

Ford's Fabulous Flip Top

As an original member H.V.T.C. started in 2001 by our club president, Roger Noll, I have always been fascinated by our club member's 58-66 T-Bird convertibles. After requiring a restorable 64 Lincoln Convertible (a future project) and a 64 T-Bird convertible from my wife's grandfather, I have taken a keen interest in the operation of these engineering marvels of the time. By reading the shop manuals and learning the electrical and hydraulic of the top operation, I restored the 64 T-Bird top operation and restored the car. This retractable top mechanism was used in the 57-59 Skyliner, 61-67 Lincoln Convertibles, and the 58-66 Thunderbird. True T-Bird enthusiasts know the top was not fully automatic until mid-59. On the 58 and early 59 T-Bird Convertibles, one had to lift the deck lid manually and push a button on the inside of the left trunk quarter to initiate top operation. Read on to learn the origins of this engineering masterpiece.

On April 14, 1957, President Eisenhower was handed the keys to the first production model of the 1957 Ford Retractable Hardtop. The first prototype had been exhibited at the New York Automobile Show, and the car was announced in the Motoring Press in February 1957.

The retractable had been under development at Ford since 1953. Originally, it was slated to be offered on the Mark 11 Continental. But after spending \$2.19 million on its development Ford did not feel they could regain their development cost on the low production Lincoln. Late in the program, the retractable was

turned over from the special project's division to the Ford Division. It would take another \$18 Million to get the car into production.

Called the Skyliner, the car was priced at \$3137.69. It was offered with a 292 engine as standard equipment and was the only 57 Ford which could not be ordered with a 6. The car drew 20,766 buyers for the first model year, a mere five months of production. Today, it is the most collectible of all 1957 Fords, save the Thunderbird.

The top operating mechanism utilizes a complex system of four lock motors, three drive motors, ten power relays, ten limit switches, eight circuit breakers, plus a neutral switch, activating switch and cycle indicator light switch. There are 610 feet of wire in the system, which operates sequentially.

Despite its complexity, the system proved to be so reliable that it was carried into later Thunderbird convertibles and Lincoln Continental convertibles. A far more serious problem than top mechanism failure was lack of trunk space when the top was retracted. The only luggage space available was a 24x 30x15- inch bin in the center of the trunk. Loading the bin was inconvenient as there was a 20-inch stretch between the top edge of the lower back panel and the bin, and you couldn't pile anything higher than 16 inches in it without hitting the retractable top.

The retractable hard top was continued into the 1957 and 1959 model years. The 1959 retractable mechanism is somewhat different than the two previous years, and there is very little interchangeability of parts. The car was discontinued after 1959, because the 1960 models did not lend themselves to retractable

hardtop design, and sales did not live up to expectations. It stands today as one of the classic symbols of the decade of hula hoops, Sputniks, and 3D movies.

I've finished my research on the 55-57 Thunderbirds and this will be the next subject of our tech news article. Happy Motoring!

Respectively Submitted,

Larry Sneary

Special Interest Autos, August 1981, By Mr. Tim HowleyFord's