

Nothing just “pops up” out of the blue... no father, mother, chain of precedent. This includes a two-door station wagon with a rather novel roof treatment. To view the Chevrolet Nomad as an isolated occurrence is to strip it of some fascinating history. The full developmental context of the car includes names such as Harley Earl, the first C1 Corvette and GM’s traveling trick pony show... the annual Motorama.

Collection of
America’s Car
Museum

C1 +
Harley Earl
+ Trick Roof
= Nomad

1957 Chevrolet Nomad



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Today, new car models slip into the product stream at various times and with varying degrees of marketing hype and media push. Ask yourself this: When—*exactly*—was the latest Corolla introduced and—*precisely*—how did it differ from the previous version? See what I mean? It's virtually impossible today to fully appreciate the degree of public anticipation whipped up by the carefully orchestrated and highly concentrated automotive rollouts of the 1950s.

Those of you of a 'certain age'—myself included—can remember a time, typically early fall, when the new models hit dealer showrooms in masse. It was a big deal! The family would dress up and troop down to the local Oldsmobile dealership to stand in rapturous awe before the newly minted Golden Rocket 88. Each year's automotive offerings were deliberately designed with enough shape shifting and chrome fiddling to make the previous year's car seem hopelessly passé. Can't let those Joneses gain a step. Time to trade in and move up.

Dynamic Obsolescence

First developed by Alfred P. Sloan and Harley Earl, they called this annual model change "Dynamic Obsolescence." We mortals call it "planned obsolescence" . . . and certain other less flattering names. The Chevrolet Nomad is a prime example of that brilliant business strategy.

This is not to minimize the technical improvements that, from time to time, accompanied all that reworked sheet metal. The introduction in 1955 of arguably the world's greatest internal combustion engine—GM's magnificent and omnipresent small block V8 is a key case in point.

Harley Earl

Time and space do not permit an in-depth profile of GM's six foot, three-inch, supremely self-confident (i.e. "my way or the highway") VP of Design. Famous for the pivotal Buick "Y Job," Earl's true genius was his ability to spot a spark of genius in a lower echelon staffer and prod (aka brow-beat) it to fruition. The Nomad is a prime example of "Hollywood Harley's" operational style.

GM Motorama

Staged by GM from 1949 to 1961, the GM Motorama was essentially a mobile auto expo designed to create public and media buzz and ultimately boost sales. The concept grew out of Alfred P. Sloan's yearly industrial luncheons at New York City's Waldorf Astoria, a ritual that began in 1931. Prototypes, concept cars and special halo models were the stars of the show. Dubbed "dream cars," most were never intended to see the light of day. Their true mission was to probe the outer edge of the public's tolerance for new shapes, textures and colors.

continued on page 22 

The Chevrolet Nomad Sport Station Wagon

debuted at the 1954 Motorama. While working up variations for the recently introduced Corvette, Chevy Division's Clare MacKichan and Carl Renner penned a station wagon variant with a unique roof design. It would be one of three Corvette concepts in that year's Motorama. The result quickly attained 'celebrity' status—so much so that Harley Earl ordered his creative staff to apply the name and key design cues to the 1955 Chevrolet wagon. GM brass approved the car for production contingent upon its being integrated into the popular Bel Air model line.

The elements that distinguished the Nomad—and sister ship Pontiac Safari—from other wagons of the day were the fluted (grooved) roof, forward sloping B-pillar, wraparound rear side glass, seven vertical chrome accent strips on the rear droptail and two doors, all of which were transposed from the original, non-running prototype, Corvette Nomad show car. The mission was to take an essentially utilitarian vehicle and invest it with a bit of design flair—not that different from today's SUV/CUV marketing challenge.

So, how did it work out? Mixed results. On the plus side, it was a head turning ride... for a station wagon. At least being picked up at school by a mom driving a Nomad was not a totally soul crushing humiliation. On the down side, the lack of four doors limited its appeal... and functionality. The glass rich interior baked occupants on hot days. The slanted rear lift-gate had a tendency to leak and then there was the price... high! Because the rear two-thirds of the car was basically custom right down to the shortened wheel base, parts sharing with other models was severely reduced. As a result, the Nomad was the most expensive Chevrolet—\$2,571 when equipped with a V8—\$265 more than a similarly optioned Bel Air convertible.



The Corvette Nomad was one of three C1 variations introduced at the 1954 GM Motorama.

Despite tepid sales, the Nomad returned to showrooms in both 1956 and '57... albeit with a price hike of about \$150 each year and some downward creeping content. Proving you can't keep a good name down, the "Nomad" badge would be applied to a succession of Chevrolet station wagons until its last iteration in the form of a passenger van. For a complete year-to-year list, see "Auto Trivia" on page 23. As for collector desirability, the model years 1955 through 1957 are the hot tickets. STOP



1957 Chevrolet Nomad Station Wagon



SPECIFICATIONS

Base Price (V8): \$2,571 (1955)

No. Produced: 22,375 / 8,386 (1955)
7,886 (1956) / 6,103 (1957)

Engines: 235ci I-6 / 265ci V8
283ci V8

Horsepower (1957): I-6 - 140 / 265 V8 - 162
283 V8 - 185-283

Transmissions: 3-speed manual
2-speed auto

Dimensions: Wheelbase - 115"
L- 201" / H- 60.8" / W- 73.7"
Weight - 3,285 - 3,465 lbs

**Specification data can, and often does, vary from source to source. When in doubt, we use those most often cited. Above specs are for a stock Nomad.*



AUTO TRIVIA

THE “NOMAD” YEAR-BY-YEAR:

1955-1957 ~ the original 2-door with unique styling, part of the range topping Bel Air line of Chevrolets.

1958 ~ Nomad name applied to the standard Bel Air 4-door station wagon.

1959 ~ Nomad name transferred from Bel Air to expanded Impala model range.

1960 ~ Impala line Nomad adopts more conventional styling.

1961 ~ Last year for Nomad name, GM wagons henceforth go with same product designation as sedans.

1968 ~ 1972 ~ Names “Nomad” and “Nomad Custom” applied to lowest-priced Chevelle station wagon, below Chevelle Greenbrier, Concours and Concours Estate.

1976 ~ Special Nomad package offered for Chevy Vega wagons. In an attempt to relate to original car, side window trim was designed to make B-pillar appear forward slanting and the tailgate featured vertical rub strips.

Late 1970s/early 1980s ~ Nomad name returns as a trim package for the full size Chevrolet Van... boogie on!

Our Nomad was donated from the Harold LeMay Collection by Nancy LeMay in 2004. In strict terms, the car is a modified 1957 Chevrolet Nomad. Both the 4-speed transmission and engine, a 327 cu in V8, are not period correct. The car is currently on display in the Museum’s Route 66 Station Wagon exhibit.

About that engine, it’s hard to argue against it being one of the greatest of all time. Designed by a team headed by Ed Cole, it started life in 1955 at 265 cu in (4.3 liters) and has periodically grown in displacement over the years—the current Corvette Z06 6.2 small block is a direct descendent. As of 2011, 100 million SBC engines had been produced.

In 1956 *Motor Trend* named the Chevrolet Nomad one of the year’s most beautiful cars.



Michael Craft, ACM’s official photographer, created these striking photographs. To see more of his work visit www.michaelcraftphotography.com.

The car’s 4-speed and 327ci engine are not period correct

Due to its 2-door design the Nomad lacked the utility of most station wagons. A 4-door model replaced it in 1958.

The Nomad’s shortened wheelbase (115”) was due to its C1 Corvette lineage and gave the car a more sporty look.

A fluted roof and curved side glass were unique design elements.

