

A Chrysler Double-Feature: 1939 Chrysler Hayes Body Coupe



By Harold Mermel

Harold and Leslie Mermel's stunning 1939 Chrysler Hayes Body Coupe pictured at a nearby horse farm.

Walter P. Chrysler bought the Maxwell and Chalmers car companies in the mid-1920s. In 1928 he purchased the Dodge Brothers car and truck company. By the late 1920s, Walter established Chrysler Corporation, which absorbed DeSoto cars, Dodge Brothers, Plymouth, and Fargo trucks. Under Chrysler, sales grew dramatically, and it became the third-largest vehicle company after General Motors and Ford.

By 1929 and the years following the Great Depression, sales dropped dramatically for all vehicle manufacturers. The Great Depression forced businesses and banks to fail and put millions of citizens and potential customers out of work. Ten years later, during the 1939 car sales season, the United States started to emerge from the dark shadow of the Depression, and vehicle sales improved significantly.

For all the Chrysler companies, the 1939 vehicle season began in September 1938 and ended in August 1939. Chrysler and its other companies invited their top dealers to Detroit to preview the introduction of newly designed vehicles with many improved features. When the dealers and press saw these new

vehicles, they were mesmerized by the beautiful new cars and trucks and the new features offered. However, dealers realized something was missing. There were no Chrysler, DeSoto, or Dodge convertible cars available for the 1939 car lineup.

However, the Plymouth line offered two convertibles: a coupe and sedan. Plymouth was the low-cost Mopar car and truck line. No one knows why this happened, but the dealers and press did *not* like it. While convertibles were more expensive, they were enticing customer attractions. Convertibles brought customers into showrooms. Convertibles showcased in parades and public events captivated the public's attention. Dealers complained loudly that Ford, Chevy, and every other company had convertibles to offer. Except for the Plymouths, the other Mopar companies would be at a disadvantage for the 1939 car year.

The dealers pressed Chrysler, DeSoto, and Dodge factory management to get the 1939 convertibles added to the car line up. Factory management said it was too late to engineer 1939 convertibles. The convertibles would need reinforcing designs to be engineered and time-consuming testing would be needed.





Above: A view of the steering wheel and dashboard.
Below: The Art-Deco lines of the front end are mesmerizing.





Harold is also an avid license plate collector. The 1939 New York World's Fair inspired Chrysler to use the model names New Yorker and Saratoga. There was also a 1939 World's Fair in San Francisco, California.

Yet, management from the three companies told the dealers and press that they would offer a newly designed car that would make them happy. It would be another high-end coupe, like no other. At the introduction party, Chrysler already offered two coupe models. These were business coupes with two or three seats (no rear seats) and Victoria coupes with four or five seats plus two jump seats facing each other. The new mid-year offering were new Club (Town) coupes with a unique disappearing rear seat (resulting in five to six seats). It wasn't just the greater seating or folding the rear seat into the trunk.

It was an attractive, new 1939 eye catching, exterior and interior body design, loaded with accessories and upscale offerings. These new coupes were top of the product line cars. The Mopar companies told the dealers and the press that they would produce the new Club coupes meaning customers will have three different coupes to choose from. They told everyone to give them time to do the work on designs. By the end of 1938, the Mopar companies had sent detailed information and

prices on the new, improved, upscale Club coupes. These unique, custom coupes were the highest-priced vehicles in the entire line, costing more than all coupes and sedans.

Chrysler went to a custom body-building company, the Hayes Body Company. They ordered 1,000 beautiful, custom bodies. They allocated 363 bodies to Dodge, 264 to DeSoto, and the remaining 373 to the Chrysler line. Of the Chryslers, 239 were six-cylinder powered Royal Windsors. There were 99 that would be eight-cylinder New Yorkers (above Imperials), and the last 35 were to be eight-cylinder Saratogas (above New Yorkers). Chrysler shipped the first of these 1939 Club (Town) Coupes in March of 1939. Dodge and DeSoto also had upscale Custom lines. Dodge called them Town coupes. Because of the short production period for these Custom coupes (which ended in August 1939), only about 265 Hayes Body Club coupes made it to the public, as special Chryslers, DeSotos, and Dodges.





The sweeping lines of the 1939 Chrysler Hayes Body Coupe.

The 265th surviving Club coupe is a Royal Windsor Chrysler in California. Only 14 Hayes Body Club Coupes are known to survive in the world. Eight are Chryslers (four Royal Windsors, three New Yorkers, and one Saratoga). There are four surviving Custom DeSotos and two Custom Dodges. The Hayes Body Coupes featured Art Deco designs. Besides the standard 1939 waterfall grille, the top and trunk feature a unique creased turret roof and trunk lid. They have highly chromed side windows, including attractive rear vent windows and split rear windows.

My fully restored Hayes Body Coupe has many upscale features. It has two-tone luxury seats and many optional accessories, including two rear ashtrays, one front ashtray, two

rear glove boxes, a heater, a radio with under running board antenna installation, a clock, tire rim trim rings, white wall tires, rear bumper road splash pan, goose neck side mirrors, parking lights, fog lights, and floor mats. The only item I would still want are rear fender skirts. The color of this beauty is regal maroon. As you can tell from the picture it is a very dark black cherry color.

My 1939 Chrysler Hayes Body Coupe is an unforgettable automobile. This coupe's design is truly unique and gorgeous.

(Photos by Tracy Leshner)





Harold and Leslie Mermel's exceptional 1942 Chrysler Town & Country Woodie Wagon.

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Few 1942 Chrysler Barrel Backs have changed hands in the last five years. The last three that sold went for huge sums of money. These World War II rarities are the most expensive woodie cars available. In addition, they are the only production woodies that are Full Classics, recognized by the elite car club, called the Classic Car Club of America (CCCA).

In March 1941, mid-production year ending in August 1941, Chrysler introduced a unique high-end woodie wagon called the 1941 Chrysler Town & Country Woodie Wagon. This wagon had several distinctive features. Chrysler only built 997 with steel limo roofs, like SUV limousines. There were 797 9-passenger wagons with rear seats that slid back and allowed a jump seat bench to fold into place for three more passengers to enter and sit.

Chrysler made a film in color and sound that showed these cars in various beautiful scenes, including a uniformed chauffeur getting out of the vehicle and opening the door to allow eight beautiful models to exit the car. I am fortunate enough to own one of these original films. Chrysler also made 200 6-passenger versions by eliminating the jump bench and anchoring the rear seat.





Above: Are you ready to go for a summer drive?

Below: Chrysler's Fluid Drive transmission allowed drivers to stop at a traffic light without depressing the clutch and start in second or third gear.





Of the nearly 1,000 Chrysler 1941 Town & Country Woodie Wagons built only 24 cars survive worldwide. The 1941 models were the first actual Chrysler wood body cars made. Chrysler continued making different wood body cars until 1950. They were expensive to manufacture, requiring much hand labor and finishing work to create the high-end luxury wood features on wheels. Chrysler also fitted this model with lots of glass for improved vision and trimmed it with chrome and stainless steel. Several accessories were available. This model came standard with leather seats.

The rear woodie doors had a unique design, which resulted in Chrysler referring to them as barrel backs. The rear was shaped like half a barrel, with a vertical split, allowing the rear two doors to open to the left and to the right. The Town & Country Barrel Back was the only car with this look, and it continued into the 1942 model year. The 1941 version is rare and desirable, but its value is less than that of the holy grail of woodie cars: The 1942 Chrysler Town & Country Woodie Wagon.

All Town & Country Barrel Backs are made of white ash wood framing and Honduras mahogany wood paneling.





The unique barrel back rear end.

ships, ammunition, etc. Auto production slowed down dramatically during WWII.

As a result, Chrysler shut down 1942 car production and only shipped about 525 Town & Country Woodie Wagons! The last known surviving body is #1621. The 521st 1942 body is located in California. While a later blackout version was also shipped in January of 1942 with a later serial number, the wood body is of a much earlier body number—#1141, the 41st body, is in Ohio. As a result of the lower actual production of the 1942 Town & Country model, only 16 are known to survive worldwide! Because of the low production number, lower survival number, and unique aerodynamic, attractive look, the 1942 Chrysler Town & Country Woodie Wagon Barrel Backs have high desirability. Of the 1942 Town and Country Wagons, 850 were 9-passenger versions and 150 were of the 6-passenger versions.

My 1942 Chrysler Town & Country, 9-Passenger, 4-Door, Woodie Wagon Barrel Back is the oldest 1942 surviving example, built in September of 1941. It is Body #1117— the 17th body shipped.

I bought this car in May of 1979. It is finally completely restored, except for the original leather upholstery. Restoration has taken every bit of those 45 years. The car was complete, but it did not run when I purchased it. I had to do very little woodworking. However, I recently replaced the left rear door with a NOS complete wood Town & Country door, which I bought about 45 years ago from Andy Bernbaum Mopar Parts. It is the only NOS door I have ever heard about. At that time, I also located a NOS plastic marbled 1942 Chrysler steering wheel that I had recently installed.

At one time, I owned three of these Barrel Back Woodie Wagons: one 1941 model and two 1942 models. This 1942 Town & Country Barrel Back was the basis of the Danbury Mint model. It took them four years to design and offer thousands of these 1942 Chrysler Barrel Back model toys. They came to my home and took many photos, videos, and measurements. They sent me a sample model to review and critique every few months. Each time, I found errors that had to be corrected. Ultimately, they gave me the last prototype and five of the first models they produced, with lots of beautiful literature on this model car. Danbury Mint offered them in black and green versions, even though my car is Regal Maroon. They made a post-war Town & Country convertible in maroon, so they wanted to make the 1942 Town & Country in black or green.

(Photos by Tracy Leshner)

In September of 1941, Chrysler introduced its new, completely different, aerodynamic model cars with an eye-catching streamlined art deco look. The highlight of the car lineup was the 1942 Chrysler Town & Country Woodie Wagon Barrel backs. Chrysler planned on producing another 1,000 of these unique, luxury works of art. Plans changed dramatically when we officially entered World War II after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941. Chrysler had planned production through August of 1942 but had to be shut down by the end of January 1942. This allowed all automakers to switch productions for Jeeps, tanks, airplanes, searchlights, big guns, sirens, boats,

