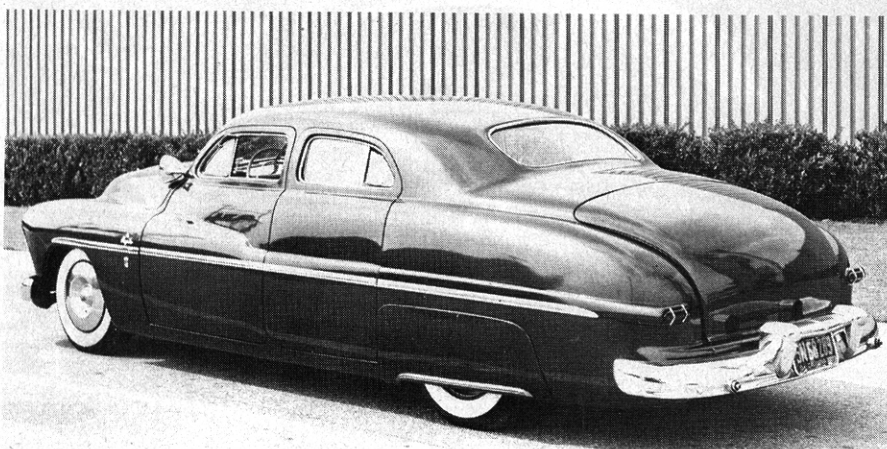
Other derogatory terms were "lead sled" and "lead barge." These, also, had some justification because more



John Geraghty's '40 Ford, by Gil Ayala, was channeled three inches, has a dropped front axle, and the windshield and side windows cut three inches. The top was by Carson, the upholstery by L & L, the running boards were removed and a lower body panel built to cover frame, the front fenders were raised three inches and the hood sectioned a like amount. Bumpers were from a '46 Ford.

An unusual car to customize was a Lincoln Continental. This 1941 was started by Howard Fall for owner Tommy Jamieson, who later sold the car to Bob Snyder who took it to Valley Custom for completion. The grille was totally custom-built from round steel bar stock, the hood was filled and the back corners rounded, all four fenders (the rears were later model Continental) were welded to the body and seams filled. A Carson top completes the body customizing.





Two 4-door Mercs by Barris—a 1949 mildly customized, and a 1950 with chopped top, drip rails removed and a 1949 DeSoto rear window to replace the larger original unit. Both cars have door handles removed, are de-chromed and lowered. Interior is of chopped '50.

often than not, custom cars carried a great deal of body lead—sometimes as much as 100 lb. per car—under their super-gloss lacquer jobs. One exception was Valley Custom, which to the best of my knowledge, never used more than a few pounds on any car, and then only when the spot to be smoothed couldn't be "hammer-welded" back into one piece. Hood and deck corners, windshield posts (after chopping) and door jams (after chopping or sectioning) were impossible to fill and smooth any other way so lead was not only useful but practical.

And customizers ran into problems not appreciated by their customers, particularly if the car wasn't brand new. Rust spots that hadn't been noticed during the estimate for the upcoming work; fenders that had been damaged and straightened so many times the metal was paper-thin; or a job that was going perfectly until time to fill the hood or a big door panel when

warpage set in.

Spence Murray tells a story about Linc Paola that illustrates a metalman's frustration. Linc was filling the center strip of a '40 Ford hood. It was late in the afternoon of a hard day, and when the rest of the employees went home for the day, Linc was still fighting the dreaded warp that occurs when the metal gets too hot.

The following morning when the employees came back to work, the '40 hood was on the scrap pile behind the shop, with over 100 holes in it. Linc had gotten so irked at that hood, and his own fight with it, he took his pick-hammer and beat the hood to death. He had to buy a new one from a dealer and start all over again. When the second hood was finally finished, it was beautiful, and the customer was happy, but Linc hadn't made a dime on the job.

Those were great days. I had been through the custom fad in 1941-42 with

a '39 Merc and a '41 Pontiac, and by 1945 was into hot rods with a '32 Ford roadster, and later the streamliner Alex Xydias and I ran as the "So-Cal Special." I towed the streamliner with a mildly customized '39 Ford convertible coupe (de-chromed with custom upholstery) and an "eighth-over Merc" bore and Edelbrock Super manifold. It was a damn good looking car with just enough power to satisfy.

Most custom cars of the era were, I thought, pretty bad. But they were a statement of the owner, expressing his ideas about what a car should look like, and as such deserved both the work that went into them and the recognition they received after completion. And once in a while, a really beautiful custom came along that seemed to make the whole idea worthwhile. We need more of that individual expression again, and I, for one, would like to see more customizing done on current cars. ■



Lincoln Capri was the basis for Ina Mae Overman's personal custom which she designed and took to Valley Custom for the work. She wanted the continental kit on the back, but didn't want it hanging out behind the car, so the rear fenders were extended 12 inches to give the spare an "inset" look. Exhaust actually came out the four portholes at the rear of the fenders. Kaiser grille guard was incorporated into Lincoln front bumper. Paint was Buick Mandarin Red and Nash Ambassador Gold.

It looks like a 41-48 body (2 or 4-door sedan made into a convertible) with the front fender extended rearward, Frenched lights, Olds grille, taillights set into the bumper guards, etc. . . . interesting.

