

La Femme

The rare and not-as-provocative-as-hoped-for 1955 Dodge La Femme

By Don Spiro

Photography by the author

"Gee Wally.... all the guys are callin' me a sissy.... a pink and white car and it says La Femme on the side.... I just can't be driven to school in mom's new car anymore.... " " Yeah, Beave.... I know what ya mean.... that's why I ride with Eddie.... and besides, mom's not all that thrilled with the car either!"

[Line from a long-lost episode of "Leave it To Beaver"?!]

Oh those wild, finned and chromed days of the Fifties; it seems that no matter what the auto makers built, the American buying public lined up at their downtown dealer troughs to ogle and buy. Bigger, lower, wider, faster, more streamlined, more powerful; if there was a usable adverb or adjective, you could find it in automobile ads. Success was still, seemingly, a given in the Detroit of the mid-fifties. Though consumer spending and demand for durable goods lingering from the war years had slackened, a strong economy seemed to assure continued sales. Detroit became more marketing "savvy" and began to target various specific segments of the mass market. For the most part, this targeting was successful and laid the foundation for automotive marketing strategies for decades to come.

There were, however, notable and not so notable exceptions to this en masse consumer gorging. Failure in the marketplace during this period did happen. First to mind is Ford's Edsel; even the most auto-illiterate individual will tell you about that "horse-collar" blunder. It is the stuff of legends. Then there were the less obvious ground balls through the infield: the entire Crosley line, the Pinin Farina-designed Nash Ambassador Custom, the Kaiser Darrin, and the Ford hardtop/convertible Sunliners, to name a few. Over at Chrysler there was a slight blip of failure on the sales chart about mid-decade. The specific car was a model variation of the 1955 and '56 Dodge Lancer.

This blip passed by almost unnoticed, as scant few examples were produced over the two-year run. There are so few examples of this car extant today that most enthusiasts have never seen one.

Unless you are a dyed-in-the-wool Mopar enthusiast, chances are you have never heard of this car. Count me as one of the uninformed, until Spud Sperdutti of Tucson's Suburban Motors beckoned me into his back warehouse to show me something that he was sure I had never seen. Spud's warehouse is a veritable shrine, and time line from the weird and wonderful to the most pedestrian of everyday cars, covering all decades from the Thirties on up. Wedged between a gold '47 Cadillac Sedanet and a green

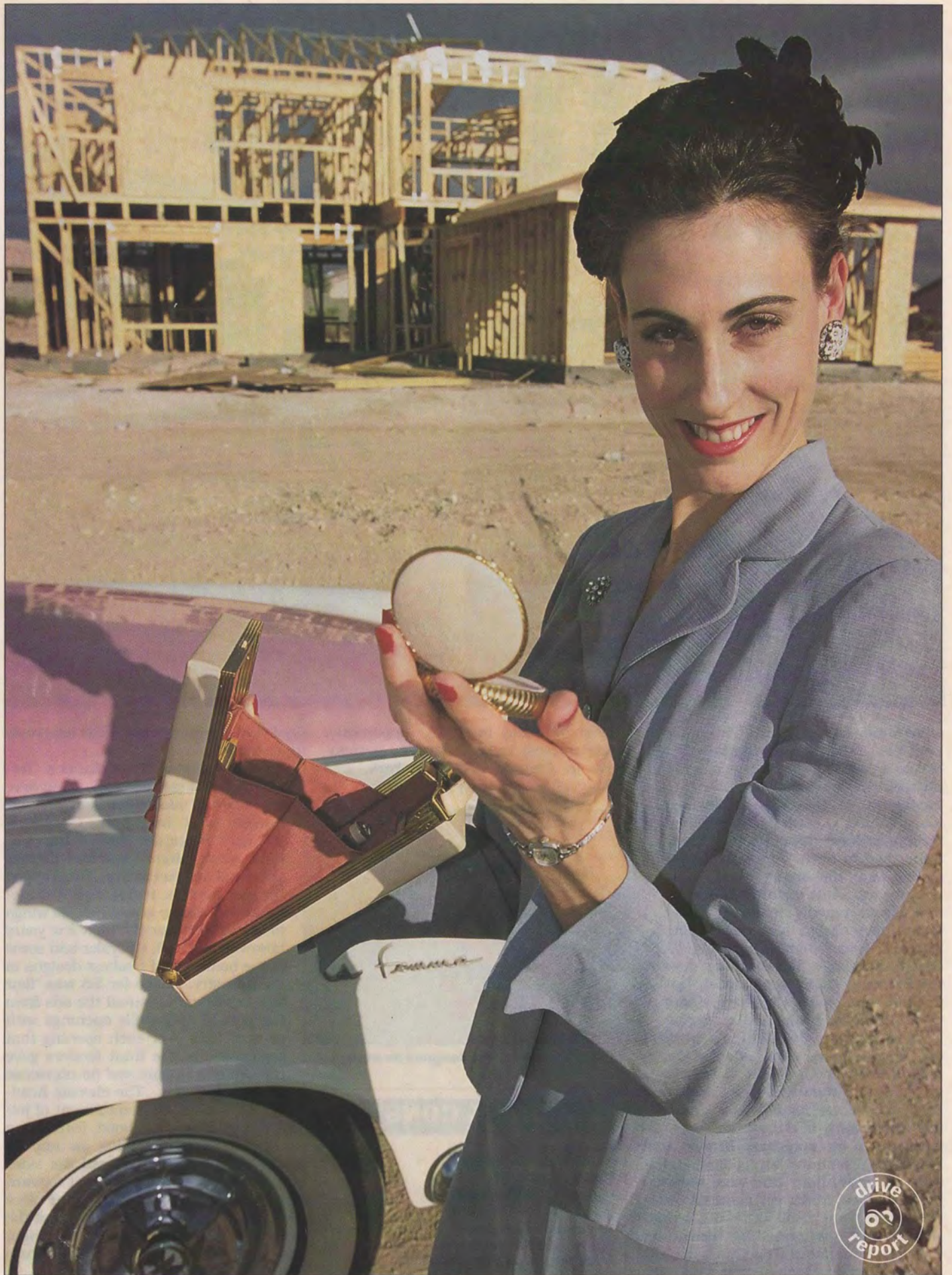
***"Her Majesty...
The American Woman
was not about to be
re-defined in
Heather Rose with
feminine accessories."***

metallic '42 Buick fastback coupe was what appeared at first glance to be a common, mid-fifties Dodge Lancer sedan. A handsome car, this particular one was finished in a garish pink and white two-tone, never one of the most popular color combos from the two- and three-tone era. "Go have a close look at it while I go get the *real* reason I bought this particular car." I carefully worked my way through the rows of gleaming beauties until I reached the Dodge. I gave the car a quick going over. It was wedged into the back row, so it was impossible to stand back and really appreciate its lines. It looked like a run-of-the-mill Lancer for sure, but a small gold stylized-script trim piece on the front fender caught my eye. "LA FEMME". Interesting name for a model. I'd never heard of it, and the thought that it might be a show car or design study crossed my mind. "Come on back to my office; I found what I was looking for," boomed a voice from the adjacent service room.

"This is only the second one of this model Dodge I've ever found, and I passed on the first one because the stuff in this box was missing," remarked

Spud as he settled into his desk chair. An excited look was fixed on Spud's face as he carefully opened the flaps of a tattered cardboard box. A pink floral-patterned collapsible umbrella and matching plastic rain hat emerged from the box. "HUH," I thought.... Now what did this rain gear have to do with the car. I didn't see the connection, unless the car was strictly for the Seattle market. Next, a stylized gray presentation box emerged, with fancy gold script on top. As Spud opened the box, a strange-looking wedge-shaped object lay inside. Because of its unusual shape, I thought at first glance that it might have been a special protective carrying case for Spock's Tri Corder on Transporter beam-downs to some of the more hostile alien planets in *Star Trek*. "Here; look at this," remarked Spud as he unfastened the gold hasp on the lid of the strange object, and began to carefully remove the contents. Onto Spud's desk emerged a gold-edged tortoise-shell comb, a lipstick, an elegant gold make-up compact, a tube-shaped container of powder, a Fifties chic cigarette case and matching lighter and, finally, a pink change purse with a delicate gold chain attached. All were in pristine condition; it was apparent that the strange-shaped object was a purse. I remained clueless as to the connection between this array of seemingly high-end feminine accessories and the Dodge back in the shop, though. Last to emerge from the musty box was a small pamphlet. On the cover was one of those great stylized illustrations of a quintessential Fifties woman. She possessed features and fashion stylings that seemed to be the prototype for the Barbie Doll. Suspended in a sea of flowers, with a relaxed yet confident expression on her face, she fingered in her delicate hand a thin baton, replete with the Dodge hood ornament on the top. Across this vision of feminine postwar loveliness was a pink banner, on which a simple line of text suddenly connected the contents of the box and the pink and white Dodge, "By Appointment to Her Majesty...the AMERICAN WOMAN." La Femme by Dodge.

The auto show circuit of the early Fifties was the springboard for new de-





signs and engineering. These shows were also used as a barometer of sorts to see just what new designs and options might inspire a purchase in the buying public. These shows were big too; in 1955 GM used 150 tractor-trailers to haul the Motorama show from town to town. The stars of the shows were the dream cars. These dream cars, while certainly futuristic and glitzy, usually featured highly impractical design and engineering features. Some items appearing on dream cars might find their way onto the eventual production model, but for the most part, the dream cars were strictly for ooohs and aaahs. La Femme can trace its origin to a show car, one designed especially for the feminine buyer. In 1954, Chrysler unveiled two show cars; Le Comte and Le Comtesse. Le Comte was the masculine and brawny of the two and was finished in a no-nonsense bronze and black. La Comtesse was painted pink and pale gray. Both cars were reported to be identical under the paint and both show cars were built on the Chrysler New Yorker platform. The design of those cars was more reflective of the late Forties Chrysler design than what was

about to come in 1955. Apparently, show interest in La Comtesse, particularly in Chicago and New York, was responsible for Chrysler making the

final decision to market a car expressly to women.

Chrysler adopted Virgil Exner's "forward look" in design in 1955. Gone were the tall and slab-sided conservative designs that had been Chrysler's hallmark since the end of the war. Bold, sleek, aircraft-inspired themes appeared across the line. Fins topped the rear fenders, tempered and tasteful for '55. Exner would flex his wings to the fullest over the next few years however. In 1955, Chrysler had some of the boldest and freshest designs in the industry. Dodge for '55 was "flair fashioned," or so touted the ads from the period. Split grille openings with stylized bars over each opening that wrapped into the front fenders gave the Dodge a unique and no-nonsense look coming at you. The chrome headlight trim was highly reminiscent of jet-engine nacelles. The hood featured a chrome band surrounding an implied scoop that continued around the sides of the car as a trim piece. Just forward of the rear wheel wells this trim piece dipped, came back up and ended at the dual-lens aircraft-exhaust-like taillight assembly. A very provocative and harmonious design.



Even the brochure was designed for women.

PROS & CONS

Pros

- Eye-catching color scheme
- Powerful Chrysler Hemi V-8
- Ideal car for Interior Designers

Cons

- Production was very limited
- Original upholstery not available
- Accessories almost always missing

Dodge went one up on an industry enamored with two-tone paint schemes, and offered three-tone schemes. How successful the three tones looked was strictly dependent on the colors; some were stunning, others best rolled out at night. Top of the line were the Custom Royal Lancer hard-tops and convertibles. La Femme would be an option available on this top-line model. Base price of the Custom Royal Lancer was \$2,543, and the La Femme option added another \$143.30, which got you the two-tone Heather Rose over Sapphire 36White paint. The all-important "La Femme" badging appeared on the front fenders and glove-box door. Inside, you got the special Jacquard Fabrics upholstery; the compartments on the front seat backs were covered in Heather Rose Cordagrain and held all of the "feminine" accessories to not only keep your styling intact, but dry should you be caught in the rain. These rainy-day necessities included a fisherman's-style rain hat, stylish rain cape, rain boots and an umbrella that featured the Jacquard motif. There were slight detail variations between cars built in Los Angeles and those in Detroit, most notably the colors of the wheels. There also seemed to be variations in the color of the taillight area as well. Most appeared painted pink; some were white.

There were two variations of the same engine available for La Femme in '55: the standard Super Red Ram Hemi-head V-8, which made 183hp at 4,400 rpm; and the optional, 193hp Super-Powered Super Red Ram Hemi V-8. "Super-Powered" and its neck snapping increase of ten horsepower came via a Carter 4-barrel carburetor, instead of the standard Stromberg 2-barrel. The one key-spotting feature of a genuine La Femme is the gold La Femme badging. (It appears on Spud's example that the gold plating either peels off or fades to more of a silver/chrome-like color. The badges are original, though, as under scrutiny you can see remnants of gold plating on all of the lettering, especially at the base of the badge closest to the fender.) While La Femme would re-appear as an option on the '56 Dodge Royal Lancer, the colors changed to two-tone lavender, and gone was the purse and all its wonderful feminine accessories.

Was La Femme successful? Far from it, in spite of flowery press releases to the contrary prior to the '56 models



Levittown 1955? Randy and Sistine Casellini look back.



Umbrella, purse, lighter, rain hat, lipstick, etc....

release. While there are no exact figures for how many La Femmes were produced, I have seen estimates ranging from 300 to 500 for each year. A report by an owner of a La Femme I came across on the internet reported contacting Chrysler's PR department and was told that a total of 1,140 La Femmes were produced over the two-year run. Whatever the figure is, these were very rare cars in their time; and if these numbers are accurate, how many are still around today? Until I saw Spud's, I

never had heard about, let alone seen one. It would appear that, in spite of great interest on the show circuit level, when it came time to plunk down the hard-earned cash, women cared little about La Femme; and if women didn't buy it, how many Fifties-era men would? The car had too narrow an audience. But let's not dwell on failure; happily, there are a few around, and Spud was most gracious in allowing us behind the wheel.

"She runs fine," assured Spud, "no need to baby her." Pink and white; what a combination, I thought, sliding behind the wheel. This was definitely an acquired taste in color. Now I have fond memories of so many of the two-tone color schemes applied to cars from the Fifties. I think back to those summer drives as a kid down New Jersey's Garden State Parkway to Point Pleasant Beach, being surrounded in a rainbow of pastel-and-white and other two-tone cars. Shore vacations were special, and I always felt as if I was in a fantastic celebratory parade of rolling birthday cakes that would announce that two weeks at the beach was at hand. Pink-and-white was never a favorite, though, and seemed few and far between even back then. The vast expanse of Heather Rose dashboard in front of me took some getting used to. It might even be an affront to my sense of aesthetics under the cover of darkness. Thankfully, the black top of the dash did temper and tone down the color somewhat. The dash itself was classic Dodge, the instruments arranged in a purposeful "aircraft-inspired" manner across the fascia. Centered over the pink steering column (yes even the column was pink; I wonder what Freud would say?) is a large speedometer with attendant gauges to monitor all engine vitals spaced out on either side; a nice overall symmetry and balance. Down low to the right of the steering column is the small, protruding, knobbed-chrome lever, the "Flite Control" to operate the Powerflite automatic transmission. Radio and ventilation controls are spaced out along the bottom of the dash panel in their own tasteful fascia. To the right of the instrument panel, the simple glove box, finished in black carried down from the dash top, sported the gold "La Femme" logo plate on the lower right corner. Aside from the Heather Rose color, the dash layout was elegant and purposeful; in another color combination perhaps



Combination of chrome trim and Heather Rose "pinkish" color keeps driver readily alert.



Distinctive pointed nose and twin grilles were a one-year-only design for 1955 models.

one of the best dash layouts I've sat in front of from that era.

The seats are finished in vinyl edges with silvery pink fabric inserts. The same fabric is carried through in the door panels. Dodge press releases call the fabric "Cordagrain," and the pattern was small pink rosebuds on a pale pink background. The patterned tapestry-style fabric was made especially for "her majesty," and did not appear in any other Dodge or Chrysler product from the period. For the collector and restorer, the fabric did not hold up well, and deteriorated rapidly. Today, this fabric is virtually impossible to find. Spud is in the process of having the fabric specially made to repair a few problem areas on the back seat and door panels. "The maker will only deal in bulk, so I'll have more than I need. I've heard a rumor that a special hat box came in some of the La Femmes. I have so much of that material coming that we've decided to make up a hatbox using the excess material. "In letters to Dodge dealers announcing La Femme, it was stated that the "crowning touches which personalize the La Femme are its special feminine accessories in two special compartments." On the back of the passenger seat is a compartment shaped to hold the unique purse. The center of the compartment is open, no doubt, for rear seat passengers to view the purse with envy, perhaps, and be reminded of just how special the owner of this car is. In the back of the driver's seat is a similar compartment, slotted for each of the foul weather gear items.

The seats, in spite of their age, were still somewhat firm and comfortable...initially. Fore and aft adjustment allowed ample leg room for my six-

PARTS SUPPLIERS

Autosports

2410 W. Freeway Lane
Dept. SIA-186
Phoenix, Arizona 85021-4135
602-995-5311
Reproduction lenses.

Andy Bernbaum Auto Parts

315 Franklin St.
Dept. SIA-186
Newton, Massachusetts 02458
617-244-1118
Engine, suspension and body parts.

Antique Mopar Auto Sales

5758 McNicholl Dr.
Dept. SIA-186
Hale, Michigan 48739-8984
517-257-3123
Full line of parts for 1936 to 1969.

Arizona Parts

320 E. Pebble Beach

Dept. SIA-186
Tempe, Arizona 85282
602-966-6683
New and used parts and accessories.

Atlas Obsolete Chrysler Parts

10621 Bloomfield St. Unit 32
Dept. SIA-186
Los Alamitos, CA 90720
NOS & repro parts for 1936-74 models.

Mike Hershenfeld

3011 Susan Rd
Dept. SIA-186
Bellmore, New York 11710
516-781-7278
NOS mechanical and electrical parts.

MoreParts North

P.O. Box 345
Dept. SIA-186
Ornangeville, Ontario, Canada L9W 2Z7
519-941-6331
Hard to find NOS parts 1930s to 1970s.

PRO Antique Auto

50 King Spring Rd
Dept. SIA-186
Windsor Locks, Connecticut 06096
860-623-8275
Body materials, carpet sets and weatherstripping.

Roberts Motor Parts

17 Prospect St.
Dept. SIA-186
West Newbury, MA 01985
New & NOS parts and literature.

Terrill Machine Inc.

Rout2 2, Box 61
Dept. SIA-186
DeLeon, Texas 76444
254-893-2610
New, used and rebuilt mechanical parts.

foot-three frame and, glancing back, adequate room still for rear-seat passengers. A turn of the key, and the 270-cu.in. V-8 awakened. Blipping the throttle proved the engine smooth and quiet. It was a reach to adjust the outside mirror; it was mounted forward on the door. After a fair amount of fiddling, it seemed I would have to be wary of a blind spot during lane changes. I reached down for the "Flite Control" lever and slipped the car into drive. We were off or, as Dodge proudly claimed, "in flite." Out on secondary roads at 40 mph, the car felt solid. There was a slight amount of rear-end wander, from the bias-ply tires perhaps, or maybe the suspension was just a bit tired after 45 years. Then, too, perhaps it was inherent in Dodge's suspension design of the period. Through sweeping curves, it exhibited its hefty weight of one and three quarter tons as the suspension loaded rapidly with each sweep of the turns. The handling, though lethargic, was predictable, and the tires whoomed with a definite presence, in case you missed the signals emanating from your sliding posterior. La Femme was certainly not a real handful to control over such roads, and the car inspired more confidence the longer I was behind the wheel. The brakes seemed more than up to the task in routine driving and didn't appear to require a lead foot to engage them. "Her Majesty" would find them easy to operate, for sure. An overall slower response of the suspension and brakes required more attention to the task at hand: driving. As happens the more I drive Fifties cars, I wondered if drivers from that era were better skilled overall because of these shortcomings than the drivers of today's cars, where even an econ-o-box sedan has point-and-shoot handling and braking capabilities that require less on the part of the driver.

It was on the interstate that the Dodge exhibited the prowess that suspension designers of that period were becoming increasingly good at dialing in: "The Boulevard Ride." The Super Red Ram would never be mistaken for its sibling the Hemi as I nailed the accelerator to get up to the 65 mph posted speed down the on-ramp. The Powerlite kicked down a gear and held it there as long as I kept the pedal to the floor. Acceleration was smooth and adequate, considering the horsepower-versus-weight ratio; pretty much in line with other cars of the period that I've driven. Once up to 65, the Dodge felt solid and well built. Lane changes were a bit squirrely, however, as the bias-plies couldn't immediately decide which side of the road's center seam they wanted to run on. "I like this side...no this side...uhhhhh...wait it was nice over there...uhhhhh... OK that's it!" There was a trace of gradual rear-end wander side to side,



Fed by a two-barrel Stromberg, the Super Red Ram Hemi V-8 makes 183hp at 4,400 rpm.



Unlike the larger fins of the later fifties, this "bolt-on" tailfin is a very tasteful design.

ever so slightly, but just enough to be mindful of. After 10 miles or so, it became borderline annoying, as course corrections were necessary at the wheel. The gauges on the dash were indeed very well placed, and once I oriented myself to each of them, a mere glance was all that was necessary to reveal that all was well under the hood. You get used to waves and thumbs-up driving Fifties cars on the interstate, and the color scheme screamed for attention. In La Femme I felt almost like a true celebrity, so encompassing was the positive response from each and every passing car and truck. Maybe it is just me and The Beave, after all, who have a real problem with "Heather Rose".

With dusk settling in, I headed off the interstate and back towards Spud's shop. The '55 Dodge has a six-volt electrical system; the more efficient 12-volt system was introduced in '56. Driving

CLUB SCENE

Chrysler Products Owners Club

809 Nelson St.
Rockville, MD 20850
Dues: \$18/year; Membership: 350

National Chrysler Products Club

Walt Govern, Membership Director
5516 Silvercreek Dr.
Mechanicsburg, PA 17055-1961
Dues: \$20/year; Membership: 707

Northeast Hemi Owners Association

74 Diller Ave.
New Holland, PA 17557
717-354-0502
Dues: \$ 25/year; Membership: 235

Walter P. Chrysler Club

P.O. Box 3504
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49003-3504
Dues: \$25/year; Membership: 5,000



Be it fashion, housing developments or two-tone cars, the '50s were unique.



Gold-trimmed compact case helped the "American Woman" always look her best.

ASKING PRICES

If you like the basic styling of the La Femme but can't seem to find one, perhaps you may want to consider the Custom Royal Lancer series, on which this rare option was based. We came across a few in *Hemmings Motor News* that are rather affordable examples. If you must have a La Femme, however, expect prices to be about 10 to 15 percent more than a standard Custom Royal Lancer, especially if all the original feminine accessories are included.

1955 Dodge Royal 2-dr hardtop, decent body, pink, black and white, \$3,995

1955 Royal, V-8, pretty, \$5,500.

1955 La Femme, perfect concours condition, complete with all accessories including luggage, cape and boots, \$65,000



Stylish illustrations used in brochure.

over undulating back and secondary roads really illustrated the shortcomings of the meager, amp-challenged six-volt system. Over 30 mph the Dodge was clearly outrunning the paltry range of its dim bulbs. Nocturnal Javelinas and Coyotes, beware the approach of "Her Majesty...!" Oh, the seats; that familiar numbness in the lower back was there. Forty-five minutes behind the wheel told me yet again that, like most good fifties-

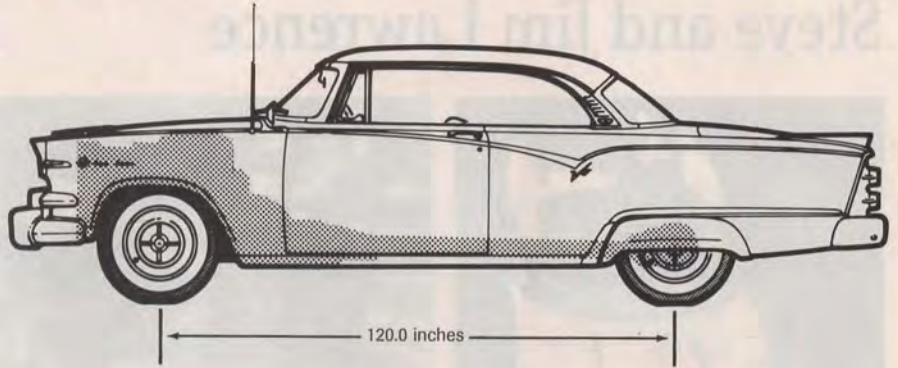
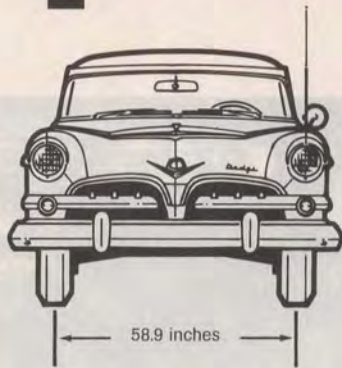
WHAT TO PAY

Low	Avg.	High
\$3,000	\$12,000	\$25,000

era bench seats, lumbar support was never ever a consideration. Maybe posture was just better in that postwar era, and back fatigue took longer to induce, but I wondered what toll a six-hour stint behind the wheel of La Femme or any Royal Lancer would exact on the back and sciatic nerve? Then, finally, it was time for the real "panic" brake test, as no test is complete unless you can stop swiftly. I nailed the brakes good approaching a stop sign. La Femme stopped in a dignified manner befitting her "majesty," with just a bit of sultry twitching in the rear end. There was a degree of... "come on, you can do this" coaxing as I pressed the brake pedal, but again, my feet know mostly of signals that emanate true from four-wheel discs. Four-wheel drums are another story indeed, and, again, I had to ask myself, were there better drivers on the road back when La Femme was new?

La Femme was fun to drive and a real window into 1955 engineering. Comparatively speaking, the Dodge La Femme offered the buyer a fine quality car combined with fantastic styling, as I assume all Royal Lancers of the period did. The oversized fins and chrome would arrive next year; in '55 Dodge had achieved an almost perfect balance of new design themes. Just enough chrome in just the right places, exciting new aircraft design themes tempered in harmony with overall shape. Too bad it lasted but one year. Unhappily, but certainly not surprisingly, in La Femme garb its meager sales record indicated that, "Her Majesty...The American Woman" was not about to be re-defined in Heather Rose with feminine accessories. No, the American Woman of 1955 was not even remotely close to Dodge's image of woman moderne. These women of the mid-fifties were women who just a short decade earlier attached wing spars to B-29 bombers, made up freight trains in frigid New England railroad yards, and wrestled millions of red-hot rivets into the sides of Liberty Ships. Yes, they had returned, many reluctantly, to the domestic lifestyle, but they had their own sense of what "feminine" was. When it came to automobiles, these "moderne" women wanted only what the men back then wanted: good cars, exciting new cars with fins and chrome, and cars with lots of power. La Femme was a dismal failure from a sales perspective. To see one today is not only special because of its rarity but because it is a reminder of a time when heady and limitless vision sometimes missed the mark

specifications



1955 Dodge La Femme

Price when new \$2,518
Options Town & Country radio, heater, air-conditioning, PowerFlite, power steering, power brakes, power windows, power seat, D-500 custom wheel covers, whitewalls, windshield washers

ENGINE
 Type Ohv V-8, cast-iron block, water-cooled, 5 mains, full pressure lubrication
 Bore x stroke 3.63 inches x 3.25 inches
 Displacement 270.0 cubic inches
 Compression ratio 7.6:1
 Bhp @ rpm 183 @ 4,400
 Torque @ rpm 245 @ 2,400
 Carburetor Two-barrel Stromberg
 Exhaust system Cast-iron manifolds, single exhaust
 Electrical system 6-volt battery/coil

TRANSMISSION
 Type PowerFlite 2-speed automatic torque converter, planetary gears
 Ratios 1.72/1.00

DIFFERENTIAL
 Type Hypoid, open driveshaft
 Ratio 3.54:1
 Drive axles Semi-floating

STEERING
 Type Power, recirculating ball nut
 Turns lock-to-lock 3.5
 Ratio 16.2
 Turn circle 42 feet, 3 inches

BRAKES
 Type Four-wheel hydraulic, power assisted
 Drum diameter 11 inches
 Total lining area 173.5 square inches

CHASSIS & BODY
 Frame Double-dropped, channel and box section, steel, four crossmembers
 Body construction All steel
 Body style 6-passenger hardtop coupe

SUSPENSION
 Front Independent, unequal A-arms, coil springs enclosing tubular hydraulic shocks, linkless stabilizer bar
 Rear Solid rear axle, longitudinal semi-elliptic leaf springs, tubular shocks, stabilizer bar
 Tires Tubeless type, 7.10 x 15
 Wheels Drop-center rims, pressed steel discs, lug-bolted brake drums

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES
 Wheelbase 120 inches
 Overall length 212.1 inches
 Overall width 74.5 inches
 Overall height 60.6 inches
 Front track 58.9 inches
 Road clearance 5 inches (minimum)
 Shipping weight 3,480 pounds

CAPACITIES
 Crankcase 5 quarts
 Cooling system 20 quarts
 Fuel tank 17 gallons

FUEL CONSUMPTION
 Best 21.3 mpg
 Average 16.5 pounds

PERFORMANCE
 0-30 4.95 seconds
 0-60 13.8 seconds
 Top speed 105.2 mph (fastest one-way)
 103.2 mph (slowest one-way)
 (from *Motor Life*, February 1955. V-8 sedan with PowerFlite)



"C" pillar trim same as Royal Lancer.

PARTS PRICES

Radiator	.....	\$270
Brake drum	.....	\$54
Water pump	.....	\$80
Stainless steel muffler	.....	\$70
Pressure plate/clutch assembly	.....	\$180
Ignition Switch	.....	\$33
Spark plug wires	.....	\$16
Rebuilt brake booster	.....	\$90
Master Cylinder, Rebuilt	.....	\$80
Timing Chain	.....	\$25
Shock Absorber Kit	.....	\$115
Engine Overhaul Kit	.....	\$95
Carburetor Rebuild kit	.....	\$45
Tune up kit	.....	\$19



Pocketbook slot on driver's seatback.