



Nancy Drew's blue roadster, the focus of much fascination for generations of young girls from 1930 to the present, features prominently in the early stories. Many Nancy fans lament the transformation of Nancy's vehicle from roadster to convertible, but the change was inevitable.

What is a roadster?

Decades before Corvettes or Mustangs, roadsters were the sports car of the day. Some even came equipped with special carriers for golf clubs! Clara Bow, the famous "Jazz baby" of the 1920s, had one painted flaming red to match her bobbed hair. Typically though, roadster drivers tended to be male.

Roadsters were designed to accommodate two, or at the most three, people on a single bench seat (I always wondered: how plump could "plump Bess" be if she, Nancy, and George could fit in the roadster?); they did not have a backseat. Most makes offered a choice of trunk or rumble seat (Nancy's blue roadster had a trunk; her maroon roadster had a rumble seat). The spare tire was housed on the side of the car between the driver's front fender and the running board (called a "side mount") or attached to the rear bumper (Nancy variously had both).

Tops could usually be removed entirely. But the distinguishing feature of roadsters was their lack of roll-up glass side windows (a trait shared with touring cars). Getting caught in a storm as Nancy frequently does meant getting soaked unless one stopped to attach snap-on canvas or leather trimmed "side curtains," an awkward task even in good weather. No wonder Nancy was always casting an anxious glance at the sky! Roadsters were fun cars, not meant for serious transportation, but coveted for their sporty appearance and speed.

"Motoring" was still a popular leisure activity in the early 1930s, especially as roads and highways improved. Those who could afford a new car had an eclectic array of body styles to choose from, but by far "open" (i.e., convertible) cars such as roadsters, cabriolets, phaetons, and touring cars dominated the market. Packard, Lincoln, Chrysler, Cadillac, and Pierce-Arrow, among many others, offered costly deluxe-model roadsters. By the mid-1930s "closed" (fixed top) cars like coupes and sedans became more prevalent. They were practical and could be driven in any kind of weather. U.S. automakers began phasing out roadsters, and most had stopped producing them by 1937.

What exactly did Nancy drive, and when did her roadster become a convertible?

A perusal of the original texts indicates that Nancy had a roadster -whether blue, maroon, or green and black- from 1930 to 1935. This coincides with the popularity and prevalence of roadsters. The shining new blue roadster she drives in the initial stories was a birthday gift from Mr. Drew. The three volumes penned by Walter Karig between 1932-1933 (*Nancy's Mysterious Letter*, *The Sign of the Twisted Candles*, and *The Password to Larkspur Lane*) have Nancy in a maroon roadster. In the latter, the maroon car is traded in for a green and black "Packlin" (a fictional make), yet another birthday present from the doting Mr. Drew. Ostensibly an amalgamation of Lincoln and Packard, the Packlin is described as "the very acme" of comfort and luxury.

While Nancy appreciates these aspects of her vehicle, she is equally pleased by its powerful speed (the better for chasing down tough customers) and dark color (easier to hide than bright yellow, for instance). Nancy's detective work sometimes enabled other girls to acquire their own roadsters: the Horner sisters of the *The Secret of the Old Clock* (1930) and *The Hidden Staircase* (1930) use some of their Crowley inheritance to buy one; and Laura Pendleton's true guardian promises to buy Laura a roadster just like Nancy's in *The Bungalow Mystery* (1930).

After 1935, details about Nancy's cars become rather vague. Even the color is unspecified. Perhaps author and editor were at a loss as to what exactly Nancy Drew should drive, if not a roadster. In *The Mystery of the Ivory Charm* (1936) the style of the Drew auto is, for the first time in the series, never alluded to. It is presumably not a roadster however, for at one point Bess reaches into the backseat to retrieve the ubiquitous picnic basket (ch. 17). Nancy is on vacation without her car in both 1937's *The Whispering Statue* and *The Haunted Bridge* (1938). The last book of the decade, *The Clue of the Tapping Heels*, gives no clue at all about what the girl sleuth is driving, although there is a classic Nancy car crash scene.

By 1941 and *The Mystery of the Moss-Covered Mansion*, Nancy had neither a roadster nor a convertible but a coupe (ch. 2)! In *The Quest of the Missing Map* (1942) it is the suspicious Mr. Bellows, not Nancy Drew, who drives a blue roadster (for contemporary readers would have recognized that roadsters were by now older model cars, appropriate for shady characters, not the wealthy daughters of famous criminal lawyers). Nancy's own vehicle is never described, but whatever the car it is apparently not very powerful as Nancy decides chasing kidnappers in it would be dangerous and opts to let the police handle this in their "fast cruiser."

Nancy's car is curiously absent in the next volume, 1943's *The Clue in the Jewel Box*. Although it takes place in River Heights and there is a lot of legwork involved in the case, the Drew girl is walking or riding her bike, and almost takes a bus! Has Nancy finally lost her license after all that reckless driving of the past? Or was she doing her part for the war effort by conserving rubber and gas? The federal government had

imposed mandatory gas rationing controls in late 1942 and rations for "nonessential" trips were extremely limited. Work-related driving was permissible, however. It may be mere coincidence, but those who do drive in *Jewel Box* are either going to or coming from work (that is, except for the thief who snatches Mrs. Alexandra's faux jeweled hair ornament from Nancy - but such a reprobate wouldn't care about the regulations anyway).

At any rate, Nancy's car reappears in the two succeeding volumes of the war years, *The Secret in the Old Attic* (1944) and *The Clue in the Crumbling Wall* (1945), although its style is unrevealed. *The Mystery of the Tolling Bell* (1946) inexplicably has Nancy back in a roadster! This is an apparent anomaly however, as most U.S. automakers had not offered roadsters for nearly a decade. It does take time for certain terms to fall out of popular usage (electric refrigerators were still referred to as "iceboxes" for many years, for example), so it is more likely the author simply called a convertible car a "roadster."



In any event, it is in the very next volume, *The Clue in the Old Album* (1947) that Nancy's car is first described as a convertible. From this point forward, her car became a mere "convertible" and this change was subsequently incorporated into the revisions of the earlier books.

From Roadster to Convertible: A Fast Guide to Nancy's Cars

1930s:

- 1930 *The Secret of the Old Clock*: New blue roadster with trunk.
- 1930 *The Hidden Staircase*: Blue roadster with trunk.
- 1930 *The Bungalow Mystery*: Blue roadster.
- 1930 *The Mystery at Lilac Inn*: Blue roadster, matching blue outfit for Nancy Drew.
- 1931 *The Secret at Shadow Ranch*: No car in this story.
- 1931 *The Secret of Red Gate Farm*: Blue roadster.
- 1932 *The Clue in the Diary*: Roadster with top and rumble seat. Possibly the maroon roadster, since the blue one had a trunk.
- 1932 *Nancy's Mysterious Letter*: Maroon roadster. Described as new.
- 1933 *The Sign of the Twisted Candles*: Roadster.
- 1933 *The Password to Larkspur Lane*: Maroon roadster with rumble seat; green and black "Packlin" roadster.
- 1934 *The Clue in the Broken Locket*: Roadster with rumble seat. Described as "new," it is presumably the Packlin.
- 1935 *The Message in the Hollow Oak*: Roadster.

- 1936 *The Mystery of the Ivory Charm*: Not specified.
1937 *The Whispering Statue*: No car in this story
1938 *The Haunted Bridge*: No car in this story.
1939 *The Clue of the Tapping Heels*: Not specified.

1940s:

- 1940 *The Mystery of the Brass-Bound Trunk*: No car in this story.
1941 *The Mystery of the Moss-Covered Mansion*: Coupe.
1942 *The Quest of the Missing Map*: Not specified.
1943 *The Clue in the Jewel Box*: No car in this story.
1944 *The Secret in the Old Attic*: Not specified.
1945 *The Clue in the Crumbling Wall*: Not specified.
1946 *The Mystery of the Tolling Bell*: Roadster. An apparent anomaly.
1947 *The Clue in the Old Album*: Convertible.
1948 *The Ghost of Blackwood Hall*: Convertible.
1949 *The Clue in the Leaning Chimney*: Convertible.