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2008 Chrysler Sebring Convertible Product Heritage

March 29, 2007, Auburn Hills, Mich. - When Americans think of convertibles, they think of the Chrysler Sebring Convertible — and little wonder. Just when it seemed the convertible was lost forever a quarter-century ago, Chrysler brought it back with panache — and the vehicle that evolved from that revolutionary gesture has been an American favorite ever since.

Open-air motoring has been part of the driving experience since motorized carriages began replacing horses at the turn of the 20th Century. The first Chrysler, the 1924 Chrysler Six, was a convertible “touring car.” Throughout the company’s history, each of its brands — Chrysler, Dodge, Plymouth, Imperial and DeSoto (and, after 1987, Jeep®) — featured memorable drop-top models. Especially noteworthy among those dozens of vehicles are the 1932-33 Chrysler Imperial convertibles, including the distinctive dual-cowl phaetons; the 1939 Plymouth convertible, which featured the first power-operated top in the industry; the renowned 1946-49 Chrysler Town & Country “woody” convertibles; the colorful, two- and three-toned Chrysler, Dodge, Plymouth and DeSoto convertibles of the mid-50s, and the stylish but scarce 1970-71 Plymouth Barracuda convertibles from the muscle-car era.

The convertible’s popularity reached its zenith in 1965. Sales of all convertible models then began a rapid descent, prompted by changes in public taste, air conditioning and the recent availability of retractable glass roof panels on some hardtop models. Never large sellers and expensive to produce, convertibles began disappearing from automakers’ catalogs in the early '70s. With the discontinuance of the Cadillac Eldorado convertible in 1976, the breed became officially extinct. Or so it appeared.

Just seven years later, Chrysler, extracting itself from its greatest financial crisis, was creating derivatives from the highly successful front-wheel-drive K-car platform that had brought ever-increasing numbers of customers back to its dealers’ showrooms. Amid the K-based coupes, sedans, station wagons and hardtops of the time, might there be marketing advantage in resurrecting the convertible? There was, and soon the droptop dream cruiser came back to American streets and highways in the form of a 1982 Chrysler LeBaron.

Converted from LeBaron coupe bodies by a supplier in suburban Detroit, these first renaissance Chrysler convertibles were more refined than other members of the K-car family, with vinyl bucket seats, a center console, standard automatic transaxle and a power top with tailored boot. A high-end Mark Cross option package included a standard 2.6-liter, four-cylinder engine, leather/vinyl seats, air conditioning and power windows and door locks.

Encouraged by the early response to this sole American-made convertible, Chrysler expanded the selection of available options, especially on the Mark Cross models. Between 1983 and 1986, buyers could purchase a limited-edition “retro” version of the famous Town & Country convertible of the late '40s. Chrysler described this LeBaron-based interpretation as “the re-introduction of an American classic.” This time, the “timber” framing and “wood” paneling were made of sturdy plastic rather than ash and mahogany – but, unlike the original Town & Country, it didn’t require periodic revarnishing.

The most memorable of the LeBaron convertibles would appear in the 1987 model year, when a new “J-body” platform replaced the K-car and its angular architecture with a smoothly contoured body, featuring curved rocker panels, a curved interpretation of the trademark Chrysler “waterfall” grille and retractable headlight covers. A 2.5-liter, naturally aspirated four-cylinder engine was standard; at various times a 2.2-liter turbocharged four-cylinder and two versions of a 2.5-liter turbocharged four-cylinder were optionally available.

The “J-body” LeBaron convertible was a refreshing alternative to other Detroit offerings in a period when American car design was struggling to find a new direction. During its first year, the legendary driver Carroll Shelby piloted a striking red LeBaron convertible to start the Indianapolis 500-mile Race. Soon, the new LeBaron’s popular reception was reflected in Chrysler sales figures. Between 1986, the last year of the K-based convertible, and 1988, the second

year for the J-body version, sales almost doubled – from 19,684 units to 38,197.

Sensing it had a winner on its hands, Chrysler in 1988 created two versions of its hot new convertible – the base, or Highline model, and a more fully equipped Premium version. The Premium convertible featured standard automatic transmissions, power door locks and heated mirrors and automatic temperature control, plus a tilt steering wheel, cruise control, power antenna, cassette player and two-tone paint. Still other appearance and convenience options could be added to create a “fully loaded” factory droptop.

In the 1989 model year, the first of several GT/GTC sport packages appeared, giving LeBaron convertible buyers a choice of higher-performing turbocharged engines mated to five-speed manual or three-speed automatic transmissions. The car’s peak performance capability would be reached the following year, when an optional 3.0-liter Mitsubishi-built V-6 became available. Now LeBaron convertibles, brought closer to parity in weight-to-power ratio, could cruise in the manner of their celebrated V-8-equipped open-top ancestors.

For eight years, the LeBaron convertible brought the excitement of open-air driving to tens of thousands of buyers in a compelling, affordable package. By 1993, the interior had been restyled and the exterior freshened with a new grille, exposed headlamps and newly combined red and amber tail lamps. But time was running out; the vehicle was nearing the end of its life cycle, and its replacement, the first generation of the Chrysler Sebring convertible, would arrive in the 1996 model year.

The LeBaron was the benchmark convertible of its era, remembered fondly by many and still driven enthusiastically by some. The all-new 2008 Chrysler Sebring Convertible builds on the LeBaron’s reputation by bringing the fun of sun-drenched driving to new generations of Chrysler buyers and coupling it with today’s innovative automotive technology and a striking new design.

	<u>1990 LeBaron Convertible</u>	<u>2008 Sebring Convertible</u>
Wheelbase:	256 cm (100.6 in.)	277 cm (108.9 in.)
Length:	470 cm (185.0 in.)	492 cm (193.8)
Weight:	1,315 kg (2,900 lbs.)	1,796 kg (3,959 lbs.)
Engine (<i>one example</i>):	MMC V-6	V-6
Horsepower:	105 kw (141 h.p.)	175 kw (235 h.p.)
Displacement:	3.0 L (183 cu. in.)	3.5L (213.6 cu. in.)
Bore/Stroke:	3.59 in. x 2.99 in. (9.1 cm x 7.6 cm)	3.78 in. x 3.19 in. (9.6 cm x 8.1 cm)
Compression ratio:	8.9:1	10.0:1
Transmission:	Three-speed automatic	Six-speed automatic
Suspension:	<u>Front:</u> Torsion-bar <u>Rear:</u> Asymmetrical leaf	<u>Front:</u> MacPherson strut, coil spring <u>Rear:</u> Multi-link independent, coil spring
Brakes:	Four-wheel disc	Anti-lock four-wheel disc

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