

How to Buy A Tri-5 Shoebox Shopping? Let Us Help

By Drew Hardin Photography: Drew Hardin

There are only a few cars that have achieved icon status among hot rods. The shoebox '55, '56 and '57 Chevys. All are immediately recognizable and enjoy immense popularity.

But when it's time to buy one of these icons, you're still buying an old car. You have to know what to look and watch out for. It helps to know which models are popular (or scarce) to guide you in finding one and paying a fair price. You must beware of the rust demon, and of scammers who may try to pass off a bread-and-butter car as a highly desirable (and expensive) model.

Buying an icon car has its advantages. There are large numbers of owners, books, clubs, restoration shops, and other resources that specialize in them, so you have a vast amount of information available when you begin your project-car search. Popularity also breeds reproduction; you can (almost) build a complete '57 Chevy from scratch with newly minted parts and pieces. You probably won't need to, though.

Chevrolet manufactured more than 4½ million 150s, 210s, and Bel Airs during the '55 through '57 model years. If you're looking for a tri-five Chevy, chances are good your dream car is still out there.

What Kind Of Car Do You Want?

Or, what do you want to do with your car? If you're looking for a complete, original, numbers-matching car to restore, get ready for a long search and be prepared to write a big check. On the other hand, if your goal is to find a decent car to modify, and you're not locked into any particular model, there's a world of shoeboxes to choose from.

During the three years these cars were produced, Chevrolet made a variety of body styles in all three of its models—the low-level 150, the mid-level 210, and the high-line Bel Air. So if you'd like a two-door sedan, but you plan on shaving most of the trim off of the car, don't waste your money on a chrome-laden Bel Air. A 210 or 150 would be a better and cheaper starting point.

The same holds true under the hood. If you're planning to ditch the original engine for a newer alternative, a six-cylinder car may be cheaper to buy than one with the original small-block V-8. (However, see "The Sum of the Parts" section for a second opinion.)

If your plan is to build a competition-oriented car, like a drag-race or NASCAR look-alike, your first choice should be a two-door sedan, called post cars after their fixed B-pillars. The post cars weighed less than the hardtops, and the lightest of the bunch was the 150 Utility Sedan. Also known as business coupes, these cars had no back seat, used cardboard for the rear interior panels and had fixed rear windows. Without most of the chrome and other gingerbread found on 210s and Bel Airs, the 150s were the cheapest in the line, too.

They proved so popular with racers over the years that a real 150 Utility is tough to find these days. You can fake one by removing the back seat from a standard two-door sedan, but the window cranks and channels will give its origins away—if you care.

Where's the Best Place To Find One?

Shoebox Chevys are not hard to find. Check all of the usual resources: Hemmings, your local car-trader paper, ads thumbtacked to the walls of speed shops, and the tri-five specialty shops advertising in car magazines. Do some Internet browsing. Many of the specialty shops have Web sites, as do many Classic Chevy Club chapters with good leads on cars for sale, parts for sale, technical help, events, and more.

If you're hunting for the fabled "car in a barn," our sources tell us the best places to look are in the Southwest and the Midwest—the former because of its dry climate, the latter because these cars are just not all that popular with rodders and restorers in the center of the country.

What Should I Pay For One?

According to a recent Old Cars Price Guide, the Bel Air convertibles are the most dear, with '57s commanding the highest prices. A '57 in number-one condition (a professionally restored trailer queen) is worth \$59,000, while a '56 can bring \$54,000 and a '55, \$57,000. Results from the 2001 Barrett-Jackson auction in Scottsdale seem to support the '57 values, with Bel Air converts selling for between \$49,680 and \$82,080 (that for a car with original fuel injection, a three-speed manual trans, and Posi-traction axle).

But let's look down the condition ladder a rung or two to the potential project cars. These same Bel Air convertibles in good to very good condition still aren't cheap, according to Old Cars. The '57s are worth \$11,800 to \$23,600; \$10,800 to \$21,600 for the '56s; and \$11,400 to \$22,800 for the '55s.

What about the '55 150 Utility Sedan mentioned earlier? If you can find one, the Old Cars Price Guide says it'd be worth \$2,900 to \$5,800 in good to very good condition. Two-door hardtops in the same condition range from around \$5,000 to \$10,000 for the '56 210 (the cheapest), to \$6,600 to \$13,200 to for the '57 Bel Air (the most expensive).

Nomads, among the most collectible because of their rarity, surprisingly don't fetch anywhere near the money that Bel Air converts do. A mid-range '57 or '55 can be worth \$5,400 to \$10,800, while a '56 dips down to between \$5,000 and \$10,000.

Keep in mind that these prices are for unmodified cars. If you're looking to buy someone else's hot rod project, our experts said that modified tri-fives commonly sell for anywhere from \$25,000 to \$40,000. Very few hot-rodged tri-fives went across the block at the Barrett-Jackson sale, but those that did fell into that range.

A '57 Nomad with a 350/350 swap and billet rims brought \$30,240; a street-rodded '57 Bel Air sold for \$25,920; a Pro Street '56 fetched \$38,880; and a wild '57 Bel Air custom, with a chopped Buick top and Chrysler front fenders, was a no-sale at \$65,000.

Looking For Trouble

Like any old car, tri-five Chevys rust. Take a close look at the sheetmetal anywhere water would pool, like the bottoms of doors, floors, and the trunk's tail pan (just below the trunk lid). Check the front fenders where they meet the rocker panels, as water would seep in through the cowl area.

Check a convertible closely, since there are so many places water could leak in and puddle. When you're checking out the floor, be sure to look not only at the floorpan, but at the braces below. A rusted toe board is relatively easy to repair, but if the braces below it are rotten, that's a much more extensive (and expensive) repair job.

Some cars, especially those from the Northeast, get what California Street Rods' Chuck Lombardo Sr. calls the "circle of death": a ring of rust on the inside of the rear quarter-panels that's caused by water getting trapped behind a rubber seal. Northeastern cars are also prone to rust behind the headlight buckets, since snow, rain, salt, and other road debris gets pitched up in there by the front tires.

To check for accident damage, look for even door and trunk gaps. Sight down the sides of the car to make sure the panels are flat. The front fenders and rear quarters tend to bow outward if they've been hit. Look at the bumper brackets. There are six of them on each end of a '57 Chevy, and if they're not straight, the bumpers will never align.

The Sum Of The Parts

The good news about tri-five parts is that between swap meets and the reproduction houses, virtually any part you need is available, from hood birds to taillight lenses. Yet our experts recommended buying as complete a car as possible to save you the time and expense of rounding up missing parts.

Some complete cars will actually put you ahead financially.

During a discussion of engine parts, restorer Art Fernandez punctured our "six-cylinder cars are cheaper" idea. In Art's experience, good-quality original V-8 parts are valuable. For example, air cleaners sell for \$400 to \$500, four-barrel carbs can get \$200, and original power-steering and power-brake units sell for \$300 to \$500.

So by parting out that old small-block, you're well on your way to paying for a late-model motor. Six-cylinder owners can't enjoy that kind of bonanza.

The Rare Ones

From a production standpoint, the rarest tri-five models are the Nomads. Only a little more than 8,000 were made in 1955; by 1957, the number had dropped to a tick over 6,000. The rarest of the rare, however, are '57 Chevys originally fitted with factory fuel injection.

Fuel injection was a \$501 option, which was pretty pricey given the fact that Bel Airs cost between \$2,700 and \$3,000 in 1957; few of the systems were ordered, and those that were didn't work very well.

We couldn't determine exactly how many fuel-injected cars were ordered in 1957, but our experts guessed that there are far more "original" fuelie cars on the road today than were originally built. Authenticating a fuel-injected car is tough.

The option is not listed on either the VIN tag or the cowl tag, but a special suffix on the date code stamped into the block under the valve covers will denote a fuel-injected engine. Of course, stampings can be counterfeit, so it would be a good idea to get a couple of forms of ID—the block stamping plus original paperwork from the factory—to make sure you're getting a real original fuelie for your wads of cash.

Alternatives To The High-Priced Models

Are you dying for a Nomad or a Bel Air, but finding them a little beyond your financial reach? There are alternatives, as long as you're not a stickler for detail.

For example, if you want to approximate the look of a Nomad, you could buy a 150- or 210-series Handyman two-door wagon for a fraction of the cost. It won't have the Nomad's trademark roof ribs, tailgate bars, or curved rear glass, but it'll look a lot sportier than the family oriented Townsman or Beauville four-door wagons.

Also, it's easy to turn a '57 210 into a Bel Air look-alike by adding the Bel Air's aluminum side panel inserts to the 210's stainless rear-quarter trim spears. Your 210 won't have all the Bel Air's chrome and gold-look trim—unless you add that, too—but at a glance it'll look like the more expensive car.

So, Which Year Is Best?

That's a matter of personal taste, but there does seem to be some consensus with shoebox fans. According to the restorers, hot rod shops, and parts manufacturers we spoke with, the '57s are by far the most popular, followed by the '55s and then the '56s.

Why? "People just like 'em," was the typical answer. Something about the ornate grilles and the tail fins strike a chord. But you'll pay a price for popularity. Take another look at the values section and you'll see how the '57s tend to be the most expensive to buy, though prices for comparable '55s and even '56s aren't far behind.

There's no best shoebox, really. Pick a style that floats your boat and then go make one your own.





Post sedans are racier while hardtops are classier, goes the consensus, so if you want to build a race car or a racer look-alike, pick a post.



150 Utility Sedans, like this '56, had fixed rear windows and no back seat. That made them the lightest of the Chevys and popular with drag racers. Because there were so few (around 10,000 were made each year) and so many were cut up to build race cars, a real Utility Sedan is scarce today.



Four-door sedans cost much less than two-doors; the hottest sedan is the four-door hardtop (the Sport Sedan). Made in 1956 and 1957, these were an attempt to add glamour to the utilitarian four-door; the second set of doors is nearly hidden in the beltline drop. The current value of this sedan is half to two-thirds of the two-door hardtops.



A fully restored '57 Bel Air two-door hardtop can be worth north of \$35,000—way north if it has the right options.



Because it was in such good shape and so complete, this all-original unrestored '57 was offered for sale at \$14,900.



Conversely, this well-worn '57 wagon was sold on the Internet auction site eBay for \$600. It has problems, but nothing that's impossible to fix. If you can scour swap meets for parts and work on the car yourself, this can be a good deal.



Yes, all-original '57 Bel Air two-door hardtops are still out there. This loaded one-owner car had been sitting in a California driveway since 1974.



The eBay wagon has a rotted floor, but the floor braces are still in good shape. This means a less-expensive fix than if the braces needed replacing.



Original air-cleaner housings for the dual four-barrel carb (dual-quad) setup are hard to find because so many owners tossed them in favor of racier-looking chromed Corvette air cleaners. Good-quality originals can fetch \$3,000 and up. Sheetmetal reproductions are available, but cost around \$1,600.



No one reproduces original-style frames, so try to find an undamaged or unmolested one. This '57 convertible frame (note the huge X-member in the center) was butchered to install Pro Street rear suspension, but the new owner has since repaired the damage. Several companies offer custom chassis to fit shoebox Chevys, and they'll accept a variety of suspension setups.



The headlight eyebrows and side spears for a '55 Nomad are rare treasures because they were made for that car only and are too costly to reproduce. A pair brings \$3,000 to \$4,000 if you can find them. J Restorer Art Fernandez recommends using a flashlight to look for pinholes caused by rust in lower door panels, the floorboards, and trunk floor.



California Street Rods turned a 210 post sedan into a Bel Air by sticking the aluminum panel inserts within the 210's rear moldings.



Here's the Holy Grail of tri-fives: fuel injection. There were two versions of fuel-injected 283s back in 1957: a 9.5:1-compression model putting out 250 hp, and a 10.5:1 version that produced 283 horses, or one for each cubic inch.



Note that the side panel on this '57 at CSR doesn't have the Bel Air script; Danchuk and other parts manufacturers make repro panels without the script mount holes for a clean look.



To fully appreciate how revolutionary the '55 Chevy was, take a look at the '54 that preceded it. Styling was still in the rounded, post-war vein, and the most powerful drivetrain combination available was a Blue Flame six/Powerglide that produced 125 hp.



The '56 Bel Air two-door hardtop (which Chevy called the Sport Coupe) has much simpler lines than the fancier '57 version to follow.



Another cool alternative to a Nomad would be a sedan delivery, like this '56 150.