

KING OF CORONETS

Just one Coronet-o!

We've featured plenty of rare cars in *Classic American* over the years, but this is a real rarity – the number of 1967 Dodge Coronet hemi convertibles made could be counted on one hand ... by a three-toed sloth ... with some left over!



Words: Dave Smith, photography: Anders Odeholm

Define a muscle car. According to the *Classic American* Lexicon of Automotive Jargon, it means 'an intermediate-sized two-door coupe based on regular sedan underpinnings, but with uprated running gear and an engine that can turn treads into slicks when the driver so much as looks at the throttle pedal. See also: "drag strip", "bargain price" (new), "astronomical price" (now), "Cheshire cat grin". Now, by our reckoning, this Dodge Coronet slots perfectly into this definition.

That's not to say that the Coronet was always a fire-breathing muscle car. In fact, its lineage goes right back to the first new post-war Dodges back in 1949 when, along with the Wayfarer and Meadowbrook, it replaced the line-up that had been sold all through the lean pre-War years. The Coronet was the top trim level, and could be bought in a bewildering number of body styles, including the beautiful 'woody' station wagon. The plodding sidevalve sixes could not be considered muscular at all though, and struggled to break the 100bhp mark.

Things began to look up late in the 1953 model year with the introduction of the Red Ram 241cu.in. Hemi V8 engine. Although strangled with a low 7:1 compression ratio and a two-barrel

carburettor, it still managed 140bhp and came out top in the Mobilgas Economy Run that year. Suddenly, for the 1954 model year, the Coronet was rudely ousted from its throne at the top of the Dodge tree to make way for the new top-line Royal series. While the Royal had the Red Ram Hemi as standard, the Coronet still had the ancient sidevalve six as the base engine, but 1955 was even worse! The Coronet was relegated to the base trim level as the Meadowbrook was dropped and the Custom Royal brought on to head the beautifully-restyled '55 range. You could still order your Coronet with the Red Ram Hemi, or even the new Super Red Ram, both bored-out to 270cu.in. and with up to 193bhp courtesy of a Carter four-barrel carburettor.

With prehensile tail fins and an eye-watering range of two- and three-tone colour schemes, Dodge hit Fifties fashion head-on. A new engine option, the D-500, offered a stroked hemi with up to 295bhp in dual four-barrel form, and NASCAR racing became a useful publicity tool, with Dodge taking a record 11 wins in 1956.

1957 brought the Exner 'Forward Look', with aggressive bumpers and headlamp eyebrows, thrusting fins, torsion bar suspension and even more power. With up to 340bhp available from the rare D-501 V8 option, and a costly and unreliable fuel-injection option in

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1958, there were some plenty-powerful Dodges about, even if they found few takers: only 101 D-501s were made, and the 12 fuel-injected cars were recalled to be reconverted to carburettor set-ups.

1959 saw the birth of the 383cu.in. wedge V8, an engine that would go on (in both 383 or 440cu.in. form,) to power some of the most desirable and collectible Mopar muscle cars ever made. It would also see the last of the Coronet name, dropped in 1960, in favour of the Matador.

Whilst Chrysler and the Ramchargers were having lots of fun with their Max Wedge engines up and down America's dragstrips, the Coronet name languished at the back of the names cupboard. Fortunately, they dragged it back into the daylight at the best possible time in 1965. While the 426cu.in.

Hemi V8 and the 413 and 426 Wedge engines were still on the options list, the new Coronet was introduced to bridge the gap between the Dart and the Polara/Monaco. Available as the Coronet, the Coronet 440 and the 500 (nothing to do with engine sizes or bhp), all rode on a 117-inch wheelbase, larger than the Ford Fairlane and the Chevrolet Chevelle. The 500 was the sportier model, available only as a two-door hardtop or convertible, and with the base 273cu.in. 180bhp V8 as standard.

The adverts suggested: 'Why not drop a Hemi in the new Coronet 500?', but as this added about \$1800 to the base Coronet 500 price of \$2600, it was for serious racers only ... especially as it came with no factory warranty at all!

The Coronet got a complete restyle for 1966, but much of the attention was focussed on the new car that shared its chassis and running gear; the Charger. There were 468 Charger Hemis built in 1966, but over 740 Coronets got the elephant treatment, showing that they were still the dragstrip Dodge of choice. Also debuting across the Dodge range was the 440cu.in. wedge V8, basically a bored and stroked 383, which could be very easily persuaded to

provide similar performance figures to the Hemi, but with better street manners and less maintenance.

For 1967, the Coronet remained much the same as in '66, but a few styling cues had been lifted from the Charger, and the base model was now called the Coronet Deluxe. A new model was added at the top of the range, much to muscle fans' delight; the Coronet R/T, with the new 440cu.in. Magnum V8 as standard. It had all the features found on the 500, plus TorqueFlite automatic transmission and heavy-duty running gear, and was available only as a hardtop or convertible.

Naturally, these were the car of choice to house the \$457 hemi option, and 283 were thus equipped. It was advertised with the tag-line 'road runner', some months before Plymouth's Belvedere package of the same name, and was squarely aimed at the street/strip market. As the ads stated, 'Advance and be recognised in Coronet R/T. No more hiding beneath the hood for Dodge performance.'

1968 marked a big change in the line-up. The Coronet and Charger series were both completely restyled, giving Dodge arguably the most handsome range of vehicles on sale that year. While the Darts went Super Stock drag racing, the Coronets went NASCAR racing, and began to lap the ovals at up to 185mph. Dodge advertised their hi-po cars under the banner of the 'Scat Pack', reinforced mid-year by the arrival of the Super Bee. Based on the mid-range Coronet 440, the Super Bee was a two-door coupe with a 335bhp 383 as standard, but without all the luxury appointments of the R/T series, making for a formidable street-racer.

In 1969, Dodge had a hugely capable performance line-up. The little Dart's 340cu.in V8 and the R/T series' 440cu.in. V8 could be bought with the mighty Six-Pak carburettor set-up. Three Holley two-barrel carbs sat atop an Edelbrock manifold, and on light throttle opening, only the centre carb was used making for a reasonably





CENTRE: HANDSOME STYLING, SOFT TOP AND A HEMI; THIS R/T HAS IT ALL. SADLY FOR THE REST OF US, THERE ARE NO MORE OUT THERE! TOP RIGHT: MOPAR 'STREET HEMI' PUT OUT 425BHP, AND THAT WAS PROBABLY AN UNDERSTATEMENT!



had all the bases covered. From cheap-and-cheerful Dart Swingers and Coronet Super Bees to the well-equipped and over-powered R/T Coronets and Challengers and of course the huge, solid Polaras and Monacos. 1970 was indeed a golden year for Dodge. The Coronets had now lost their front bumper, to be replaced with a pair of chrome loops that encircled the headlamps and grille, and this was the last year for Coronet muscle cars of any kind.

Suddenly, it was all-change at Coronet Central. The Super Bee package was dropped, to reappear on the Charger. The Deluxe, 440 and 500 names were dropped too, and replaced by plain Coronet (for the base model), Custom and Brougham sedans and Greenwood station wagons, with not a two-door among them. The Coronet gained weight and bulk as its muscle turned to flab. No '71 Coronets carried a Hemi engine, nor would any other Mopar product from then on. The Coronet name limped on until 1977, when it was replaced by the demoted Monaco name, but by then it was just one of those anonymous cars you see in the background in old episodes of *Columbo*. The mighty had well and truly fallen.

economical motor. Step on it, however, and all six throttles opened, economy went out of the window and all hell broke loose as the extra 15bhp the Six-Pak offered felt more like 150. Sadly the Coronets were sidelined at the oval tracks, while the Charger 500s and Daytonas went on to become the conquering heroes.

The new Challenger appeared in 1970, and the sporty Dodges

The car pictured on these pages was ordered on December 7th, 1966, from O'Steen-McCard Motors in Quinnan, Georgia. Jimmy Piland sat down with salesman Kelly McCard to work out what he wanted, but he had a pretty clear idea anyway; he wanted the most powerful engine, a four-speed transmission and a soft-top. Jimmy



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Mark Olin in Florida. Olin used it at the Gainesville drag strip, and managed mid-13-second quarters before selling it on. Somehow it wound up in Cleveland, Ohio, where it was spotted by Bill Stennet. Bill told Detroit collector 'Hemi' Harold Sullivan about it, and Hemi Harold hotfooted it to Cleveland to pick up this R/T rarity.

Hemi Harold had the car restored by Jeff Reif and Jeff Dawson, and while they were at it he traced as much of the car's 30,000-mile history as he could. He found and interviewed Jimmy Piland and Kelly McCard, and while he was at the original dealership, they even looked through their archives and found the original dealer order form, invoice, shipping notice and bill of sale, still with Jimmy Piland's name on it!

Now the car leads a pampered life with Hemi Harold, and is treated with the care that befits its rarity. How rare? Well, according to our sources, 283 '67 Coronets came fitted with the hemi motor, of which one was a convertible with automatic, and one was a convertible with manual transmission. Now that's rare! Did Jimmy Piland ever realise just what a unique piece of Mopar history he put his name on back in December 1966? Well at least it has survived, and here are the pictures to prove it! 📷

THANKS TO TONY OKSIEN FOR HELP COMPILING THIS FEATURE

got the call from O'Steen-McCard on February 1st, 1967, to say his car was ready, and he went straight round to fetch it. The price was \$4509.25, plus \$98.90 sales tax, so after Jimmy had traded in his '64 Mercury Comet for \$1425 and handed over \$583 in cash, he drove away his Coronet with only \$2600 of outstanding financing to worry about.

Two years later, Jimmy received his call-up papers; Uncle Sam wanted him to go to fight in Vietnam, so he sold the car to a Chevy dealership, from whence it travelled south to its new owner,

NORM'S THE NAME ...

Norm Kraus's Grand Spaulding Dodge dealership was responsible for turning out some of the hottest street/strip Mopars ever. In fact, Grand Spaulding was to Dodge and Plymouth what Royal was to Pontiac and Yenko was to Chevrolet.

Norm, and his brother Len, began selling used cars from their father's gas station at the corner of Grand and Spaulding in Chicago back in 1948. The enterprise took off, and by 1951 they had had to buy the lot next door to expand into. They began to notice a distinct market for performance cars with manual transmission, and specialised in these cars. In 1956, the name 'Mr Norm' appeared for the first time, quite by accident, due to space limitations in a newspaper advert!

After several years of persuasion by the local Dodge sales rep, they became a new car dealership in the autumn of 1962, and called it Grand Spaulding Dodge. They quickly started the 'Mr Norm's Sport Club' for their keen, young, performance-oriented customer base. A Clayton dynamometer was installed in the service department, and Mr Norm's racing gear went on sale.

In 1964, the first Grand Spaulding Dodge racing team comprised a Max Wedge and a Hemi Ram (the ram became the logo for the Sport Club) and the success of the racing team was reflected in the showroom as sales of new Dodges doubled in '64. Even the service and tuning department doubled in size too!

In 1965, Norm and Gary Dyer teamed up to match-race with an altered wheelbase, supercharged Dodge Coronet Hemi that went on to start the now-familiar funny car classes. They altered the wheelbase by moving the back axle forwards, which helped weight transfer no end and the car ran a fastest time of 8.63 seconds at Lions Dragway. By the end of the year, after a visit to the fledgling SEMA show in California, Mr Norm had started a full-scale hi-po parts department at Grand Spaulding.

Mr Norm's was soon to become the largest high-performance Dodge dealership in the country; a second Dyno was installed to cope with demand, and the premises expanded yet again. In 1967, Norm developed the first 383cu.in. Dart, which the factory then turned into the Dart GTS. The following year, he did the same with a 440cu.in. V8,

which Dodge turned into the 440 Dart GTS M-code. The parts department doubled in size, and another lot was bought for hi-po trade-ins from the dealership. Norm's Dodge Super Charger super fuel funny car was doing the rounds on the strip, and Norm even branched out into truck and van sales.

In 1972, the two-storey building across the street from the original showroom was bought, featuring an amazing 75-car indoor showroom and Norm's new Kawasaki franchise. Grand Spaulding was now America's third-best-selling Dodge dealership, but he noticed that the muscle car market was in decline. He became one of the first to start the 'dayvan'/conversion van ball rolling, and by 1974, Grand Spaulding was the largest volume Dodge dealership in the world. They supplied all of Chicago's Police cars (including the one used in *The Blues Brothers*!), all of which were 440-equipped and tuned for maximum power.

In 1977, Norm Kraus sold his ownership of Grand Spaulding. Since then, he has collected enough 'lifetime achievement' and 'hall of fame' awards to fill his old showrooms, including membership of the Mopar Hall of Fame. In 1999, he started the old Mr Norm's Sport Club up again after much demand from Mopar fans around the world. You can find more details about Mr Norm and Grand Spaulding on his website at www.mrnorms.com

