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1954 Dodge Sierra four-door station wagon.
by Rick Feibusch

SAN FRANCISCO: One of the rarest postwar American Station Wagons was the 1954 Dodge Sierra four-door station wagon. The Iona Body Works in Michigan built only 1300 of these luxury family haulers. It was installed on the longer 119" wheelbase sedan chassis, rather than the factory built, Plymouth-based 114" wheelbase two-door wagons.

Dodge built a limited number of various different station wagons, both wood and all steel, since their standard wooden wagon was officially discontinued in 1938, after only 375 were sold. The first postwar Dodge wagon was introduced in 1949. It was a wood bodied wagon that used the same configuration as the DeSoto and Chrysler. In 1950, a Dodge version of the corporate, all steel 123.5 wheelbase wagon called the Coronet Sierra was added to the line. In 1951, the woody was dropped and the large Chrysler bodied all steel Sierra went unchanged until the whole Dodge line was totally revised for the 1953 model year.

For 1953, Dodge offered its first V8 and a very attractive new body that, though based on much of the Plymouth underpinnings, had a look of its own. Sporting a wide grille and smooth sides, the Dodge received rave reviews from the auto testers of the time. The station wagon versions were all two doors on the shorter 114" wheelbase. Six cylinder models were called Meadowbrook Suburban, while V8 powered cars carried a Coronet Sierra badge. Late in the year, the Meadowbrook name was dropped and all Dodges became Coronets. Though 1954 models had only minor trim changes, a longer four door wagon, again called the Sierra, was offered in both six and eight cylinder form, the two-door wagons were, regardless of power plants, all Suburban.

The Feature Car

This feature car is a beautiful Jade green and white Sierra wagon owned by Bob Philips of Berkeley, CA. Bob, an Assistant Director in the film business, was working on an Oldsmobile commercial in Sweet Home, Oregon when he found the car parked at a Texaco service station. The station manager owned the car and no, it wasn't for sale. Bob was on the set in the area for almost a week and often went to visit the car, kept upping his offer and finally reached a number that hit the spot. He drove the Dodge back to the Bay Area at the end of the shoot.

Though the concept was to replace his aging Volvo wagon with the Dodge for everyday transport, Bob soon found out that it was a bit too big, thirsty, and hard for his wife to handle. The Dodge was demoted to weekend family travel and cruise nights. It features the 241 cube, 140 h.p. Hemi V8, a three-speed stick and overdrive. With "Armstrong" non-power steering and manual brakes, we can see why the little lady found it a bit hard

to scoot around in town.

The Classic Drive

A look inside presented a large load space and what seemed like acres of white painted metal. The original two-tone green interior material seemed pretty solid showing only wear on the driver's seat. All of the controls fall easily to hand and there's plenty of room, though I felt a bit close to the steering wheel, even with the seat all of the way back. I hit the starter and the Dodge rumbled to life. A very quiet single exhaust pipe reduced the engine noise to a light "tuppa-tuppa-tup" that seemed to find its way through the well-insulated floor. More of a vibration than a noise. I slipped it into gear and let out the clutch. The Dodge pulled away smoothly with a light action and no shudder.

Now I thought that a Hemi V8/stick combination would be a real street scorcher. Wrong! It had bags of torque right at the bottom, great for pulling a trailer, but not much of anything over about 3800 rpm. A run through the gears produced power that was on par with an early Ford 239 cube OHV V8 or a good running Chevy 6. This wagon is heavy and the little Hemi actually has only 11 cubic inches over the standard Dodge side-valve six. It's smooth as butter and is so under stressed that it will probably last forever, but a hot rod it is not. The shift action is top notch and the overdrive works just swell. The steering and brakes are another matter. They work great but the effort expended would put some gym equipment to shame. I could see why the Mrs. was not fond of driving the Dodge. Personally, I liked it and found the car direct, predictable and easy to drive but then again, I'm not driving it in stop and go city driving and taking the kids to school and soccer practice.

Most of us have become used to power accessories and would welcome any and all of the modern updates, but then how would we ever remember how it was way back when? This Dodge was probably the last of the postwar cars, and cars to follow started to take advantage of all of that WW II aircraft hydraulic technology. This Sierra was a trip into the past that reminds us of how far we have come. It also reminds us of a time when things were slower and there was less traffic and traffic controls. The people around Berkeley loved it as well, as we got waves, shouts and thumbs up everywhere we went.