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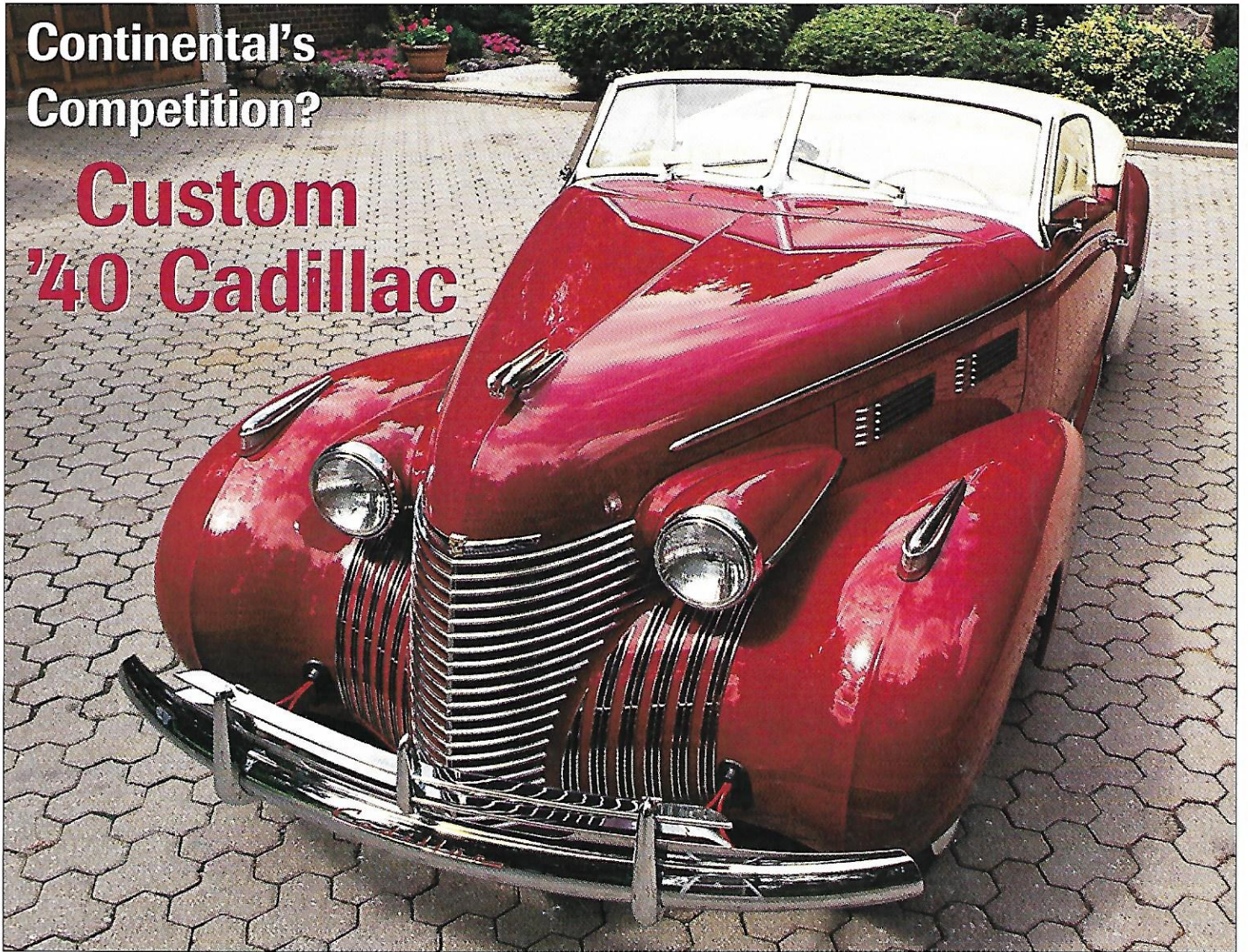
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**What Might Have Been:
Thunderbird Wagon**

Continental's
Competition?

**Custom
'40 Cadillac**



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SPECIAL INTEREST AUTOS: A PUBLICATION FROM HEMMINGS MOTOR NEWS



VISTA-BIRD:

THE MIGHT-HAVE-BEEN 'BIRD



COULD this have been Ford's answer to Chevrolet's Nomad or Pontiac's Safari? Is this a great-looking wagon or what? When you walk up to Craig Whatley's Vista-Bird at a show, it looks so right and natural it's not the least bit obvious that it is a one-off custom. In fact, if you merely mention to people that these Thunderbirds are quite rare, they will mumble something about not remembering having seen one before. With good reason; this one was built by a body shop owner to use up a damaged car he had bought at a police auction.

Lyman C. Dye, of Idaho Falls, Idaho, is the man responsible for the Vista-Bird's creation. As the owner of a body shop that also offers customizing work, it was his vision and imagination that saw the possibility of adding a 1965 Oldsmobile Vista-Cruiser station wagon roof to the 1962 Thunderbird hardtop coupe, to create our fea-

**By Bud Juneau
photos by the author**

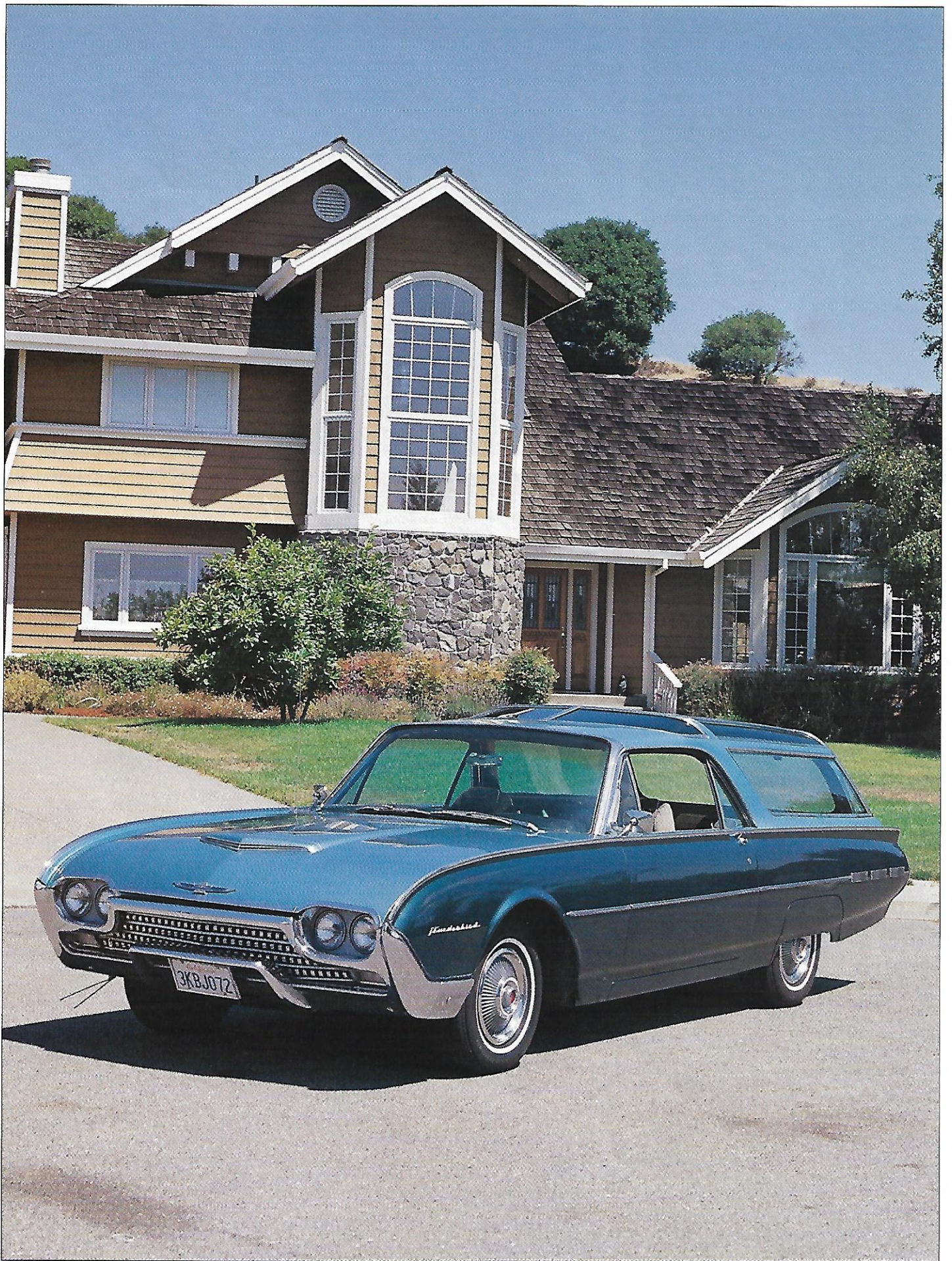
ture car. The first wagon roof that he ordered from a local salvage yard was destroyed by a freak tornado before he could pick it up, so he located another one and removed it from the car himself.

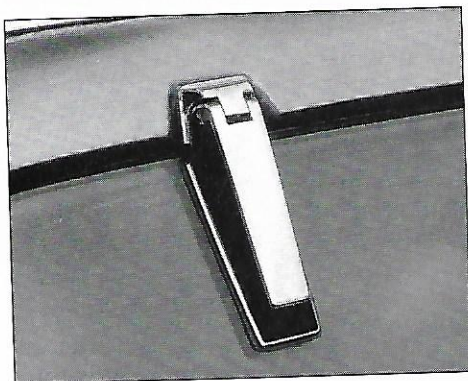
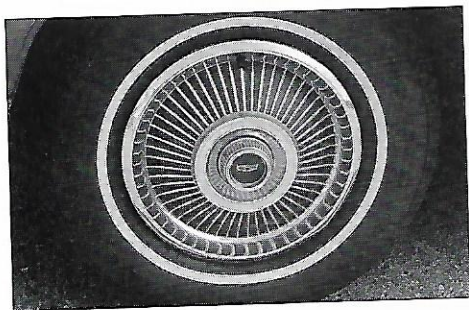
Once he had cut the Thunderbird up, it looked so pathetic that he felt sick about what he had done. He quickly tried fitting the Olds roof and was amazed at the good fit. The side "B" pillars needed to be rolled out a bit to meet the wider wagon roofline, but the rest was a natural. The original trunk floor pan was left in place to form a spare-tire well, with a flat wood floor built over it to form the wagon's rear compartment.

Carpeting was applied over the structure, to match that in the front. The entire rear lower body and bumper were left in place, to retain structural integrity. The tailgate was formed from a sheet of clear plexiglass, using Pinto hatchback hinges at the top, and a generic T-handle at the bottom, flanked by two cabinet locks at the lower corners. The car was painted with "base coat-clear coat" 1983 GM colors: Medium Teal and Jade-stone.

The original T-Bird interior had ribbed metal







VISTA-BIRD

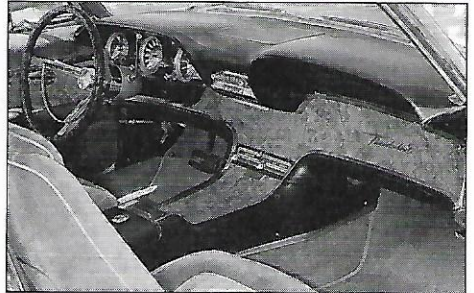
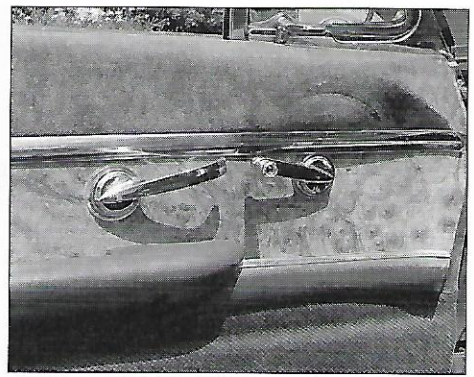
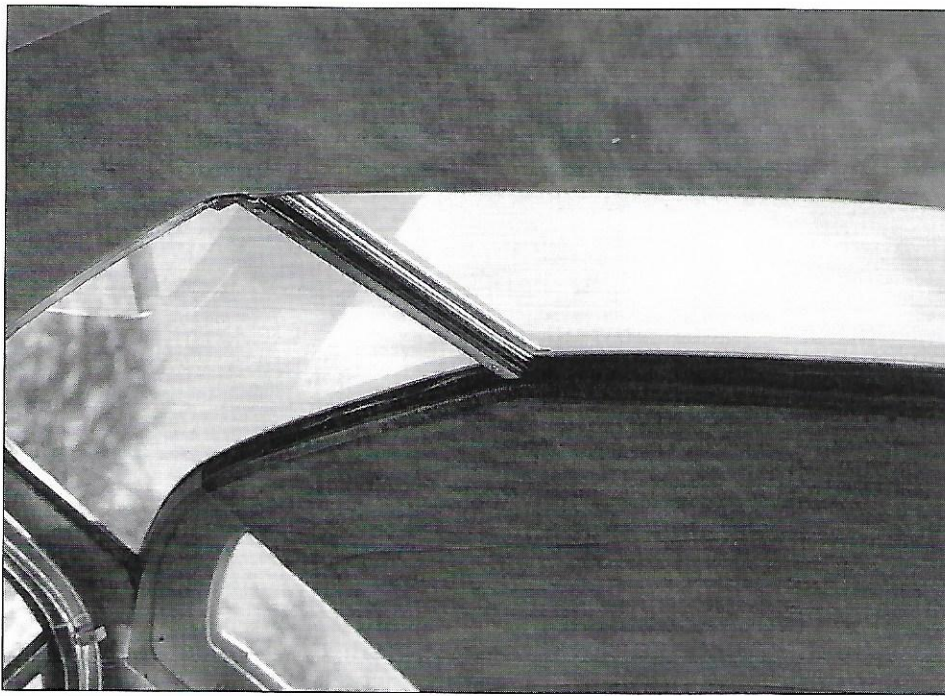
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panels on the doors, console and dash which were replaced with burl walnut pattern formica. Since Mr. Dye was customizing the car for his own use, he chose 1978 Plymouth Sapporo bucket seats with lumbar support and tilt-backs. However, the Thunderbird stitch-



ing pattern was followed to match the original rear seat, which was mounted on brackets, so it could be folded down flat to extend the cargo area. One oddity resulted from the fact that the car was left at the upholstery shop for over two years. The shop forgot about the fold-down rear seat and covered it in a rigid manner. It was such a beautiful job that no one has had the heart to do it over, so it currently doesn't fold down. Es-





timates put over 400 hours into the total conversion.

The chassis and running gear are essentially stock, with the 113-inch wheelbase, and 390-cubic-inch V-8 with Cruise-O-Matic automatic transmission. The engine has been slightly modified by the addition of a 428 crankshaft and high-lift camshaft, which launches it off the line a bit quicker, but still delivers about 14 miles per gallon city

and 20 on the highway. Overall weight of the vehicle has remained essentially the same with a gain of only 25 pounds in the conversion.

The present owner, Craig Whatley, has been fascinated by station wagons since his dad came home with a 1951 Willys Jeep Wagon that the family enjoyed greatly and is fondly remembered in childhood memories. Craig later bought a 1959 Cadillac Miller-Meteor combina-

tion hearse/ambulance, and then later a 1957 Pontiac Safari Station Wagon, which he still has. So somehow, the Vista-Bird was destined to find a new home with a station-wagon lover. In 1989 Craig saw an ad for the T-Bird, sent for pictures, but was not in a position to add another car to the fleet, and eventually lost the papers with the details. However, fate has a way of putting things together, and in 1994 he ran across the phone number again. On a lark, he called on the car again, and was surprised to find it still available. Unable to resist further, he sold the '59 Cadillac to make room for the Vista-Bird, and as they say, the rest was history.

Craig has shown the car extensively and always with positive results. In 1995 it won a second place at The Vintage Thunderbird Club International meet at San Diego, California; and in 1996 it won a first place in The Nor-Cal Thunderbird Concours at Lake Tahoe, Nevada. Other awards include The Good Guys "Dare to be Different" award, and The Napa Valley Cruizers "Way Cool Wagon" award. Always a show stopper, head turner, and master of the double take, it provides some great people watching for Craig and his friends, wherever it is shown. ☺



Facing page, top left: Stock 'bird wheel covers are retained. **Above left:** Hatchback uses Pinto hinges. **Top right:** T-Bird's rear styling works well with hatchback. **Center:** Spare hides under rear floor. **Bottom:** Rear window's size makes loading easy. **This page, top left:** Vista Cruiser windows let the sunshine in. **Top and above right:** Burl walnut replaces stock trim. **Above left:** Oldsmobile meets Ford in a harmonious pairing. **Left:** Wouldn't it have made a great-looking addition to the T-Bird lineup?