1951-55 Nash-Healey: Plans Across the Sea

This transatlantic hybrid has been called one of the most improbable cars ever built—perhaps because the idea for it was hatched *on* the Atlantic. Here's the story of the truly international sports car that brought together a race-winning British engineer, an Italian design maestro, and a far-sighted U.S. auto executive in a hurry.

by John A. Conde

Nash's Anglo-American sports car bowed with a somewhat ungainly all-aluminum body, then acquired smart new Pinin Farina styling for 1952. Shown is the '53 convertible. Bodies were built of steel in Italy (owner: Steve LeFevre).

In 1951, for his 60th birthday, George W. Mason received a small book, *It's Later Than You Think*. Based on an old Chinese proverb, it so impressed the president of Nash-Kelvinator Corporation that he sent copies to many of his friends in the auto industry who were about his age.

I remember the incident well because it was the job of the company's small public relations staff, which I had joined six years earlier, to locate and distribute those books. In carrying out this and other personal assignments for Mason over the next year or so, our staff came to the conclusion that he had taken to heart the admonition contained in that title. Somehow, he knew he wasn't going to live much longer, yet there were many things he still wanted to do.

From that time until his death in October 1954, Mason rushed several projects to completion and accelerated others that were already underway when he read The Book. In late 1949, for example, he had asked William Flajole, an independent auto designer in Detroit, to create a tiny car. Based on Fiat mechanical components, this prototype toured the country the following year as the NXI, for "Nash Experimental International," in a company exhibit that pointedly asked, "Is America Ready for the $1000 Car?" A few months later, Nash introduced the trim Rambler wagon and convertible landau, the industry's first postwar compacts and the first in a long line of smaller, 100-inch-wheelbase models that would ultimately prove to be the company's salvation.

Then Mason surprised everyone—including many of his own dealers—with the 1951 announcement of the Nash-Healey, the first sports car offered by a domestic producer in more than two decades. For 1953 his engineers came up with an automotive air conditioning system that put the compressor under the hood for the first time and was simpler and far less expensive than competing units. Meantime, the Rambler continued to build an enthusiastic buyer following, which encouraged Mason to go ahead with an even smaller model. This was the tiny, imported Metropolitan, introduced in early 1954. Available as a three-passenger coupe and convertible, it was styled closely along the lines of the well-received NXI, sat on a petite 85-inch wheelbase, and weighed less than 1500 pounds. It was built to Nash specifications largely by Austin in England, which supplied its 42-horsepower, 74-cubic-inch four-cylinder engine. A few months after the Met appeared, Mason concluded the merger negotiations with Hudson Motor Car Company that created today's American Motors Corporation, and he nearly brought Packard into the fold.

Though our story here concerns the Nash-Healey, it's important to note the profound effects of *It's Later Than You Think* on Mason personally. After all, the new sports car appeared the same year he discovered the little book.

It was at about this time that Mason made several fundamental changes in his will. During World War II and for several years afterward, he had been quietly buying up land on both sides of the Au Sable River's south branch in northern Michigan, and he loved trout fishing along this 20-mile ribbon of beautiful, unspoiled countryside. Now, Mason specified in his will that all this land, then worth well over $2 million, be left in perpetuity to the people of Michigan and in its natural state, with no trails, cabins, or other signs of civilization. He also willed $25,000 to the state's Department of Conservation for replacing the trout that he estimated he'd taken from the Au Sable over a lifetime of enjoyment.

Mason also wanted to provide a place for meditation and prayer that would inspire visitors of all denominations. Thus, a year or so before his death he arranged with the state to have a small Norwegian log chapel erected in a virgin pine forest near Grayling, Michigan. For the dedication he composed a simple prayer and gave it to Nash-Kelvinator public relations director Fred Black, asking him to review it and make whatever changes were necessary to improve it. Black showed it to our staff. "I hope you agree that not one word should be changed," he said. "These are George Mason's own thoughts."

A few months later, my son Jeffrey and I attended the dedication ceremony and joined with hundreds of others in reading Mason's simple "Nature's Prayer":

"Our heavenly Father, creator of all that is nature, we humbly come to you in the midst of nature's splendor to thank you that, as Americans, we are free to worship as we please, work as we please, and move about as we please to enjoy all that is nature—its mountains, its hills, its valleys, its lakes, its streams, and the living things that dwell therein; we pray unto you that some day the world may be at peace and all men free to enjoy nature's abundance. We ask you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that we be guided to protect this priceless heritage which we, in America, are privileged to enjoy. Amen."

Opposite page: Nash-Kelvinator president George Mason, here chomping his customary cigar, met Donald Healey aboard the *Queen Elizabeth* in late 1949 and the Nash-Healey was born. Mason rushed the project to completion, partly because he believed he didn't have long to live. Right: Photographed in England, the Healey-built N-H prototype differs from the production '51 primarily in its frontal styling. Note the three-abreast seating.

Nowhere was there any indication that the chapel and its grounds were the gifts of George Mason.

But it was quite in character, for Mason insisted on anonymity in his innumerable, private philanthropic projects. For example, about three years after the war, he had become interested in helping the blind, and not just by giving money to the various concerned organizations. He learned of a small school in Detroit that trained Dobermans for use as guide dogs. Called Path-Finder Dogs for the Blind, it was loosely organized and little known. Mason gave Fred Black the enormous task of seeking financial support for the school, which first had to be restructured according to state law, with a staff, a board of directors, and a building to house the blind boarding students. There was a myriad of other problems to be solved, but now by people who knew far more about promoting automobiles and refrigerators than running a school. Black became president of Path-Finder and I was named secretary and business manager. We worked more than four years to build and strengthen it, ultimately raising funds to provide guide dogs for nearly 300 students. Path-Finder then merged with the Leader Dog League of Rochester, Michigan.

Another of our boss's projects was what we called "Mason's Coffee Lift." In the late Forties, a decade after succeeding company founder Charles W. Nash as president, Mason learned that coffee was one of the scarcest of life's pleasures in the new war-torn state of West Germany. Again calling on his public relations staff, he arranged to send packages of coffee to Lutheran churches throughout the country. It was all done with no public mention and little, if any, fanfare among Nash-Kelvinator executives and employees, most of whom didn't

Nash sent a few six-cylinder Ambassador drivetrains to Donald Healey Motor Car Company in Warwick, England. One of the first results was a Nash-Healey racer that finished fourth in the prestigious 1950 LeMans 24 Hours.

know about this further expression of Mason's generosity until after his death.

The Nash-Healey has been called one of the most improbable cars ever conceived. Maybe that's because the idea for it originated not on land but on the sea—and really quite by chance.

Mason had visited Europe in 1949 and was fired up by the exotic sports cars he'd seen there. He returned home aboard the *Queen Elizabeth*, where he happened to meet Donald Healey, the British sports car specialist. Mason had already heard of Healey. An amateur mechanic turned competition driver, the Cornishman had won events like the Monte Carlo Rally in the Thirties for makes such as Triumph, Invicta, and Riley. After the war, Healey fulfilled a long-held ambition by building cars with his own body and chassis designs, powered by Riley's 2.5-liter four-cylinder engine. The first of these appeared in 1946. Healey offered a series of attractive sedans, roadsters, coupes, and convertibles through 1951, albeit in very small numbers, only about 500 in all. However, just one model accounted for about a fifth of that total. It was the Silverstone, a fast, lightweight two-seat roadster with classic cycle fenders that was making a name for itself in European competition at the time the two men met.

Healey was heading to the U.S. in 1949 primarily to persuade Cadillac to supply its new 331-cid overhead-valve V-8 for a new sports car he was working on. On the voyage he mentioned this to Mason, who told him that if Cadillac didn't come through for some reason, Nash would be happy to sell him some of its ohv Ambassador sixes. Sure enough, Cadillac refused, needing all the engines it could build in those steel-short years. Healey contacted Mason.

Soon, a few Ambassador engines and drivelines were on their way from the Nash factory in Kenosha, Wisconsin, to Donald Healey Motor Car Company Ltd. in Warwick, England. Healey went to work immediately, converting his Silverstone operation into a larger but still quite limited Nash-Healey production facility. One of its first efforts was a two-seat racer that Healey entered in the 1950 LeMans 24 Hours in France. It came home fourth among the 29 finishers from a starting field of 66 (see sidebar), bested only by two Talbots and an Allard. Earlier, a Nash-Healey had finished ninth in class at the grueling Mille Miglia in Italy.

With the car's performance and stamina now firmly established, Mason and Healey moved full steam ahead on a roadgoing version. Healey penned a smooth, envelope-style two-seat roadster body, and Panelcraft of Birmingham, England, was contracted to execute it entirely in aluminum. The ohv Nash six was a strong,

Making the Grade: LeMans 1950

It's been more than three decades now, but I still clearly remember one of the most compelling automobile racing films I ever saw. It was a black-and-white documentary produced by a British oil company about the 1950 LeMans 24 Hours. This event was only the first outing for the then-new Nash-Healey, but the Anglo-American sports car proved itself for all the world to see by coming in fourth, one of only 29 finishers in a starting field of 66.

The film's British commentators were surprised by the N-H, not only because an American-powered car did so well but also because it was the first entrant in LeMans history equipped with overdrive. Bearing number 14, the car had a Nash clutch, transmission, and rear axle assembly. Power was supplied by a modified version of the production Ambassador six, with a special aluminum cylinder head, special camshaft and valve springs, and dual carburetion, all of which boosted horsepower to 130 at 4300 rpm. Tipping the scales at 2300 pounds, the racer could reach 130 mph flat out.

The Nash-Healey faced impressive competition. Among the starters were five Ferraris, three Aston-Martins, three Jaguars, two Bentleys, four Renaults, and four Dyna-Panhards, along with two Cadillacs fielded by American sportsman Briggs Cunningham, which finished 10th and 11th overall. The winning car was a Talbot that averaged 89.72 mph, but the N-H averaged only 2 mph less. Another Talbot finished second and an Allard came in third.

Piloted by A.P.R. "Tony" Holt and J.D. Hamilton, the Nash-Healey managed fourth despite being out of the race a full 45 minutes. This was the result of an accident caused by a Delage, which rammed the N-H from behind, sending it into a spin and damaging its rear axle.

As noted (see main story), the Nash-Healey would again triumph on the French circuit, but its 1950 showing was commendable, even remarkable. Aside from establishing the N-H as a serious proposition on the international sports car scene, it also gave Nash dealers something new to talk about: performance.

Right: the first Nash-Healey production prototype, fresh out of its shipping crate from England. It did not have the permanently open cowl ventilator that distinguishes the 1951 production models. Grille and other body hardware came from the Nash Airflyte.

modern engine capable of a fair amount of "hotting up," and Healey duly attended to it, mating the modified power unit with Nash's three-speed manual transmission and Borg-Warner overdrive. The Healey works would take care of final assembly. For proper make identification, the car was designed to accept the grille, headlights, bumpers, and other trim parts from the '51 Nash Airflyte. Though production didn't get underway until December 1950, the N-H bowed in prototype form at that fall's London and Paris shows. Remarkably, this was less than nine months after the program's inception.

Contrary to some accounts, initial plans did not call for the Nash-Healey to be exported solely to the United States. A public announcement issued in Detroit on September 27, 1950 stated that the new sports car would be distributed by both the Healey company and Nash Motors' Export Division in Great Britain and France and by Nash "in all other countries except the United States and Canada." That decision was quickly changed, and all 104 of the first-year Nash-Healeys (36 of which were built before the end of 1950) came to America. That wasn't very many, but they were worth a lot in publicity.

Speaking of publicity, the N-H made its U.S. debut at the Chicago Auto Show in February 1951. I was there, and remember how excited Nash sales people were about having a real live sports car to call their own. I also remember that the cute little Rambler Country Club hardtop, just introduced, garnered about as much interest among showgoers.

The Nash-Healey arrived with a suggested retail delivery price of $4063 POE New York City. Standard equipment included leather upholstery, adjustable steering wheel, directional signals, chrome wheel discs, foam rubber seat cushion, five four-ply whitewall tires, and the aforementioned overdrive. The heater cost extra, and color choices were limited to just two, Champagne Ivory and Sunset Maroon.

Dimensionally, the N-H was as compact as you'd expect in a British roadster of the early Fifties, with a 102-inch wheelbase and overall length of 170 inches. Track measured 53 inches at each end, fairly wide in relation to the 60-inch overall width. Thanks to the aluminum bodywork, curb weight held to 2690 pounds. That sounds like a lot today, but it wasn't excessive considering the healthy powerplant. As modified by Healey, the 234.8-cid Ambassador six was rated at 125 bhp at 4000 rpm versus 115

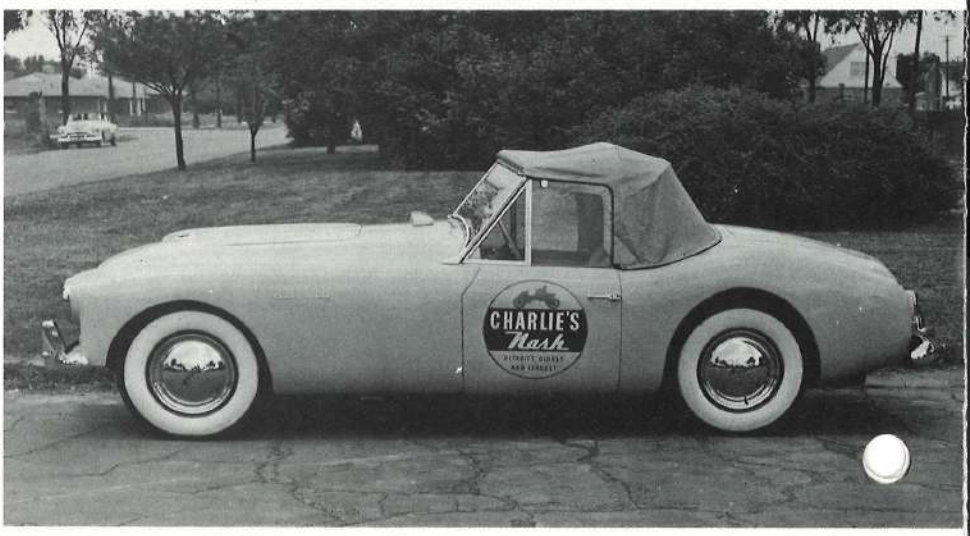
Above and upper left: The fourth-place N-H in action at LeMans 1950. Left (l to r): Drivers A.P.R. "Tony" Holt and J.D. Hamilton, Healey Paris agent Tom Kenny, Donald Healey, and Harry Costley of Nash celebrate after the race. Car 14 sits directly behind them.

for the stock 1951 engine, and retained its seven-main-bearing crankshaft. Providing the extra horses were a pair of British SU sidedraft carburetors, a hotter cam, and an aluminum cylinder head with sealed-in intake manifold and 8.0:1 compression ratio. The chassis incorporated Nash's torque-tube drive and rear coil springs, but a Healey-designed trailing-link suspension was used up front. Fuel capacity was a generous 20 gallons.

Press reaction to Nash's new sports car was what our P.R. people half-expected: guarded enthusiasm. *Mechanix Illustrated* magazine's veteran tester Tom McCahill, certainly not one to say harsh things about any car he drove, wrote: "I want to go on record right now and say I have never driven a sports car that handled better or gave the driver so much control in a powerglide or spin." *Motor Trend* magazine reported that "the Nash-Healey rides far better than the average sports car without any apparent ill effect upon handling qualities." Meantime, the N-H returned to LeMans in 1951 and again proved its mettle by finishing fourth in class and sixth overall in the 24 Hours, ahead of two Ferraris and an Aston-Martin.

Chrysler Corporation took more than a passing interest in the Anglo-American hybrid, going so far as to purchase a Nash-Healey from a Detroit-area dealer. After studying it, the firm's engineering department prepared a comprehensive, illustrated report for executives, describing it in part as "a low, fast convertible featuring an aluminum body with lines reminiscent of Italian styling." Though Chrysler couldn't know it, the Nash-Healey was about to get legitimate Latin lines.

Mason hadn't cared much for the original N-H styling, with its slab sides and tall, two-piece flat-pane windshield. Accordingly, he ordered a restyle for 1952 and handed the job to



Center spread: A rare color advertising photo of the production 1951 Nash-Healey. Near right: Chrysler Corporation shot this '51 N-H for a comprehensive, internal-use-only report to top executives. Sign on door refers to the Nash dealership of Charles Dalgleish, today one of America's top Cadillac agents. Opposite page, bottom left: The '51 on a road test at the Nash Proving Grounds near Burlington, Wisconsin. Bottom right: The '51 in a contemporary press photo. Only 104 of these cars were built.


Healey

Baseball, Hot Dogs, Apple Pie, and . . . Nash

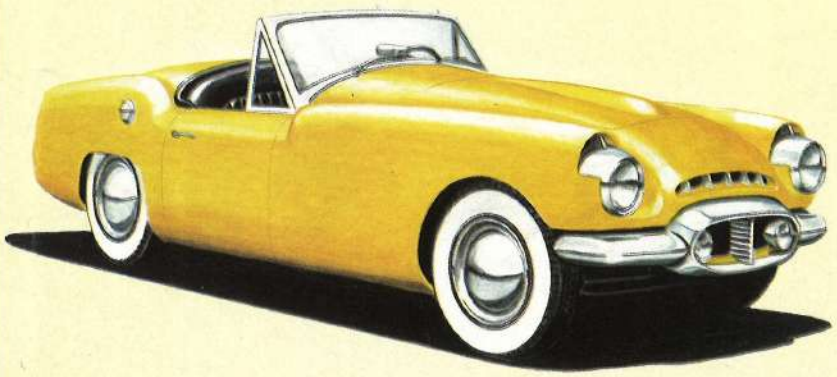
The most unusual Nash-Healey ever built wasn't really a Nash-Healey. In the summer of 1951, S.C. Johnson & Son of Racine, Wisconsin, bought one of the new roadsters with the idea of featuring it in a contest as part of a promotion in the U.S. and Canada for two of its car waxes. Ted Williams, star outfielder for the Boston Red Sox, was signed to appear in national advertising and would receive the car as a gift when the promotion ended.

To make the car even more appealing, Johnson Wax commissioned William Flajole of Detroit to design and build a one-of-a-kind roadster body for it. A year earlier, he had devised the small NXI experimental that evolved into the British-built Metropolitan, and later became involved in the body design for several early Rambler models. Built by hand, the body cost about $25,000 and sported a one-piece curved windshield and a front end that was markedly different from the standard car's. Most N-H diehards describe the latter as ugly.

Johnson Wax showed off its newly rebodied N-H at a press conference staged at the Dearborn Inn near Detroit on July 5. Bill France of stock-car racing fame gave personal demonstration rides to reporters and Nash executives, including George Mason. The car then toured the country to promote Johnson's products and its contest, where the top prizes were all-expense-paid trips to the World Series. All you had to do was give the car a name.

This car was widely shown and generated considerable publicity. Surprisingly, no one at S.C. Johnson & Son seems to remember the winning name to this day. I attempted to find out, however, on numerous occasions during my career with Nash and American Motors, writing the Johnson company and perusing newspapers and trade journals of the period. Unfortunately, nothing turned up.

As a postscript to this reminiscence, I wrote to Ted Williams in early 1985 to find out what happened to the car after it was given to him. His response: "All I remember is that I sold [it] to someone in Detroit. I wasn't interested in the car. In fact, I never drove it."



Pinin Farina, the renowned Italian designer he'd recently hired to do the all-new Ambassador and Statesman that would also appear for '52. Farina's *carrozzeria* in Turin would also build the bodies, a change that only added more international mileage to Nash-Healey production. As before, engines and drivelines were built in Kenosha, boxed, and shipped to England, where the Healey works continued to fabricate the frame and complete the rolling chassis. This was then shipped to Turin, where Farina craftsman fashioned the bodywork by hand and took care of final assembly. The finished cars were then shipped to U.S. ports of entry.

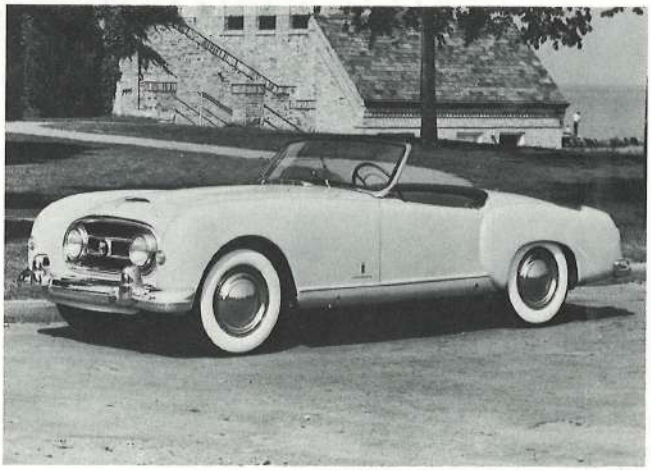
Warm and gracious, Pinin Farina looked more like a well-dressed banker than the masterful and innovative automobile body designer he was. He came to the U.S. twice before Nash started production on the full-size 1952 models he had designed, and I was assigned to be his unofficial host on both occasions by George Romney, then Nash-Kelvinator executive vice-president. Farina spoke little English, but he wanted to see the sights around Detroit. We ended up attending a baseball game and touring Greenfield Village, the General Motors office complex, and the Ford Rotunda with his English-speaking son-in-law, Renzo Carli (still with the firm, which was renamed Pininfarina after the designer's death in the early Sixties to distinguish it from another concern owned by Pinin's brother).

Farina's most important American visit began on February 13, 1952, when he arrived in New York aboard the *Ile de France*. Within a week he was the star of the Nash national dealer show in Chicago. That was when dealers got their first look at his new Ambassador and Statesman, while the revamped '52 Nash-Healey was displayed at the Chicago Auto Show that was going on at about the same time. I recall sitting at a luncheon table with several Iowa dealers and their wives as Farina was introduced by Nash sales vice-president H.C. Doss. One dealer turned to me and expostulated, "Hell, all I can sell is the Ambassador. That little Rambler won't go with farmers where I live. And as far as I'm concerned, Farina is nothing but chicken feed." Fortunately for the company, this low opinion of one of

the world's foremost car designers was not typical of Nash dealers.

Adding Farina's Italian flair to American components and British engineering made the 1952 Nash-Healey an extremely pleasing international blend. Though the body was still rounded, it was more visually interesting. Notable styling highlights included a simple oval grille with the headlamps mounted inboard, as on the Farina-designed senior Nashes, plus a slightly curved and shallower one-piece windshield and pronounced rear fender bulges that broke up the slab sides. The body was now made entirely of steel, yet careful engineering actually reduced curb weight. Price went the other way, leaping to $5868, which was more than $1500 higher than for a 1952 Cadillac Sixty-Special. Nevertheless, production rose to 150 units for the model year. Nash added several adjectives to describe the powerplant, dubbed "LeMans Dual Jetfire Ambassador Six" in honor of the car's racing exploits. During the year a larger 4.1-liter/253-cid

Above: Another advertising shot, this time a '52 minus the circular Nash grille badge fitted in production. Green upholstery coordinates well with the red exterior, but only for Christmas. Below left: This N-H scored another LeMans triumph for the hybrid sports car by finishing first in class and third overall at the 1952 running of the 24 Hours. Powered by a "Dual Jetfire Ambassador Six," it averaged 91.5 mph over 2190 miles. Below right: The roadgoing '52, priced at $5868.



six arrived with 8.25:1 compression, domestic Carter carburetors instead of the British SUs, and 135 bhp, still developed at 4000 rpm. This engine would continue through the end of N-H production.

Nash's sports car again did itself proud in 1952 competition, contesting both the Mille Miglia and LeMans. In the Sicilian road race a special coupe, driven by Donald Healey and his son Geoffrey, crashed, but a second car piloted by Leslie Johnson and W. McKenzie came home fourth in class and seventh overall, a fine achievement in that notoriously rugged event. But the Nash-Healey's finest hour came at LeMans. There were two entries: an open sports model built over from the '51 coupe for Johnson and Tommy Wisdom, and the 1950 prototype, fitted with an experimental cylinder head, to be driven by Pierre Vyron and Yves Giraud-Cabantous. Both were obviously no match for the big Ferraris, Jaguars, and Cunninghams, but Donald Healey had decided to run a conservative race, hoping the more powerful cars would drop out before the finish due to driver mistakes.

By the 18-hour mark, the N-H prototype had retired, but the Johnson/Wisdom roadster was running sixth, behind two Talbots, two Mercedes, and an Aston-Martin. By the 20th hour it had passed one of the Talbots to claim fifth. Then the Aston pitted with rear axle problems. The N-H now lay fourth. The leading Talbot then dropped out with engine failure. The N-H moved up to third. While the German cars held on to finish 1-2, the Nash-Healey's third-place showing was tremendously impressive. Johnson/Wisdom averaged 91.5 mph for the 2190 miles and hit up to 140 mph on the long Mulsanne Straight. They handily won the Gold Cup for first in the 3000-5000cc class, ahead of a Ferrari and a Talbot, and took second in the Index of Performance. Besides besting its prestigious rivals, the N-H delivered 13 miles per gallon and needed no oil or water for the entire 24 hours.

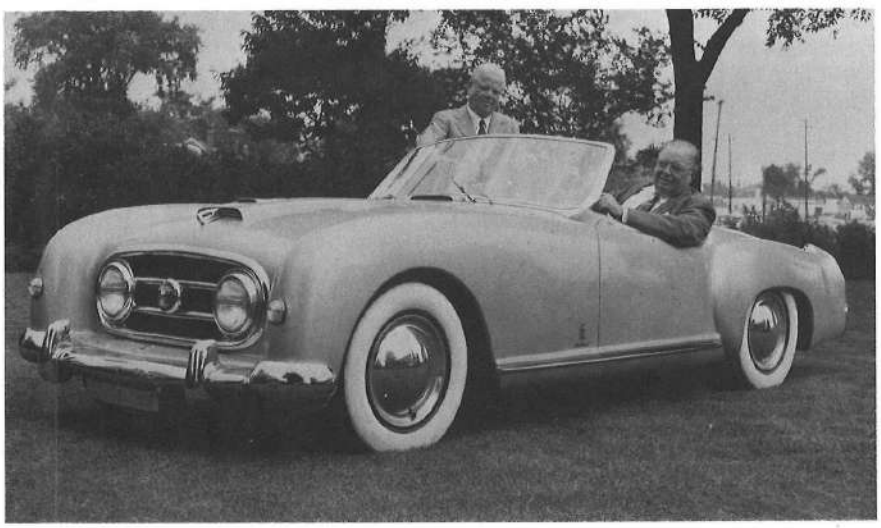
Despite its sterling performances at LeMans for four straight years, the Nash-Healey failed to catch on. The big problem was its high price, reflecting the enormous shipping costs involved in its construction.

In honor of this great feat, a pretty new closed coupe called LeMans arrived for 1953 as a companion to the Nash-Healey roadster, which was now termed a convertible. Built on a 108-inch wheelbase, it bowed in mid-March, again at the Chicago show, with an announced list price of $6399, versus $5908 for the convertible. Respective curb weights were 2970 and 2700 pounds. Nash called attention to the new coupe's "low hood and high fender contour, which extend beyond the cowl, through the windshield and out the rear window into the rear deck without interruption." Shortly before its U.S. debut, the coupe had won first prize in the Italian International *Concours d'Elegance* at Stresa, beating more than 150 other contestants.

Donald Healey made one more assault on LeMans with the Nash-Healey, but his emphasis in 1953 was on his Austin-Healey 100-4, which he was now producing in cooperation with the new British Motor Corporation. The two Frenchmen returned to drive one Nash-Healey, and Leslie Johnson teamed up with Bert Hadley in the number-11 car, a 1953 convertible. Again the French dropped out early, but the N-H acquitted itself well for the fourth consecutive year as Johnson/Hadley managed 11th. Interestingly, they averaged 92.45 mph, faster than the third-place 1952 finish. This car survives today as one of 49 Nash-Healeys owned by Leonard N. "Mac" McGrady of Aberdeen, Maryland.

Despite these sterling accomplishments, Nash-Healey sales continued to lag. The reason was obvious: high price, reflecting the enormous shipping costs involved in building the car. Even so, total production actually rose to 162 units for '53, but all were built in the first five months of the calendar year.

In the face of such meager volume, Nash delayed introduction of the 1954 models until June 3rd of that year. The convertible was dropped, leaving just a slightly reworked LeMans coupe, distinguished by a three-piece backlight instead of the previous one-piece glass. The POE price was cut by more



Left: George Mason tries out the '52 N-H roadster as Italian designer Pinin Farina looks on. The car would keep this basic look through the end of production in August 1954. Opposite page: A close-up look at the 1953 LeMans coupe, which appeared that model year as a companion to the open-air N-H. Also bearing Farina styling, it won the Italian International *Concours d'Elegance* over 150 rivals and rode a six-inch longer wheelbase (owner: Gerald Newton).


CALIFORNIA
1LBZ575


DUAL JET FIRE


Nash-Healey

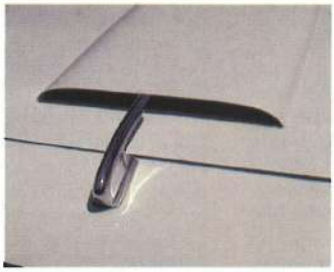

pininfarina

Though only 506 Nash-Healeys were built, over half survive today and more are turning up all the time.

than $1200 to $5128, but it was only a token gesture. Nash finally gave up in August after building exactly 506 Healeys in a little less than four years. A few leftover '54s were sold as 1955 models.

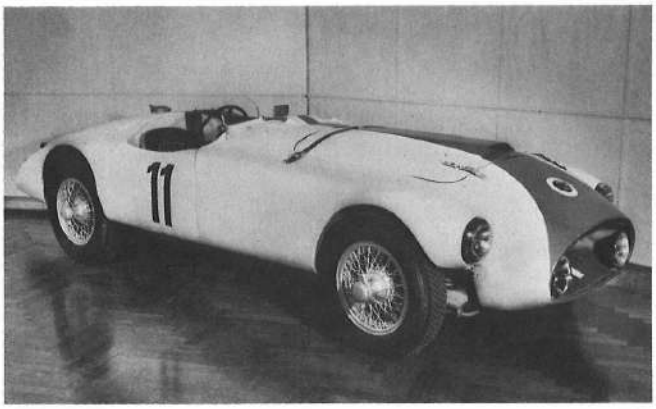
According to Ray Soles, Jr., president of the Nash-Healey Car Club, more than half of total N-H production survives today, and it seems hardly a month goes by that another car doesn't turn up somewhere. Incidentally, the club was founded in 1959 and now counts more than 100 members in the U.S., Canada, and England.

Though rumors occasionally surface that at least one or two Nash-Healeys left the factory with eight-cylinder engines, only the Ambassador six was used for the entire production run. However, there are two beautiful cars that have been



converted by their owners to American Motors V-8 power. One belongs to Carl Chakmakian, who bought the red 1952 roadster from its original owner in 1954 with but 2000 miles on the clock. Now AMC's manager of sales training, Carl fitted the company's big 327-cid powerplant shortly after it was introduced in the late Fifties. The other car is a 1953 roadster originally owned by AMC engineers James T. Moore and Les Viland. Remembered for piloting many Ramblers to first-place finishes in the Mobile Economy Runs of the Fifties and Sixties, Viland bought Moore's half interest in the car several years ago. It's powered by a bored-out Nash V-8 with 358 cid and 12.5:1 compression, which Les says makes it a one-of-a-kind item. It also carries conventional coil-spring Ambassador front sus-

Opposite page and above: Though little changed in appearance, the '53 Nash-Healey roadster was retitled a convertible and continued with the bored-out 253-cid six that was phased in during '52. Pinin Farina's redesign did little for the shallow trunk, though space was good by contemporary sports car standards. Low-profile hood ornament doubled as the hood release latch. Simple cockpit combined British and American design elements but lacked bucket seats (owner: Gerald McGregor).



pension. Les is convinced his car will do 145 mph, though he has never driven it that fast. We should also note that "Mac" McGrady's extensive Nash-Healey stable includes two cars with AMC V-8s, but obviously these are also owner conversions.

As for the unconverted cars, all the 1951 Nash-Healeys and a few of the early '52s carried the 3.8-liter/234.8-cid six. Everything else had the later 4.1-liter unit. Owners can tell which is which—and correct—by checking serial and engine numbers. Anything above N2250 and 1163, respectively, should have the larger powerplant. Another point for would-be owners of this classy collectible is that all the Healey-built roadsters had pull-up windows while the Farina-bodied roadsters had removable windows. Only the LeMans coupe had roll-up door glass.

There's no mystery about the reasons for the Nash-Healey's demise. As mentioned, it was too expensive, much costlier than its main rivals, the Kaiser-Darrin and Chevrolet's Corvette. Then too, a Nash dealership was the last place most enthusiast buyers expected to find a sports car. Sales volume was insufficient to warrant spending money for promotion and further model development, and Nash had other, more important fish to fry. By 1954 the firm was losing about $2 for every $1 the N-H brought in, and the merger with Hudson in May of that year made it imperative to establish the Rambler, which would

The Plastic Nash-Healey: Fiberglass Frustration

A little-known aspect of Nash's brief Fifties fling with sports cars is that the firm once seriously considered building the Nash-Healey entirely in the United States. The key was a body done in fiberglass, which promised lower production costs and, as Chevrolet would shortly find out with its Corvette, was more suitable for a low-volume product.

In the early fall of 1953, Nash president George Mason asked his purchasing vice-president, A.M. Wibel, to look into the possibility of having Ionia Manufacturing Company build the N-H body in plastic. Located in Ionia, Michigan, this firm later became Mitchell-Bentley, and was already well known as the supplier of thousands of wood station wagon bodies for General Motors and Ford (its first major contract came from Chevrolet in 1947).

Wibel told James A. Lee, director of purchasing for Nash-Kelvinator, to obtain preliminary unit prices from Ionia. Lee reported back on October 9. The estimates he received assumed chassis, windshield assembly, and hinges would all be furnished by Nash. The bottom line was $7215.05 in lots of five, ranging down to $4655.60 in lots of 200 or more, both FOB Ionia, which included fabrication, delivery, and full painting and trimming.

Unfortunately, even the "quantity" price was prohibitive considering that only 506 Nash-Healeys were actually built, and the company was simply not prepared to commit itself to volume production in a market where demand for sports cars was still infinitesimal. Small wonder then that Lee concluded his report to Wibel, Mason, and vice-president George Romney with this terse comment: "Ionia has been advised that these prices prevent any further consideration of this job."

be sold by both Nash and Hudson dealers, as the basic volume product for the new American Motors. Also, the imported Metropolitan, introduced in March, was gaining sales momentum. Then came the sudden death of George Mason on October 8. The practical-minded George Romney was elected to succeed him four days later, and he had no use for marginal products with limited sales prospects.

Nevertheless, the Nash-Healey was a noble experiment that's left us with one of the most interesting cars of the Fifties. It remains today a gallant tribute to George Mason, and we can all be thankful that he discovered that little book.

1951-55 Nash-Healey Production & Major Specifications

Model	Wheelbase	Weight	Price	Prod.
1951 roadster	102.0	2690	$4063	104
1952 roadster	102.0	2700	5868	150
1953 convertible	102.0	2700	5908	162[1]
1953 LeMans coupe	108.0	2970	6399	
1954-55 LeMans coupe	108.0	2970	5128	90[2]

Engines	Bore × Stroke	bhp	Availability
L6, 234.8	3.38 × 4.38	125	1951-52
L6, 252.6	3.50 × 4.38	140	1952-55[3]

1: *combined production; body style breakdown not available.* **2:** *production terminated August 1954; total includes 1954 models sold as 1955s.* **3:** *from serial #N2250 and engine #1163.*

Clubs for Nash-Healey Enthusiasts

Nash-Healey Car Club, International
530 Edgewood Avenue
Trafford, PA 15085

Founded in 1959. Current membership: 100+. Also welcomes owners of related Healey and other Nash models.

Nash Car Club of America
Route 1, Box 253
Clinton, IA 52732

Founded 1970. Current membership: 1500. Annual dues includes newsletter and quarterly magazine. Advisor service and travel assistance available.

Opposite page, clockwise from bottom left: The production 1953 N-H LeMans coupe; the 11th-place 1953 LeMans racer, photographed at the Henry Ford Museum and now owned by Leonard McGrady of Aberdeen, Maryland; and two views of the roadgoing 1954 LeMans coupe, with three-piece backlight and upswept C-pillars. This page: Another look at the '53 roadster/convertible and its flowing body lines (owner: Steve LeFevre).