

## Cars of the Rockaways – Part I: 1945-1955



Nothing defines us for all to see like the cars we drive. By 1950 World War II was fast becoming a monument of memories kept alive with movies and parades. The GIs were back at work buying their first refrigerators and washing machines and a few brave souls even had boats moored at Capell's marina on 59<sup>th</sup> street. The GI Bill was helping to build a middle class in post-war America, even in the sleepy Rockaways. Truman had promised full employment, but now what America really wanted to see was the USA in its Chevrolet.

Like every community, the Rockaways were strictly fenced by lines of social demarcation reflecting pride and a steadily warming class warfare beneath the surface. Our cars were our standards, our colors, the flags we marched under. Democracy brought home a victorious generation, commemorated by Hollywood and promised, as its prize of demobilization, a new car. And there were plenty of them.

It didn't get any finer than a Cadillac which is why all the doctors drove them. Their wives drove them too keeping the body-shops busy. Long, sleek and generally black, this was a serious mark of distinction prized by the burgher class. The last of the "bathtub" models, the 1947 Series 75, was a reminder of the Depression, and America—even the doctors in Rockaway Park—wanted a *personal* automobile, not a limousine. Lawyers longed for Cadillacs too and dreamed of torts and settlements but that winter wheat hadn't come in yet so they settled for Oldsmobiles and Pontiacs and the occasional Buick.



But Detroit was listening. The shape of things to come began with the 1948 Caddy: a sleek fastback, with a split windshield and curious, rudimentary tail-fins. The designers claimed they were inspired by the Lockheed P-38 and for the next ten years, they spread like some design virus throughout GM, Chrysler and



Ford and even crossed the Atlantic.





THE ROCKAWAYS' CAR ICONS included the *Doctor's Cadillac*, the *Professional's Oldsmobile*, the *Middle Class Chevrolet* and the *Roman Catholic Ford*. Jews didn't drive Fords just as they didn't buy products from Germany: Henry Ford had been a notorious German sympathizer and was held in great local contempt. A few Lincolns appeared here and there because Hollywood movie stars drove them, but Fords were strictly working class. Chryslers including Plymouth, Dodge, De Soto,

and the Imperial were considered mechanically untrustworthy; you could tell a Chrysler by the sound of its starter, even though most New York City taxicabs were Chryslers.

These were the salad days of Mel Chevrolet, Herbst Brothers Oldsmobile, Far Rockaway Ford, Klass Buick, Mann Dodge, Feingold Pontiac, Wides Motors and others. GMAC was on a roll: the finance department of General Motors had decided that "Every Man a King" may not have worked for Huey Long, but it had meaning for Detroit.

The Rockaways didn't have African-Americans yet. They were called Colored People. This phrase described their standard of living, housing, education, skin color, food tastes, music and cars. Colored People who could, drove Buicks. Those who couldn't, drove Hudsons, Fords and Mercurys. Dressing up a Buick meant attaching chrome strips, fox-tails, fog lights and great mud flaps with reflectors behind the rear wheels.



By 1947 the car companies had quit building military equipment and were back to turning out jalopies with minor face lifts from pre-war production lines. The iron frames and flat-head engines were unchanged from the 1930s. But change was in the air: some good, some bad. Detroit cars were considered *finito* at 50,000 miles. You could buy one of these for \$50 almost anywhere.

The Studebaker was a failed social experiment with more built-in flaws than Soviet history. By the mid '50s you were as likely to bump into one trolling in the shallows of Jamaica Bay as on the road. Styling was inspired by science fiction and it wasn't all that bad, but they just would not run.



There wasn't much romance built into the '46-48 Chryslers. These mammoth cruisers were built from enough steel to put up a small skyscraper. Their counterparts were only a little smaller but GM was toying with V-8 engines, automatic transmissions and a few retro styles including woodies and station wagons. Hudson Hornets were tearing up the race tracks in California and the

Midwest, but they never made landfall to speak of in the Rockaways. At least not until the Hot Rods began to rev their engines.

Rockaway youth wanted wheels and their limited finances put them into hated 1930s clunkers that ate up a steady stream of engines, transmissions and rear-ends because these cars simply

wouldn't go more than fifty or sixty thousand miles on original equipment. You heard them coming with rattling valves and lifters and worn down bearings, and departing with smoke blowing past worn rings and glazed cylinders. But if Henry Ford was a supporter of the Bund, his cars from the 40s onward made workable economic traction for Young Men With Tools.

The Chevrolet was Everyman's family car, but it lacked appeal to young men because it needed a V8, not the sturdy, oily, straight-6 under its hood.

Ford had offered flat-head V8s for years and with a little welding modification, the big Lincoln and Ford truck V8s could be shoe-horned into roadsters and coupes from the '30s through the '40s making them speedy little rods that could outrun most police cruisers. When *The Big Wheel* showed up in theaters, the Quadrozzi salvage yard which had been selling engine blocks to fishermen for anchor buoys became the Rockaways' speed shop.



Although the other GM divisions as well as Ford and Chrysler were all building overhead valve V8s, Chevrolet continued with its unglamorous six until 1955 when the beloved '55 Chevrolet with a short-block V8 appeared.



By the 1960s some of the most bizarre styling had come and gone, and come again. The '48 Cadillac's vestigial tail-fins underwent some kind of automotive Darwinism resulting in factory-direct



caricatures. The tailfins were like filters on cigarettes, meaningless except in advertising where it counted. Chrysler even claimed that they contributed to a more stable ride at high speed—probably around 200 mph or more. Oldsmobile's '58 jukebox styling contributed to the decline and eventual extinction of the line.

The Rockaways had plenty of new car dealers, most of them in Far Rockaway. This fed into to a national romance with new car styles. As each model year appeared with press and panache, the announcement dates began to creep backwards. The '53 models weren't seen until December of the previous year; but by 1954, models were "previewed" to the public in late October or were leaked to *Popular Mechanics*. The styling/horsepower race competed for draw with the World Series and boxing's heavyweight championship.



In 1954 the Chevrolet division came forth with a tentative concept called the *Corvette*, a little fiberglass two-seater with the venerable six-cylinder engine so they could cut their losses following its anticipated failure in the marketplace. But the Corvette struck a chord in America just as *Playboy Magazine* had the same year and lust conquered all. Most of the Corvettes sold went to the Five Towns where income

was more disposable, but Mel had a thriving business in Rockaway Park as Corvettes became powerful symbols of sartorial splendor. The six was quickly dumped and a succession of powerful V8s made Corvettes as basic to young manhood as Marilyn Monroe and boners.

Some say that Germany and Japan lost World War II, but you can't convince their automakers of that. What the B-17s and B-29s accomplished, among other things, was to force Japan and Germany to build new factories. They had learned a thing or two making airplanes and tanks, and when the first *Volkswagens* showed up in the mid-50s they were cheap, reliable, sipped gas, and all their parts were interchangeable.



Then there was the quality thing. American and British cars were notoriously subject to the ravages of time, especially Jaguars, Sunbeams and MGs. They were lovely to look at but as passenger cars, they didn't hold up. Germany's *People's Car* whose 1930s design was partially attributed to Hitler, had an air-cooled engine, unbreakable transmission and clutch, and four wheels. And it ran and ran and ran. Beetles are still manufactured in Mexico and make up the world's largest taxi fleet. By the late '50s Japan's Nissan was beginning to sell its *Datsun* in American markets. Although not taken seriously by *Car & Driver*, Detroit saw Japan's cars as a shot across their bow, which it was: they were still building cars on thirty year old assembly lines but if America's priorities were changing, you couldn't tell it by visiting Far Rockaway Ford, Mel Chevrolet or Herbst Oldsmobile.

Car ownership as a social credential had gotten very serious and even a little humorous. Middle class owners especially in Bayswater and Rockaway Park were careful to display the precious New Car Sticker on the side window for weeks after it took its place in the neighborhood. It was important for the mailman and the neighbors to know just what options and features had been ordered with the gleaming new Buick, Oldsmobile or Cadillac.



Pink Cadillacs sold like hotcakes to the Five Towns' Mafiosi. Each one came with a star sapphire pinky ring for Made Men, who generally stayed on their side of the Nassau County line dreaming up heists and who to whack and how to keep their daughters away from Jews and Irishmen.

End of Part I

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