

The Rough Road That Gave the Edsel a Bad Name



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A 1959 Edsel Ranger

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This is the VOA Special English Technology Report.

ANNOUNCER: "They'll know you've arrived, when you drive up in the nineteen fifty-eight Edsel -- the car that's truly new, from nameplate to taillight."

The Ford Motor Company built several versions of the Edsel from nineteen fifty-eight to nineteen sixty. Ford ended production of the car after just three model years because of weak sales.

The Edsel has been described as both a "colossal failure" and "a car ahead of its time."

John Heitmann is a history professor at the University of Dayton in Ohio and vice president of the Society for Automotive Historians.

JOHN HEITMANN: "It was a car that was controversial in styling. Its horseshoe-shaped grill is still remembered today. The Edsel is kind of the example of the car that never caught on. It's known as the 'disaster from Dearborn.'"

Dearborn, Michigan is Ford's headquarters.

Professor Heitmann says the biggest problem was that the Edsel arrived around the same time as a recession. He says Americans were beginning to question their values.

JOHN HEITMANN: "It's a really curious kind of economic episode. It was actually quite severe but also rather short. But it was at a time when many Americans were reacting to the dinosaur in the driveway. These very heavy, chrome-laden Buicks and other cars -- the fifty-eight Buick had fifty-eight pounds of chrome on it. The Edsel was also a very heavy, very fuel-inefficient vehicle."

Even so, some people say the Edsel's technology more than made up for what it lacked in looks and fuel efficiency.

"Shamrock" Shelly Cleaver is the public relations director for the Edsel Owners Club in the United States. Mr. Cleaver has been a member of the club since it formed in nineteen sixty-nine. He says the Edsel was the most modern car of its time.

SHELLY CLEAVER: "It was the first Ford product to have self-adjusting brakes on it. And then on the back and rear bumper it had little bumper tips, had a guard with rubber mounted in them so when you could push your car or something, you wouldn't skin up your bumper. And it had power lubrication where you could lubricate your ball joints and everything inside the car where you mashed a button."

Mr. Cleaver liked one feature especially.

SHELLY CLEAVER: "The fifty-eight Edsel had five buttons in the center of the steering wheel to shift the gears, see. And that way you could shift the gears with your left hand and keep your arm around your girlfriend, or your wife, whatever and keep on driving. That was unique. It was Teletouch Drive."

"Shamrock" Shelly Cleaver made good use of that feature when he got married in nineteen fifty-eight. He went on his honeymoon in an Edsel, with one arm on the wheel and the other around his new wife.

The Edsel was named for Edsel Ford, the only child of company founder Henry Ford. Edsel was president of Ford Motor Company until he died in nineteen forty-three.

Today the cars are considered collector's items. They can cost anywhere from hundreds of dollars to tens of thousands of dollars.

And that's the VOA Special English Technology Report, written by June Simms.
I'm Steve Ember.