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Canadian built '48 Caddy
wows them south of the border



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Douglas

Roger Chestnutt's 1948 Cadillac might reside on US soil but it was built in Canada by one of the best custom car builders in North America.



Story and photos by Paul Sontrop



Roger Chesnutt has always loved custom Caddies and when he was getting close to retirement in the early 1990s he started making plans to find one of his own so he could cruise coolly into his post-work life.

He attended the 1994 NSRA car show in Louisville, KY and there saw a red 1948 Cadillac convertible. It was a gorgeous car and he liked many of the styling cues. He took lots of pictures and made notes, which helped him in his design process.

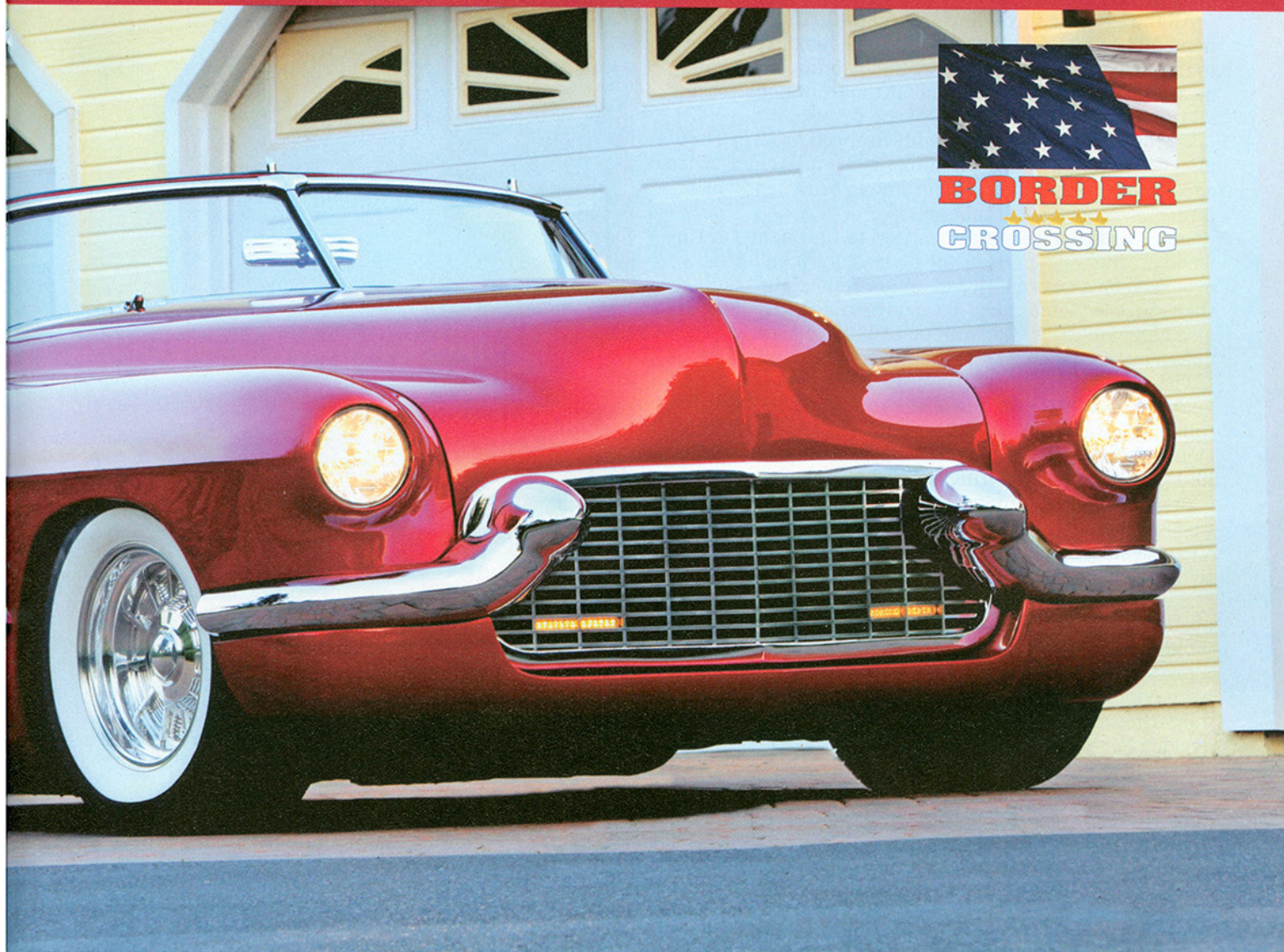
He then turned his focus on the famous Cadzilla built by Boyd Coddington for Billy Gibbons of ZZ Top. Chestnutt decided he was going to do something similar and in 1995 he returned to the NSRA show in Louisville and

bought two donor cars; a '48 and a '49 both coincidentally owned by a fellow Michigan rodder.

Through connections in a car club he'd organized many years previous, Chestnutt was hooked up with noted Canadian car customizer, Jim Bailie in Windsor, ON. He had heard how Bailie could fabricate incredible pieces out of nothing, and with hand built tools to boot.

After lengthy discussions about the project, it became clear that more help was needed. Bailie knew just about everyone in the business on both sides of the border and recommended Chestnutt go see Larry Ericson. Ericson designed Cadzilla and was also renowned as a designer for both Ford and Cadillac. A meeting was arranged in

Baile D



BORDER
CROSSING

Baile's shop with the two Cadillac carcasses on hand.

Ericson immediately jumped at the chance and agreed to work up some designs. Chestnutt gave the nod and in short order, the talented Ericson came up with a winner. They had both agreed to take an "all out" new concept car approach to the design, which explains the studio look of Chestnutt's finished 1948 Double "D" Caddy.

Yes, the name was inspired by the twin breast-shaped front bumper bullets GM guru Harley Earl infamously dubbed "Dagmars" in reference to a female character from Jerry Lester's 1950s Broadway Open House late night TV show. Lester had a very buxom, blond hostess named Dagmar.

Baile had originally recommended Ericson to Chestnutt because he said, "the guy designs cars that can actually be built." Baile studied the design Chestnutt liked and agreed it could indeed be built as designed.

The main donor car was originally out of the southwest and in solid rust-free condition. The body was completely removed from the frame, which in turn was stripped and blasted before alterations began on a rotisserie. The front clip was removed and replaced with a 1969 Camaro sub-frame.

Chestnutt had considered dropping in a GM Northstar V8 then a 500ci. Caddy. But his shopping around led him to a great deal on a 502ci Chevy crate motor.

Bailie topped the 502 with a hand fabbed custom air cleaner, valve covers with recessed "Double D's". The 502 was then mated to a TCI Turbo 400 4 speed auto. This was all fitted and mounted at Baile's shop along with the master brake cylinder and brakes. A custom stainless exhaust system was then fabbed to complete the setup.

Chestnutt decided to clean up the engine compartment, so Bailie hand fabbed all the panels including the fan and radiator shroud, firewall, interior fender panels, louvers for breathing, and a/c and fuse box panels that open up for easy access.

All the exterior shrouding around the grill was also hand fabbed by Bailie for an ultra sleek look in contrast to the bulk of the normal heavy Caddy bumpers. That meant 300 less pounds hanging off the front not stressing all that new sheet metal.

The overall height of the Caddy dropped by 8" by chopping the ragtop 2" and sectioning the car another 2", then adding air ride. The wheel wells had to be raised 2" by Bailie to accommodate that air ride.

Jake Caron from RM Restorations in Chatham, ON finished off the top for one of the nicest convertible tops ever seen on a custom. He cut and re-welded the bows then chrome plated them. The convertible top latches are also hand fabbed by Don Summers of Troy, MI who also does a lot of concours Duesenbergs and Packards.

The Air Ride system was done by Jim Hitchcock of nearby Lapeer, MI. Hitchcock also applied the lush red finish to the car – twice. Chestnutt didn't like the first version and decided to change it a couple shades more to his liking. "All out" was getting expensive.

Bailie had a few signature treatments all his own that Chestnutt agreed to employ. Bailie had taken '56 Crown Victoria side moldings and made them flush as opposed to the stock concave design.

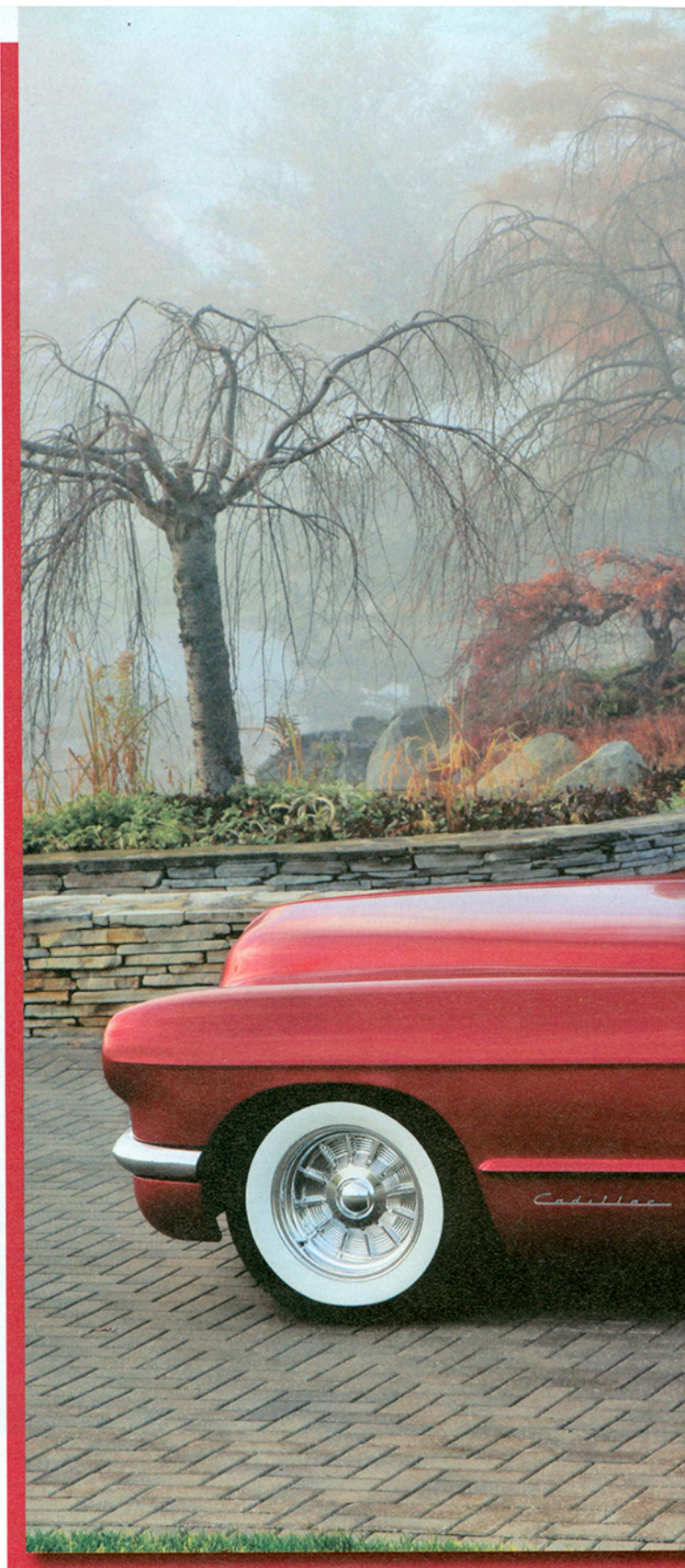
Bailie cast the Caddy pieces from donor moldings, then opened up the whole side (sectioned) and inserted the moldings so they looked flush. Despite all the work, it didn't look right and the idea was scrapped. The moldings were removed and filled back in and changed to outside mountings. Hitchcock reworked the moldings and it was decided to paint them the same color as the body.

The deck lid and hood were then sectioned and pancaked. The center of the hood was also modified. The crown was made more pronounced as were all the side moldings for more definition.

The removable hand fabbed fender skirts are four feet long. They fit so tight it is hard to tell that the rear quarters are two sections. Spring loaded turn buckles snap under the molding and keep the massive skirts snug.

Wood bucks were used to design the front and rear recessed bumpers then custom cast but when they were polished before chrome plating, porosity came into play. The more they were polished, the more porosity. They were sent out to be spray welded with .050 of pure aluminum. When they came back, the polishing that followed went right through the spray-welding coat. They proved too porous and would not polish out properly. Chestnutt decided that the cost of spray welding a second time was too much so another great idea was scrapped. An artist on the English wheel, Bailie hand fabbed a second set of bumpers from 16-gauge aluminum. When completed, the bumpers were then polished.

The spears for the dash and doors were also hand fabri-



cated in a similar fashion.

The taillights proved to be a real adventure in design. A retired Chrysler engineer friend suggested D.C. neon tubes but this presented a reliability issue so the idea was modified to the current LED's. Wooden bucks were made to form the lenses. Lens material was then vacuum formed to form the actual lens.

The forward lean of the design matches the taper of the



convertible top as well as the deck lid taper for continuity.

The car then left Windsor and was in the U.S. for painting at Hitchcock's shop. Because of an engineering change in the bumpers, it was necessary to make bumperettes under the taillights to maintain the appearance. Rather than return the car to Canada, Bailie suggested famed Detroit drag racer and master metal fabricator, Al Bergler make a pair of bumperettes for the

Caddy to fit with the flow of the taillights.

In the interior, the center console insert was fabricated in the same contour as the rear fenders and offset to accommodate 60/40 seats. The seat idea was later changed to 50/50 buckets but the offset console remained. The custom speedo was originally referred to as a "Juke Box" and was replicated in the digital console head for a perfect match. The dash was also highly modified and features a



filled glove box. The front and rear door sills are also hand fabbed. Hitchcock then powered all the windows along with the door poppers and power hood latch.

Chestnutt agonized over what type of wheels he wanted and in the end decided he needed big white walls. To create a balance of old and new custom looks, he opted for Colorado Custom 17" Segundo custom cut wheels to replicate the famous '57 Caddy covers. They were then wrapped in Diamond Back wide whitewall tires.

The project took 10 years to complete and in the same year it earned the prestigious Trendsetter Builder's Choice award (personally picked by Roy Brizio) at the

2009 Annual Goodguys Columbus Nationals. Double D has earned top honors and accolades in every show it's been entered in since completion.

Chestnutt's proudest moment came at Jim Plunkett's Fleetwood Country Cruise In held in London, ON where famed customizer George Barris lingered by the car at length and declared it the nicest Caddy he'd seen in 30 years. The King of Kustomizers followed that up in 2011 by awarding Double D top honours in its class at the prestigious Glenmoor Gathering in 2011, held near Canton, OH.



