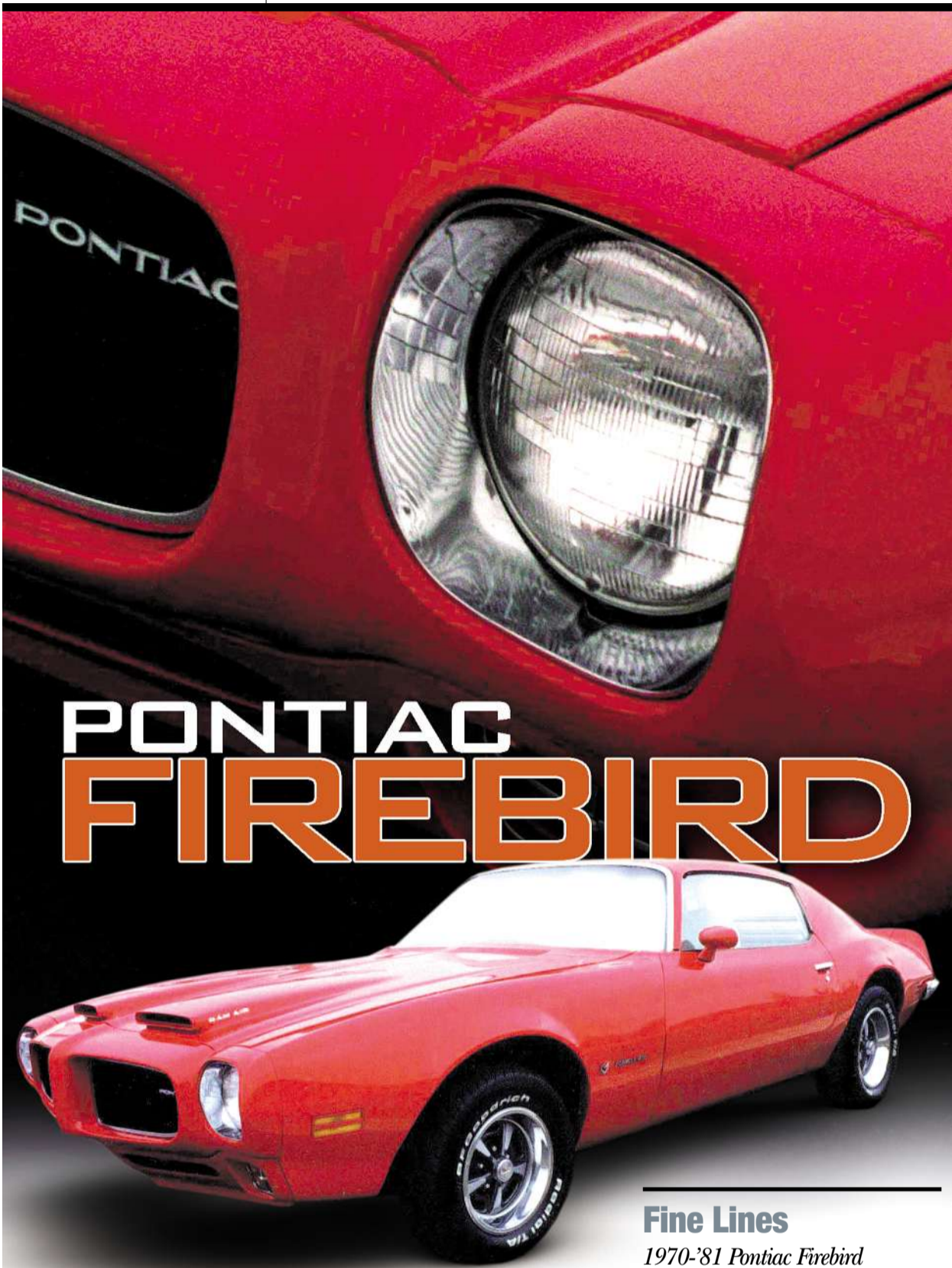


AutoSunday



BY MALCOLM GUNN
Wheelbase Communications

It quite literally had the "Formula."

In the early 1970s, the absolute peak of all-out automotive muscle and attitude, the Pontiac Firebird represented not only what was fast, but was also cool and hip.

The car was a foamy broth of performance and passion, a heady mixture that kept it clearly in the sights of the bulging, baby-booming youth market, plus anyone else who doted on driving a car that was several cuts above humdrum.

In an unfortunate twist, though, one of the hottest-looking machines on the planet nearly fizzled on the launchpad.

Buyers waiting to catch a glimpse of the all-new Firebird for 1970 were forced to wait well past the traditional autumn introduction window. In fact, it wasn't until several months later, an eternity in the car business, when the curtains finally parted, the General Motors publicity mill got up a head of steam and prospective buyers could finally drink their fill.

Why the delay? These days, mid-year new-car introductions are commonplace, but 35 years ago, it was practically unheard of for a domestic manufacturer to miss a fall unveiling.

Unfortunately, GM was embroiled in a lengthy strike with its unionized workers and was forced to push back the release of its star "ponycar" attractions, the Pontiac Firebird and close-cousin Chevrolet Camaro.

When the Firebird finally did

arrive, the sounds of jawbones smacking the asphalt could be heard throughout the land. What Pontiac had wrought was nothing less than sensational. The car shared no resemblance to the previous 1967-'69 'birds, but had that clean and mean look of a real racer. Even the base models, priced below the \$3,000 threshold, looked every bit as glamorous despite hiding a 250-cubic-inch, six-cylinder engine that could do no better than 155 horsepower.

For anyone who didn't want to play pretender, the new Firebird had three V-8 options, including the King Kong-sized 455 cubic-inch V-8, complete with shaker hood scoop, fitted to the Trans Am model.

Despite the late start to the model year, Pontiac managed to find homes for nearly 50,000 new Firebirds, including about 3,200 Trans Ams, the buyers of which were able to come up with the \$4,500 entry fee (excluding the exorbitant insurance premiums).

Unlike its Ford Mustang, Mercury Cougar, Plymouth Barracuda and Dodge Challenger competitors, the Firebird (as well as the Camaro) were only available in a one-coupe-fits-all version. The decision not to drop the top probably cost GM some sales, but the design really didn't lend itself to a folding top and the corporation wisely left well enough alone.

Brute strength continued to be the order of the day, but stricter emissions regulations and the move to lead-free gasoline meant detuning the Trans Am powerplant to a more sedate 335 horsepower in 1971. To compensate — somehow — Pontiac

Fine Lines

1970-'81 Pontiac Firebird

offered a giant Firebird decal positioned across the hood. It wasn't for everyone, but plenty of buyers who wanted to announce to the world their specific brand of automobile in a none-too-subtle way sprung for the low-cost option.

By mid-decade, the Firebird's reputation as a hip and quick transportation device was further reinforced through product placements on TV and in the movies. On the popular series, "The Rockford Files," James Garner's private eye character toolled around in a tan-colored Esprit while Burt Reynolds and Sally Fields co-starred in a couple of "Smokey and the Bandit" films, sharing top billing with a black T-roofed Trans Am.

Nothing could stop Burt and Sally in that car. But the Firebird's wings were being clipped with each passing year. The 455 monster motor breathed its last after 1976.

Toward the end of its run, Pontiac even tried turbocharging the Firebird's base 301-cubic-inch V-8, but there was by then little left of the performance attitude that once struck fear into the hearts of stoplight challengers everywhere. Still, these sporty coupes at least looked the part, a fact that kept sales pointed on an upward path.

General Motors replaced the Firebird and Camaro with all-new versions in 1982, bringing an end to what had been the glory days for both makes. The third-generation Firebird became more of a Camaro clone than ever, and, without a high-horsepower, big-block option, would never be the same.

Classic recollections



Pete Lettecci of Lake Zurich gets ready to race his 1962 Pontiac Catalina in Wisconsin, back when he was an 18-year-old student growing up on the Northwest side of Chicago.

Who says you can't travel back in time?

BY MIKE BURKE
Daily Herald staff writer

Where were you in '62?

That well-known line from "American Graffiti" brings memories racing back for Pete Lettecci of Lake Zurich.

It was the year Lettecci, then an 18-year-old high school senior, walked into Seltzer Pontiac on Irving Park Road in Chicago and spent \$4,300 to drive off in a shiny new, light "Yorktown blue" Pontiac Catalina.

Back in 1962, kids from all over would gather and hang out at Skip's Fiesta Drive-in on North Avenue, across from Kiddieland in Maywood.

"Everybody was driving Pontiacs," Lettecci said, because of their fast, powerful engines.

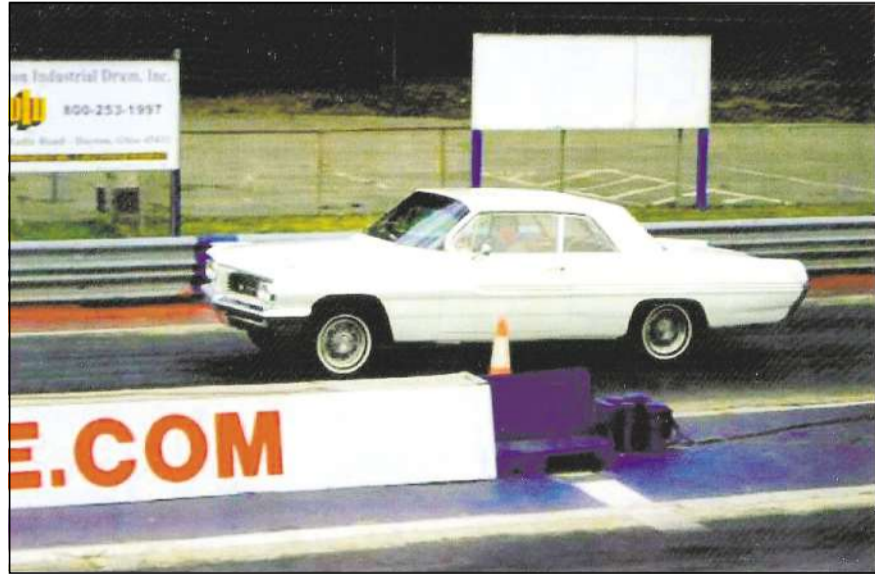
Lettecci and a buddy had matching Pontiacs. On weekends they would routinely drive 60 miles up to Union Grove, Wis., and the Great Lakes Dragway. There, he put his four-speed, two-door hardtop to the test.

"There was no such thing as Christmas tree lights in 1962. In those days, when you saw the starter wave his flag, you popped the clutch and you were gone," Lettecci said.

Lettecci says he'll never forget his best time, covering the quarter-mile track in 13.89 seconds, hitting 89 mph.

In 1963, Lettecci reluctantly sold his Pontiac after being drafted into the Army. Life then ensues.

Fast forward some forty years, and those fond memories of his first car come roaring back. Lettecci, a ceramic tile setter and instructor who has long read the classified pages in search of that elusive Pontiac, learns about an ad for one in Indianapolis.



Lettecci, now 66, took to the drag strip once again last July behind the wheel of his current 1962 Pontiac.

Show off your classic

- Send a photo and a few details or memories about your car to auto@dailyherald.com.

In 2001 he buys a perfect '62 Pontiac Catalina replacement — all original factory equipment and body, Cameo Ivory with red tri-color Ventura trim. Better yet, it's spent virtually its entire life in California, protected from the road salt and rough Northern winters.

"We all have to have toys, and this is it (for me)," he said.

Last July, Lettecci took his car to a large national Pontiac and GTO convention in Dayton, Ohio, where a host of classic car owners were gathered. Show organizers there had set up a quarter-mile racetrack on which owners could compete for the fastest times.

Lettecci, 66, decided it was time to experience the thrill of drag racing once again. His heart was pumping and the adrenaline was flowing as he eased up to the line, then sped down the track.

"(I did it) just for the memories. I wanted to have that feeling again," he said.

The times of Lettecci's two runs were in the sub-17-second range, not as fast as in 1962. But the level of fun more than measured up.

Most of Lettecci's drives these days are at a more leisurely pace. He enjoys attending car shows with his wife of 43 years, Barbara, and taking their four grandchildren for a ride in the '62.

"When I bought the car nine years ago it had 31,000 miles on it," he said. "Now it has 50 (thousand)."

At 100,000-plus miles, preventive maintenance makes more sense

Q. Recently I took my Toyota Camry in for the 105,000 mile service that includes replacing the timing belt. The shop recommended I replace the water pump and some seals and bearings at the same time. I told them to go ahead but lately I have been second guessing myself since I wasn't having any problems with those parts.

A. Actually, in my opinion you did do the right thing.

On most Asian cars the water pump is driven by the



Doug McAllister
Under the hood

be the camshaft and crankshaft seals. To replace any of these parts, the timing belt has to be removed, which is

timing belt. There is also an array of idler pulleys and a tensioner or two that hold the belt tight.

The seals they are referring to would most likely

generally a three- to five-hour job. With the long interval between timing belt changes (105,000 miles) you would be taking a chance of having one or more of those components fail before the next service interval.

By doing it all at the same time you have actually saved the labor money that you might spend down the road if one of those parts fails.

You also have the peace of mind that all of those important components are new and peace of mind is worth a lot.

Q. The ABS light on my car is on. I guess that means there is something wrong with the anti-lock brake system. I don't have the money to get unneeded repairs and I'm willing to driving it without the anti-lock feature working. However, are there any dangers to doing this, or any problems that could cause this light to go on that would cause a safety issue?

A. You are correct when the

ABS light is on the anti-lock brakes will not work. The regular braking system will work normally and you will not be adversely affecting the vehicle in any way. There is however a safety concern that I think warrants the repair of the system as soon as funds allow. We have all become accustomed to having anti-lock brakes on our cars and I believe it is a great safety feature. In a panic situation your teenage daughter is not going to be thinking about the fact that the ABS doesn't work

and her car may go into an uncontrollable skid. By the time she reacts to the skid it may be too late. So that your daughter is driving the safest car possible I would have the problem diagnosed and repaired as soon as possible.

• Douglas Automotive is at 312 S. Hager Ave., Barrington, (847) 381-0454, and 7218B Virginia Road, Crystal Lake, (815) 356-0440. For information, visit douglasautomotive.com. Send questions to underthehood@dailyherald.com.