

HEMMINGS
CLASSIC CAR

STATION WAGONS OF THE '70s COMPARISON



Hemmings Classic Car

#59

THE DEFINITIVE ALL-AMERICAN COLLECTOR-CAR MAGAZINE

AVANTI

BUYING TIPS
TO OWNING THIS
POST-WAR GEM



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HEMMINGS CLASSIC CAR #59

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WILLYS WAGON
UTILITARIAN
PERFECTION

LAST OF THE

It's FORD vs. OLDSMOBILE vs. CHRYSLER in a battle of

Words and photography by Jeff Koch

It's been the worst-kept secret in collector cars for about 15 years now: Station wagons are cool again. A generation of kids who remember growing up in the back seat of their parents' wagons—and who rejected them in order to flock to minivans in the 1980s—have now done an about-face. Combin-

ing the old-car hobby and their family with cherished memories of older days, a station wagon seems an easy, inexpensive way to get everyone involved in the collector-car fun.

Alas, finding nice older wagons, even when they weren't on our collective radar, has been a near-impos-



LEVIATHANS

the full-size SEVENTIES STATION WAGONS

sible task: Even higher-end machines like the three fine examples on these pages were used as tools, family haulers or double-duty work wagons that absorbed merciless beatings and careless lack of maintenance. There was never an inkling that station wagons would be special to the broader collector-car market, and

later on, plenty gave up their lives to provide bits and pieces for other, far more valuable two-door and convertible models that may have shared sheetmetal or mechanical bits.

We should have known better. America has never fallen out of love with the station wagon concept —



FORD COUNTRY SQUIRE LTD

we've just called it different things along the way. In the 1980s, they were minivans, a crossbreed of van and station wagon that offered all of the utility of a wagon but with a smaller footprint. Despite the full-frame Jeep Wagoneer having existed since the 1960s, the so-called sport-utility vehicle (or SUV) caught on in the 1990s: It's a station wagon on a truck chassis, and serves many of the same commercial and domestic functions. Earlier this decade, Dodge called its Magnum a "crossover" vehicle, when anyone over 12 years old knew darn well that it was a station wagon.

Cadillac, Imperial and Lincoln never had readily available wagons in the showrooms in earlier eras, but all of the other GM, Chrysler and Ford divisions sure did. And this cross-section is why we're here today: to evaluate the last of the Big Three's full-size, rear-drive station wagons. To do so, we gathered one GM, one Chrysler and one Ford to duke it out.

Let's meet the players. Our fully restored 1976 Oldsmobile Custom Cruiser is owned by Larry Camuso of San Jose, California; the 455-cu.in. V-8-powered beast sports a set of polycast Super Stock IV wheels from a 1971-era Olds 88, and a mega-plush Regency-grade Olds interior that was unavailable on wagons, but otherwise is completely restored



Pictures are deceptive: The Country Squire is the lightest of the bunch. This style lasted through 1978, when Ford downsized its full-size sedan for the last time.

back to factory-stock condition. In 1976, a six-passenger wagon like Larry's cost \$5,563, and 2,572 were built; the \$5,705 nine-passenger model was more plentiful, with 3,626 built in its swan-song season. It weighs within a suitcase of 5,000 pounds.

The 440-cu.in. V-8-powered 1977 Chrysler Town & Country station wagon belongs to Brian McCann of Sunnyvale, California; with just 55,000 original

miles, this unrestored wagon boasts power windows and seats, a tilt/telescoping steering wheel, vent windows and a heavy-duty suspension. The six-passenger-seat models cost \$6,461 in 1977; only 1,930 were built. Plump for the nine-passenger model, shelling out \$6,647 as the first owner of this Chrysler did, and you've got one of 5,345 built. It, too, flirts with the two-and-a-half-ton barrier.





Small wheel makes it easy to slide in, but the smallest door-opening of the three makes it tough to squeeze in. Lots of vinyl inside—it's acceptably plush without feeling opulent.



This DiNoc-covered cross-window piece was meant to help keep the back window clean.



The speedometer is more easily pegged now, thanks to a few minor engine tweaks.



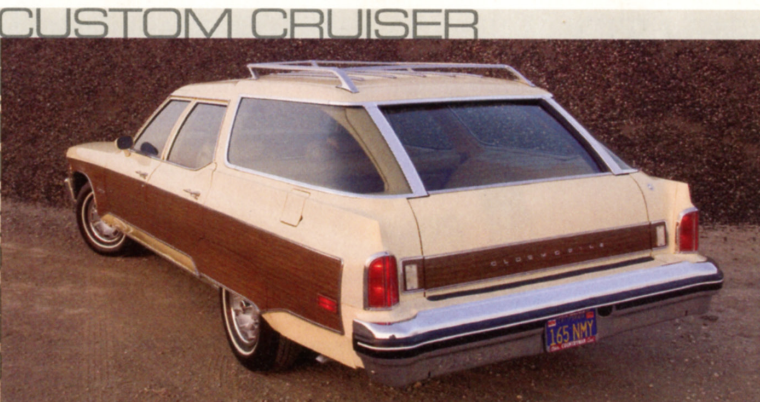
Unlike the other full-size models, Country Squire features opening headlamp doors.

The 58,000-original-mile 1977 Ford Country Squire station wagon belongs to Trey Longmire of Reno, Nevada; he and feature Chrysler owner Brian are cousins, making full-size wagons something of a family affair. Options included power windows (including tailgate window) and locks, four-wheel disc brakes, heavy-duty suspension, limited-slip rear differential, and Golden Glow Metallic paint, among other items. This original California car is fitted with the top engine option available, a 173hp, two-barrel 400-cu.in. V-8, but Trey has compensated for the comparatively low displacement (and his hometown's altitude) by adding two choice pieces of Edelbrock equipment: a 650 CFM carburetor and an aluminum dual-plane intake manifold. This, plus dual exhaust, should more than make up for the power deficit. Ford's well-equipped wagon was priced at \$5,866; a total of 90,711 full-size wagons were built in 1977, with Squire production not able to be broken out. In the group, the Ford is a lightweight: It's just under 4,700 pounds.

OLDSMOBILE CUSTOM CRUISER



OLDSMOBILE CUSTOM CRUISER



It looks and feels factory and it uses factory parts, but Custom Cruisers didn't have the Regency interior; owner demanded it during rebuild. It's the cushiest of the bunch.



We've been in hotels that offer less room and comfort than the back of this Olds.



Gas level, gear selection, speed. Surely that's all you really need to know?



Plush pillow-feel door panel a Regency item, not stock—although it feels like it could be.

Our two '77s are functionally comparable to the '76 models, so these were all true showroom competitors. Truth be told, a Mercury Colony Park would be the perfect fit with the other two machines here, but in Squire trim, we felt that the Ford had enough luxury doodads and gewgaws that it was Mercury-plush where it needed to be.

Inside, all three feel equally spacious, and so the difference truly is in the details. Let's start with the Oldsmobile. It offers tilt wheel, all power options, a speedometer that goes to 100 MPH (which taller drivers will need to scrunch down to see completely) and plenty of room to get comfortable. The frameless door also shuts most solidly here. All of the buttons and handles move as if carved from solid ingot. Purely on atmosphere, the Custom Cruiser emerged as our favorite to simply sit in and touch—it feels the richest, but we're mindful that the slightly non-stock interior helps make it so.

While the Chrysler's doors also shut solidly, the controls also feel a degree less sure—the ignition lock and window switches, including the power vent windows, all offered a little bit of play, and didn't have as smooth an action as the Olds' did. Whether that's Seventies build quality 30 years on, the restored Olds offering an impossible standard, or something in between, we can't tell. The Town & Country's gauges are all grouped together and easy to read, and the speedometer goes around a dial, rather than across a line of numbers as in the Olds; it, too, goes up to 100 MPH. The Town & Country also has a seatbelt buzzer that might be the most annoying we've heard in an American car—a throttled rasp that sounds like something's breaking, or else about to.

The Ford offers a mixed message as you slide in: The steering wheel feels smaller in diameter, so you can more easily slide your legs underneath without fiddling around beforehand, but the door opening itself feels the narrowest of the three, thus making it that much harder to



CHRYSLER TOWN & COUNTRY



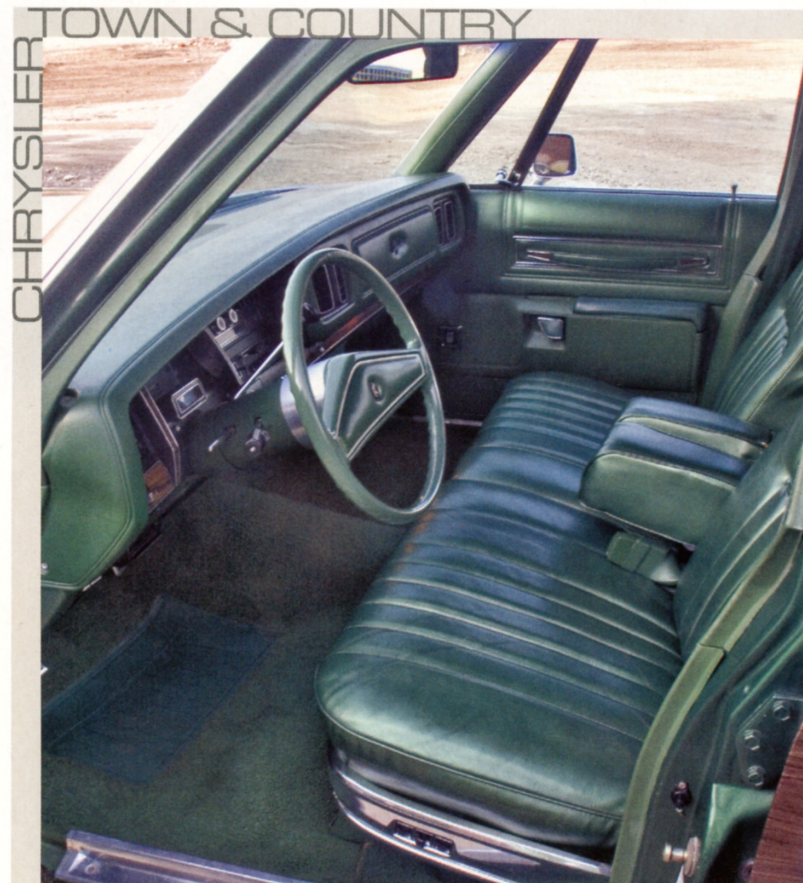
Full-size Chrysler station wagons weren't common even when new in the late '70s.

squeeze inside in the first place. Once you're inside, though, it's as roomy as all the others, although you're faced with an 85 MPH speedometer—the only one of the bunch. It's marginally more spartan in here—no leather, no overstuffed throw-pillow trim—and the feel of the controls splits the difference between the tight Olds and the freer Chrysler knobs. Also, the door panel wobbles slightly as you close it shut behind you.

Time to drive. Here, you'll find the smooth application of power, where torque will silently whisk you to speed without realizing what happened. You don't accelerate so much as gather speed; none of the three wagons are fast, but some feel faster. Let's drop 'em into D and see what results.

Of our trio, the Ford feels quickest. Its engine got the fewest cubic inches, yet is as torquey as the Mopar V-8 from the factory, and is also hauling around about 300 pounds less. Unmodified, it probably would have been competitive with our other two contestants. Yet we have the aftermarket carburetor and exhaust to contend with: Bump up the power and of course it's going to feel quicker. Get into the kick-down gear at a mild cruise and the sounds are a little more super-stock than factory-stock. The apparently stock cam wasn't so aggressive that it shook the chassis; a mild idle lope was audible, but not felt in the cabin. Also, idle speed felt a little on the high side; the carb was jetted for high-altitude Reno. So this one's a bit of a ringer, and not an entirely fair comparison to its brethren. Its shift quality was imperceptible, however; only the engine note clued you in to how (and when) you were shifting.

It's a very close call between the Chrysler and the Oldsmobile, in terms of sheer acceleration, but our seat-of-the-pants judgment has to give the nod to the



CHRYSLER

TOWN & COUNTRY



Sportiest-looking instrument cluster here, though it offered no more information.



Optional third seat allowed tomorrow's adults to entertain/annoy traffic behind.



Taillamps continue into the tailgate, the only one here to adopt this styling cue.

Mopar. Blip the throttle at idle and the car rocks, its emissions-strangled 440 V-8 desperate to show a piece of its former muscle-machine self, yet it quickly settles down into a simmy hiss of an idle that's as smooth as you like. And in back-to-back drives, it simply felt stronger than the Oldsmobile—a surprise, consider-

ing the Olds Custom Cruiser's 30-lbs.ft. torque advantage on paper.

Strangely, the whisper-silent Olds 455 V-8 actually felt like it had more initial power, and you can feel the Turbo 400 transmission's smooth shifting action as it changes into the next gear, but it was clearly straining against the weight.

(Keep in mind that our weight numbers come from printed literature, rather than actual scale figures, and it's entirely possible that the fully restored Olds, with its factory-unavailable premium interior, heavier-than-stock wheels and extra coats of paint, weighs more than the all-original Chrysler.)



Ford and Chrysler offered tailgates that would either swing out or fold down, with the rear window disappearing into the door; only the Oldsmobile's clamshell tailgate would disappear behind the bumper altogether, with its window retracting into the headliner.

Get moving around our improvised test road, however, and the Olds and Chrysler conspire to leave the Ford behind. First, it must be said, there isn't much in the way of road feel being offered up by the power steering on any of the three cars. The Custom Cruiser offered a pillowy-smooth ride with none of the bob, float and weave that cars of this size are famous for, and steering into the turns provided immediate action but sadly little feel. Turning the Chrysler's wheel proved its reactions a tick slower than the Olds' reflexes, offering the expected firmer (but by no means harsh) ride we've come to expect from full-size Chrysler products; the Country Squire's steering was marginally quicker than the New Yorker's, except with a tad more play when going straight, and its ride control efforts were more heard than felt in the cabin.


The Chrysler is hands-down the best road handler of the bunch: The firm ride hinted at its turning prowess, and indeed it feels as if the tall whitewall tires would be ready to give before the chassis would. Next is the Ford, which offers handling that doesn't feel like the body is leaning too much until you straighten out

and the suspension pulls you back into place. The Oldsmobile's handling seems the reverse of the Chrysler's: The newer radial tires manage to keep everything in place despite the most dramatic body lean during cornering of the bunch. This is more in line with what people think of when full-size Seventies American cars come to mind. Yet despite the minute differences between them, we wouldn't hesitate to hop in any of these distinctive wagons for a 500-mile trip.

All good things must come to an end, and it must be said that the power brakes on all three of our wagons worked just fine. We were quite enamored of the Country Squire's optional four-wheel-disc brakes: They stopped us sure, strong and straight every time, with no fuss or drama. The Town & Country's brakes felt nicely modulated, requiring only minimal pedal travel to start slowing things down. Meanwhile, the Custom Cruiser's binders are surprisingly sudden at around-town speeds, clamping down with such force that you strain against your seatbelt if you're not modulating the pedal properly. From higher speeds they bite just as hard, but your momentum keeps you from being thrown forward.

As always, we're beyond choosing winners and losers here. There are aspects of each car that we like: the Chrysler's dial-speedometer and ride, the Olds' plush interior and quality feel, the Ford's sheer accelerative force and four-wheel-disc brakes. Oh, if only the best bits of all three could be combined into a single station wagon.

After a long morning of driving, what stands out is that an owner's attention to detail can make all the difference. The Regency interior wasn't available in the Custom Cruiser, yet the owner's taste demanded it—and the result, created all from Oldsmobile parts, was dynamite. For its part, the Ford's California-restricted power was unleashed by its new, non-California owner with a simple carb, intake and exhaust upgrade.

And so what our test drive underscored was the potential that lies within these and so many other classics: Without destroying any of their hauling capabilities, or veering away from their factory-imposed style, minor tweaks to the factory formula using readily available (and even factory) parts can increase the sheer driving pleasure for all concerned. Even in a two-and-a-half-ton family hauler. 

CHRYSLER TOWN & COUNTRY



FORD COUNTRY SQUIRE LTD



OLDSMOBILE CUSTOM CRUISER



SPECIFICATIONS

	1977 Chrysler Town & Country	1977 Ford LTD Country Squire	1976 Oldsmobile Custom Cruiser
Engine type:	OHV V-8, cast-iron block and cylinder heads	OHV V-8, cast-iron and cylinder heads	OHV V-8, cast-iron and cylinder heads
Displacement:	440-cu.in.	400-cu.in.	455-cu.in.
Bore x Stroke:	4.32 x 3.75 inches	4.00 x 4.00 inches	4.13 x 4.25 inches
Compression ratio:	8.2:1	8:1	8.5:1
Horsepower @ RPM:	195 @ 3,600	173 @ 3,800	190 @ 3,400
Torque @ RPM:	320-lbs.ft. @ 2,000	326-lbs.ft. @ 1,600	350-lbs.ft. @ 2,000
Fuel delivery:	Single Carter four-barrel with Lean-Burn system	Single Edelbrock 650 CFM four-barrel carburetor (Carter AFB, stock)	Single four-barrel Rochester Quadrajet carburetor
Weight:	4,961 pounds	4,674 pounds	5,002 pounds
Pounds per horsepower:	25.44	27.01	26.33