

STUDEBAKER'S 1956 GOLDEN HAWK UNNOTICED, UNAPPRECIATED, UNWANTED, UNLOVED

By Frank Ambrogio

The 1956 Studebaker Golden Hawk is a unique car which never achieved the level of acceptance predicted at its introduction. It's the only product of the Studebaker-Packard Corporation to reflect its dual company heritage. The platform was the 1953 Studebaker Starliner. The engine and automatic transmission, were both products of the Packard arm of the corporation.

The management of Studebaker-Packard probably felt the car would appeal to both Studebaker and Packard fans. However, the opposite happened. The Packard power plant never generated much interest among most Studebaker fans. The Packard crowd also failed to embrace this illegitimate offspring of orphaned parents. As a matter of fact, the old car hobby, in general, has been an apathetic audience.

Yet, the model has a lot going for it. The styling is clean and crisp, placing it squarely in the 1950s era. The modest fins hint at the excesses which would come as the decade unfolded. The power was potent, with Packard's 275 horsepower, 352 cubic inch V-8, crammed into the engine compartment. With style by Studebaker, power by Packard, the combination should have been a natural. It appeared to be the right car at the right time, yet it never achieved acceptance with the motoring public.

The car certainly had plenty of top end speed. A NASCAR Official Certificate of Speed, dated February 21 1956, shows Wallace Chandler attaining a measured mile speed of 127.343 mph in a 1956 Golden Hawk. Many long time owners reported speeds beyond 130.

So why did the Golden Hawk for 1956 fail to live up to its potential? Word on the street is that it was too nose heavy. This caused either oversteer or understeer, I'm still not certain, and excessive wheel spin. The car was super when going in a straight line. However, due to the heavy Packard engine, the car did not handle well. At least, this is the accepted opinion.

However, this was not always the case. There was a time when no one seemed to notice the heavy front end. During its inaugural year, the 1956 Golden Hawk was given high marks in almost every category, including handling.

Several magazines, of the period, printed test drive reports. Tom McCahill had the only negative commentary on the car's handling. Here are some of the comments:

Mechanix Illustrated April 1956 Tom McCahill: "Due to the tremendous torque of the engine (380 foot-pounds @ 2800 rpm) and due to the fact that the Hawk is quite a nose heavy car (because of its heavy engine), it is almost impossible to make a fast getaway start on any surface without considerable wheel spinning."

Auto Age March 1956 Staff Report: "59% of the total weight was on the front wheels and 41% was on the rear wheels. These figures are entirely compatible with present-day passenger car practice and should serve to dispel the doubts of anyone who believes that the Golden Hawk is any more nose heavy than other makes. The tenacity with which our Golden Hawk stayed stuck to the road through the most violent road race maneuvers was considered exceptional. Only in the fastest turns did the rear end show any signs of breaking loose, this being a simple matter to correct."

Motor Life January 1956 Ken Fermoye: "I was able to get around the not-too-steeply banked corners at close to an indicated 90 mph. The car felt solid at those speeds, gave no indication that it was near the point of breaking loose. Over the various paved road courses at the proving



Drawing by Ron Meyer

What an interesting concept. Take a big engine, intended for a larger, heavier model, and stuff it into a smaller, lighter car. Sound familiar? Could this be one of America's first muscle cars?

ground, the Golden Hawk maintained its footing quite well, although we didn't attempt any really drastic cornering maneuvers. The ride was comfortable at all times."

Motor Life Oct 1956 Ken Fermoye: "This car had 100,000 miles on it when I ran it through its paces. At one point I hit an unexpected bend of diminishing radius a shade faster than was comfortable. I was running in overdrive second and punched the throttle to try to power thru. It worked out all right, but I had an anxious moment as the front end munched down and the tail started to come around. This 100,000 miles later test indicated to me that Studebaker has some basis for claiming that it builds high quality products. When you can put an automobile thru 100,000 miles of back breaking testing and have it wind up performing as well as this Golden Hawk - you must be building 'em right!"

Motorsport Jan-Feb 1956 Bill Holland: "The day I arrived to make the tests, it rained all day, but we decided to make

the tests anyway, so keep in mind everything we did in this test was on a wet surface. We then did a few fairly fast laps around the three mile track going into the turns about 85 to 90, sliding a little but with good control and recovery at all times. There is some lean noticeable on the corners, but not excessive, due to the low suspension of the Golden Hawk.”

Speed Age March 1956 Bill Holland: “I was impressed immediately with the tremendous acceleration of the car. Floor-boarded, it took off with hardly a trace of wheel spin and roared with turbine-like smoothness well up over the 100 mph mark without any lag or flat spots at all. You may be wondering whether or not the car is hard to drive or even if it’s safe. I will say definitely that this automobile is not a compromise in any way between safety and performance.”

Speed Age July 1956 Jimmy Reece: “We tested the Chrysler 300B, Chevrolet Corvette, Ford Thunderbird, and Studebaker Golden Hawk, for both acceleration from a standing start through the measured quarter mile and for zero to 60 mph performance. In each case, the Hawk was by far the fastest, taking off with a neck snapping burst of speed that was impressive, to say the least.”

Comparison of acceleration

	1/4 mile	0-60 mph	
Golden Hawk	17.01	7.8	
Corvette		17.12	8.4
Thunderbird	17.21	8.6	
Chrysler 300-B	17.80	9.1	

It would seem that a Golden Hawk would have no chance against these cars, if it had such wheel spinning characteristics as Tom McCahill had indicated. Someone must have found a way to keep the Golden Hawk’s tires glued to the pavement.

The report from the 1956 *Auto Age* issue addressed the concerns of weight distribution and handling. In both instances, the report discounted these as totally acceptable, and compatible with other cars of the time. Virtually all major magazine road test reports at the time were very complimentary.

However, in the ensuing years, those reports have been forgotten, or their message clouded by other documents. The prevailing opinion is that the 1956 Golden Hawk is a snow plow, with such a heavy front end, that it can barely make a turn without running off the road and settling in the corn field.

How did the 1956 model come by this reputation? Ironically, the culprit turned out to be 1957 Golden Hawk. As shown in the reports above, there was very little criticism of the handling or heavy front end on the Golden Hawk for 1956. Whenever it was mentioned, it was treated as insignificant. Once the 1957 model appeared, all that changed.

Performance figures from *Motor Trend*, *Hot Rod*, and *Sports Cars Illustrated* indicated that the 1956 and 1957 Golden Hawks were very similar in straight line performance. Again, this belies the theory of excessive wheel spin on takeoff. So, the big difference in the two models was in handling. This is when the crucifixion of the 1956 model really began to gain a footing. Here’s what some of the road tests indicated:

Motor Trend January 1957 Staff Report: “Last year’s Golden Hawk had the weight distribution of a blackjack. The heavy Packard engine, mounted well forward in the otherwise light car, caused the rear wheels to have at most times, only the loosest kind of relationship to the highway. Studebaker powered Hawks, on the other hand, handled beautifully. This year, the light engine with a supercharger (that only weighs about 40 pounds installed) proves to be an ideal combination for both performance and hauling though reliability may suffer.”

Motor Life December 1956 Ken Formoyle: “Why the switch (in engines)? There’s undoubtedly some production and financial reasons, involved, but the desire for a better handling car was probably an important factor. The larger (Packard) V-8 furnished plenty of torque and horsepower - although the performance didn’t seem quite up to its potential - but was awfully heavy.”

“As a result, Golden Hawks last year didn’t handle as well as they might have - especially since they were billed as sports type cars. They certainly had sports styling and performance but handling wasn’t on the same high plane.

This has changed the weight distribution from 59 per cent front, 41 percent rear, to approximately 57 per cent front, 43 per cent rear.... And taking that 100 lbs., or so, off the front end has made a big difference in handling.”

Sports Cars Illustrated 1957 Albert Prokop: “Many of the idiosyncrasies peculiar to its predecessors were inherited by the new Hawk, and the resultant problems were passed as part of the legacy to the present engineers. They did with what they had and what they did with it, they did well. Every change, every alteration was a benefit, and this became more obvious each day we had the car.”

Wow! That is quite a change in just one year. Virtually all the kudos the 1957 model received, were at the expense of the 1956 version. It seems that less effort was spent praising the improvements in the 1957 Golden Hawk, than were spent in degrading the 1956 Golden Hawk. Yet the 1956 model was the same car it always had been, the same car everyone wrote such nice things about, only a year earlier.

Richard M. Langworth summed it up in his superb 1979 book, *Studebaker - the Postwar Years*. While citing the remarks made by Tom McCahill. Langworth wrote, “Interesting, no other tester condemned the Golden Hawk for nose-heaviness at the time. But in 1957, when the Packard engine gave way to the supercharged 289, they outdid themselves to say what an improvement it was.”

It wasn't that the 1956 model was that bad. It was simply that the 1957 model was an improvement. But rather than comment on the improvement, everyone seemed obliged to suddenly explain how bad the 1956 model was. It was as though they just didn't mention this fact in 1956, but had to stress that they knew about it all along.

What made the 1957 Golden Hawk so much better? Most people think that replacing the heavy Packard V-8 with the much lighter Studebaker 289 cubic inch V-8 allowed for better weight distribution in the 1957 model. This is simply not the case, or is only partially true. Let's look at this a little more closely.

The New Packard V8 Engine, a paper by W. E. Schwieder, Packard Division, Studebaker - Packard Corp., was presented at the SAE Golden Anniversary Passenger-Car, Body, and Materials Meeting in Detroit, March 2, 1955.

Table 2 of that paper contained a comparison of the weights of the 1954 Straight-8 and the new 1955 V-8. The data for the 1955 V8 is shown below:

Table 2 - 1955 Engine Weights
All weights are in pounds)

Cylinder Block, Bare	210
Cylinder Head(s), Bare (cast iron)	128
Crankshaft	56
Ultramatic Flywheel and Ring Gear Assembly	8
Connecting-Rod Assembly, Complete Set	14
Intake Manifold	28
Exhaust Manifold(s)	23
Camshaft	10
Valve Train without Camshaft	27
Engine, Complete Assembly, Including all	
Accessories. Except Air Cleaner, Dry	698
Radiator, Complete with Core and Tank	22
Engine and Radiator, Dry, Total Weight	720

Excluding the radiator, the weight of the Packard V8 is 698 lbs.

1956 Golden Hawk owner, Roy Hastings of Jacksonville FL did some extensive engine weight research on the Studebaker V8. Here is Roy's report:

Many years ago, I weighed the individual components of a Packard V8 and a Studebaker V8 on my bathroom scales. My conclusion at the time, was that the Packard V8 was about 30 pounds heavier than the Studebaker V8. The comparison did not include anything bolted to the rear of the engine, including bell housing, flywheel, clutch, etc.

Data from True Life, Car Life, and Speed Age magazines, list the weight of the Studebaker V8 at 645 lbs, without the flywheel. The Packard V-8, without the flywheel is 690 lbs. This is a difference of 45 lbs. In either case, this is far less than the 100 lbs difference indicated in some of the magazine reports shown earlier.

If nothing else, the above shows that any weight distribution correction was not created by replacing engines. In fact, with the lighter engine under the hood, the

shipping weight of the 1957 Golden Hawk weighed 40 lbs more (3400 lbs) than a 1956 Golden Hawk (3360 lbs.)

How can that be? The McCulloch supercharger allowed the 1957 Golden Hawk to achieve the same 275 horsepower figure as the 1956 model. Most reports indicate that the unit weighed just about 40 lbs. I wanted a more accurate figure, so I contacted Jon Myer of Duncan Falls OH. Here's his report.

I have an original mounting bracket and most of the rest of this type stuff in stock so I just weighed everything. The weights on 57 Golden Hawk items are bracket, arm, spring, pulley 10 lbs, air box 6 lbs, S/C elbow 1 lb. Add another 2-5 lbs for hoses, bolts some type of bonnet etc. and the total would be around 55 lbs. You can't add in carb, special oil fill pipe, thermostat housing or air cleaner as the normal engine had these also.

So how do we explain the fact that the 1957 was more evenly balanced front to rear?. If the Studebaker V-8 weighs 40 lbs less than the Packard V-8, and you add a 55 lb supercharger to the mix, wouldn't that make the 1957 even more nose heavy than the 1956?

Many people believe the answer involves the engine's location. They claim the Studebaker-Packard engineers simply did a better job of engine placement in the 1957 Golden Hawk. Moving the engine rearward led to a more even weight distribution. However, based on the data from the magazine reports, here's how the math works out:

YEAR	WGT	FRONT	TOTAL
1956	3360	59%	1982 LBS.
1957	3400	57%	1938 LBS
	DIFFERENCE		44 LBS.

After all the commotion, we find that the front end weight reduction, on the 1957 model, amounts to 44 lbs. Not 100 lbs as we've been told.

Excluding some styling changes, the consensus seems to be that, from a handling standpoint, the 1957 Golden Hawk was an improvement over the 1956 model. That's nice, but, is the 1956 Golden Hawk all that bad? If we believe later articles about the car, it certainly is, and maybe worse.

Previously, I mentioned Richard M. Langworth's fine book, *Studebaker-The Postwar years (1979)*. He alluded to how the 1956 Golden Hawk bashing began when the 1957 was introduced? In that same book he had this to say about the 1956:

"Unfortunately the Golden Hawk had a drawback - it was nose heavy. The Packard engine weighed about one hundred pounds more than the Studebaker 289, itself no lightweight. This made the car understeer with a single-minded consistency, and sometimes even interfered with acceleration."

Mr. Langworth was even more critical in 1991. Here are his comments:

STUDEBAKER-ILLUSTRATED BUYER'S GUIDE 1991

Richard M. Langworth: *"The 1956 model with its Clipper engine is a nose-heavy beast given to what in my experience can only be described as final and irrevocable understeer. It plows with a vengeance and most examples have long since settled into a pronounced front-end rake with weakened coil springs and dicey handling."*

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The assault continues in more modern writing. Consider this from Mike Mueller's excellent book, when writing about the 1956 model:

FIFTIES MUSCLE - The Dawn of High Performance

1996 Mike Mueller: *"With a single four-barrel carburetor and dual exhausts, the Golden Hawk's 352 V-8 rated at 275 horsepower, had enough muscle to help produce 0 to 60 times in the eight-second range. On the flip side, the engine was quite large (725 pounds), meaning the Golden Hawk was very nose heavy. Handling suffered accordingly."*

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Mike wrote more in a magazine article a few years later.

Cars & Parts January 2002 Mike Mueller: *"Curves were another story, however. While all that Packard power did make the Golden Hawk one of Detroit's fastest performers off the line in 1956, all that Packard V-8 weight - roughly 725 pounds - compromised the car's handling as a pronounced forward weight bias came along as part of the deal. At best, overall handling was above average compared to typical American cars. But road worthiness came up a bit short in comparison with the truly agile (again from an American perspective) Corvette and reasonably spry Thunderbird."*

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As a point of interest, the pictures used by Mike in both his book and the magazine article, were of my car. I remember discussing the nose heavy attributes of the car with him. I told him that I had never noticed any problems of that nature. To his credit, he did point out that handling was above average for typical American cars. It was with the sports cars of the era that it didn't fare as well.

As recently as August 2004, the nose heavy issue still presented itself. I received an Email as I was preparing this article. The sender was Ken Fermoye, author of the Motor Life articles mentioned earlier. Here is a portion of Ken's message:

"My most memorable drive was in the Golden Hawk with the big Packard V8. I was timed at 129 mph around the oval - which actually was slightly egg-shaped, with a somewhat smaller turning radius at one end than the other. A Studebaker engineer I knew well at the time rode with me and warned me about the tighter turn so I was prepared for it."

"My only complaint was that the heavy V8 put about 63% of the car's weight on the front wheels and only 37% on

the rear wheels. The result was pronounced oversteering and it was easy to break the rear wheels loose. Otherwise, it was a fine car with great performance and gorgeous styling."

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It was true then, and still true today. No one can resist mentioning the front end weight problem. Worth noting is that Richard Langworth said the car had a tendency to understeer, but Ken said it had an oversteer problem. I've been confused on this for years. It must be one or the other, but who cares? It isn't a problem for today's hobbyist.

I think Mike Mueller summed it up best with his statement about the handling being above average compared to typical American cars. The 1956 was billed as a family sports car. Sports car fun with seating for five. This placed it in new territory. It wasn't one or the other, and certainly not both. At best, it was a nice compromise. Because of its sports car billing, most writers compared it to the sports car field, and ignored the family car genre.

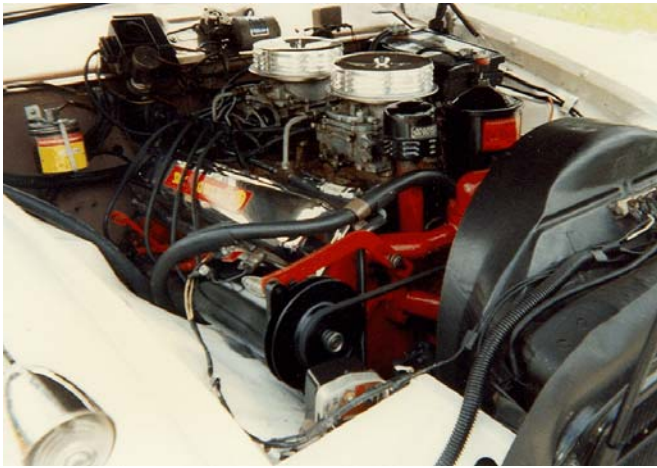
Although Studebaker-Packard initiated it, comparing the 1956 Golden Hawk to a Corvette or Thunderbird makes no sense. The two smaller cars are a totally different breed. Let's take a different approach. Try cramming five people into a Vette or Bird and see how many body parts are hanging over the side. It could get really ugly when you put the top on and closed the doors.

On the other hand, price notwithstanding, the 1956 Golden Hawk compares favorably with the Chevrolet Bel Air, Ford Victoria, and Plymouth Fury. Unfortunately, an independent manufacturer the size of Studebaker couldn't compete financially with the likes of GM, Ford, and Chrysler. The Golden Hawk cost several hundred dollars more. In 1950s dollars, the price was too high to induce many buyers to jump ship. Most stayed loyal to the big three offerings.

Despite all the bad press, that 352 cubic inch Packard V-8 is a good looking engine. While it may not beat everything on the road, it certainly gets the job done. The only major problem was valve lifter noise, due to a design flaw in the oil pump, which can easily be corrected.

Considering that the engine was only produced for two years (1955-56), it has done pretty well. Several more years of engineering development, would undoubtedly have produced a superb power plant, if Packard's history of excellence is any yardstick. The Studebaker V-8 was in its sixth year of production by 1956, and improvements were being made each year.

Then there's the fact that a 1956 Golden Hawk could be outfitted with a dual four barrel carburetor setup, borrowed from the Packard Caribbean. Though no cars came from the factory with this hefty configuration, many dealers were happy to perform this modification for their customers, for a price. The result was a power plant delivering around 300 hp.



Not Low Carb! The engine compartment of a 1956 golden Hawk with a dual four barrel carburetor setup (Frank Ambrogio photo)

And if that still wasn't enough to get you going, you could order a supercharger for the Packard V-8. The same company, McCulloch, that supplied the supercharger for the Studebaker V-8, had a model available for the Packard V-8 as well. The supercharger on the 1957 Golden Hawk kicked up the horsepower from 210 to 275. A similar boost to the 1956 Golden Hawk would have it cranking out nearly 360 horsepower.

As much as I'd like to, I've never driven a 1957 Golden Hawk, so I can't make a comparison between it and a 1956. However, I have never had a problem with the handling on either of my 1956 Golden Hawks. The automatic version is a nice comfortable car and a fine cruiser. Yet, it can still move out pretty well, when I just can't help myself.

The other car, a manual 3 speed with overdrive, is a completely different bird. The original owner, Jim Thomas of Muncey PA, told me that he had the engine out of the car seven times. The reason? *"One day, while driving home from work, I got beat by a Chevy. I swore that would never happen again."* He decided to do a little "beefing" up of the engine. I'm not sure how Jim fared in future Chevy encounters, but flooring the accelerator pedal, in any gear, is quite a kick in the gas.

With twin Carter AFB carburetors, Iskendarian solid lifter cam, polished and ported heads, 2-1/4" exhaust, and dual point Mallory ignition, it has surprised many hobbyists who thought they knew better.

Unfortunately, a reputation is tough to shed. Once the seed is planted, the weed will grow and it is virtually impossible to change the perception. Probably the best example is the innovative Corvair by Chevrolet introduced for 1960. It was enjoying a good deal of success, as a sporty little performer. However, once Ralph Nader suggested that the car was unsafe at any speed, even mighty General Motors couldn't stop the bleeding.

I read somewhere that copy cat reporting is laced with folk myth. This leads to word of mouth perpetuation of that myth. Our society tends to listen closely to the person who

can point out the deficiency. When a similar situation occurs in the future, we tend to wax eloquently, by repeating what we heard before. We become the copy cat.



Vroom mates - No matter how you look at it, the 1956 Golden Hawk makes a bold statement (Frank Ambrogio photo)

Studebaker offered heavy duty springs and shocks for this model. When I replaced the tired front and rear springs which had served for over 40 years, I went with the heavy duty option. Strangely, it wasn't the front springs which had collapsed. It was the rear springs which had sagged the most. The rear of the car sat lower than the front. I didn't notice much difference in the ride, but I could see the road better through the rear view mirror.

Before completing this article, I decided to go on my own fact finding mission. Instead of relying on second hand information, I could check the weight distribution ratio myself. I had both cars weighed for total weight, front end weight, and rear end weight. Each car had a full tank of gas. Here are the figures:

1956 Golden Hawks

Equipment Twin-Ultramatic, PS.

1. Front end weight = 2120 lbs.
2. Rear end weight = 1640 lbs.
3. Total car weight = 3760 lbs.

Weight distribution

Front = 56.38% Rear = 43.62%.

Equipment Manual 3 sp, PS, Dual Carbs.

1. Front end weight = 2140 lbs.
2. Rear end weight = 1640 lbs.
3. Total car weight = 3780 lbs.

Weight distribution

Front = 56.61%, Rear = 43.38%.

J. D. Nutgrass of Bedford KY had his 1957 Golden Hawk weighed, and reports these results:

1957 Golden Hawk

Equipment Flight-o-Matic, PS, PB.

1. Front end weight = 2120 lbs.
2. Rear end weight = 1630 lbs.
3. Total car weight = 3750 lbs.

Weight distribution

Front = 56.53%, rear = 43.47%.

Obviously, the weight distribution has little to do with any major handling differences. Owner Jack Vines of Spokane WA has a different theory. Here are Jack's comments:

"If you weigh the 1956 and 1957 Golden Hawk, you won't find much difference. The Packard V8 was very little heavier than the Studebaker V8 with the supercharger. The main reason the handling seemed different was because Studebaker changed the rear leaf springs. Up through 1956, the leaf springs were symmetrical, same length front and rear. This gives a smooth ride. In 1957 and later, they made the front part shorter and stiffer, the better to control torque. This changed the handling and the road feel, also."

"Because the '56 GH was the first authentic Studebaker performance car, it was driven harder and faster than the earlier cars. This tended to bring out the understeering tendencies equally present in earlier hard tops - they just weren't going as fast!"

Charlie Hackenberger, of Thompsettown PA, has driven Studebakers since he was 18. He has owned 1956, 57, and 58 Golden Hawks. In the 1960s he raced at local drag strips with a 1956 Golden Hawk and a 1957 Silver Hawk. We had a rather lengthy, phone conversation. When all was said and done, Charlie felt that the 1956 Golden Hawk handled about the same as the 1957 and 1958 models. He didn't notice any appreciable difference. Imagine that!

I still contend that any handling and nose heavy characteristics are of no consequence for today's driver. Today's collector simply doesn't drive the car the way the test drivers did in 1956. I've driven my Golden Hawks for 21 years. Never did I overshoot a turn, land in a ditch, or bounce off a curb.

I don't think it was a problem when the cars were new either. Here is what Owner Bill Glass of Valhalla NY. Says:

"We had a 1956 Golden Hawk when I was a kid. My mother worked in NY City (Bronx) and we lived in the suburbs, 28 miles each way. She drove the Hawk, to work everyday from 1959 to 1962, and never found that she was losing control in snow storms (big ones - where back then they plowed two and three days after the storm), rain, sleet etc."

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I'm sorry, but I just don't buy this notion that the 1956 Golden Hawk is any more nose heavy than other American cars of the 1950s. It is still hard to explain the vast difference between 1956 reports and those offered in 1957.

Any criticism was the result of driving the car to extremes, to which the average motorist didn't subject it. Much of the information relating to the 1956 Golden Hawk seems to have little basis in fact. Closer evaluation shows fault with almost every negative comment. The handling problems detailed in later years have little meaning in today's collector car world.

If you've shied away from buying a 1956 Golden Hawk because of the nose heavy or oversteer/understeer condition, you are just cheating yourself.

I know I'm not going to change anyone's opinion with this writing. When anyone writes, or talks, about the 1956 Golden Hawk, it is certain that a remark will be made about the heavy Packard engine pulling the front end down to the pavement. A few pages, written by one owner, are not going to change the prevailing sentiment which has been propagated for nearly half a century. I've read and heard this countless times over the past 25 years, and I see no reason for that to change.

However, if you like the styling of 1950s era cars, and the sound and feel of a big V-8, the 1956 Golden Hawk is certainly worth considering. Once you accept the handling problem propaganda, you'll find that this car measures up well with any car from that era.

I enjoy driving, showing, and talking about both my 1956 Golden Hawks. And there is this added bonus that I love repeating. Whenever someone says, "you just never see these cars around anymore", I simply reply, "Oh really? I see two of them every day!"

For more information, visit the 1956 Studebaker Golden Hawk Owners Register web site at www.1956GoldenHawk.com