

## A VENT WINDOW VIEW – **CHARIOTS of DESIRE**

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Automobile salesmen who learned their craft during the Thirties and Forties must have looked upon the Fifties as an absolute circus. Prior to 1955, automobiles generally came in the colors we learned to identify in our first-grade art classes; the earth was brown, the oceans were navy blue, and witches always were black.

While a few makes occasionally offered bright colors on their sportiest models, those specially ordered units were priced out of the range of most buyers. Therefore, those elite colors were seldom seen. New cars in general appeared in sedate tones that matched clothing choices worn to funerals. The primary reasons were that auto-makers knew multiple colors would slow production due to scheduling problems and mismatched parts because of the otherwise unnoticed hindrance of colorblind workers.

Paint mismatches have always been a problem for car makers; shading can vary when mating a red front fender with a red hood sprayed a few minutes apart in the same paint booth. The reasons are multiple, ranging from paint viscosity to temperature variations in the paint and the metal. This was not a big issue for auto plants before 1950, as customers seldom noticed color irregularities on pre-Forties machines. In those days, after a car had weathered in the sun for a couple weeks and then suffered a minimum of wax and a maximum of dirt, paint flaws tended go unnoticed. Later on, American car buyers had to ignore bad paint jobs when Germany flexed her muscles and WW II began. That remained the case for a long while after VJ Day because new cars of any make, regardless of color, were hard to come by until the early Fifties.

When Dad had a new grain-box built for our wagon in 1943 or 1944, he dealt with the war-time paint shortage by pouring the contents from partially used cans of machinery paint into one container. He then applied the ensuing mixture—liberally. That wagon, like the fabled Joseph, truly wore a coat of many colors. But, unlike Joseph's coat that (according to all the pictures shown me by Sunday school teachers) was a garment of multi-colored stripes, our wagon ended up in a shade of dusty rose. For some reason, Dad did not like anyone calling it "pink."

That paint job lasted until I began my senior year in 1954, the same year that Detroit went "all in" for color. There were even some pinks among the brightly colored autos showing up in showrooms by then. And, not only were the makers using bright colors, their cars appeared in two-tones and multiple colors. I was astounded by the sight of a gray and pink '55 Bel Air. That machine, owned by a neighbor, was a stunningly bright contrast to Dad's steel gray '53.

For a color-starved market, the advent of those unfamiliar colors on Detroit's new offerings made dealer showrooms and car lots the equal of those magnificent flower gardens displayed in homemaker magazines of that era.

Like the rest of America I savored the new body styles and engine improvements; Dad must have found the new colors enticing as well. One day, in what amounted to a birthday cake surprise, he returned home in a brand new, blue and white Chevy 210; that machine was a party hat compared to the fedora gray '53 two-door he had traded away. The new Chevy, although powered by a six, rather than the hot new V-8 offered by GM, would have disappointed me had it not been for the fact that it was equipped with an overdrive. And, since it was one of the best looking cars in the USA, that Chevrolet did more for my dating successes than my carefully tended flat-top haircut!