

BACK TO THE FUTURE

It is hard to contemplate that when the first 1955 Chevrolets began hitting dealerships around the country 68 years ago this fall that these cars were so sophisticated and ahead of their time that they swept the American public into a frenzy that led Chevrolet to sell a whopping 1.8 million cars in 1955. Chevrolet led all US sales in '55, boasting 22% of all car sales and 44% of the low-price passenger car market. Total passenger car sales recorded in the mid-point of the booming 1950's was slightly over 8 million total vehicles sold. General Motors, the largest company in the world at the time, sold a record 3.8 million vehicles which was 47% of the total vehicles sold in the US in 1955.

The 1955 Chevy was a hit from the day it was unveiled, which was at the end of October 1954 in most areas. Dealerships were draped in a carnival like atmosphere and the public responded accordingly. GM had spent an incredible amount of money to change the face of the entire corporation, one which had led the car wars with Ford in all but 2 years since WWII but was faced with a need to modernize its fleet. Harlow Curtice, who led GM from 1953 to 1958, spent over \$1 billion to change over GM's entire lineup, and Chevrolet was the brand that helped make the investment worth every penny.

Consider these numbers: Chevy outsold Ford by nearly 400,000 cars, Buick the second-best selling GM car sold half as many cars as did Chevy, and if you take all of GM's offerings other than Chevy, their combined sales only slightly edged out Chevys' sales on their own.

The promotion of the all-new Chevrolets was centered around two things: the all-new, futuristic

Nomad of which they sold a total of 8,386 units and the all-new, revolutionary 265 Chevrolet V8. Chevrolet offered 16 different models across 3 series, the entry level 150, mid-level 210 and top of the line Bel Air. The most popular 1955 Chevy model was the four-door Bel Air like the one seen in these pictures. Chevrolet built 366,293 of these perfect family sedans in 1955. These were the perfect sedans during the height of the baby boom, and they were priced right at just over \$2,000 for the ever-expanding suburban families.

Equipped with the tried-and-true Chevrolet 235 in-line 6-cylinder backed by a Powerglide, this Bel Air was capable of these staggering performance numbers right from the dealer: 0-60mph in 14.2sec, ¼ mile time of 19.6 sec at 70mph and a top speed 90mph. If anything is staggering about these numbers, it is that when we think of the venerable '55 Chevy most think of the classic lines of a Nomad, Convertible

or Hardtop and the hot rod history that the '55 2-door sedan has made throughout the years, we generally don't think of a sleepy and slow '55 four-door. Well, we are going to take this sleepy crew cab and make it the ultimate *Sleeper!*

We thought that we would divide this build into several segments to allow for us to show what can be done to make a really cool old car into the ultimate driver with plenty of power on reserve, a modern suspension, and all the upgrades needed to give the owners Jim and Gina Hensley from Warren, Michigan a perfect cruising Tri-Five.

To start things, in order to take on a build like this, you first have to find a good starter car. Some may recognize Jim and Gina from the Tri-Five Nationals; they have been a fixture since the 2016 event when Rinke Chevrolet signed on as our official Chevrolet Performance dealer. Rinke Performance has contributed the engine and transmission for every give-a-way car since 2016 and has been a huge supporter of the American Tri-Five Association at every turn. While at the Tri-Five Nationals in 2018, I spotted

this incredibly clean, completely unrestored, 30K mile Shoreline Beige Bel Air. I noticed the car was parked near my good friend Don Singleton (member #2541), and when I asked Don about the car, he said that his good friend Leonard Allen (member #5480) owned the car.

Don said, "*Leonard is a hound dog! He stays on the hunt 24/7, he will jump in his truck with trailer in tow, in the drop of a hat to chase a lead on a good Tri-Five.*"

Leonard told me that he found the car in a magazine classified ad a few weeks prior to the Tri-Five Nationals. The car was in northern Ohio and as soon as Leonard hung up the phone with the seller, he was in route to Ohio from his home in Whiteland, Indiana, trailer in tow. After seeing how clean the car was Leonard made the easy decision to drag it home.

"That car wasn't only nice and clean; it ran and drove great. I drove it all over town for weeks before coming to Bowling Green," Leonard said. "I wouldn't have sold it, but I am always looking for the next car."



After seeing the car, Jim and Gina were smitten and bought it from Leonard. Gina's smile could be seen for miles as she drove it around the grounds at Beech Bend for the remainder of the weekend. The Hensley's took the car home and enjoyed it just as it was in 1955 for the next year then returned to the 2019 Tri-Five Nationals with the car and an idea of what we could do with it. Jim hatched the idea of giving the old girl a mechanical makeover. You know brakes, driveline, radio...the basics.

Not having a way to get the car back to our shop 4 hours from Beech Bend, I asked Jim if he would mind if we just drove it home. He said, "We are changing the engine so what's the worst that could happen?" So, after the show was over, and we cleaned up the grounds we headed north on 65 towards home. Other than a flat tire about halfway home, the car ran and drove like a new car. An albeit slightly underpowered, hard to stop new car.

Unfortunately, our next year was interrupted by COVID, and the project got put on the back burner. After sitting for the better part of two years we have finally jumped back into the project. Much like the *Chillin' with Dillon* articles, we are planning a series of build-up articles on the *Hensley Sleeper*. We will be upgrading this cool more-door on the inside with a complete new American Autowire Classic Update wiring harness, Custom Autosound Bluetooth radio, and Dakota Digital RTX gauges to match the 21st century driveline.



Underneath will see a new John's industries 9", and a complete Woody's 4-Corner Coilover suspension package featuring a triangulated 4-link rear suspension with Viking double adjustable coilover shocks, and Woody's tubular A-Arms and Viking coilovers up front as well. Steering will consist of a CPP 500-series steering box and steering SLK-CP steering linkage upgrade, all tilted by a tilt column. CPP's C7 hub drop spindle Big Brake Kit will provide the whoa to a set of custom Billet Specialties 18" steelies with dog dish caps.

But possibly the most impressive upgrade is a Rinke Performance LS3 topped with a slew of goodies from Lokar and LS Classic, including



their '63 Fuelie intake manifold. And with a CPP 29-gallon fuel tank feeding the LS3, the Hensley's should see cruising distances increased, and more comfortable to boot.

As you can see in these shots, the work has already begun and is moving fast. You will see more in the next issue about how to install a 4-link into a car with the body still on the chassis, adding wider wheel tubs and installing the monster CPP 29 gallon tank. 

