= American automobile industry in the 1950s =

The 1950s were pivotal for the American automobile industry . The post @-@ World War II era brought a wide range of new technologies to the automobile consumer , and a host of problems for the independent automobile manufacturers . The industry was maturing in an era of rapid technological change ; mass production and the benefits from economies of scale led to innovative designs and greater profits , but stiff competition between the automakers . By the end of the decade , the industry had reshaped itself into the Big Three and AMC , and the age of small independent automakers was over , as most of them either consolidated or went out of business .

A number of innovations were either invented or improved sufficiently to allow for mass production during the decade : air conditioning , automatic transmission , power steering , power brakes , seat belts and arguably the most influential change in automotive history , the overhead @-@ valve V8 engine . The horsepower race had begun , laying the foundation for the muscle car era .

Automobile manufacturing became the largest industry segment in the US , and the largest ever created ; the US auto industry was many times larger than the automotive industries of the rest of the world combined . By 1960 , one @-@ sixth of working Americans were employed directly or indirectly by the industry , but automation and imports eroded the need for such a large workforce within a couple of decades . The 1950s were the pinnacle of American automotive manufacturing and helped shape the United States into an economic superpower .

= = Industry consolidation = =

At least 100 automobile companies had begun operations in Detroit by the beginning of the 20th century , but by the 1920s , the decade that gave rise to the Big Three , Ford was the largest .

In American automobile parlance , the Big Three refers to General Motors (GM) , Ford and Chrysler , each of which had bought out other companies to become conglomerates earlier in the 20th century . Together they accounted for 70 percent of auto sales . Their combined market share grew over the following decades , declining only slightly after World War II , but the Big Three soon came to dominate the industry , claiming 94 percent of all automobile sales in 1955 , 1956 and 1959 . The industry grew at a pace never before seen , and the broader industry soon employed one @-@ sixth of the entire American workforce .

In 1954 , the smaller American Motors Corporation (AMC) was formed when Hudson merged with Nash @-@ Kelvinator Corporation in a deal worth almost USD $ 200 million ($ 1735 million in 2013 dollars) the largest corporate merger in U.S. history at that time . Other mergers with smaller independent manufacturers followed . Although AMC was moderately successful it was never sufficiently large to challenge any of the Big Three , and was eventually bought by Chrysler in 1987 .

Studebaker had enjoyed earlier success and was the first independent automaker to produce a V8 engine , a 232 @.@ 6 cubic inch , 120 hp unit , the first low @-@ priced V8 . The company 's peak year was 1950 , when it produced and sold 329 @,@ 884 units . Studebaker struggled during the first half of the decade . The cars had styling ahead of their time but were overpriced when compared to the offerings of the Big Three . Low sales and financial difficulties led to a merger with Packard in 1954 , itself in financial trouble . The new company , Studebaker @-@ Packard Corporation , retired the Packard name in July 1958 , but continued marketing automobiles under the Studebaker name until 1966 .

= = Industry sales = =

This table shows the number of sales reported for each significant American automotive brand during the 1950s .

Some numbers are based on some estimates . Total does not count the figures from smaller independent automakers .

A total of almost 58 million cars were produced and sold during the 1950s by the American

manufacturers . Compared to the total population of the United States by the end of the decade , 179 @,@ 323 @,@ 175 , that is almost one new vehicle for every three living persons of all ages .

= = = Production by year = = =

Production numbers are sometimes conflicting , depending on how they are calculated and how vehicles are classified , but according to Ward 's , the number of actual autos and duty trucks manufactured in North America for each year , including domestic production intended for export , are represented below :

= = Innovations = =

Many innovations were introduced or refined in the 1950s to make driving safer and more comfortable . Combined with lower prices and the growth of the suburbs , car ownership became ubiquitous and more people were driving longer distances . The new innovations fueled the automaker 's philosophy of " dynamic obsolescence " , forcing buyers to upgrade every few years and guaranteeing future sales .

= = = Automatic transmission = = =

The first automatic transmissions were developed by General Motors during the 1930s and introduced in the 1940 Oldsmobile as the " Hydra @-@ Matic " transmission . They were incorporated into GM @-@ built tanks during WW @-@ II and , after the war , GM marketed them as being " battle @-@ tested " . But it was not until the 1950s that they became dominant in American passenger cars . One of the most influential was the GM Powerglide , the first automatic transmission in a low @-@ cost automobile . It was a two @-@ speed automatic transmission that was in production from 1950 until 1973 ; variations are still used in drag racing owing to its simplicity and durability . Ford initially offered GM 's Powerglide for its Lincoln cars , as its own were not capable of handling the torque of the large V8s used in the vehicles , but soon after began production of its own inexpensive automatics . Before the end of the decade , more than half of new cars sold in America had automatic transmissions .

= = = Power windows = = =

The first automatic power windows were developed by Packard in 1940 . Each of the major American brands experimented with the technology , which was initially for luxury vehicles as a replacement for manually operated roll up windows . In the 1950s , these became widespread in American passenger cars .

= = = Suspension design = = =

As more roads were built and average travel speeds increased , the inherent limitations of the pre @-@ war suspension systems became obvious . Before the 1950s , most automobiles used a kingpin @-@ based front suspension , which limited the degree of free movement and ultimately the smoothness of the ride , particularly at higher speeds . The transition to a ball joint type of suspension allowed greater flexibility in adjustment and the use of a variety of methods to support the weight of the car : leaf springs , coil springs and torsion bars . In combination with a shock absorber , the newer suspension designs made cars safer and more controllable at highway speeds , although at the cost of being slightly less durable than kingpin @-@ based systems .

As the 1950s approached , solid front axles had been generally replaced with front wheel independent suspension , smoothing the ride considerably and allowing for safer highway speeds . Along with others , the 1950 Studebaker Champion introduced independent front suspension into its product line , with Cadillac marketing its new " Knee @-@ Action " suspension in 1953 model year

automobiles .

The vast majority of American made vehicles continued to use simple Live rear axles into the 1980s , but Americans could access four wheel Independent suspension technology on imported cars , like the 1952 Volkswagen Beetle , 1961 Jaguar E @-@ Type , and 1968 Datsun 510 .

In 1958 , Cadillac introduced self @-@ levelling air suspension as a $ 215 option , a first for an American manufacturer , and a quick response to the suspension advances of the 1955 Citroën DS . This replaced the coil springs with an air @-@ filled bladder , but the American version proved troublesome and was discontinued . Later that same year , Chevrolet , Buick , Oldsmobile , Ford , Mercury and Pontiac also introduced air suspension as an option for select models but it was unreliable and was soon dropped . For Buick , the unpopular " Air Poise Suspension " contributed to the division 's decline to fifth place in industry sales for 1958 . Decades later though it became a common and reliable method of suspension on luxury cars , buses , large transport trucks , and in some custom car applications .

= = = Chassis design = = =

Unibody construction first went into mass @-@ production in the 1934 Citroën Traction Avant , the 1936 Lincoln @-@ Zephyr , and the 1941 Nash 600 . It came into popular use until the 1950s . Unibody construction differs from the traditional " coachwork on chassis " design in that it integrates much of the framing into a single body using a number of pieces welded together into a single unit , thus distributing the load over the entire frame of the car . Chrysler claimed that unibody construction made its automobiles much stronger , more rigid , easy to handle , and quieter .

= = = V8 engine = = =

The more powerful V8 engine had been in mass production cars since the 1914 Cadillac , but it became more commonplace in the newer and heavier cars being built in the 1950s . Of particular significance was the American 's use of this technology in cars at a relatively modest price point .

The Chevrolet small block 265 cubic inch engine was released in the 1955 model year and still the basis for the V8 engines in use by General Motors today . The original 265 cubic inch engine with a two @-@ barrel carburetor produced 162 hp , while the four @-@ barrel version in the 1955 Corvette produced 195 hp , an amazing amount of power at the time . By 1957 , the engine had been increased to 283 cubic inches , including a fuel @-@ injected version that produced 283 hp , the first engine to have a ratio of 1 : 1 horse power versus cubic inches .

Ford used its V8 flathead engine in most of its line up through the beginning of the decade , even as it introduced the Ford Y @-@ block engine and the similar but larger Lincoln Y @-@ block V8 engine in 1952 for its luxury car lines . These were soon phased out with the Ford Windsor engine in 1962 , which still forms the basis for the current engine line . The Lincoln Y @-@ block 317 cubic inch motor was rated at 160 hp , only slightly higher than the 336 cubic inch " Invincible 8 " flathead design that it replaced . The Lincoln also came in 341 and 368 cubic inch displacement (CID) versions . Like the GM motor , it used an overhead @-@ valve design rather than the inblock @-@ valve design shared by all flathead engines .

Studebaker began development of its overhead @-@ valve Commander V8 in 1947 . Despite later rumors that Studebaker had copied the Cadillac OHV V8 design , Cadillac OHV V8s were not available to the public until 1949 , and therefore , not available for Studebaker to copy until Studebaker 's own engine was well into development . The Studebaker engine also had features not found in the Cadillac design . Testing was well under way by early 1950 , and the first production units were installed in late 1950 model @-@ year Commanders , thereby becoming the first OHV V8 available in a low @-@ priced American sedan . The engine was officially available in 1951 model @-@ year Commanders and Commander Land Cruisers . The engine displaced 232 @.@ 6 cubic inches with a bore of 3 @.@ 375 inches and stroke of 3 @.@ 250 inches . It produced 120 hp at 4000 rpm , and 190 lb. ft. torque at 2000 rpm . Due to the stroke being smaller than the bore , the engine had excellent fuel economy and longevity . Since the engine was designed to be scalable , it

appeared in various displacements throughout the 1950s , including 224 , 259 , and 289 cubic inch versions . It should be noted the Studebaker 289 was in production in 1956 , a full seven years before the Ford Windsor 289 was available in 1963 . They only had displacement in common . The Studebaker OHV V8 reached its zenith in the 1960s with the record @-@ breaking Avanti R @-@ series , with the R @-@ 3 having a maximum displacement of 304 @.@ 5 cubic inches , and the experimental R @-@ 5 having dual superchargers and producing 635 hp .

Chrysler created its V @-@ 8 Firepower engine for the 1951 model year , using hemispherical combustion chambers . It featured 331 @.@ 1 CID and produced an impressive 180 hp at 4000 rpm While the name " Firepower " is no longer used , the name " Hemi " is still synonymous with Chrysler as a trademarked name for its engines , although they no longer use hemispherical combustion . The engines were larger and heavier than competing designs from GM and Ford owing to the larger cylinder heads required for hemispherical combustion . By 1959 Chrysler was producing a 375 hp , 413 CID engine for its Chrysler 300 , triple the average horsepower of just a decade earlier .

AMC also developed its own overhead @-@ valve V8 engine called the Gen @-@ I , in 1956 . The original was a 250 CID design and within a few years , a 287 CID and a 255 hp 327 CID version was produced .

= = = Seat belts = = =

Nash offered optional seat belts in some models by 1949 , and in all models the following year . Ford followed suit in 1955 , but it was the Swedish company Saab who introduced seat belts as standard equipment , in the Saab GT 750 shown at the 1958 New York Motor Show .

The first modern three @-@ point seat belt , the CIR @-@ Griswold restraint used in most consumer vehicles today , was patented in 1955 (US patent 2 @,@ 710 @,@ 649) by the Americans Roger W. Griswold and Hugh DeHaven . It was developed into its modern form by Swedish inventor Nils Bohlin (US patent 3 @,@ 043 @,@ 625) for Volvo , who introduced the three @-@ point safety device in 1959 as standard equipment . He demonstrated its effectiveness in a study of 28 @,@ 000 accidents in Sweden ; unbelted occupants sustained fatal injuries throughout the whole speed range , whereas none of the belted occupants were fatally injured at accident speeds below 60 mph (97 km / h) , and no belted occupant was fatally injured if the passenger compartment remained intact . American manufacturers followed their lead , and most automobiles had three @-@ point front seat belts as standard equipment by 1964 and standard rear seat belts by 1968 .

= = = Tires = = =

Radial tires were invented by Michelin in 1948 , and quickly became standard equipment on Michelin 's auto making subsidiary Citroën .

Use spread to 100 % of the US auto population by the 1980s , following Consumer Reports 1968 evaluation of competing technologies , noting the technology 's superiority in tread life , safety , handling and fuel economy .

The 1968 Pontiac GTO offered optional OEM radial tires , but only for one year ; they became standard on all 1970 Lincoln Continental Mark IIIs .

= = = Air conditioning = = =

The 1953 Chrysler Imperial was the first production car in twelve years to offer air conditioning , following tentative experiments by Packard in 1940 and Cadillac in 1941 . In actually installing optional Airtemp air conditioning units to its Imperials in 1953 , Chrysler beat Cadillac , Buick and Oldsmobile , who added it as an option later that year . The Pontiac Star Chief offered the first modern " underhood " design in 1954 . By 1960 , air conditioning was a common dealer option and was installed in 20 percent of all automobiles on American roads .

= = = Steering linkage = = =

BMW began to use precise rack and pinion steering systems in the 1930s , and many other European manufacturers soon adopted the technology . American automakers adopted rack and pinion steering beginning with the 1974 Ford Pinto .

= = = Steering power assistance = = =

The first power @-@ assisted steering on any type of vehicle dates to 1876 , but little is recorded of the system . Other attempts were made to add power @-@ assisted steering to motorized vehicles such as in the 1903 Columbia 5 @-@ ton truck and other heavy vehicles , but it was not until 1928 that a practical hydraulic power system was invented by Francis W. Davis . It was used on some armored vehicles and heavy trucks during World War II , but it took more than decades before the system was commercialized in passenger automobiles .

Chrysler introduced the first commercially available passenger car power @-@ steering system on the 1951 Chrysler Imperial , marketed under the name of Hydraguide . The option was available for less than $ 200 . General Motors followed suit the next year , offering it as an option for the 1952 Cadillac . Two years later , Cadillac was the first manufacturer to offer power @-@ assisted steering as standard equipment .

= = = Brakes = = =

By 1939 , all the major car makers were using unassisted hydraulic brakes ; Ford was the last to switch from cable @-@ manipulated systems . Power @-@ assisted Vacuum servo brakes had been invented in 1903 , but did not become generally available as an option until the 1950s . Self @-@ adjusting brakes initially were offered on the 1957 Mercury and 1958 Edsel , and other manufacturers soon followed suit . Buick offered power brakes as standard equipment on several of its vehicles by the 1954 model year .

American vehicles used Drum brakes until the 1962 Studebaker Avanti - the first American production model to offer front wheel Disc brakes . These are less prone to fade and are the current standard of design .

= = = Entertainment = = =

Until mid @-@ decade , all radios in automobiles used vacuum tubes , but on April 28 , 1955 , Chrysler and Philco announced the development and production of the first all @-@ transistor radio for an automobile . Dubbed the Mopar model 914HR , it was jointly developed by Chrysler and Philco and offered as a $ 150 option for 1956 Imperial and Chrysler car models . Philco manufactured the radio exclusively for Chrysler at its Sandusky , Ohio plant . A few years earlier in 1952 , Blaupunkt had been the first company to offer FM radio for automobiles , although AM radio still dominated for years to come . Beginning in 1955 , Chrysler offered a small phonograph called the Highway Hi @-@ Fi in its luxury cars , which played proprietary seven @-@ inch records . It proved unpopular and was soon discontinued .

= = Concept cars = =

Auto design in the 1950s reflected the Atomic Age , the Jet Age and the Space Age . Several technologies were pioneered in these prototypes , but most never reached production owing to their impracticality or other market forces . The concept cars ranged from the insightful to the bizarre and were often uncomfortable or non @-@ functional . They were sometimes created to inspire the public 's imagination or simply to promote the image of the company or the product line as a whole .

The Ford Nucleon was a concept car announced by Ford in 1958 . The design lacked the capacity to house an internal combustion engine and was instead designed to be powered by a then

nonexistent small nuclear power plant in the rear of the vehicle , similar to a submarine 's .

The Mercury XM @-@ 800 was one of many concept cars created by Ford . It was introduced at the 1954 Detroit Auto Show , and featured forward @-@ canted headlights , rear tailfins (a first for Ford at that time) , and power seats , brakes , steering and other advancements . Like many similar cars of the time it was not operational , except for the electrical components such as the motorized trunk and front hood , although some of its innovations appeared later in the Lincoln Premiere .

Harley Earl helped develop the General Motors Firebird , a series of three concept cars shown at Motorama auto shows in the 1950s . The Firebird I , II and III were part of a research project to study the feasibility of gas turbine engines and featured radical , aircraft @-@ like styling .

= = Notable failures = =

Named after Henry Ford 's son , Edsel Ford , the Edsel made its debut as a separate car division on September 4 , 1957 , for the 1958 model year . The front grill was said by critics to look like " an Oldsmobile sucking on a lemon " . It ended up being a marketing blunder that not only cost Ford almost $ 250 million ($ 2169 million in 2013 dollars) , but also turned the word Edsel into an enduring metaphor for failure . The car sold poorly and production for the final 1960 model year had ceased by November 1959 .

In 1956 , Ford tried to revive the Continental brand as a standalone line of ultra luxury automobiles , but abandoned the attempt after the 1957 model year , by which time around 3000 Mark II cars had been built . The failure was due in part to the price tag of $ 9695 , an extraordinary amount of money for the time . The Continental thereafter became a successful car model under Ford 's Lincoln brand .

Kaiser , Allstate , Frazer and the economy / compact Henry J product lines all ceased production before the end of the 1955 model year run , partly owing to their failure to produce and market a viable V8 engine in a marketplace increasingly focused on the clout (and horsepower) associated with a V8 power plant . In particular , the Henry J (named after Henry J Kaiser sold an initially strong 82 @,@ 000 units with its 68 hp , inline @-@ four power plant and optional 80 hp inline @-@ six , but starting at $ 1363 , the consumer could buy a full @-@ sized Chevrolet auto with an inline @-@ 6 for only $ 200 more than the Henry J inline @-@ 4 , making it economically unappealing , and all three lines underpowered when compared to the offerings of the Big Three . The Allstate is an example of badge engineering , being a rebranded Henry J. It was sold exclusively at Sears , Roebuck and Company in 1952 and 1953 .

DeSoto died a slow death in the 1950s owing to decreasing popularity and the 1958 recession . Chrysler moved the DeSoto into the mainstream price range when it came out with the upper priced Imperial line , putting the Chrysler marque in direct competition with it . By the 1961 model year , the DeSoto was reduced to a single model and on November 18 , 1960 , Chrysler ended the DeSoto marque , just two weeks after the introduction of the 1961 models . Chrysler seemingly sudden announcement to discontinue the marque resulted in negative publicity as their advertising and press releases had given the impression the brand would be continued . It offered a $ 300 discount towards 1962 Chrysler vehicles to recent DeSoto purchasers as consolation . Added to the expense of changing signs at dealerships and other expenses , the estimated the cost of ending the marque was more than $ 2 @.@ 2 million .

Hudson produced automobiles for 49 years , until 1957 . Hudson cars were very popular in NASCAR in the early 1950s , in particular the Hudson Hornet , now known as well for its prominence in the 2006 Pixar animated movie , Cars . Its early popularity was due to its sleek design , low center of gravity and excellent handling , but it failed to keep up with rest of the industry by mid @-@ decade . The 1955 Hudson was actually a rebadged Nash auto with different trim . It were offered with a V8 in 1955 , but it was too little to save the brand , which was discontinued two years later .

Packard began the 1950s on a difficult note , as sales dropped from 116 @,@ 248 in 1949 to an underwhelming 42 @,@ 627 in 1950 . While its higher @-@ end products offered advanced features such as automatic transmission as standard equipment , its overall body designs were considered dated . Four years after the 1954 merger with Studebaker , production under the

Packard marque ceased as the company was unable to keep up with the advances and sales of the Big Three .

Crosley produced cars from 1939 to 1952 , including the only compact cars in an era of bigger and more powerful cars . They were unique in that they were sold through the Crosley 's network of appliance stores . Peak production was in 1948 , with almost 29 @,@ 000 vehicles produced , followed by a sharp drop off in demand , resulting in an unsustainable loss of more than $ 1 million that year . The automobiles sold for a maximum of $ 350 , could go as fast as 50 miles per hour (80 km / h) , and achieved 50 miles per gallon . In 1952 , the company was sold to the General Tire and Rubber Company , which liquidated the assets and ended production of all Crosley automobiles .

Muntz Car Company produced cars from 1950 through 1954 in Chicago . Muntz was assisted by Frank Kurtis , who had earlier attempted to produce a sports car under the Kurtis Kraft marque (the Kurtis Kraft Sport , which sold just 36 units by 1950) . The company managed to produce only about 400 cars during 1951 ? 1954 . It was estimated by Muntz himself that his company lost about $ 1000 on each car , leading to its collapse after just four years in business .

= = Influential events = =

A number of critical events changed the manufacturing environment during the decade , including two wars , cultural changes and economic difficulties , creating opportunity and challenges for the automobile industry .

= = = War = = =

World War II ended in September 1945 , which allowed for the conversion of the economy to a peacetime economy , with excess industrial capacity and a high demand for new consumer goods by returning soldiers .

The Cold War began in after World War II and served to increase paranoia and concern over a nuclear war with the Soviet Union . Many Americans responded by escaping into a lifestyle of heavy consumerism , which benefited automakers . President Dwight D. Eisenhower launched the Interstate Highway System by signing the Federal Aid Highway Act of 1956 into law . Eisenhower gained an appreciation of the German Autobahn network as a necessary component of a national defense system while he was serving as Supreme Commander of the Allied forces in Europe during World War II .

The Korean War officially began on June 25 , 1950 , and a cease fire was signed three years later in July 1953 , and no official ending . For automakers in the early 1950s , this meant US government control over raw materials such as steel . While not as strict as the rationing that was seen during World War II , the impact was obvious , with steel being rationed to the different manufacturers under government control , rather than by market forces . The National Production Authority (NPA) had the final say on what resources each company would be given . In 1952 , it limited the industry to 4 @,@ 342 @,@ 000 cars , with General Motors (GM) given a quota of 41 percent of that total . The company exceeded its quota in the first three quarters , forcing it to close some production lines in the fourth . These limitations continued until the NPA was shut down in October 1953 .

= = = = Cultural changes = = = =

The decade saw a shift in American culture due in part to suburbanization , the Interstate system , and the baby boom . The 1950s were centered in the post @-@ war baby boom , with an average of about 4 million births annually throughout the decade . From 1946 to 1964 , a total of about 77 million new " baby boomers " were born , dramatically increasing the demand for automobiles for the new families . The new Interstate Highway system facilitated the migration to the suburbs . Automobile ownership had once been considered a luxury but now had become a necessity , as well as a cultural symbol for independence and individuality . Ever @-@ larger families drove the demand for larger automobiles , and for the first time , many families owned more than one

automobile . New suburbs such as Levittown , Pennsylvania were rapidly being developed , fueled by the promise of new Interstates and expanding families .

= = = = 1952 steel strike = = = =

Although it lasted for only 53 days , the 1952 steel strike caused the National Production Authority (NPA) to limit the amount of steel available to automakers , and had a broad effect before and after the strike . During the run up to the strike , unemployment in Detroit jumped to 8 @.@ 3 percent in December 1951 , auto employment dropped to 600 @,@ 000 a month later and soup kitchens were set up in Detroit . Auto employment dropped by another 100 @,@ 000 during the strike , which ended on June 2 , 1952 . While the strike was for better wages for steel workers , many auto workers blamed their unions for layoffs . The auto manufacturers were accused of speeding up work during these period of heavy layoffs , which resulted in a number of wildcat strikes .

= = = = Recession of 1958 = = = =

The Recession of 1958 was in part due to dramatic declines in the automotive industry during 1957 and early 1958 . It had been a record year for sales in 1955 with the industry selling almost 8 million automobiles , but this extraordinary surge in sales served to reduce demand in the following few years . Sales had declined to 6 @.@ 1 million in 1957 and just 4 @.@ 3 million by 1958 , making 1958 the worst year for auto sales since World War II . Manufacturing had declined 47 percent by the end of the recession , and Michigan experienced 11 percent unemployment , the highest of any state at that time .

= = Labor union activity = =

The 1950s mark the peak of union membership as a percentage of the total US workforce , with labor membership peaking at 35 percent of the nonagricultural workforce by mid @-@ decade . The United Auto Workers (UAW) was founded in 1935 and helped play a major role in reshaping the automotive industry after World War II . By 1954 , almost all UAW workers had health coverage and other benefits that didn 't exist in the automotive industry previously . Pension plans were established , as well as a Supplemental Unemployment Benefits fund , which supplemented employees unemployment insurance during periods of layoff .

A series of pivotal strikes took place during the decade , including the 1950 Chrysler Strike which lasted 104 days between January and May and centered around the UAW 's demand that Chrysler pay a pension to retired workers , as well as other benefits . A first for the UAW , the union paid striking workers benefits during the strike , dangerously depleting its cash reserves . In the end , Chrysler capitulated on the main issue , but not before the strike had disastrous consequences for the automaker . Chrysler ended the year with an 8 percent gain in sales over the previous year , compared to GM and Ford 's gains of 38 percent and 47 percent respectively , costing Chrysler an estimated $ 1 billion in lost sales .

= = Racial discrimination = =

During the 1950s , racial discrimination was common throughout America and the auto industry was not immune . African @-@ Americans were typically offered only the lowest paying jobs or were outright denied employment as employers openly advertised for " white only " applicants . Workplace discrimination was not universal , but it was widespread and it was not until 1955 that listing racial preferences in job advertising became illegal under Michigan law . Still , hiring practices varied according to the individual plant managers , so some factories were relatively integrated while others had virtually no black employees . African @-@ Americans had made up 15 percent of the auto manufacturing workforce in 1945 increasing only slightly to 16 percent by 1960 , even while blacks outnumbered whites in the city of Detroit . Although unions fought for the end of racial

discrimination , manufacturers were free to openly discriminate in their hiring until the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act .

= = Enduring models = =

A few automobiles introduced in the 1950s have had an impact that extends well beyond the decade . By being continuously recognized or reinvented , they have created a following of admirers that often spans multiple generations .

The Studebaker Starliner hardtop was introduced in 1953 and is considered by many to be one of the most beautiful American @-@ made automobiles of the 1950s . It was designed by a team led by industrial designer Raymond Loewy and is sometimes called the " Loewy Coupe " .

The Chevrolet Corvette was first introduced in 1953 , and as of the 2014 model year is still in production . It has gone through seven major generations , with minor changes yearly , and still features a fiberglass body , a tradition since the original model rolled off the assembly line . Originally , Chevrolet had expected to use fiberglass only for the concept car shown at Motorama and to use steel for production cars . It has come with V8 engine as standard equipment every year since 1955 but used the Blue Flame inline six @-@ cylinder engine for its first two years of production . In 2012 , Consumer Reports named it the best sportscar available in America .

The Ford Thunderbird was introduced in 1955 and remained in production until 1997 . Production resumed in 2002 and continued through the 2005 model year . There were with eleven or twelve different generations during these time spans . Unlike the Corvette , it was not marketed as a sportscar , but rather as a personal luxury car . The car changed dramatically in size during these production periods , sometimes having a back seat and other times not .

Chrysler produced the first of its 300 series automobiles for the 1955 model year , whereby they added a letter to the model name for each year . This lettering scheme was continued until 1965 , but at the same time they began producing the " non @-@ letter series " automobiles for the 1962 model year , so there are three years with overlapping model names of different vehicles . The non @-@ letter models were produced through the 1971 model year . It was not until 1979 that Chrysler began using the " 300 " name again , as a rebadged Cordoba for the latter half the model year . It would be 20 more years before they again used the name , this time for the Chrysler 300M , which was produced for the 1998 through 2004 model years . Finally in the 2005 model year , the Chrysler 300 was introduced and as of 2013 , is still in production .