

By Alan Mayes

It has been said over the years that there was a distinction between the styles of East and West Coast Customs in the 1950s. Maybe so. Look at these two customs and be your own judge.

The '55 Chevy Bel Air is a Barris Kustoms product, a California car, while the '57 Ford Fairlane 500 was built on the East Coast around the same time in the late 1950s. Both cars now belong to Joe Bortz of Chicago. Bortz is best known for his collection of restored and original 1950s and 1960s Detroit dream cars, such as the 1955 Motorama Chevrolet Biscayne now undergoing restoration, and the 1954 Pontiac Bonneville Special. Recently he has become a fan of significant custom cars, too. These two are the jewels of that group so far.

The Ford was actually customized when it was new by its owner/builder John Tuttle of Rockton, Connecticut, and made its show debut at the 1958 Hartford Autorama. Named White Pearl, it was a well known car, featured in 25 different magazine issues during 1959 and 1960, including *Rodding & Restyling*, *Hot Rod* and *Car Craft*.

Like most Barris customs, the Chevy appeared in several magazines of the period, too. A photograph of the Bel Air is shown in the 1959 program for Barris' Bakersfield Motor & Boat Show. It was built for Jim Seaton by

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Barris. Additionally, it appears in a well-known staged photograph of Barris' North Hollywood shop. That photo appears on the cover of the *Barris Kustoms of the 50's* DVD.

Neither car is a slouch in the power department. The Ford carries the 1957 top-of-the-line Police Interceptor 312 Y-block with dual 4-barrels. It was rated at an impressive 285 horses at the time. The tranny is a manual 3-speed. The car has power brakes but not power steering. The Chevy now has a 350 small block and a Turbo 350. It has neither power steering nor power brakes.

Because of the hulking V8s, unencumbered by power accessories, air conditioning or smog equipment, the cars are both a blast to drive, but it's the customizing that really draws attention. At first glance, they appear somewhat similar in style, but a little closer examination reveals some East Coast/West Coast differences.

The Ford is a little more conservative in its design, not surprising considering George Barris' tendency to be a little flashier. The '55 Chevy has restored paint but the upholstery is original. The Ford is all original – paint, interior, chrome, everything. Joe points out that even the air in the tires is original!

It's a beauty, too. Fords in 1957 were gorgeous cars and this one was improved upon by Tuttle. The tube grille was a mainstay back then on mild cus-



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toms. Another common touch for '57 Fords is the flat taillight lenses with glass blue-dots in the center. The stock side trim was retained. The front bumper was reworked into bumperettes and a rolled pan was added to the center. In the rear, a complete rolled pan replaced the bumper and a pair of nerf bars serves bumper duty.

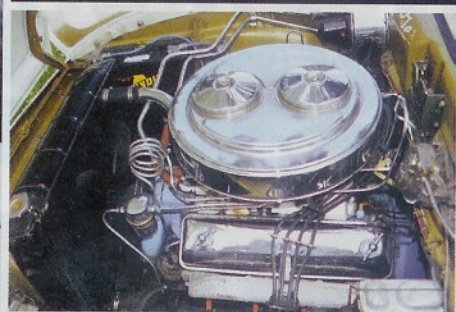
By contrast, the Chevy retains not only stock bumpers but the accessory bumper extensions and bumper guards. Its stock side trim was removed and a more elaborate gold anodized new side trim was fashioned. The grille is a more elaborate custom piece with mesh and 21 chrome bullets. The headlights are the most dramatic front end feature, dual stacked and Frenched Lucas-style versions.

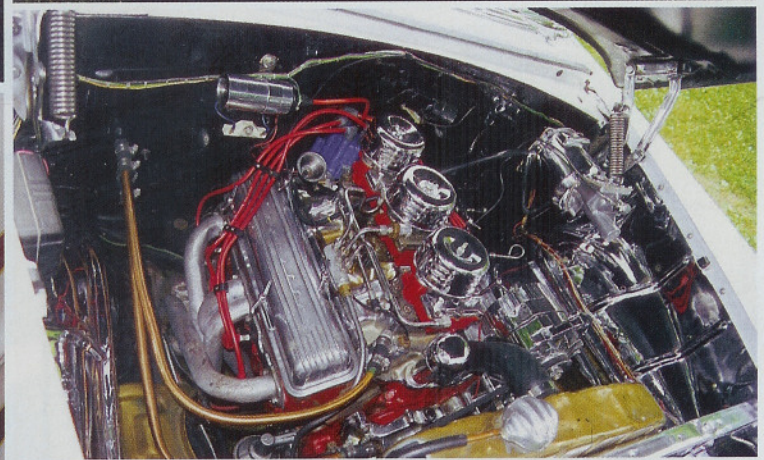
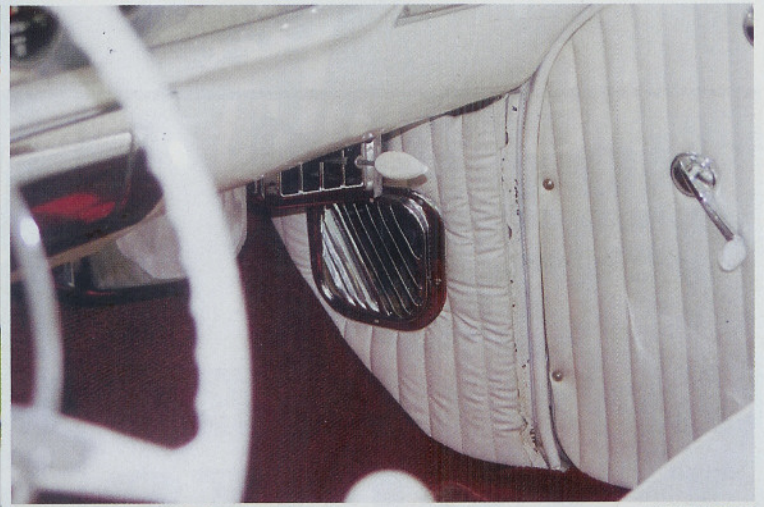
The interior is where the cars seem similar at first glance. Both share white tuck and roll vinyl and both have televisions. The Ford's is in the dashboard. The Chevy's is between the front seats, facing rearward. The Chevy interior has more custom touches overall, including four bucket seats (or at least late '50s versions of buckets), separated by consoles. The rear one houses a mini bar and a telephone. The Ford retains stock bench seats. The steering wheel cover on the Ford was autographed by its famous second owner, rock 'n' roller Gene Pitney. Yeah, he was an East Coast boy, too.

Check the attitude of the cars from the side. The Ford sits low in the front, higher in the rear. Ironically, that look was called a "California rake," but the California-built Chevy from Barris sits level. The Ford has Lancer-style 4-bar spinner wheel covers and the Chevy has chrome wheels and Barris' then-new candy red bullet centers.

Some more similarities arise. Both cars are white and both have scallops, gold on the Ford, red on the Chevy. Both have shaved door handles. Lakes pipes are bare on the Chevy, molded and shrouded on the Ford. The cars' scalloped paint jobs are augmented by pinstriping. The Ford even has pinstriping on the windows, most of which is still intact.

It's fun to look at these two cars and compare styles. Which differences are due to their builders' locations and regional influences? Which are due to their builders' tastes and preferences? Hmm, which indeed? [www.bortzautocollection.com](http://www.bortzautocollection.com)





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