



## '56 Dodge Custom Royal Lancer

Imagine Finding the Car You've Been Seeking for Years—  
and Then Learning It's Traveled Only 7500 Miles by Bob Tomaine

**I**T'S HARD to say just when Chrysler Corporation decided to cut loose again following its unfortunate experience with the ultra streamlined Airflow, but the years of overly cautious and mostly straightforward dullness were clearly behind it when the feature car left the factory.

Not a vehicle that's frequently seen today, the 1956 Dodge Custom Royal Lancer is light years from the take-no-chances cars introduced in the wake of the 1934-37 Chrysler and DeSoto Airflow. In fact, it's almost as far from the Dodges and other Mopars that preceded it by just a few years.

Like nearly everyone else, Chrysler resumed production after World War II by building slightly modified 1942 models. It was a valid approach, being relatively inexpensive and simple enough that cars could begin appearing quickly to meet the demands that had gone unsatisfied during the war years. With the rest of the Chrysler family, Dodge remained all but unchanged into 1949, when the company's first postwar designs were introduced.

The new Dodge—1949's second series—did, indeed, look different. Its sides were much smoother, thanks in large measure to front fenders that were far better integrated into the overall package. Even the rear fenders seemed to be a better fit to the body. The roof was flatter, too, and that helped as the styling moved away

from the rounded pre-war thinking and toward the angular look still a few years in the future.

At the same time, though, that left Dodge with a practical boxiness that translated to plenty of interior room but was something less than inspiring. Similarly, there was also a kind of practicality attached to Dodge's engine. A 230-cubic-inch flathead six dating to 1942, it was smooth and durable. Dependable, yes, but few have ever described it as thrilling. It would serve as the line's sole powerplant until 1953, when Dodge put some significant distance between past and present. Styling was further smoothed to continue the shift away from the pre-war designs, but the biggest part of that '53 jump was the 230's new companion.

Dodge finally had a V-8, the 241-cubic-inch Red Ram. Its 140 horsepower might not seem like much today, but for comparison, consider that the six was just 11 cubic inches smaller while generating only 103 horsepower. Besides its role as the first Dodge V-8, the Red Ram had another feature for which it would be remembered. Like its siblings in Chryslers and DeSotos, it was a hemi. That description comes from the shape of its combustion chambers and is just a shortened form of "hemispherical." In brief, its big benefit is improved breathing, thanks to a combination of placing the spark plug in the center and the valves across from each other, operated by a pair of rocker shafts.

The Red Ram was a milestone in Dodge's evolution and at the same time spoke well for the division's place in the industry as the 1953 American cars powered by modern V-8s still made up a select group (the others being Buick, Cadillac, Oldsmobile, Studebaker and Lincoln).

Nineteen fifty-four didn't bring any major changes, although the hemi was now up to 150 horsepower and the styling was updated. The following year was another matter.

### Vast Changes for '55

Virgil Exner's Forward Look was applied across the board at Chrysler and there would be no mistaking any 1955 Mopar for its immediate predecessor. For Dodge, that meant crossing the line into angularity, even if roundness didn't completely disappear. The new look added chrome, wraparound windshields, three-tone paint schemes, the very beginnings of fins and some curious stamping on the hood. That might sound like an unkind description and the look is indeed slightly ostentatious, but all of those items somehow add up correctly and the 1955 Dodge is an attractive car.

From Chrysler's perspective, it undoubtedly eliminated "Dodge" as a synonym for "yawn." A *Popular Mechanics* Owners Report tallied praise for styling as third among the car's best-liked features. In his road test that accompanied the Owners Report, Floyd Clymer found the inte-