

Wouldn't you really rather drive a Goodspeed? No?
Then how about a Quick, or a Manly, or a Durable Dayton?

It was 1966, and Chevrolet was searching for a suitable name for its soon-to-be-launched response to the Mustang. The long list of possibilities included several animal names, and Panther, the leading candidate, was already being used internally, by the press, and even by eager enthusiasts throughout the country.

But General Motors, concerned about

the growing auto safety movement, decided that a less ferocious-sounding handle was needed. One day, when the pressure was really on, when tooling to make the car's insignia had to be finalized, two executives were sifting desperately through all

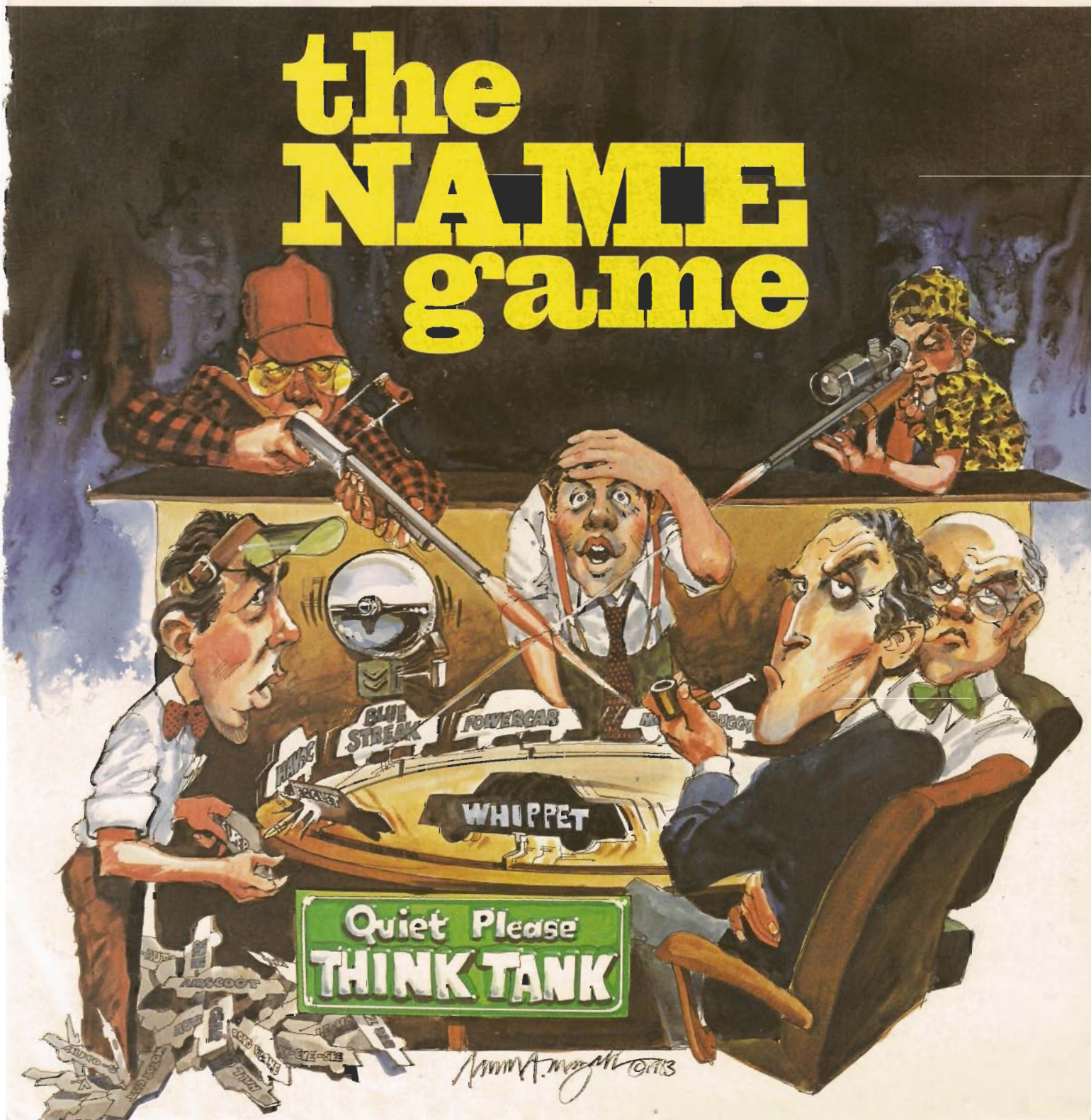
by Gary Witzenburg

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the names that had been suggested. Nothing seemed right. Then one of them came upon the word "Camaro" in a French dictionary. It meant "pal, comrade." It sounded good, it was vaguely foreign and exotic, it started with a C, and it really meant nothing at all to most Americans. Eureka! The decision was made.

Soon after it was announced, however,

the NAME game



the NAME game

Chevy's friendly rivals at Ford and others started coming up with less pleasant definitions. One Spanish meaning was, "a shrimp-like creature with many legs." Another was, "loose bowels." GM's general manager at the time, E.M. "Pete" Estes, liked to say that a Camaro was a little-known animal "that feeds on Mustangs." For a while, a lot of fun was had at Chevy's expense over the name choice. But Camaro it was, and Camaro it stayed. Some 18 years later it seems like a perfectly good name.

In this case, the car has made the name. Which seems to make sense. After all, says Chevrolet Market Planning Manager Jack Madejchick, "a good name can never overcome a bad product." If a car is good enough—or bad enough—it doesn't much matter what you call it.

Maybe so, but would you buy an Airhorse or an Average Man's Runabout? A Gearless or a Hall Gasoline Trap? A Havoc, a Hazard, or a Holmes Gastricycle? Could we interest you in a shiny new Hustler Power Car, a Jay-Eye-See, a Maxim Motortricycle, an O-We-Go, a Pak-Age-Car, a Peter Pan, a Poppy Car, a Road Cart, or a Serpentina? Well, then, how about a Seven-Little-Buffalos, a Step-N-Drive, or a Tally-Ho? All of these are actual make (not model) names of autos or trucks that were built at one time or another in the United States—most of them very briefly. Then again, would you consider an Oldsmobile or a Dodge if you were hearing those names for the first time today?

Whether these and the hundreds of other short-lived products listed by the Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association (MVMA) were doomed by dumb names—or because they were lousy products or inappropriate for their time—is open to conjecture. The fact is that of the 3000-plus makes of cars and trucks that have been produced by some 1500 American manufacturers since the dawn of automotive time, only a handful survive. And today, while creation of a new manufacturer is a rare occurrence, each existing maker is forever creating new model lines and variations.

Without exception, every time a new product is being born its nervous parents agonize over a name for it. "It seems to consume an inordinate amount of time," groans Ford Product Research Manager Tom Moulson. The name has to be just right, has to convey the proper image and "position" the product in the marketplace. It wouldn't do to pull up to the club in your plush new Pinto, or economize in your cute little Sedan deVille.

Name ideas come from the sales staff, ad agencies, designers, almost anyone. Sometimes there are contests among the employees. American Motors Research Manager Dave Garfield says his company holds brainstorming sessions where the partici-

pants are geared to generate ideas at machine-gun speed, rejecting nothing. The result is an incredible 600-1000 suggestions in just an hour or so. These are quickly culled down to a hundred or two, then to a couple dozen, which are exhaustively researched in clinics where a sampling of people are shown a profile of the product and asked to rate each candidate name along with it.

Ford likes to research names at public places like shopping malls, asking people how much they like or dislike each one, how suitable they think it is for an automobile, what sort of car it suggests, what connotations and associations it brings to mind (practical, exciting, economical, modern, efficient, reliable, etc.), and whether they've ever heard of a car by that name. "We can get a pretty good idea that way how well each name would work," says Moulson.

Successful candidates then have to survive a legal search—does someone else al-

American cars have
been named for cities,
16 of the 50 states, two
oceans, and four
compass points



ready "own" a name; and if so, how expensive would it be to obtain it? Ford wanted to use the name Colt on a new European car in the 1960s, but Mitsubishi of Japan already had claimed international rights to it. Capri was chosen instead, even though many Ford people thought it would never work. (It did just fine, thank you.) A chain of Granada stores and service stations in Great Britain sued Ford for using that name on its European luxury sedan, but lost. On the other hand, the Maine Potato Growers were paid off when Ford launched a series of MPG economy cars in the mid-'70s, as was a Detroit builder of Lynx race cars when that name was adopted for Mercury's front-drive subcompact.

GM's Pontiac division pays the Sports

Car Club of America \$5 for every Trans Am it builds because the car was named for SCCA's Trans-Am racing series. But Chevrolet's policy is to pay tribute to no one. When race-car builder Jim Hall insisted on \$1.50 per car for anything bearing his Chaparral name, Chevy called its mid-'70s econosport model Monza instead. Both Chevrolet and Chrysler wanted Eagle for cars introduced in 1976, the Bicentennial year, but refused to pay racer Dan Gurney for use of his longtime name. Then American Motors grabbed it anyway for its 4wd cars, figuring that Gurney's rights didn't extend to production vehicles. Gurney was miffed but declined to pursue the matter in court.

Then there's the problem with meanings in other languages. As in the Camaro case, a good name in one language is often found to mean something profane, obscene, or ridiculous in another. Nova, for example, another long-lived Chevrolet name, means "doesn't go" in Spanish. Volvo in Latin means "I roll." VW's Jetta in Italian-Argentine slang means "bad luck."

Sometimes there's a pronunciation problem. When Chrysler chose Cordoba (a town in Spain) for its mid-size luxury coupe, it was quickly informed that the proper Spanish pronunciation was "Cor'-do-ba," accented on the first syllable. "It's our car and we'll say it however we want to," fumed the marketing people. But actor Ricardo Montalban, hired to do TV ads for the car, couldn't or wouldn't pronounce it that way at first and wanted to change it. The question was ultimately settled when Chrysler tested the word with a number of radio announcers, and most automatically Americanized it by accenting the second syllable.

Divisions of the same company, and even different companies, often trade names among themselves. Both Chevrolet and Oldsmobile researched Celebrity for their new mid-size fwd A-cars, but Olds (which had used the name in the '60s) agreed to let Chevy have it and chose the more foreign-sounding Ciera for itself. In such intra-company cases the two general managers usually work it out; but name bartering between rivals is normally handled by legal beagles. "Our legal department sometimes comes to us and says, 'Ford called and wants to use such-and-such. Do you want to release it?'" explains Chrysler Advanced Marketing Plans Manager Dick Harper. In the late '50s, for example, both Ford and Chrysler were working on new economy cars called Falcon; but Chrysler had first rights to the name via a 1955-vintage Falcon show car. So Henry Ford II put on the charm and talked Chrysler into renaming its car, which then became the Valiant. One name that was not given up, though, was Mustang. Both Ford and GM were using it on concept cars in the early '60s, but Ford beat GM to it by a matter of days.

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the NAME game

MVMA provides the name-keeping service and will protect for one year any new idea submitted. There are thousands of make, model, and feature names on file, plus hundreds more on confidential "proposed" lists available only to a select group at each company. As indicated by the sampling above, it's great fun to page through MVMA's list of the more than 3000 make names used since man began making motor vehicles in America.

Think how confident you'd feel driving a shiny new Best, a Durable Dayton, a

The first Eagle was built in 1906, the Colt and Falcon in 1908, the first Mustang in 1948

Fool-Proof, an Ideal, a Nonpariel, a Peerless, a Perfection, a Preferred, a Reliable, a Superior, a Super Kar, an Ultimate, or, for that matter, an Old Reliable. Think how smart you'd feel picking out a new Practical, an Economycar, or a Safety. Think how macho you'd feel in a Manly, a Playboy, or a Savage.

Would an Advance, a Modern, a Progress, or a Scientific have all the latest features? Would you be better off driving a Traffic in the city, touring in a Long Distance, or just passing through in a Transit? Would you put your faith in a Buddy, a Friend, or a Loyal? Would you feel social in a Climber, proud in a Patrician, self-righteous in a Puritan, or blue-blooded in a Thoroughbred? Would you get a ticket in a Goodspeed, a Powercar, a Quick, a Speedwagon, or a Rapid Truck? Would you faint at the sight of a Blood? Could you be happy with a Bliss, get in shape with a Runner, or improve your sex life with a Climax? Could you get lucky in a Winner; make it to the top in a Famous or a Success?

Would you feel down and out in an Everybody's, a Simplicity, a Utility, or—worse yet—a Spartan? Would you have to take out a mortgage to buy a House, or steal for a Pirate? Would it be immature to drive a Juvenile? Could you ever neglect your Duty, swear at a Blue Streak, throw stones at a Kidney, or get a flat in a Sharp? Could you be hot in a Super Cooled or harassed in a Silent Knight? Could you even fit in a Small or a Little? Would you overload a Light? Would you need a pilot's license to operate an Airscoot, a Flying Auto, a Lewis Airmobile, or a Road Plane? Would an Available Truck be hard to find? Could you love a Hug Truck? And how big is a Little Giant Truck, anyway?

Finally, could a lady drive a Lad's Car? Would Charleton Heston prefer a Ben-Hur? Would an astronaut like a LeMoon Truck? Would Scarlett O'Hara drive a Dixie Tourist? Could you sell Ripper to a

man named Jack, or a Yankee to a red-neck? Would Anita Bryant be caught dead in a Gay?

American cars have been named for cities and towns (usually where they were built) from Albany to Kalamazoo and Kankakee to Wichita, for 16 of the 50 states, both adjoining oceans, all four directions of the compass, and at least two other countries (Canada and Peru). They have borne the names of their inventors and company founders, national heroes, 21 presidents, and one president's wife (Dolly Madison). Super-patriotic nameplates have included All American, America, American, Americar, Pan American, Patriot, Veteran, and no less than 28 others begin-



Ford can't use its Mustang name in Germany because it's owned by a lawnmower company

ning with American, from American Austin to American Voiturette.

Animal names always have been popular. Those used and discarded in the past include Badger, Beaver, Bug, Bull Dog, Coyote, Gopher, Greyhound, Hare, Hawk, Lion, Panda, Panther, Pup, Tiger, Wasp, Whippet, and Wolverine. Interestingly, many of today's familiar animal names were first used years ago: The first Eagle was built in 1906, the Colt and Falcon in 1908, and the Mustang in 1948.

Among current major makes, Chevrolet, Oldsmobile, Buick, Ford, Dodge, and Chrysler were christened for their founders, Pontiac for an Indian chief, Cadillac for the explorer who established what is now Detroit, Lincoln for a president, Mercury for a wing-footed mythological god,

and Plymouth for the rock where the Pilgrims were said to have landed. And Volkswagen means "People's Car" in German.

When Chevrolet was seeking to christen its new sports car back in 1952, the story goes, a contest was held. Literally thousands of ideas were suggested, none of them good enough. Then someone started leafing through the "C" section of the dictionary and noticed the word Corvette. It means "a small, swift warship." Years later the division was agonizing over a name for its new luxury-version big car, and that night someone with names on his mind went out to dinner at New York's Caprice restaurant. Voila! Apparently no one dis-



Cadillac's Cimarron could easily have been the Caville, J9000, Envoy, Carmel, Cascade, or Series 62

covered, or cared, that Caprice means "a sudden change of mind or action without adequate reason." Some recent additions to Chevy's current collection include the (award-winning?) Citation, the (dashing?) Cavalier, and the (world famous?) Celebrity.

Pontiac is changing its image from GM's tire-burning performance division of old to its sophisticated, engineering-oriented division of new, hence the move toward European-sounding number designations: 1000, 2000, and 6000. Besides Bonneville (the famous Utah salt flats), other current Pontiac labels include Grand Prix ("big prize" in French), Firebird (a legendary Indian symbol promising action, power, beauty, and youth), and Phoenix (a mythological bird known for rising from its own ashes).

The original Firebird was almost named Banshee, until someone looked it up; a banshee is a creature from Gaelic folklore whose wailing foretold a death. On another occasion, Pontiac wanted to use Cirrus (a white, wispy cloud) on a new model, until it was pointed out that Cirrus sounds a lot like *tsouris*, a Yiddish word for trouble. Newest addition to Pontiac's stable is the mid-engined, 2-seat Fiero. They tell us the name means "proud one" in Italian, but they must not have looked it up in Spanish. It means "ugly, deformed" and worse.

Fiero means "proud one" in Italian, but says "ugly" and "deformed" in Spanish

Oldsmobile's fwd A-car was labeled Cutlass Ciera, retaining the very successful mid-size Cutlass association while simultaneously adding a new dimension to the smaller, more fuel-efficient model. Olds calls it "the most thoroughly researched name in the division's history." Firenza, the Oldsmobile J-car's moniker, is a made-up name with performance connotations that once identified a macho-look subcompact Starfire.

When Buick set out to change its image back in 1936, the division hung names (instead of just numbers) on its redesigned new cars for the first time. Special, Limited, and Super supposedly were named for famous trains, while Century related to the fact that the car could go 100 mph. Roadmaster was self explanatory. Later came Regal (relating to royalty), LeSabre ("the sword"), Riviera (the fashionable French resort area), and Electra (another figure from Greek mythology). When a new image again was sought in the middle '70s, two free-spirited new bird names, Skyhawk and Skylark, were adopted.

Cadillac derives its famous Fleetwood handle from a Pennsylvania town where the Fleetwood coachworks set up shop in 1909 to produce elegant luxury car bodies. Eldorado, literally "the golden one" in Spanish, comes from an imaginary South American kingdom of fabulous wealth, which in turn was named after a legendary Indian whose body was sprinkled with gold dust. DeVille is French for "of the city or town." Cadillac's first small car, Seville, was named for a city in Spain, though some in the division wanted to revive the old LaSalle name for this car, and GM design staff wanted to call it LaScala. Seville was ultimately picked because, according to Marketing Director Gordon Horsburgh, "It had no negatives. There's not much positive about it, but at least it had no negatives."

Horsburgh was again instrumental in naming Cadillac's newest and smallest

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model, the Cimarron. "We wanted an upscale, American name," he relates. "It should start with a C, look good in script on the car and have no negative connotations. We also looked at letter/number combinations but got off that because we knew Pontiac was doing it." Hundreds of suggestions were reduced to a final seven—Caville, J9000, Envoy, Carmel, Cascade, Series 62, and Cimarron—which were then researched using WATS-line telephone surveys to save time and money.

Caville surveyed strongly, with positive associations to Cadillac and images of luxury, class, quality, and high price. J9000 also did well with sporty, fun-to-drive, good-handling, youthful, and foreign-car connotations. Cimarron (a river that flows out of New Mexico) was found to have a strong American West flavor plus images of youth, masculinity, and (surprisingly) economy. Envoy carried an image of dependability but also (for some reason) a fairly high association with Chrysler. Series 62 got varied responses, including some association with foreign cars. Cascade connoted waterfalls and (horrors!) dishwasher soap, while Carmel was associated with Chevrolet and made people think of candy and the California city. Cimarron was ultimately chosen because of its American and Western flavor and because, according to the research report, it topped the list "for sheer favorable reaction as a pleasant-sounding name."

Ford's first Mustang, an experimental, 2-seat sports car that never reached production, actually was named for the WWII fighter plane, not the horse. Ford later stuck that name on its famous 4-seat production car after almost choosing Cougar (the designer's choice), then Torino. An ad campaign and a promotional movie were prepared around the Torino name before it was changed at the last minute. Believe it or not, Henry Ford II wanted to call it T-Bird II. But Mustang kept rising to the top of the surveys, so Mustang it was. Ford can't use that name in Germany, though (Mustangs there are called T-5s), because a lawnmower company owns it.

Thunderbird was not even among the 1000-odd suggestions submitted by Ford's ad agency for the company's '55 hurry-up answer to Chevrolet's Corvette—it was offered by one of the car's designers because he liked the sound of it and the graphic image possibilities it conjured up in his mind. Some of the losers were Falcon, Eagle, Apache, Tropicale, Hawaiian, and Thunderbolt.

Probably the best Ford name story involves the ill-fated Edsel. More than 6000 names were considered, including some wild ones suggested by poet Marianne Moore. Asked to dream up ideas connoting "some visceral feeling of elegance, fleetness, advanced features, and design," Moore submitted such beauties as Utopian Turtletop, Mongoose Civique, Pastelo-

gram, Andante con Moto, and Intelligent Bullet, among others—apparently with a straight face. Five serious candidates—Ventura, Pacer, Ranger, Corsair, and Citation—were ultimately considered; and then the chairman of the board picked Edsel, after Henry Ford's son (Henry II's father). Four of the final five were used as model names and . . . well, you know the rest.

For its most recent new cars, Ford has chosen Escort (security . . . and a popular European Ford name), EXP (high tech), and Tempo (upbeat, musical). Sister Mercury models are Lynx (a small wildcat), LN-7 (high tech, again), and Topaz (jewel-like).

"There's a lot to be said for continuity

Would you feel social in
a Climber, proud in a
Patrician, self-righteous
in a Puritan?



and carrying over established names," says Chrysler Market Plans Manager Ed Fleming, "but also for new names on new products." Fleming explains that Horizon and Omni came from the ad agency's research—"what they wanted those cars to stand for." Omni connotes versatility, flexibility—that the car can do a lot of things. Horizon suggests the future and, additionally, long-range use, "because we were afraid people would see it as just a short-haul commuter." Reliant combines the image of reliability with Plymouth's old favorite small car, the Valiant. Aries is a sign of the Zodiac and, not coincidentally, of the ram—which ties in neatly with the famous Dodge Ram symbol of strength.

LeBaron was a famous coachbuilder, and a longtime Chrysler name. E Class was a last-minute choice (replacing Gran LeBaron) to put perceptual distance between Chrysler's new luxury front-drive 4-door and the K-class cars from which it's derived. Dodge's Euro-style 400 and 600 labels were picked for the same reason Pontiac went to numbers for its mainstream models. Chrysler's '84 K-based sport coupe is the Laser (space-age high tech), while its counterpart gets the traditional Dodge Daytona label.

Going back a few years, when Dodge wanted to name its early-'60s stablemate to Plymouth's Valiant, the planners wanted

to call it Dart. But management decided to spend a small fortune on research, and the research company came back with Zipp. "That sounds like soap," said management after careful study. "We'll call it Dart." Later, when the equivalent to Plymouth's Duster was dubbed Demon, letters from religious fundamentalists started pouring in complaining that Demon was related to the Devil. The next year, it was dropped. Still another sporty Dodge name, Hang Ten, found itself in trouble with a clothing manufacturer.

There's also a story that Chrysler was once pretty close to calling a new small car Beaver, until someone pointed out what the word meant in CB slang. (Too bad; the performance version could have been Eager Beaver.) One cutesy name that did reach production, though, was Feather Duster for a special lightweight version of that popular compact.

American Motors has recently replaced Hornet (a once-strong Hudson nameplate) with Concord (a feeling of unity, agreement, and friendly relations) and Gremlin (an imaginary, gnomelike troublemaker) with Spirit (a positive state of mind). Eagle (a high-flying, independent, native-American bird) was chosen for the Concord-based 4wd car. The smaller Spirit-based 4x4 might have been dubbed Eaglet, says AMC's Garfield, but that name "didn't test very well." AMC/Renault's newest entry, of course, was named Alliance in honor of the happy union between the two companies. The company was all set to call the Alliance's hatchback sequel the X-37 until the name produced nothing but cat-calls from the enthusiast press. Encore was hastily substituted. One ancient AMC name story has the early '50s Nash Rambler originally called Diplomat to go with Statesman and Ambassador—but Dodge had that on hold even then. So Nash reached way back into time. The company's forerunner had built its first prototype in 1897 and its first production model in 1902, both called Rambler.

"Every time there's a naming issue," says Chrysler's Fleming, "everyone has his personal favorites. Sometimes he eventually gets them on a car, sometimes he doesn't. That's why names are so neat—they're so darned subjective, nobody's ever wrong or right. Picking a name is the toughest part of making a new car," says Chrysler Chairman Iacocca. "Naming a car is definitely more difficult than naming your child," adds Cadillac's Horsburgh. "There's a lot of emotionalism and egomaniacal attitudes that come forth."

Witness the frustration expressed in a cartoon from the trade paper *Automotive News*. It shows a harried Marvelous Motors manager, face contorted, his hands over his eyes, as a subordinate holds up an ad proposal for the new Ruby Throated Nuthatch. "But all the good bird names are taken," the young man is pleading. 