

The Lincoln Town Car

America's last chance at traditional luxury

In these times of nuclear shutdowns, inner-city regurgitation and dollar-a-gallon gasoline, what does one say about a 4800-pound Lincoln that seems to span half an acre and sucks down fuel with all the vengeance of a wide-body 747? Do you simply call it ludicrous? Is it Benson Ford's answer to the housing shortage? Could it actually be

by Ro McGonegal

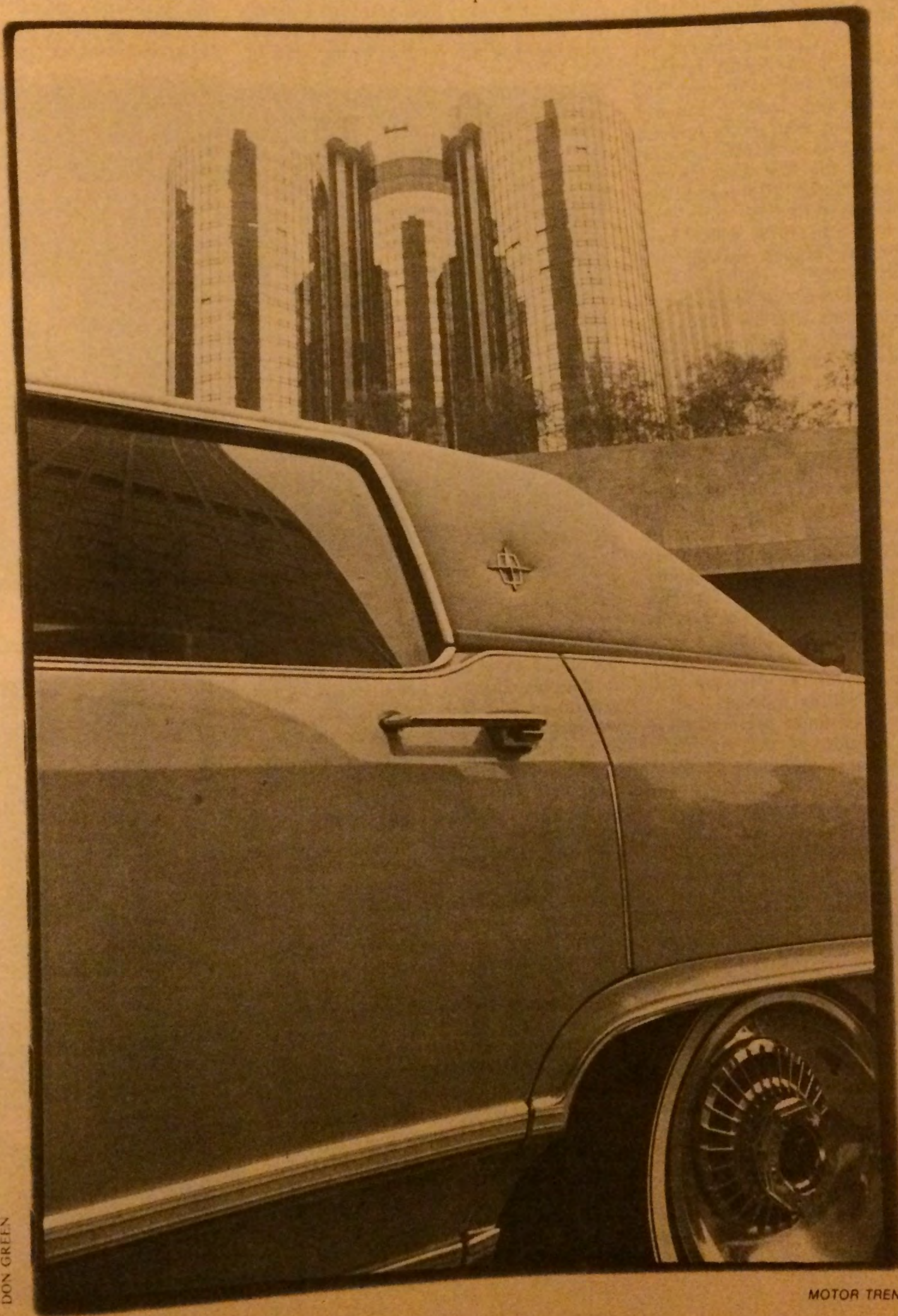
pornographic and have no redeeming social value?

To a great many people, all the above is true, but to a great many more, the Lincoln lineage is a necessary part of American automotive heritage.

The Lincoln line is a proud one and

has produced some of the more innovative styling in automotive history, but somewhere along the line (about the same time the colors black and pink became au courant), it became fashionable to have the biggest car possible.

It was all very acceptable (nay, expected) for the period; certainly, tailfins were approaching their zenith, and the



DON GREEN

Lincoln Town Car

bodies they grew from were purely comical. Surely the public (as well as the stylists) could not bear much more. And in the early Sixties, a modicum of prudence returned to southernmost Michigan. Body lines became smoother and more homologous, but the car remained as large or larger than its Pleistocene predecessors. Naturally, Lincoln and Cadillac were leading the pack.

And so it went until the end of the decade, when carthink segued into massive engine displacements that matched equally massive exterior dimensions. It's been a downslide to the edge of the world ever since; Cadillac (except for its limo) decided it was totally fashionable to get small and went over the edge two years ago, leaving Lincoln with an open field and giving impetus to sales of more than 50,000 Lincolns and Mark Vs in the first three months of the '79 model year. The year before that, the division sold 55% more Lincolns than it did in 1973, which happened to be the biggest automotive boom year in history.

The Lincoln Town Car is unique in terms of sales and size. In 1980, cars that fail to produce x number of miles per gallon will be taxed accordingly on a sliding scale, and this will continue into 1985, at least. In this context, the Lincoln is a top contender for bottom-of-the-barrel fuel economy, but even a guzzler tax wouldn't stop the people who really want the car from buying it.

But the government will. The guzzler tax is purely incidental; what really matters is corporate average fuel economy (CAFE). And with that spectre hanging in the doorway, it is easy to accept the importance of 28-mpg Capris and Bobcats. So, the longer the Lincoln remains, the harder the division will have to work at selling mileage.

But what of consumer preference? If it were the opinion of the American big-car buyer (there are more of them than you think), Lincoln could build and sell these cars indefinitely; but people who are not big-car types will eschew the car because to entertain such an extravagance in the energy-consciousness of today seems ethically and morally wrong. A lot of people who secretly aspire to the heady realm of luxury would like to step out of the closet but are unable to because of conscience and peer pressure. The big-car mentality isn't bothered by this in the least because to it, the Lincoln is as sensible a car as the Honda Civic.

Next month, the overweight champ will go the way of the free lunch, bow ties and the convertible, but we've had a chance to examine the body before the wake, even though the funeral procession has already begun.

The last time we drove a Lincoln Town Car we won't forget. That was the time we and uncle Louie (it was his

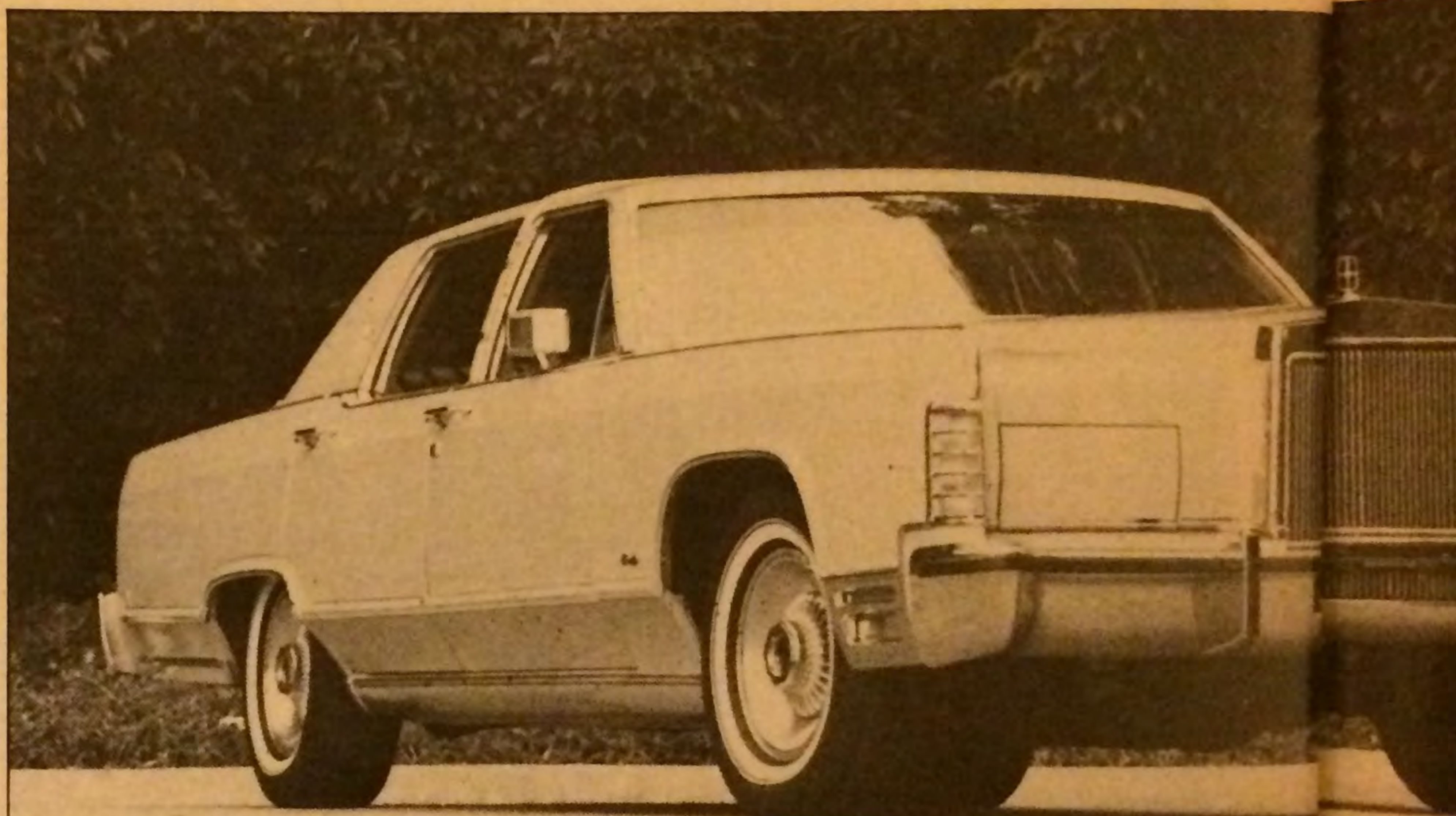
car) went to the Clam Broth House in Hoboken, New Jersey. The Clam Broth is an old, old joint a few blocks from a reconstructed wharf area, except that where the CBH is it hasn't been rebuilt, so parking's a real problem and the people on the street associate big cars with people who do their best work after midnight.

So I proceeded to "bumper park" the long boat, successfully wedging it between two rotting hulks masquerading as cars. When we got out, every baleful eye on the block fixed us until we crossed the street and stepped into that malodorous haven.

Attention like that you don't need, but it is a fact of life with the Lincoln, whether you are on the wrong side of

Although the manually adjusted side views were incongruous with the luxury car's demeanor, they were the only non-power option we could find, save for the cigar lighter. The rest of the car was crawling with them. The base Lincoln 4-door with 6.6-liter V-8, automatic transmission, power steering, power brakes, power windows, Cartier digital clock, steel-belted radials, solid-state ignition, coolant recovery system, remote-control left-hand mirror and cornering lights costs \$11,713, plus tax.

Since the Lincoln doesn't come equipped with a vinyl roof, you must have one (\$285), as well as the following: California emissions package (\$84), illuminated entry system (\$65), headlamp convenience group (\$140), white



the tracks or at the Ritz. Quite simply, it denotes success, even if you ride around in a T-shirt and cut-offs, as I was wont to do. Being alone in the Lincoln is like being in the gym two hours before the big game: you feel ridiculous. The Town Car seems to respond better when it's full of T-shirts and cut-offs, anyway. A complement of passengers puts the creature to work, loading its suspension and bringing out its best quality: complete comfort for six.

Driving America's largest production vehicle takes a lot of getting used to after years behind the wheels of the other cars. It's nostalgia to the max, the late Fifties in living sheet metal; it's a remembrance of all the cars anyone over 30 grew up with, except that the view from the Town Car is even better. But despite an incredible 28½ square feet of glass, the Lincoln entertains a rather serious blind spot in its left rear corner. The width and squareness of the body and the high catwalk (top of the doors) reveal another phenomenon. When there is something small directly behind the car, it becomes invisible in the sideview mirrors.



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sidewalls (\$54), defroster group (\$121), tilt steering wheel (\$81), speed control (\$140), 4-wheel disc-brake anti-skid system and Sure-Track differential (\$525), CB radio (\$321), AM/FM stereo search with quadrophonic 8-track tape (\$407), interval windshield wipers (\$39), Town Car option (\$1527), appearance protection group (\$91), lower body protection (\$35), right-hand remote-control mirror (\$39), illuminated outside thermometer (\$28), heavy-duty battery (\$21), interior light group (\$135), power door locks (\$155), forged aluminum wheels (\$373), and body side moldings (\$136).

Full tilt? You bet, because nobody buys a Lincoln any other way unless he plans to be buried in it. For what the options cost, you could purchase a fair-

ly well-equipped Pinto as a second car. Some of the items on this list may seem extraneous, but hidden in the various "groups" are safety and convenience devices we'd have on any car.

The Autolamp headlight system, touch-control stereo, 6-way power seat and the steering wheel-mounted cruise control are gimmicks that make sense. This pragmatism is carried through to the Lincoln's mechanicals, the most outstanding being the anti-skid system with its dinner plate-sized disc brakes.

Although we didn't instrument the car for stopping distance, and although it won't change history with the length of macadam it requires to still its heft, the Lincoln assured us that it would come down brutally straight every time. It implants this trust the first time you need it, and it's a feeling you never forget.

But going is more costly than stopping; the Town Car swallows gasoline like a super tanker gobbles crude, although careful open-road maneuvering can mean as much as 16 mpg at the national limit. Our test loop included an inordinate amount of stop-and-go traffic, but the big car managed something just under 12 mpg. So who really cares? Certainly not the owner of a future collectible.

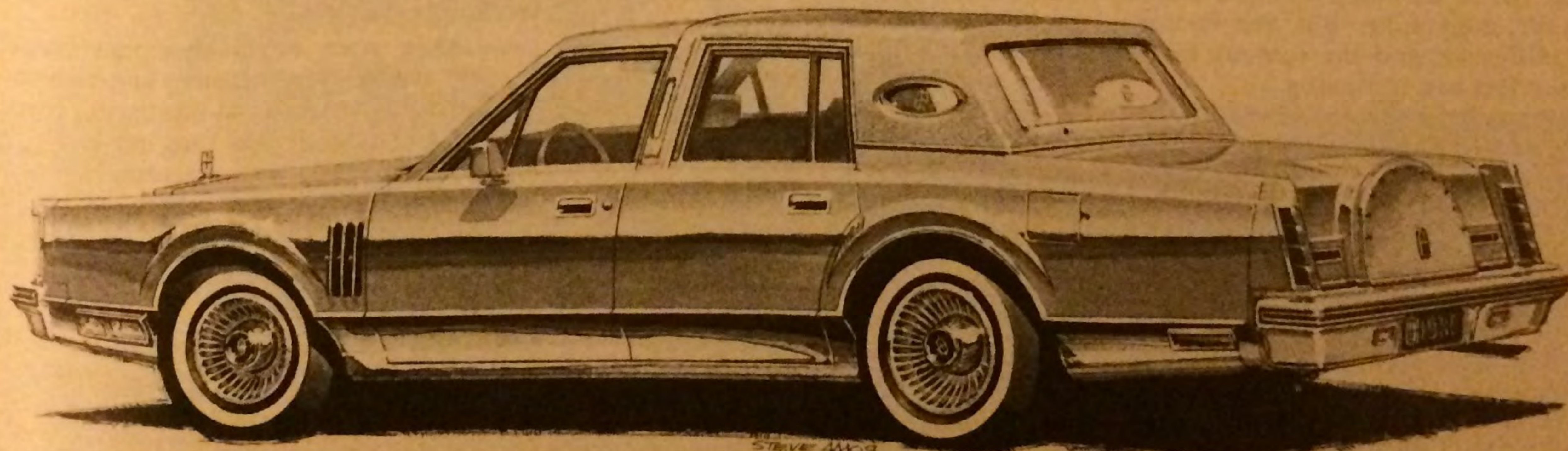
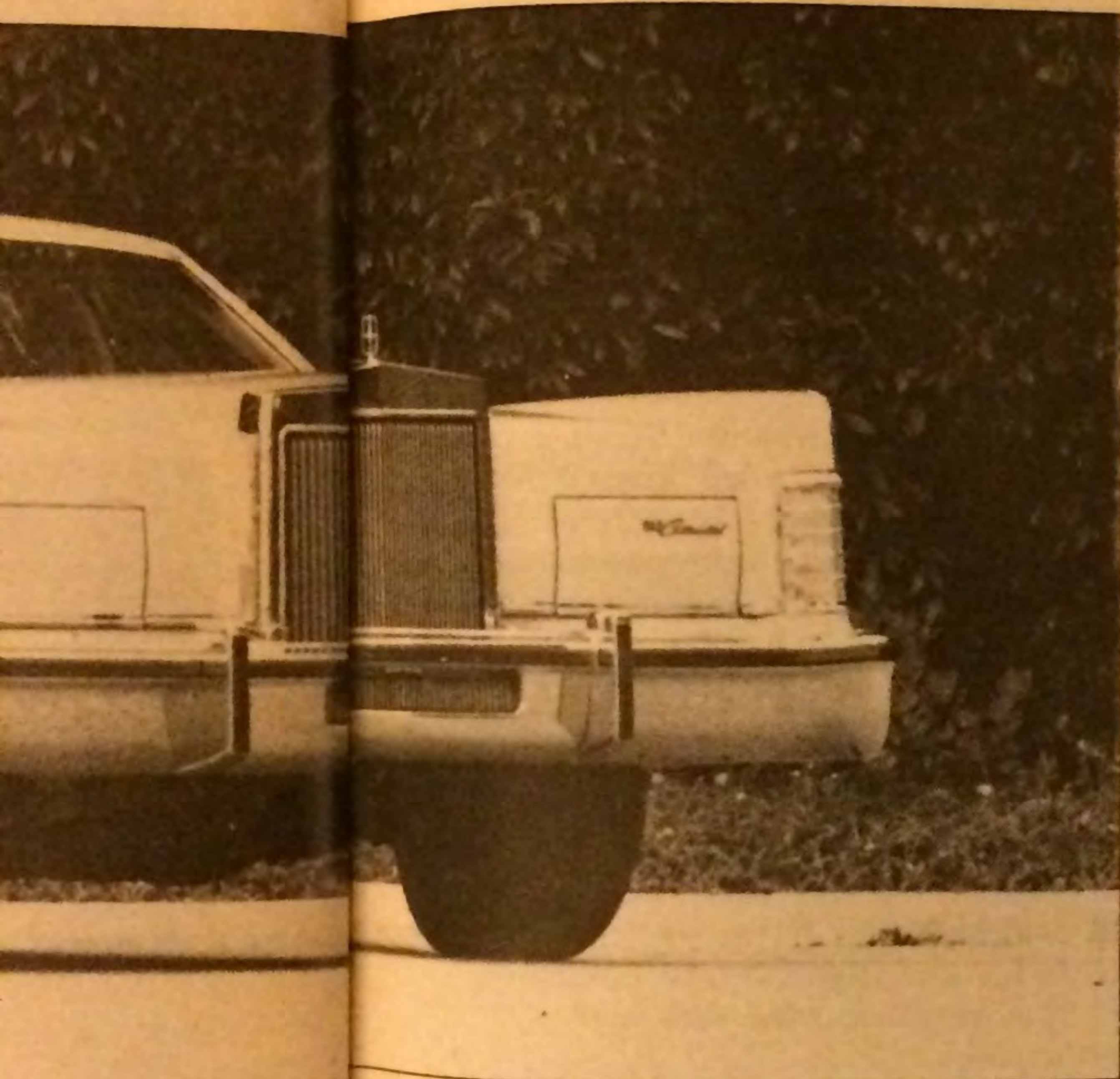
One would think that the Town Car's superior weight and 127-inch wheelbase would effectively smother bumps, but in spite of the heavy-duty suspension, the front wheels would judder slightly, and the rear wheels seemed to do a shuffle all their own on uneven pavement. Single-wheel bumps, if they are severe enough, are transmitted directly to the steering column and dashboard.

Cruising quietly is what the Town Car does best, and all the interior appointments that help its occupants enjoy

that are there, except for the opulence. We can chalk that up to the particular color scheme adapted to the test Lincoln. It was a monochromatic frieze of a curious oyster color, broken only by the simulated wood trim and two-shades-darker carpeting. The headliner was stretched at its seams in places and made from the same chintzoid material found in prole cars. There seem to be no official boundaries inside, and the definition one would expect is hidden in yards of off-white leather and plastic (an artful blending of the two substances, but a close look will reveal which is which). Only the presence of occupants is capable of establishing where the seats end and where the door panels begin.

The doors to which these panels are attached are surprisingly light, due to the facts that there are four of them, which makes them smaller than those on the coupe, and that they are devoid of window frames. They're hollow sounding and close with a "tink" instead of a "thunk." This may be a boon in disguise simply because they make entering the car effortless. There's no stepping down; there's sliding in, and that's extremely easy to do on leather facings. The 6-way power seat is just as soothing, and the passenger side even reclines, but this is a \$17,000 automobile, so why doesn't the one for the driver do the same?

The Lincoln is the last of the mastodons and headed for the tarpit because evolution is coming down fast, and maybe that's where the purpose of the Town Car lies. The Lincoln-Mercury Division will sell every one it makes, whether or not they conform to past stature. People will buy them to put in their own museums because there will never be anything like them again. 



They've made their mark

The year 1980 will mark the introduction of an all-new Mark series. In addition to the totally new Lincoln Continentals, there will be two Mark VIs—the traditional coupe and a new 4-door sedan. All the vehicles are smaller on the outside, with spacious

interiors and considerable weight savings. It had to be this way if there were to be any Lincolns at all, says the federally mandated CAFE standards. The Marks have retained their distinctive look but are more angular in appearance. Many innovations have

been incorporated into the vehicles, and it's L-M's hopes that these resized cars will carry it well into the '80s. The only question that has yet to be answered is, will the luxury car market react to efficiently designed automobiles.

—John Dianna