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Hemmings Classic Car ^{#52}

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MERCURYS**
of the '50s



JANUARY, 2009

HEMMINGS CLASSIC CAR #52

\$4.99



ONE-OF-NONE CONVERTIBLE
1969 OLDSMOBILE 88 ROYALE

Lansing Logic

One man's tribute to the 1969 Oldsmobile Delta 88 Royale, in one-of-none convertible form





The black vinyl upholstery seems plain at first glance, but the owner added just about every available power option Oldsmobile offered that model year



Red pinstripe is factory-type, but sporty Polycast wheel was a '71-'72 option



Words and photography by Jeff Koch

We'd wager that you've probably never seen a 1969 Oldsmobile 88 Royale convertible before.

That's okay; before this one turned up, we hadn't either. That's because, for all of its good looks and factory-installed swiftness, Oldsmobile never built a 1969 88 Royale convertible. Of course there were 88 convertibles of other flavors manufactured that year, but the Royale (a new up-market model

for 1969 featuring a standard 455-cu.in. V-8, a ritzier interior a step above the 88 Custom and select chrome additions on the outside) was only available as a two-door coupe.

You'd think that convertibles, as high-line models, would have gotten the best of everything—including the premium interior and trim. In retrospect, there was no reason that Olds couldn't have done one ... was there? Maybe, maybe not: Penetrating Lansing's logic calls for a lot of speculation. "There was a 98 convertible that was truly the flagship of the line. I don't know for a fact, but since the Royale was the high-line model, they might have felt the 88 Royale was competing with the 98," owner-builder Larry Camuso of San Jose, California, reasoned ("Collector Profile," *HCC#47*, August 2008). "Also, there was a Delta 88 Custom, with an upgraded interior—but you could get a Custom interior on a standard 88."

Larry even sought out an expert—Blaine Jenkins, a retired GM interior stylist who had worked on the 1967-'74 Oldsmobile interiors before moving on to Pontiac. Surely if a rationale was to be offered, it would come from an insider?

No such luck. "He just said that it was a new model, an exclusive exterior for the trim level, and completely exclusive interior to the two-door."

But what the factory cannot abide, enterprising enthusiasts will provide. The seeds for Larry's dissent from the factory way were planted early; he was just nine when his parents decided they needed a new 1969 Olds 88 as their family car. But rather than the convertible that young Larry suggested, the elder Camusos settled on a green-on-green two-door hardtop. "I tried to persuade them to buy a convertible, but they wouldn't go for it ... and they used all of the old excuses: They squeak, rattle, leak and are unsafe. There was a new convertible on the back row at the dealer lot, and I couldn't persuade them."

If it's any consolation, Larry still owns that car, unrestored—along with nearly a dozen other Oldsmobiles from the 1940s to the 1970s.

More than a decade later, Larry found himself skulking around a salvage yard one day, where he discovered an 88 Royale with most of the interesting Royale



The Royale got a different door-handle than lesser 88s did. Seriously



Snazzier door panels, with chrome and wood, replaced plainer 88 pieces



Convertible top intrudes, but there's still plenty of room for two



Optional floor shifter (with bucket seats) was an option in Toronado and Cutlass, too



Convertible top well eats into massive trunk space, and so does that bias-ply spare



While the Royales didn't have a different Olds 455 throbbing away underhood, this one had air conditioning, cruise control and more features added on later



Royale grille and headlamp bezels received more black, less argent for its special look

bits still attached. Instantly, a thought occurred to him: "It'd be neat to build a Royale convertible." About his dream car, Larry mused, "The outside was fine, but the 88 convertible had a rather boring interior. I couldn't deal with it—it was too plain for what that car should have had."

And so over the course of years, Larry collected parts, moving from one salvage yard Royale to another. "I didn't

think the parts would be so plentiful ... I just went from one Royale to another, without yet having a convertible to hang all the parts on. I got the best parts from four or five cars." As it turns out, the Royale was far more plentiful than the convertible: Just 5,294 convertibles were built in 1969, versus a whopping 22,564 Royale coupes built.

Then ... kismet. "I was at the post office in San Jose in 1986, and sitting there across the street from me was an abandoned 1969 Olds 88 convertible. The body shell was solid, the black interior looked okay. I thought, 'There's the car for my Royale conversion.'"

In fact, the nose had already been changed over: Sometime in its history, the white convertible had been hit, and the replacement sheetmetal was from a silver Royale. It also had a red sticker on the window, announcing the police department's imminent decision to tow it away and, most likely, crush it.

Rather than let that happen, Larry

hunted down the owner through DMV records and bought the car for \$50. "It was basically equipped—it had a 455-cu.in. four-barrel V-8 and some decent convertible-specific interior trim like the visors and the rear corner trim—but it didn't have a/c or a lot of power options. Really, it yielded a good frame, body shell and convertible top frame—and not much else."

Into storage it went. By the time Larry got back to it in the mid-'90s, the big 88 was well past a quarter-century old, and the once-common parts in local yards had completely dried up. Good thing he got what he needed when he did.

Those parts comprised more than you might think. "The front fenders are different—there are stamped louvers on each fender—I actually found those NOS. The hood isn't a different shape, but it has provision for the center molding. Other than the specific wheel moldings, the body is devoid of side moldings. Instead of bodyside moldings,

"I just went from one Royale to another, without yet having a convertible to hang all the parts on. I got the best parts from four or five cars."



it has a painted-on pinstripe. The doors are interchangeable, but the Royale door is different, to accommodate a different, lift-type door-handle. The trunklid isn't a different stamping, but it had more ornamentation—the molding, Rocket trunk lock, the Royale script and the Oldsmobile block lettering. And there's more black-painted detail on the grilles and headlamp bezels—they're not separate stampings, just painted differently."

The one thing that may throw off the period-perfect look is the wheels. Known in some circles as Super Stock IVs, these polycast 15x7 wheels (touch the raised edges—they're soft!) offer the look of an aluminum wheel at a fraction of the cost. These were available only on the 1971-'72 models as roughly a \$100 option, (code PE2), but Larry couldn't help himself: "I just thought they were great-looking wheels."

Under the hood, things were brought up to a like-new level of detail, but other than detailing the engine, Larry

roped his friends into helping him install a complete, working air-conditioning system; heavy-duty cooling and cruise control were the only other added options there.

The interior, of course, was a different matter altogether. The instrument panel was the same between model ranges, but Larry added just about every possible option to his Royale convertible: AM-FM stereo with under-dash 8-track unit, tilt and telescoping steering column with Rim-Blow wheel, power windows, locks, trunk release and top, and power bucket seats with console (a no-cost option on Royale.) "That console is actually the same as every other Olds had from 1967-'69," Larry said. "Toronados and Cutlasses used the same console. The mounting bracketry was just different." Work on this one-of-a-kind Oldsmobile was completed in July of 1999.

Now, Larry has a garage full of serious Fifties-era classics: a 1953 Cadillac

Eldorado, a 1959 Cadillac convertible, a 1956 Lincoln Mk II, a 1972 Hurst/Olds convertible pace car replica, a 1948 Oldsmobile woody wagon, and plenty more—about two dozen in all. Landmark cars. Milestone cars. We mention his collection for two reasons: First, despite all of the remarkable machinery he has to choose from in his arsenal, Larry manages to drive his 88 Royale convertible more than 500 miles a year. Second, he claims that, of all of the amazing vintage machinery that graces his garage, this garners the most attention from visitors.

"They're mesmerized by it: People will walk by all of these rare and desirable cars to look more closely at it—and it's probably the least likely car someone would look at. If you just mentioned that you had a 1969 Olds 88 convertible in passing, they probably wouldn't be able to picture what you're describing. But for an obscure, forgotten car, it's sure gotten a lot of attention over the years." 

