

Growing up with tail fins

Born at the end of 1942, I was never cognizant of The War. Our family felt little effect from it other than that my father had a well-paying job working in a shipyard in Tacoma. I remember seeing a ration book when it was being passed around as a souvenir, a bit of memorabilia.

My real generational imprinting is based in the 1950s, the decade of my middle and high school years; and the milestones of my life were the automobiles. Each fall, Detroit would provide a feast of new mobile metal sculptures for me to admire. Well, more than admire. Lust after? Worship?

Today I had the internet show me the new cars from each of the years 1949-1963, and I am surprised to find that through the first half of that period, tail fins were not a thing. Cars from 1948 through 1954 had a box-on-box shape, with rounded corners, like this 1950 Chrysler:



That started to change only in 1955, coincidentally when I became a teen. Taillights on the 1955 Chevy and the 1955 Chrysler perked up like buds about to open in spring.



As was typical for Detroit, the following year's cars saw only incremental tweaks to their design, but in 1957 the fins took flight on the Chevy, the Ford,



and especially the Chrysler:



This continued for 4 more years. I have a clear memory of sitting at the kitchen table and just poring over an article about the 1959 Buick. I thought then, and I still think, that this was purest, most elegant piece of automotive design ever produced. It wasn't *practical* — I didn't think it was *practical* even then — nor aerodynamic. I'd learned enough about sports cars to realize the Buick was probably too big and soft-handling to be a performance car. But its shape was absolutely, unapologetically, itself. I mean, *look* at it:



I don't think it sold particularly well. The corners of the next year's Buick were softened, and by 1962 the Buick was back to a round-ended box on box.

In 1962 I was out of school and working my first full-time job, as a parking lot attendant at a Cadillac dealership, and actually getting to drive the last of the big-time tail fins, the 1962 Caddy.



Apparently America's tastes were maturing along with my own, for by 1963 the tail fins were melting back into the fenders and cars were no longer spiky. We were all older and wiser and more boring.