ROAD TEST:

Chrysler Imperial

Cadillac Fleetwood

Lincoln Town Car

By Jim Brokaw

The Cadillac isn't dead, it's embodied by the Fleetwood, but Lincoln's Town Car and Chrysler's Imperial look and act a lot like it.

When I was 15 years old, in the summer of '48, there weren't that many ways to earn some summer bread. A few of the stronger kids worked farmers' fields, while some of the strange, silent ones harvested sea moss in smelly dories from the off-shore kelp beds. "Mossin' " paid very well, but you had to be the son of a mosser, or the best buddy of a son to crack that cloistered clan. Since I was neither, and a relatively new kid in the very small and very tight New England seacoast town of Scituate, Mass., I joined the band of scavengers who carried golf clubs for the moneyed sportsmen at the brand-new-solid-concrete-on-top-of-a-hill Hatherly Country Club. Scituate was a vacation haven for the wealthy and wish-they-were of Boston. Hatherly was the social center for the Summer People.

I made some pretty good money that first peaceful and uncluttered year, picking up a few regular customers along the way. I had a good set-up, but my buddy Scott had the world by the wallet pocket. He was the personal, private caddy for MR. BARNES, who drove a Cadillac. Many club members had personal caddies, some club members had Cadillacs, but *Mr. Barnes* had *two* Cadillacs. To have one Cadillac was to be the butt of many jokes and humorous remarks, but it also meant being first through the clubhouse door. To have *two* Cadillacs meant being first through the clubhouse door, without the jokes.

I didn't really envy Scott on the days when he met Mr. Barnes at his house and rode to the country club in one of

the Cadillacs—I died. One day when all the members were at the bar celebrating something, Scott let me get close enough to actually see inside. I was very careful not to touch it or Mr. Barnes would have discovered my fingerprints, Scott would have gotten in trouble and I would have been thrown off the grounds.

The following summer, everything changed. Along with my driver's license, I got a job at the Ford garage. Suddenly the new kid was a member of the Establishment. A steady job (paying 75¢ an hour), cars to park and deliver, and I worked every night until 10 o'clock right on Front Street. God, what a deal. The mechanics cussed right in front of me, some of the customers learned my name, and one day I actually drove the town police car out of the garage. I didn't even mind cleaning the restrooms.

Around the 4th of July, I was surveying my asphalt kingdom, waiting for a good-looking Summer Girl to come in for gas—they always charged it and if you stood just right, you could look down the front of their blouse while they signed the ticket. Suddenly I saw a brand new maroon Cadillac with a canvas roof cover oozing down the street. As it floated by, the driver gave me a big grin and lifted his left hand from the wheel just enough to be noticed. It was Scott, and he was *driving* Mr. Barnes' Cadillac.

Nancy Gilly pulled up to the pumps in her old man's Hudson convertible. I didn't even look down when she signed the ticket.

After awhile, Scott got real brave and gave me a ride. I don't know if he was supposed to or not, but we drove out of town and took the state road where we weren't likely to see anyone who knew us. All I remember about the car was that it felt like that time in the seventh grade when Roberta Hopkins leaned up against me from behind, right in the classroom. Scott got the Cad up to 100 miles an hour before we headed back to Front Street.

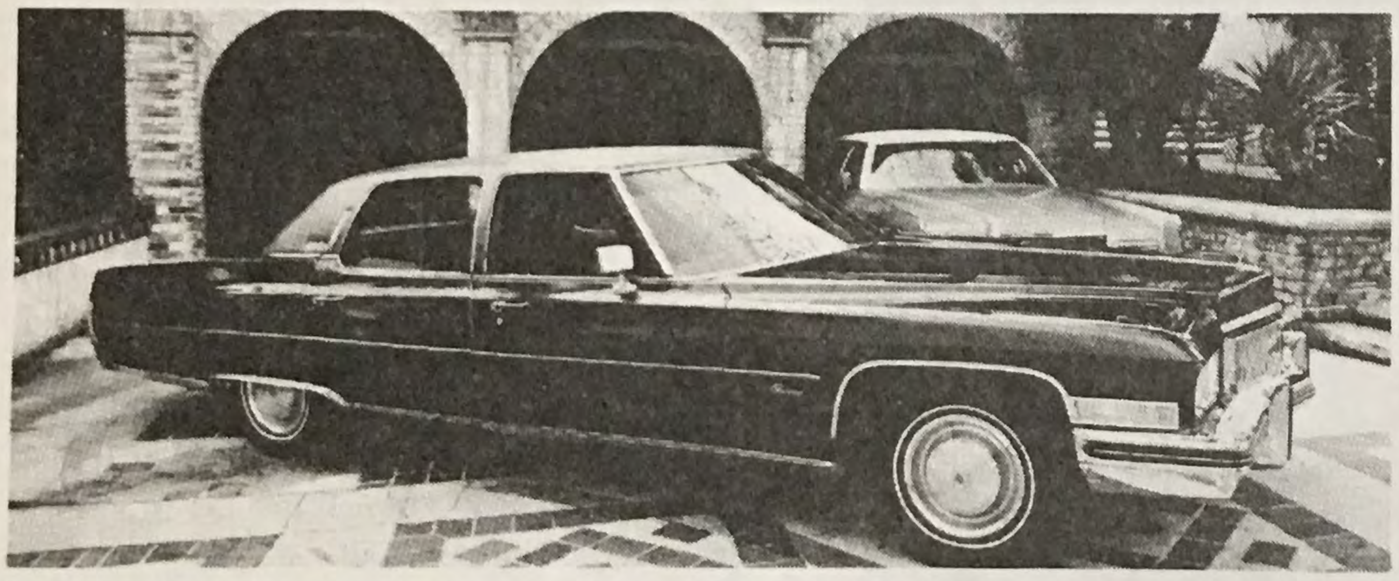
Later on, it didn't bother me anymore when Scott drove by in the Cad. Scoop neck blouses were getting popular, and the boss let me take a vacuum shift '46 Chevy home on rainy nights.

It was more than 20 years before I actually drove a Cad. I think it was a Calais or maybe a Coupe de Ville, I forget which. After I adjusted the seat to my taste and figured out where everything was, I slid out onto the street, waiting for Roberta Hopkins to press up against my back again. She never showed up. It was just a car. A little bigger than most, a little smoother than most, but just another car.

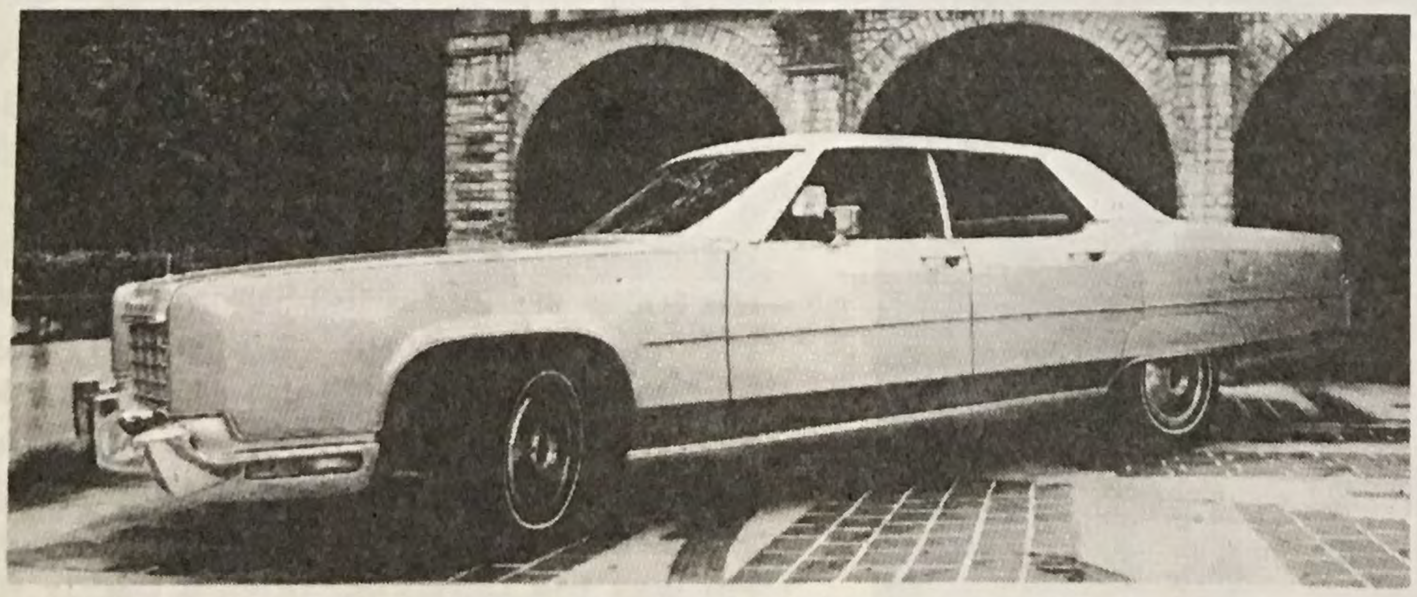
I had relegated Mr. Barnes' Caddy and Roberta to the figment file until the day I had to return a Fleetwood, borrowed by some visiting brass. Lord a'mighty, what a car! Roberta wasn't leaning, but she was sitting in the back seat. I whipped the Fleetwood around the corner at the bottom of the La Cienega hill and that big blue sedan stayed flat as a Ferrari. I couldn't believe it. The Cadillac isn't dead, it is simply restricted to the Fleetwood.

We rounded up a Lincoln Town Car, an Imperial LeBaron, and a Fleetwood Brougham just to see what they were all about. Most cars are combinations of mundane concepts, functional execution, plus a little nylon and gingerbread to help the illusion. An occasional flourish of power, styling, or handling raises a given model out of the herd, but seldom does any make a complete statement. Not so with the big rolling palaces.

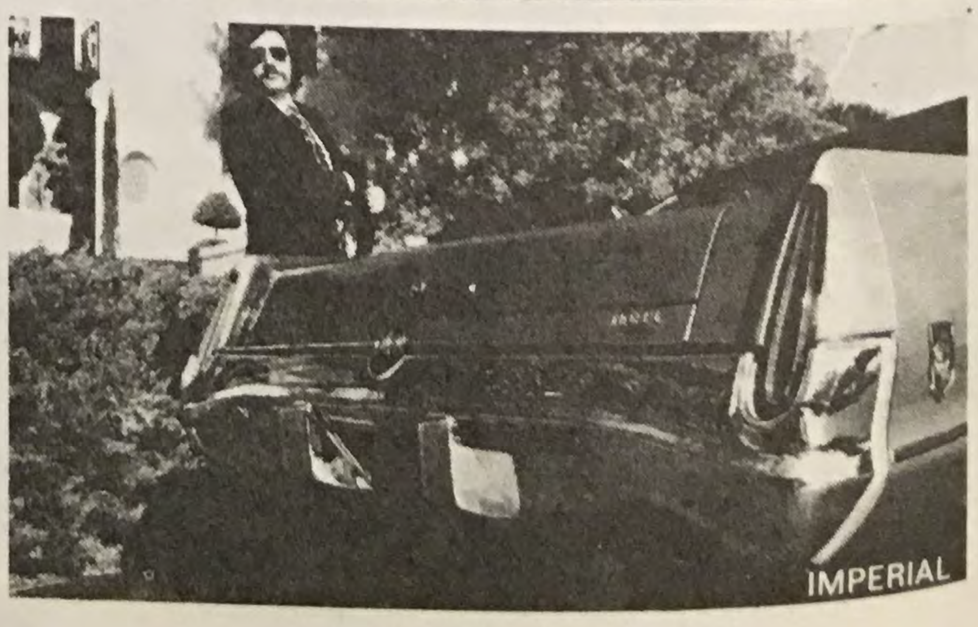
These crown jewels more than make a statement. They are the embodiment of a way of life. A very well-paid way of life. They are very expensive, starting out at eight grand for the basics. They are very big, almost 20 feet long and over 6½ feet wide. They are heavy. The Caddy, the lightest of the three, tips the scales at 2½ tons. Materials used are of the finest quality, construction is as solid as an anvil, and the attention to detail rivals that of an over-age lecher putting the hustle



CADILLAC



LINCOLN


IMPERIAL

on an 18 year old.
Driving these velvet tanks is an emotional experience. The seats aren't soft, they're firm, with full support from the back of the knee to the back of the neck. The seats are fully adjustable in every direction except sideways. All three machines aim to please. Tilt-telescope steering wheels fit all arm sizes from John Wayne to the Gallo brothers. Even the finger ridges on the back of the steering wheels are deep and vee-shaped for a firmer grip.

Visibility is virtually unlimited. Large inside mirrors are augmented by dual outside mirrors, both of which are remote controlled in all but the Imperial.

Steering response is amazingly quick and firm, far better than their less expensive cousins down at the "economy" end of the full-sized sedan list. While they could hardly be described as nimble, all three are very positive. They can all take an emergency lane change without undue upset to either vehicle or driver.

Picking the best of these is a task equal to the keenest judgment of Solomon. While we lay no claim to excess wisdom, there are differences which cater to the differing tastes of the wealthy who possess these rubber-tired symbols of distinction.

Cadillac treats its size as a natural adjunct to highway dominance by subtle employment of sharpened corners to emphasize the massive dimensions of the side view. A sense of special accommodation is achieved by utilizing a small individual drivers seat with a complete adjustment spectrum. Functional vehicle controls are isolated at various positions about the dash and left hand door panel. Everywhere the eye falls, there is either informational input, or a control device within easy reach.

The Brougham d'Elegance option includes velour upholstery as close to velvet as a durable synthetic can get. Liberal use of this "Medici" cloth extends to the front seat backs, door trim pads, door pull straps and the new retractable rear-seat assist straps. Deep pile carpeting creates an almost irresistable urge to remove your shoes and run your toes through it—or perhaps someone else's toes through it.

The AM-FM stereo radio now includes a signal seeker as well as the tape deck option. In the Fleetwood 75, known as the "Limo" to the proles, there is a remote radio control panel for the rear seat.

The ultimate statement is the vanity mirror on the back of the passenger visor. Many cars have visor vanity mirrors, but the Brougham d'Elegance has one with a cover and six side lights.

The big 472-cubic-inch engine starts easily and stays alive even when cold. Power is more than adequate for normal operation, including use of all power options, and sufficient for most abnormal requirements.

Driving the Fleetwood is remarkably easy. You are aware of the great size, but it becomes a problem only when you forget that a Fleetwood must be driven with grace and dignity. The superb suspension will support rough handling, but a deft hand on the wheel produces a very stable ride. In fact, the only real fault is the amount of lateral displacement under brisk cornering. There is no sway at all, thanks to the automatic level control, but it does move a large amount of metal through a sizeable arc. Recovery is smooth without hunting and seeking.

I have long been of the opinion that VW drivers are oblivious to traffic and Cadillac drivers just don't give a damn. I was wrong. Cadillac drivers expect to be given priority, whereas VW drivers take pointed delight in *not* giving so much as an inch to a Cadillac. When one operates a Fleetwood, one must be tolerant of the less fortunate.

The Lincoln Town Car is a subtly, but distinctly, different approach to the same end. Where Cadillac strikes a balance between ride and handling, Lincoln goes for a glass smooth ride, with a penalty paid in rebound control. Cadillac emphasizes its monolithic dimensions, Lincoln tends to reduce the visual impact by subtly rounding off the corners, gently contouring the side flares, and discreetly placing the few pieces of chrome the marketing department deems necessary.

Each manufacturer creates unique names for its decor artifacts, such as corduroy velour bodycloth, simulated rosewood applique, flocked nylon, and long-shear cut-pile carpeting. However, there is only one word that describes Lincoln's interior; *silent*, dead silent. With the windows closed and the AM/FM/MPX stereo radio and tape deck turned off, you can hear yourself breathe.

Our Town Car had a blue/grey corduroy velour upholstery, which is crushed corduroy to those of you who still don't know what velour is.

It looked a bit flat in the daytime, but at night the light from the instrument panel casts a pervasive glow over the front interior giving the car a silver tint.

While Cadillac disperses its information and control sources, Lincoln neatly clusters everything in a balanced display directly in front of the driver with a full set of engine monitor gauges.

Visibility is equal to that of Cadillac with dual remote controlled outside mirrors.

Steering is precise and accurate, requiring very little wheel movement to control the two and a half tons of silence. The 460 cu. in. engine cuts a full share of mustard to the point where it actually broke the rear end loose under full acceleration at the drag strip. This was surprising since the torque peaks at a higher rpm than either the Cadillac or the Imperial.

Lincoln's ride is smoother than that of the Cadillac, with minor defects in road texture gliding past undetected. Rebound control is not what it could be, causing an extra cycle or two after encountering large changes in road contour.

The Imperial LeBaron is a unique blend of the treasured old and the ultra functional new. Both the 440 cu in engine and the torsion bar front and leaf spring rear suspension are old, but the electronic ignition and the digital clock are new.

It is more of a driver's car than the other two, with the best handling of all three, thereby paying the price of having the harshest ride of the three. Harsh is only in reference to the Cadillac and Lincoln. Compared to any other domestic it is very smooth.

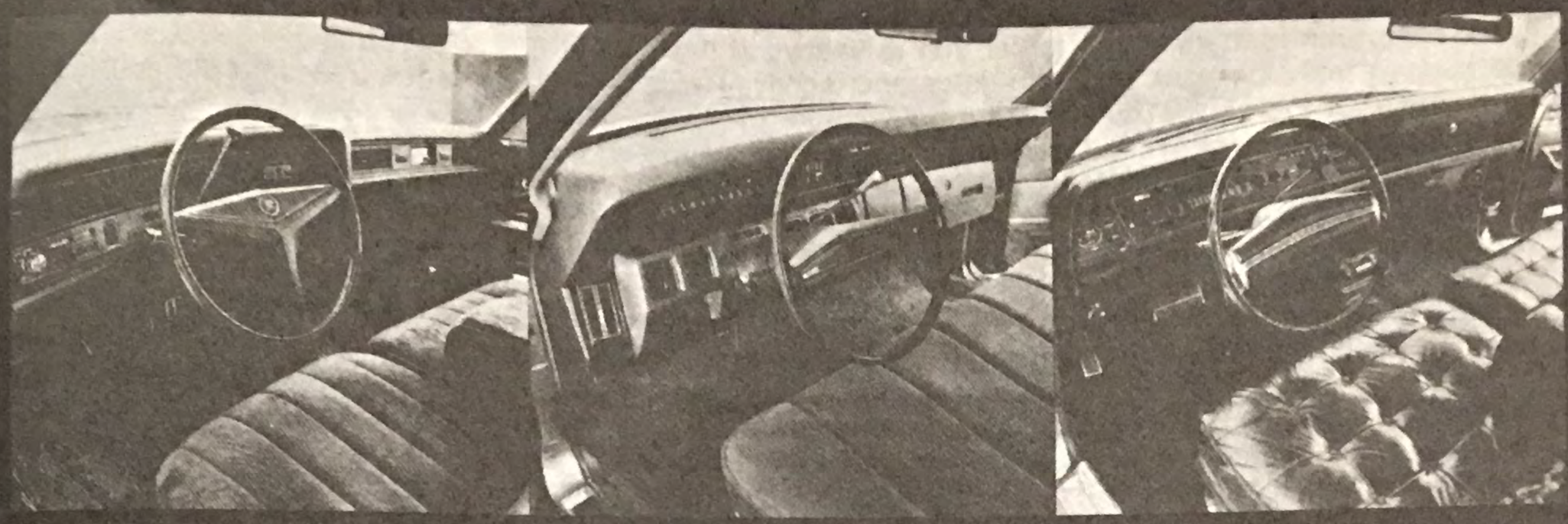
The instrument panel follows Chrysler tradition by presenting a complete and easily readable display of information. Imperial uses indirect lighting for the panel, which accomplishes the design function of instrument illumination, but seems to lack the sense of dignity created by the rest of the black leather interior. Imperial takes two approaches to the statement of size. The rear end is well rounded, tending to diminish the impact of sheer mass, while the massive hood is flared upward at the outboard edges, giving one the sensation of riding along on a huge manta ray. This tends to generate a sense of security in the knowledge that nothing made by man could penetrate all the way from the distant front bumper to your driving compartment.

The AM-FM stereo radio and tape system is the equal of both Cadillac and Lincoln, all three can best be described as magnificent. One side benefit of the mutual, liberal use of fibrous finished interior materials is the superb acoustical efficiency.

The one notable deficiency we found in the stately machine was the absence of a remote control toggle for the right hand outside mirror. It is really an unforgiveable omission for any car in this category.

Another minor Imperial deficiency is the wind and tire noise. Although not excessive, it is detectable. With all of the attention to comfort and environment lavished on these gliding palaces, perfection becomes the standard. If a flaw is detectable, what may be perfectly acceptable in a lesser machine becomes a fault in these final statements of the domestic carriage art.

Driving any of the three generates a state of mind not found in other cars. The imagination, unbeleaguered by outside input, runs wild as you glide down the freeway in aloof silence. Stately while cruising, they are refreshingly agile in traffic. Great hordes of useable torque slip you very nicely into the available break in traffic. For a few delicious moments you can almost convince yourself that you really own one of these enduring symbols of wealth and power. ■



CADILLAC

LINCOLN

IMPERIAL

SPECIFICATIONS:

	CADILLAC FLEETWOOD	LINCOLN TOWN CAR	IMPERIAL LE BARON
Engine:	OHV V-8	OHV V-8	OHV V-8
Bore & Stroke—ins.	4 3 x 4 06	4 36 x 3 85	4 32 x 3 75
Displacement—cu. in.	472	460	440
HP @ RPM	220 @ 4000	219 @ 4400	215 @ 3600
Torque: lbs.-ft. @ rpm	365 @ 2400	360 @ 2800	345 @ 2000
Compression Ratio	8 5 1	8 0 1	8 2 1
Carburetion	4-bbl	4-bbl	4-bbl
Transmission	3-speed automatic	3-speed automatic	3-speed automatic
Final Drive Ratio	2 93 1	2 75 1	3 23 1
Steering Type	Variable ratio power	Power	Power
Steering Ratio	17 8-9 0 1	21 6 1	19 1 1
Turning Diameter (curb-to-curb-ft.)	46 03	46 7	44 78
Wheel Turns (lock-to-lock)	3 25	3 99	3 5
Tire Size	LR78-15	230-15	L84-15
Brakes	Non-skid power disc drum	Power disc drum	Non-skid power disc drum
Front Suspension	Coils shocks stabilizer	Coils shocks stabilizer	Torsion bar shocks, stabilizer
Rear Suspension	4-link coils shocks auto level control	3-link coils shocks	leaf springs shocks
Body/Frame Construction	Perimeter frame	Perimeter frame	Unitized w/sub frame
Wheelbase—ins.	133 0	127 0	127 0
Overall Length—ins.	231 5	229 5	235 3
Width—ins.	79 8	79 6	79 6
Height—ins.	55 5	55 5	50 2
Front Track—ins.	63 3	64 3	62 4
Rear Track—ins.	63 3	64 3	63 4
Curb Weight—lbs.	5,025	5,260	5,255
Fuel Capacity—gals.	27	22	23
Oil Capacity—qts.	4 (1)	4 (1)	4 (1)
Trunk Capacity	19 27	18 1	18 6
PERFORMANCE			
Acceleration			
0-30 mph	3 8	3 9	3 9
0-60 mph	10 2	10 4	11 8
0-75	15 1	16 1	17 2
Standing Start ¼-mile			
Mph	80	80 2	77 3
Elapsed time	17 6	17 6	18 1
Passing speeds			
40-60 mph	5 7	5 2	6 8
50-70 mph	6 5	5 9	7 4
Speeds in gears*			
1st mph @ rpm	51 @ 4,500	46 @ 4,000	42 @ 4,000
2nd mph @ rpm	84 @ 4,500	78 @ 4,000	70 @ 4,000
3rd mph @ rpm	94 @ 3,500	83 @ 3,000	80 @ 3,000
Mph per 1000 rpm (in top gear)	26 8	27 66	26 66
Stopping distances			
From 30 mph	32 1	28 1	29 8
From 60 mph	143 0	136 2	151 6
Speedometer error			
Car speedometer	30 45 50 60 70 80	30 45 50 60 70 80	30 45 50
True speedometer	30 45 50 60 70 80	29 4 43 1 47 55 9 68 6	29 8 44 1 48 5

*Speeds in gears are at shift points (limited by the length of track) and do not represent maximum mph.