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1958 RAMBLER AMBASSADOR CUSTOM

Hemmings Classic Car - FEBRUARY 1, 2007 - BY [JIM DONNELLY](#)

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If you were a big fan of Dolly the cloned sheep, maybe you feel comfortable at a cruise-in or car show when you're surrounded by lots and lots of cars wearing blue ovals, bowties or pentastars, just like yours, stretching to the limits of the parking lot or show field. Maybe you're moping over it because all the redundancy has erased your identity or individuality just a little bit. You're the kind of person who wants to be noticed and recognized as someone all your own. Here's the guaranteed way to make that happen: Instead of something from the Big Three, drive a 1958 Rambler Ambassador.

Nothing in the world of car collecting, nothing at all, looks quite like a 1958 Ambassador, what



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with its comparatively narrow profile, towering slab sides, isosceles tailfins and forward-slanted C-pillars. As the firm clinging to the rear of the industry's careening three-man bobsled, toddling American Motors had to do something to stand apart from its much larger competitors, and with the Ambassador, it definitely accomplished its goal when 1958 rang in. When one compares the 1958 model to its immediate predecessor, the 1957 Nash Ambassador with its less-than-harmonious combination of a vaguely oval theme, vertically stacked headlamps, lightning-bolt side moldings and the same front-sloping roof pillars, the transformation is dramatic.

Two ranges of Ambassadors were produced for the 1958 model year. At the upper end was the Custom line, with four body styles offered. The Customs' main visual identifier was the silver color used on the big side trim inserts. One rung down was the Super series, available as either a sedan or a six-passenger station wagon. They're most easily spotted by their own inserts, in a variety of hues intended to contrast the overall body color, plus the "Super" nomenclature on both rear fenders. Regardless of which model line was involved, Ambassadors had block lettering naming them as such above the grille and below the hoodline, on both front fenders and on the rear deck lid. Ambassador crests were also applied to the hubcaps.

When 1958 was over, AMC had clearly shaken off the hangover of the Nash and Hudson dirge. American Motors was alone among major American auto manufacturers in ending 1958 in the black. Sales were up to 189,807, of which 14,570 were Ambassadors, 6,369 of them Ambassador Custom four-door sedans like this one. Buyers were increasingly looking for a favorable bottom line that year; witness the 42,196 Rambler Americans that were sold.

ENGINES

When it comes to the Ambassador, there's only one, the OHV V-8 displacing 327 cubic inches that served American Motors with so much distinction since it first appeared in 1957. It was an overbored version of the 250-cu.in. engine, AMC's first V-8, which was introduced in 1956. This engine was, and remains, an impressive post-war performer, with 270hp, 9.7:1 compression ratio, a bore and stroke of 4.00 x 3.25 inches and, on the 1958 Ambassador, a Holley 4150C four-barrel carburetor.

We spoke to noted AMC restorer and historian Brian Yacino of North Grosvenordale, Connecticut, president of the American Motors Corporation Rambler Club, who heaped praise for a goodly time on this landmark engine from an independent American manufacturer. "From the standpoint of its engine, AMC isn't overly different from any other American car," Brian told us. "The 327 V-8 is reliable, and it's built a lot like a truck engine, very tough, with a





lot of material. I've seen these engines resurrected after they've just been sitting for about 15 years without being run. You start them up and they just go.

"The hydraulic lifters will sometimes stick, but usually all you need is a change of oil to get them quieted down," Yacino continued. While checking sources, we found that a wide variety of engine components are available if you search out an AMC specialist. For instance, Galvin's AMC Rambler Parts in Lodi, California, stocks head gaskets, seals, freeze plugs and more for the 327.

TRANSMISSIONS

The Ambassador Custom four-door sedan you see here was equipped by the factory with the standard Borg-Warner T96 three-speed manual transmission, only fitted with a mechanical overdrive actuated by using a knob beneath the dashboard, using a 10-inch Borg and Beck single-disc clutch. With a direct-drive third gear in the transmission, the overdrive has a ratio of 0.70:1. Used components and complete transmissions are easy to find; for example, South Texas AMC sells used gearboxes.

If you select an Ambassador equipped with the optional three-speed automatic transmission, your situation is equally promising. As Brian explained, the optional AMC automatic was actually built by Borg-Warner, a fact he asserted can scare away people needlessly. "People sometimes worry that it's not a Chevy or Ford transmission, but Ford, Mercury and Studebaker all used the Borg-Warner automatic, in addition to AMC," he said. "I believe that 1958 was the first year the Flash-O-Matic name was used. It's a popular belief that it was a two-speed transmission, but AMC never used one of those." Webb's Classic Car Parts in Huntington, Indiana, has parts cars that include transmissions. American Parts Depot of West Manchester, Ohio, stocks automatic transmission overhaul kits for \$129.

DIFFERENTIAL

Nothing fancy here: The Ambassador rear end is a simple hypoid unit with a final drive ratio of 4.10:1, regardless of whether or not the car is outfitted with the overdrive; the optional ratios weren't on the option list for 1958. The search tip of the day is easy this time: Find a late-'50s Rambler in a salvage yard, and you'll most likely have also located a rebuildable differential. Generally speaking, parts are also readily found if the salvage yard is fluent in AMC-ese.



SUSPENSION

Their looks aren't the only things that make Rambler Ambassadors so all their own. Ramblers of this era were unique in that they were fitted with braced torque-tube drivelines. AMC was also ahead of the game, compared to most of its competition, in that it used coil springs at every corner to dampen the ride of its full- and mid-sized cars.

In 1958, AMC switched from the Gemmer worm-and-roller steering that was previously common among Ramblers to a General Motors-built Saginaw recirculating-ball steering box. When they're power-assisted, they use a shock-absorber-like linkage booster that's mounted in alignment with the steering link, and was originally provided by Monroe. Firms, including Kanter Auto Products, sell front end and suspension rebuild kits with parts that are adaptable to AMC products.

BODY/FRAME

The eternal parasite here, oxidization, is a potentially worse problem than it is with some of the products from AMC's competitors. American Motors designed the Ambassador as a unitized body, which means that rust can be a major bugaboo. We spoke about it to AMC restorer Warren Patterson of Pascoag, Rhode Island, who told us flatly, "The rust can definitely be a problem in the unibody cars. I have found over the years that Ramblers may be advertised as California cars, and they may be in California now, but they actually originated in Vermont. In that case, the rust has already started."

It's imperative that the unibody be checked closely for rust, especially where front subframe meets the floorpan, because reproduction parts are nonexistent. Also, inspect the truss rods that support the rear end, although replacements are available. If rot is present, your best bet is to reach out for a place like CTC's Auto Ranch in Denton, Texas, which has both complete cars and used body panels on hand for a whole range of models. Once you buy it, be prepared to do some stripping and prep work, at the minimum.

INTERIOR

Like many other manufacturers, AMC stamped its dashboards out of bare steel during these years, only to have a thick padded hood on the roof. The central theme of the Ambassador dash is its vertically ribbed panel of brushed metal that matches the side spears. A centrally located glove box is an interesting fillip. Instrumentation is about what you'd expect, a band speedometer subordinated by temperature and fuel gauges. There's a clock in the right side

of the dash, where everybody else put the glove box.

"It's not hard to find the radio or a clock, but inside, there are a lot of chrome pieces on the dash, and a lot of them get pitted," Brian advised. Your best bet here is rooting through swap meets for whatever you need inside.

RESTORATION PARTS

By now, you've probably guessed what's coming. Unless you're prepared to add a big measure of socializing to your restoration experience, your best bet is to make sure the 1958 Ambassador is as complete and fully finished as you can find. To repeat, the availability of reproduction parts, other than of the mechanical variety, is next to nil. When it comes to other cars, joining an owner's club is an option. With a 1958 Ambassador, it's a necessity. It's also one of the most rewarding experiences anyone can enjoy in this hobby. AMC fans have fervor in vast amounts, certainly, but they also have empathy for anyone who takes custody of one of their beloved "Nashes" and are always ready to help.

"Especially in terms of the body, I don't find that components are that easy to locate," Brian, who heads the AMCRC, told us. "Good luck finding reproduction parts. I don't see how anyone can attempt to restore a car like this without first getting into a club."

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309-764-3571

www.blaserauto.com

N.O.S. and used mechanical, electrical and trim parts

Webb's Classic Auto Parts

260-344-1714

www.webbsclassic.com

Used, N.O.S. and reproduction mechanical and body parts

Production

Ambassador:

Super four-door sedan: 2,774

Super four-door station wagon: 1,051

Custom four-door sedan: 6,369
Custom four-door hardtop: 1,340
Custom four-door station wagon: 2,742
Custom four-door hardtop wagon: 294

Rebel:
Deluxe four-door sedan:
Super four-door sedan: 2,146
Super Cross Country wagon: 1,782
Custom four-door sedan: 2,595
Custom Cross Country wagon: 3,101
Custom Country Club hardtop: 410

Rambler Six:
Deluxe four-door sedan: 12,723
Deluxe Cross Country wagon: 78
Super four-door sedan: 29,699
Super Country Club hardtop: 983
Super Cross Country wagon: 26,452
Custom four-door sedan: 16,850
Custom Cross Country wagon: 20,131

American:
Deluxe two-door business coupe: 184
Deluxe two-door sedan: 15,765
Super two-door sedan: 14,691

Parts Prices

Accelerator pedal pivot - \$20
Carburetor gasket kit - \$25
Carpet set - \$125
Clutch cover - \$95
Door edge guard set - \$45
Door skin, front - \$75
Engine overhaul gasket set - \$85
Gas tank sending unit - \$98
Grille mesh - \$58
Grille section, N.O.S. - \$50

Heater control valve - \$75
Hood side bumper - \$3.25
Idler arm - \$45
Overdrive gear - \$75
Shop manual - \$49
Tie rod, N.O.S. - \$29
Transmission snap ring set - \$30
Transmission yoke - \$125

Club Scene

American Motors Corporation Rambler Club
6 Murolo Road
North Grosvenordale, Connecticut 06255
www.amcrc.com
Dues: \$24/year; Membership: 1,100

International American Motors Owners Association
1615 Purvis Avenue
Janesville, Wisconsin 53548
Dues: \$35/year

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