

**T**HERE IS NO MORE extraordinary car in the world today than the Thunderbird. Although more than five years have elapsed since its first success, it has never been successfully duplicated or imitated. It is the only luxury-type car that has seriously challenged Cadillac's dominance in that class in terms of sale.

The Thunderbird tested for this report was the latest, and very probably the last, version of the current design. It was the sun-roof option which was first announced nearly a year ago, but has been rarely seen on the road. The current Thunderbird, of course, is to be replaced in 1961 by a new and different series, the third in the evolution of the vehicle.

Ford has always been fascinated by novel roof gadgets. In 1954 there was the transparent plastic panel; then in 1958 came the retractable hardtop. Now, in 1960, it is the sliding panel, which undoubtedly is the most practical trick of all. Unfortunately, according to reliable sources, the sliding roof panel will not be an option on the 1961 Thunderbird, but it is not improbable that it may reappear on the standard Fords.

# ROAD TEST THUNDERBIRD

The roof panel on the test car had an accessory price tag of \$212 retail. It was formed of steel and moved between aluminum guide rails and created, when fully open, an opening 34 inches wide and 19 inches fore and aft. The panel, when retracted, occupied a cavity or slot between the headliner and the exterior metal. Opening it was relatively easy and, when closed, it formed a tight fit. The only malfunction noted was that on sharp deceleration, the panel had a tendency to slide forward to closed position. This, of course, could be corrected by a better locking device.

The benefit of the sun roof is that it affords many of the advantages of the convertible without the disadvantages. During the hot summer, it enables quicker cooling of the interior by allowing trapped hot air to escape.

The Thunderbird tested was fitted with another important option, the huge 430-cubic-inch V-8 that is rated at 350 hp at 4600 rpm and 490 lbs.-ft. of torque at 2800 rpm. This engine actually is the Lincoln V-8 adapted to the Thunderbird and it adds some sparkle to acceleration, while dulling gas mileage down to 12 mpg.

The 0-60 time, for instance, is just under 9 seconds, which puts the Thunderbird just over the line and into the hot class. This time undoubtedly could be improved and the car, in performance, would look better if it had a slightly lower axle ratio than the 3.10 with which it is presently equipped.

The 430-inch engine when in the Lincoln is fitted with a two-throat carburetor, but for the Thunderbird a four-throat has been mounted, which adds the measure of accelerating ability expected for such displacement.

The Thunderbird has never been the good handling car that drivers expect from a vehicle of such sporty appearance. The four-seater initially was equipped with softer coil springs in order to allow the optional installation of air suspension. Now that air suspension has been abandoned, the Thunderbird has been fitted again with stiffer semi-elliptic springs, and the handling has improved measurably.

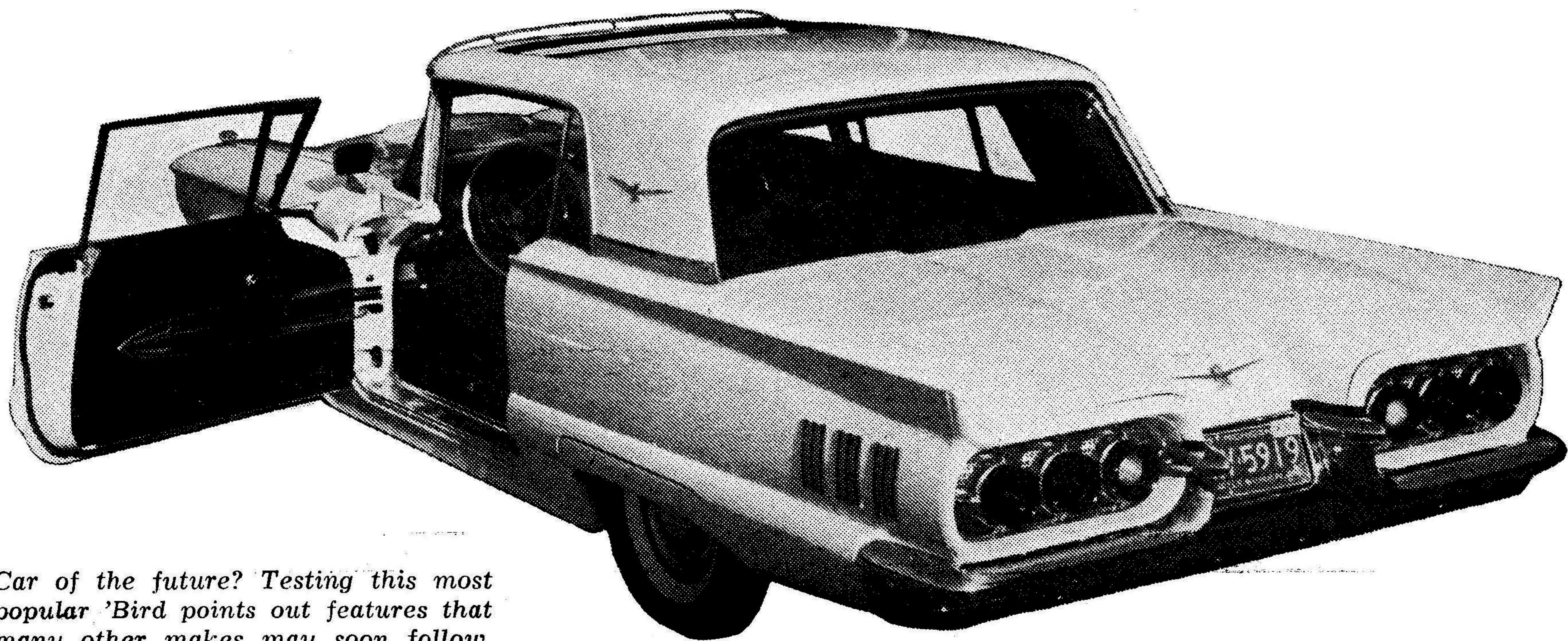
Despite such improvements, however, the Thunderbird is far from the kind of handling car it should be. Steering is slow and not precise. The driver's position behind the broad hood limits visibility and makes control clumsy and restricted.

Such limitations are particularly regrettable because the Thunderbird is not a very large car by domestic big-car standards. It is, as a matter of fact, a kind of compact car in its class. The wheelbase is just 113 inches, actually an inch shorter than the compact Comet. Overall length is 205 inches, not compact but certainly well under the standard Ford's 214 inches. Width is 4½ inches less than the standard Ford.

If the Thunderbird has some of the dimensional attributes of a compact and yet lacks some of those same characteristics of maneuverability associated with the type, this is not its only deviation from the norm. It is, for instance, nearly as costly as any standard luxury car, yet it has quality comparable only to a standard low-priced Ford. The Thunderbird from its inception has always been more than adequately powered, and yet it has no reputation for performance in any form of car competition events, at least not without being highly modified. Its styling is distinctive but certainly not notable for sheer beauty of line.

All these things the Thunderbird has not. What it does have is originality, freshness and newness of concept. This is its secret. It has, more than any current domestic car, the spirit and quality that made the classic roadsters and tourers of the 1930's such memorable favorites.

Another unique fact about the four-seater Thunderbird is that it is a real heavyweight for its size. Curb weight is nearly 2¼ tons, about average for passenger cars that range from 10 to 15 inches longer overall. Since the engine and transmission are set well forward in the chassis, this puts approximately 55 per cent of the weight on the front wheels, certainly



*Car of the future? Testing this most popular 'Bird points out features that many other makes may soon follow.*