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The Thunderbird Conundrum by Bernard Whalen

I've owned a 1964 Thunderbird since 1984. Recently I was browsing through a Hemmings catalog checking out the asking price of Flair Birds and other TBirds that our club members own: A 1964 Thunderbird convertible, factory tonneau cover, no rust was listed as \$22,000. The owner of a 1960 Thunderbird coupe with factory sunroof (a rare option) was asking \$16,500. A 1967 four door factory Landau, 428, fully loaded was advertised as \$4,800. For \$7,500, an all original 1975 Thunderbird with 28,000 miles could be had. Some decent prices, except they were all advertised in the September 1990 Hemmings catalog which had twenty full pages of Thunderbird listings including parts and services.

In the most recent December 2014 edition of Hemmings the total number of pages devoted to Thunderbirds dwindled down to ten (but to be fair the magazine itself has 300 fewer pages thanks to Ebay and Old Car Weekly) and sadly, the asking prices for most Thunderbirds were often less than they were twenty-five years ago, with the exception of the high end restorations which accounted for the majority of cars that were either for sale or up for auction. According to the current listings, a decent 1965 ragtop can be had for \$15,000. A 1961 coupe in good condition was listed for \$9,500.

Thunderbirds have an extensive well documented history, great tradition, a large following with national and local clubs and a network of restoration services and parts manufacturers across the country. They are popular the world over with avid followers as far away as Australia and Sweden. Yet with the exception of the small birds, from what I've seen, getting \$25,000 to \$30,000 for a 1958 through 1978 Thunderbird today is unlikely even when the sellers can document that they invested more than they are asking.

So what happened to the value of our cars? Why didn't they appreciate the same as say a 1967 RS Camaro coupe described by the owner in the 1990 Hemmings catalog as in "beautiful condition," and listed for \$10,500. That same RS Camaro today has at least doubled no matter what the condition and for a fully restored model, the sky is the limit.

I think that one of the things that attracts collectors to old cars are the differences in models, options, engines and drive trains. But each 1964 Thunderbird coupe rolled off the assembly line with two doors. Each one has the same 390, four barrel carburetor and automatic transmission as every other Thunderbird that Ford delivered to the showrooms that year.

The lack of appreciable differences between Thunderbirds in each three year model cycle from the fifties through the seventies, whether it be Square Birds, Bullet Birds, Flair Birds or Big Birds, in my opinion, has had a negative impact on their value, despite the numerous innovations and contributions the make has made to the American automotive scene.

While I wish my car was worth more, it was never the deciding factor when I bought mine. I loved the look of the Thunderbird, particularly the Flair Bird style, ever since I first laid eyes on one in 1966. I was nine years old when my father's buddy took us for a ride in his brand new Thunderbird. It was sure a lot cooler than my father's old Dodge Sen-eca. The impression the car left with me stuck in my mind and when I finally had enough money to buy my own Thunderbird, I did and I haven't regretted it, even though I am probably underwater after completing an extensive ground up restoration.

Remember that 1990 Hemmings catalog I mentioned earlier. A totally restored 1967 Shelby Mustang GT 350 with 39K original miles was listed for \$36,000 back then. This December, a similar 1967 Shelby Mustang GT 350 with 42,000 miles was listed for \$84,995. So Shelby Mustangs have appreciated quite a bit, but they were never in my price range in the first place. Thunderbirds on the other hand get you in the game at much more reasonable price.