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FLYING LOW

Hemmings Classic Car - NOVEMBER 1, 2006 - BY [MATTHEW LITWIN](#)

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With its high price and quirky styling, the 1954 Hudson Jet-Liner crash landed into the compact marketplace

Ask anyone at a car show today their thoughts regarding vintage American compact cars and they will probably conjure up visions of the Nash Rambler and Metropolitan, or maybe the likes of Willys Aero Ace, Henry J Corsair or King Midget. But a Hudson Jet-Liner?

The story of the Jet-Liner, while short, is an intricate part of the last days of Hudson that can be traced back to the company's 1948 step-down design. A marvel of the day, it was a recessed floor pan that not only increased roominess, but also enabled the manufacturer to lower the center of gravity and increase seating capacity. It was also one of the safest

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designs of the day. Combined with its long wheelbase and unitized construction--semi-unitized construction appeared in the 1932 Terraplane--the step-down Hudsons handled quite well. However, the Hudson's lack of a V-8 engine didn't help sales. In an era when most everyone had a V-8, Hudson continued with its traditional L-head straight-six and straight-eight.

By 1950, the post-war market had topped out, and changes to the existing Hudson models were minimal due to the great cost that would be incurred--a hindrance that would haunt the company. Though Hudson had made a tidy profit from the government contracts awarded during 1952, sales were constantly declining. Hudson step-down models peaked in 1949 with 144,685 units sold, a number that would steadily decline to 92,859 in 1951. The next two year's combined sales were only 115,000, leading to losses in 1953 over the \$10.4 million mark. Among the turmoil at Hudson sat a new compact car with an overall design price tag of \$12 million--this, for a car that lasted only two years.

The compact car market was limited, and for the most part controlled by Rambler; the very car that had a big part in reviving Nash. The 1953 and 1954 Jet line was an attempt by Hudson to tap into that lucrative market, and hopefully help pull the company out of its downward spiral. The small four-door, six-passenger sedan sat on a tight 105-inch wheelbase, and housed a 202-cu.in. L-head straight-six engine. Its 3.0 x 4.75-inch bore and stroke produced just 104hp at 4,000 rpm, thanks to a relatively low 7.5:1 compression ratio and small Carter 200cfm one-barrel carburetor. An optional high compression aluminum cylinder head, with an 8:1 ratio, increased power to 106hp.

The engine was not a new design for Hudson, however, as it was derived from the old Commodore straight-eight. Cast aluminum pistons, with iron rings and floating connecting rods, forged steel crankshaft and solid lifters were all carry-over components. Optional "Twin-H" high-compression iron or aluminum cylinder heads featured twin one-barrel carburetors with compression ratios of 7.5:1 or 8:1, that increased power output to 112hp and 114hp, respectively.

The automatic transmission of choice was the GM Hydra-Matic--that was initially offered starting in 1951, when Hudson dropped the Supermatic. The addition of the Hydra-Matic allowed Hudson to offer a true automatic transmission to the buying public for the first time. The standard rear gear ratio was 3.54:1, however, a more highway friendly 3.31 was optional. The standard transmission was a manual three-speed, which was offered with a 4.1:1 rear gear ratio; optional ratios included a 3.31:1 or 4.27:1. Overdrive was \$102 option on the Jet.

Chief designer Frank Spring objected to the body design, which was a plain and simple upright slab-sided style, pushed through by Hudson management. The six-passenger, four-

door sedan carried conventional notchback lines, a one-piece windshield, faux air scoop on the hood and a flat oval grille opening surrounded by stainless trim. Fender skirts were an option, as well as whitewall six-ply tires. Standard features inside were very limited, and included water temperature and fuel gauges, a dash-mounted ashtray, theft-proof locks, manual dome lamp and wing-type front ventipanes. Twin-contour vacuum wipers, twin horns, front parking lamps and twin stop and taillamps also came standard.

Options for the Jet are lacking, but did include an electric clock--rarely seen today--directional indicators, an outside rearview mirror, custom wheel discs and a remote-control, weather-control heater. Also available for passenger comfort were front and rear foam seat cushions, however, dealer options were more numerous and included floor and trunk mats. Although leather trim was not available on the Jet, special solid paint options were. Two-tone paint had been reserved for the upscale Super Jet.

The more upscale Super Jet model varied little from the base Jet mechanically or stylistically. While most of the aforementioned features can be found on both models, the Super Jet was available in either a four-door sedan, or a two-door coupe sedan. The only minor changes were found in the passenger compartment with the addition of an automatic dome lamp, plus oversized tires measuring 6.40x15 inches versus the Jet's 5.90x15. Refinements inside included automatic dome lights and rear wing-type ventipanes.

Both models were 180.7 inches long, and their weights varied from 2,650 pounds for the base Jet, to 2,700 for the Super Jet four-door. Most published reports indicate total 1953 production at 21,143 for both models combined. However, one source--*Complete Book of Collectible Cars 1930-1990* by Richard M. Langworth-- indicates that production figures for the Jet were approximately 11,000 units, while the Super Jet lineup came in at roughly 10,000 units. The price tag for the Jet was \$1,858, while the Super Jet four-door came in around \$1,954. The Super Jet coupe was slightly less at about \$1,933.

The Nash Rambler had a jump start of three years, however, and had found success quickly, thanks in part to better styling--courtesy of Pinin Farina in 1953--and loads of options. For about \$100 more, the Rambler was a bigger bang for the buck. Of course, for roughly the same amount of money, a buyer could have purchased a standard Chevy, Ford, or Plymouth, sinking Hudson's Jet further into automotive limbo.

The Jet and Super Jet were in fact well built, however, their styling was lackluster. Their overall lines and shortened proportions looked nothing like the bigger Wasp and Hornet, and critics likened the Jet line to a shrunken 1952 Ford; the 1954 editions were no better.

The Jets for 1954 carried over the same standard features with only minor refinements. Once

again, only solid colors were available. The power and drivetrain also remained the same from the previous year, as well as the Twin-H option. A Family Club Sedan was added to the lineup in April of 1954. This was a stripped down two-door model, coming in at \$216 under the base sedan. The new model had fewer refinements, and pricing for the Jet ranged from \$1,621 to \$1,858 depending on the model.

Super Jet features included front fender and door moldings, as well as model script on the front fenders. The only outstanding option available on either model was a six-tube manual radio. Once again, it was available in either a two-or four-door, with sticker prices of \$1,933 to \$1,954.

Hudson added a model to the compact lineup in 1954 as an upgrade to the Super Jet, called the Jet-Liner, also available in either the four-door sedan or two-door Club Sedan. Assembled on the same chassis as its siblings, the Jet-Liner also uses their engine choices. There are, however, minor exterior additions, such as the rear fender horizontal moldings, standard fender skirts, bright rear gravel shields, chrome taillamp trim and body sill trim. Many of the standard and optional equipment on the other Jet models can be found as standard equipment on the Jet-Liner, including the front and rear foam seat cushions, as well as the radio.

The interior was upholstered in a two-tone, pleated antique white vinyl material called Plasti-hide that was combined with either a blue, green or red Worsted cloth for the headliner and bolsters. Cloth seats were available in combinations of blue/blue check and green/green check. The Jet-Liner also offered optional exterior colors that included Roman Bronze, Pasture Green, Algerian Blue, Coronation Cream, St. Clair Gray or Lipstick Red, as seen on our feature car.

With the upgraded model came upgraded prices, ranging from \$2,046 to \$2,057; as well as a higher overall weight; ranging from 2,740 to 2,760 pounds. In comparison, a 1954 Ford Customline (which was Ford's intermediate model) six-passenger, four-door sedan started around \$1,793, while the two-door sedan was about \$1,744. Over at GM, the 1954 Chevy Bel Air four- and two-door sedans started at \$1,884 and \$1,830 respectively, and the Rambler was now available in eleven different styles, six of them under the \$2,000 mark. With competition and pricing such as this, it was no wonder that the higher priced Jet had such poor sales figures.

With so few changes to the compacts, 1954 production of the Jet rapidly dropped to an estimated 7,000 units, with an estimated 6,000 units for the Super Jet. The Jet-Liner estimated production figures hover somewhere around 2,000 units. One source lists total production of all Jets at 14,224 units, while Rambler output alone was 37,779.

Although 1954 would prove to be the end of compact Hudson designs, it would spark yet another creation before year's end: The well-documented Italia built on the Jet chassis and running gear. Styled by Frank Spring, this could have been a much-needed boost to the Hudson nameplate, and a replacement to the faltering step-down design, but its handcrafted production and high cost made it impractical to mass market.

From January to April, 1954, Hudson suffered a \$6 million drop in sales. Calendar year sales totaled just 36,436 units, and rumors of a merger with Nash were soon becoming a reality. On the chopping block was the virtually unknown Jet.

Since 1976, Sue Figert Meyer, a resident of Indianapolis, has owned this 1954 Jet-Liner. "We found it through the Hudson-Essex-Terraplane Club. The Jet was advertised for sale in the club publication, the *White Triangle News*. I needed a car to drive every day, and I was interested in owning an old car as my daily driver."

Sue quickly conveyed her early history with the Jet-Liner. "When I purchased the Jet, it was in running condition and fully intact. The engine was tired though, and was in desperate need of new piston rings. In 1977, I pulled the engine and a friend helped me rebuild it. That really helped it out a lot, and by the time I was in college, I had taken it off my daily driver list. Since then, I've driven it to about 20 Hudson National meets except for those held out on the West Coast: I won't take it to any of the meets that are a two-day drive."

An unfortunate event in 1985 necessitated another under-hood repair. "That year, I burned up the rebuilt engine--tired once again--while going to the Hudson meet in Atlanta: I got stuck in construction traffic in Louisville. To get home, I had to use a 12-volt battery to get the thing going again, and I drove it all the way back to Indianapolis without turning off the engine. I was able to source another engine instead of attempting another rebuild of the old block." Now in place since 1985 is a 104hp, 202-cu.in. L-head that puts out 158-lbs.ft. of torque.

The car was again treated to refurbishment in 1998, but this time, the Jet-Liner was completely stripped. The body was checked for imperfections and prepared by applying two coats of Dupont DP40 primer. It was then finished in Carnation Cream over Lipstick with three coats of RM hardened acrylic enamel without any block or wet sanding between the multiple primer and paint applications. The chassis and suspension were finished using POR-15 to ensure their longevity. The outsourced, completed interior was returned and reinstalled, as was the re-detailed engine. Having performed a restoration once already, the most difficult part of the restoration, according to Sue, was putting all the trim back on, trying her best not to scratch or nick the fresh paint.

Sitting behind the wheel, all-around vision welcomes any driver. The Jet starts quickly, and

once into drive, it makes its way up to cruising speed with relative ease. Some reports place the top speed at nearly 100 mph, however, we didn't push the envelope, and it kept up with traffic. The Jet-Liner is now sitting on Diamondback Classic radial tires, which help the handling. Different from the bigger Hudsons in every aspect, the Jet does roll a bit when cornering, but the overall ride is smooth--typical of the other makes of the 1950s. Power brakes were not an option for the Jet, but stopping it takes less leg power than you would think. Still, it's a good idea to plan ahead.

While a plethora of business missteps, combined with stiff competition from AMC and the Big Three, shortened Hudson's lifespan, many of these great cars have survived into the 21st century. And despite the Jet's failure to light the foundering automaker's afterburners, at least one well-loved example continues to soar today.

WHAT TO PAY

1954 Hudson Jet-Liner

Low Average High

\$5,000 \$10,000 \$15,000

PROS:

Near 20 mpg means fewer stops
No need to measure the garage before buying
Surprising comfort with plenty of room

CONS:

Most parts are hard to find
Nondescript styling
Interior free of typical fine appointments

Specifications

ENGINE

Type: L-head straight six, cast-iron block and cylinder head

Displacement: 202.0 cubic inches
Bore x Stroke: 3.00 x 4.75 inches
Compression ratio: 7.50:1
Horsepower @ rpm: 104 @ 4,000
Torque @ rpm: 158-lbs.ft. @ 1,600
Valvetrain: Solid lifters
Main bearings: 4
Fuel system: Carter WA1 one-barrel carburetor
Lubrication system: Pressure
Electrical system: 6-volt
Exhaust system: Single exhaust

TRANSMISSION

Type: Three-speed automatic (GM HydraMatic)
Ratios 1st: 3.819:1
2nd: 2.634:1
3rd: 1.450:1
Reverse: 4.304:1

DIFFERENTIAL

Type: Hypoid with semi-floating rear axles
Ratio: 3.54:1

STEERING

Type: Gemmer worm and roller
Ratio: 20.2:1
Turns, lock-to-lock: 4.2
Turning circle: 33.4 feet

BRAKES

Type: Hydraulic, four-wheel manual
Front: 9-inch drum
Rear: 9-inch drum

CHASSIS & BODY

Construction: Unitized, all-steel body and frame
Body style: Two-door club sedan
Layout: Front engine, rear wheel drive

SUSPENSION

Front: Unequal length A-arms with coil springs and tubular hydraulic shock absorbers
Rear: Solid axle with semi-elliptic leaf springs and tubular hydraulic shock absorbers

WHEELS & TIRES

Wheels: Pressed steel disc
Front/rear: 4.50 x 15
Tires: Diamondback Classic radial
Front/rear: P195/75R15

WEIGHTS & MEASURES

Wheelbase: 105 inches
Overall length: 180.69 inches
Overall width: 138.38 inches
Overall height: 62.75 inches
Front track: 54 inches
Rear track: 52.50 inches
Shipping weight: 2,740 pounds

CAPACITIES

Crankcase: 5 quarts
Cooling system: 15 quarts
Fuel tank: 16 gallons

CALCULATED DATA

Bhp per c.i.d.: 0.514
Weight per bhp: 26.35 pounds
Weight per c.i.d.: 13.56 pounds

PERFORMANCE

*0-60 mph: 15.2 seconds
*Top speed: 102.4 mph

PRODUCTION

1954 Jet Liner:
Club Sedan, two-door 2,000 (approximate)
*From *Motor Trend*, March 1953, using an automatic-equipped 1953 Super Jet

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