

The Rise and Fall of the Edsel

(or... "Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time.")

Why do most people smile when they see an Edsel? Probably for the same reason they laughed at Robert Fulton's steamboat. Only that was Fulton's Folly. What we're talking about here was Ford's folly. Most will say it bombed because of its bizarre front-end styling, but those in the know say that the Edsel, officially introduced in September, 1957, failed for more fundamental reasons.

In 1955, Americans bought a record 7,169,908 new cars. This auto-buying frenzy was just one facet of the postwar economy. It was during this era that the automobile changed from being mere vehicles for transportation to symbols of middle class affluence. The V-8 engine reigned supreme and horsepower was the watchword. It was in this Cloud 9 atmosphere that Ford Motor Company conceived a new car that would hopefully see the company overtake General Motors in the marketplace.

Henry Ford II and Board Chairman Ernest Breech believed that there was a gap left by the low-priced Ford, upper-middle-priced Mercury, and luxury-priced Lincoln. A 1952 market study confirming this was seen by the Ford head shed. Ford went to work on a new car, one for the young executive. By 1954, a task force had drawn up plans for a medium-priced car to be handled by Lincoln-Mercury dealers, but this was axed by Ford, Breech and others at Ford. The new car, it was decided, would be the product of an entire new Ford division with its own dealer network [error #1]. The Ford Motor Company was therefore restructured.

Polling was conducted in New York, Chicago, and two small towns in Michigan, asking people about possible names for both the new division and new car models. The company went through 10,000 possibilities, and even went to poetess Marianne Moore for suggestions (among the latter's contributions were: "Resilient Bullet," "Utopian Turtletop," and "Mongoose Civique."). At a meeting in November, 1956, with frustration at a peak, Breech finally declared, "Why don't we just call it Edsel?" Edsel was Henry Ford I's only son. All three of Edsel's sons objected, but the name was adopted anyway [error #2]. It was a name that had meaning only to the Ford family.

The "distinctive" styling of the Edsel was error #3. Actually, the original design was quite beautiful, but concessions to accommodate cooling, ventilation, production costs, and a host of options produced what we now know as the Edsel. The front-end was likened to an Oldsmobile sucking a lemon, a horse collar—and even a toilet seat.

As a promotion for the new car, leading automotive journalists were invited to drive 75 Edsels from Dearborn, Michigan, to their local Edsel dealers [error #4]. 68 ended up being driven; the other 7 had to be cannibalized for parts. The *average* repair bill for each car totaled roughly \$10,000!...more than twice the cost of the car, itself.

Only some 63,000 Edsels were sold in the first year (while the Nash Rambler sold 100,000) and just under 45,000 were sold the next year. Even as the completely restyled 1960 Edsels were coming off the assembly line, the decision had already been made to cease production. Only 2,846 were sold in its third and

