

DEPARTMENT



THE 1964 OHC-6 BANSHEE COUPE

John DeLorean's pet project could have meant big trouble for the Corvette

BY DON KEEFE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS A. DeMAURO

The personality of John DeLorean as Chief Engineer and later General Manager of Pontiac Motor Division was one of strength and non-conformity in the heavily regimented corporate structure of General Motors. His brilliance as an engineer was bolstered with an understanding of the marketing needed to successfully introduce and maintain a new model. His managerial prowess was evidenced by his assembly of a team that would be responsible for the successful engineering and marketing campaign that surrounded the introduction of the 1964 GTO.

Still, the introduction of Ford's Mustang in April of 1964 caught GM by surprise. Essentially a Ford Falcon clothed in boxy but quite appealing sheet-metal, America was captivated by the archetypal ponycar and sales topped more than one thousand units a day for the first three months in the mar-

ketplace. By December 1965, 680,992 Mustangs were built. General Motors literally had nothing to compete with it, though it claimed that the Chevrolet Corvair Monza was its competitor to the Mustang.

Nonetheless, GM was forced to bring to market its own answer to the Mustang, Chevrolet being the natural choice to carry the new F-car, code-named "Panther." Pontiac was also intended by the Corporation to get its own version, both to gain additional volume for the new platform and also because Mercury was getting an upscale version of the Mustang, the Cougar, set for a 1967 release.

The F-body program began in August 1964 and Pontiac wanted nothing to do with it. Though the Division performed some half-hearted design work during August and September 1965, they concentrated their energies on a program that was borne of DeLorean's long-held desire to bring a two-seat Pontiac sportscar to production. It would become known as XP-833.

In actuality, the XP-833 program began back in August 1963, while DeLorean was still Chief Engineer. Though GM management didn't see much volume potential, Pontiac General Manager Elliott M. "Pete" Estes and DeLorean thought otherwise and forged ahead.

At that time, a series of prototypes was developed to explore possible styling and suspension configurations and by the time the exercise was completed, it had moved from the exotic realm of the idea car to a platform that was much more conventional and, therefore, producible. The first four cars were actually not functional vehicles, but rather, full-scale mockups built for evaluation purposes. The first was dubbed SP-1 and was built by the

(Top) The XP-833 Banshee's handsome lines work particularly well as a fastback coupe. Though no one really knew it at the time, the XP-833 gave a preview of the next-generation Corvette and also the Opel GT.

Advanced Engineering group under the direction of Dick Denzer and the body was designed by Ned Nickles and Roger Hugnet, under the direction of Paul Gillan, head of Advanced Design Studios I and II. This first car was fitted with a prototype overhead cam six engine, which was being readied for a 1966 introduction on the A-body Tempest/LeMans.

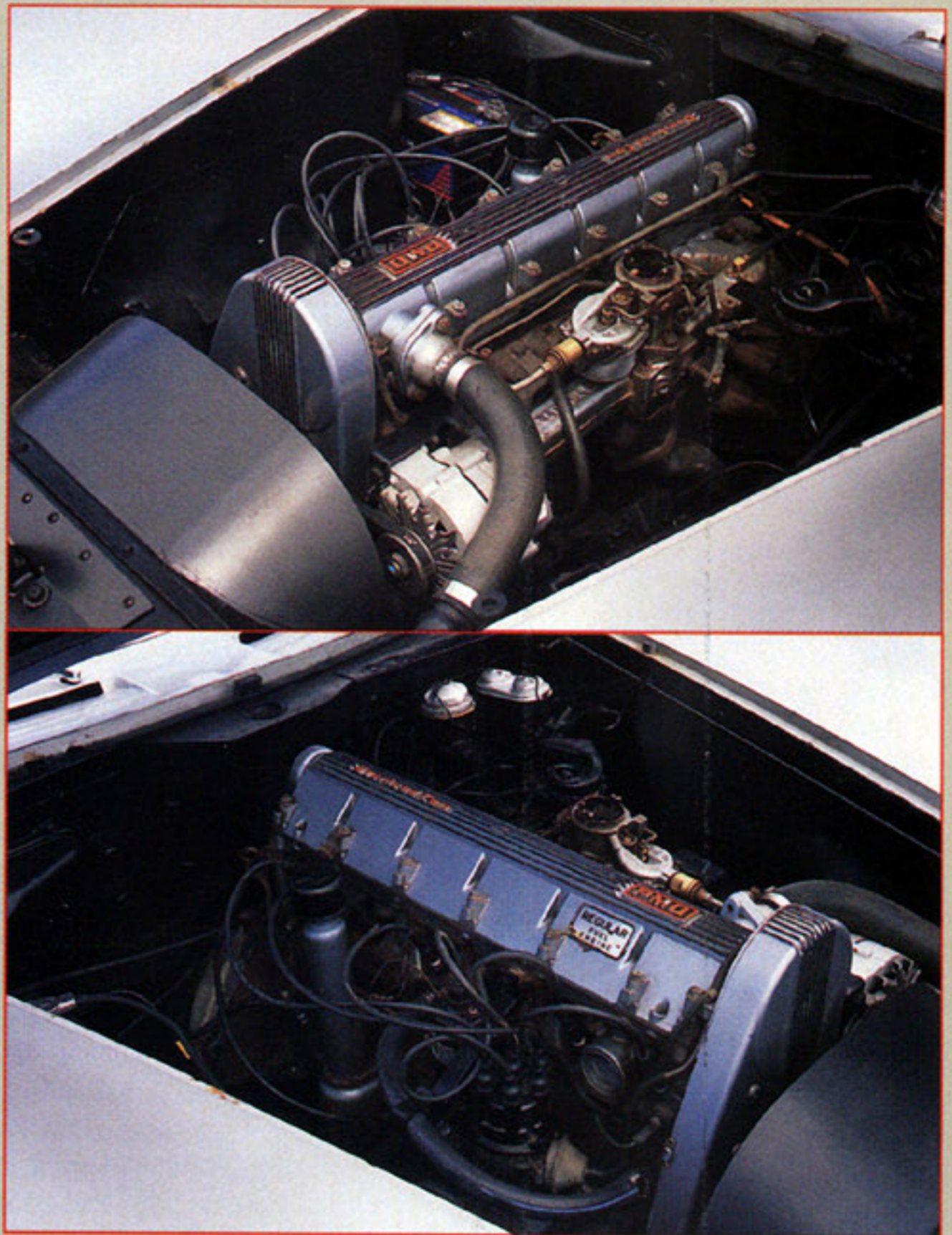
Next came SP-2, which used a custom frame with specific underbody panels, simulated aluminum cowl and custom 4-wheel independent suspension. The body was comprised of modified 1963 Corvette panels. The third car, SP-3, was cobbled together using the modified frame from a 1963 Corvette, to which a non-production torque-tube drive system was attached, along with a Jaguar independent rear suspension system.

SP-4, strangely enough, was built using a modified 1963 Studebaker Avanti chassis.

Meanwhile, the pressure was mounting on DeLorean to join the F-body program, so much so that the construction of the two functional cars, SP-5, the six-cylinder coupe featured and the V8-powered SP-6 roadster (see HPP, June 1989) actually had to be conducted in secret, in a warehouse near the GM Tech Center. The prototypes were striking both in their styling and in the economical way in which they were engineered, using a wealth of componentry already on GM's parts shelves.

The chassis was a non-production unit that looked much like a scaled-down version of GM's A-body, with a short 90-inch wheelbase. Eighty percent of the suspension pieces were standard A-body, such as steering box, brakes and rear axles, though custom upper and lower control arms were required in this application. Unlike most contemporary fiberglass-bodied cars, the XP-833's floorpan was actually steel, as was the cowl, rear inner wheelhouses and various braces. The floorpan was smooth and sat quite low, almost giving the

Though one might expect one of Pontiac's potent 4-barrel Sprint engines under the XP-833 Banshee's hood, this prototype used the standard 165-horse, 1-barrel version of the OHC-6. This was likely done to give management a fair representation of what they could expect from an entry-level Banshee coupe. It is hooked to a Saginaw 4-speed transmission. Note dual master cylinders—one for the 4-wheel drum brakes and the other for the hydraulic clutch.



impression of a bellypan.

Since the whole project was cloaked in secrecy, the bodies were not produced in-house, but were laid up by the Dow-Smith Company in Midland, Michigan. Dow-Smith had considerable experi-

ence as an industry supplier and the body details bear this out. It was a production-ready design that featured strategically placed parting lines, making for easy bonding during assembly and allowing the body to be laid up in large, simple sections.





The interior has a unique look, but still harkens to its Pontiac roots. Off the shelf Tempest pieces such as heater/defroster controls and radio add to the family resemblance. The seat shape is unique, but it's covered in familiar Pontiac material and pattern.

some long-lost Pontiac relative, which of course, it is.

The Unveiling

In July 1965, "Pete" Estes was promoted to the General Manager position at Chevrolet, putting DeLorean in charge of Pontiac. With the influence of his new post, he made his move. The XP-833 Banshees were unveiled to GM President James Roche and other

corporate executives with an elaborate proposal put together by XP-833 project manager, engineer Bill Collins. It was illustrated with sleek Van & Fitz-style artwork and contained market research explaining the burgeoning youth movement and the "hidden market" that existed for the two-seat Pontiac, which was being satisfied only by foreign cars such as the \$3,000 Triumph TR-4, Austin Healey 3000 and MGB. The proposal predicted Pontiac could bring them to market for the 1967 model year at \$2,500, a price between the aforementioned sportscars and the smaller \$2,000 MG Midget and Triumph Spitfire.

It was estimated that a market of about 32,000 units annually existed for this Pontiac two-seater and would not compete with the Corvette, which was selling for at least \$1,000 more. The total development cost was estimated at between \$15.8

million and \$18.3 million and depended on whether the bodies would be assembled at Pontiac or farmed out to save money. It was a fairly modest sum to bring the car to market and represented substantial cost savings by using so much existing componentry. This same sort of economizing helped bring the Dodge Viper to market a quarter-century later.

The two fully functional prototypes really took everyone by surprise, even GM Styling Vice-President William L. Mitchell, who was among the cadre of officials invited to the viewing. No one outside DeLorean's inner circle knew about their development or even their existence.



The Banshee coupe has led a very pampered life with the Killen family, racking up just 1,467 miles from new.

Though Collins' proposal was brilliantly conceived and executed, it fell on the deaf ears. The bottom line was that GM executives wanted Pontiac to get in on the F-car program and they didn't want to hear about a low-volume two-seater, especially one that could overthrow the Corvette's reign as America's sportscar. Why mess with Chevy's performance flagship, a car whose image had been so carefully crafted and was such a source of corporate pride? GM wanted a four-place car with the Mustang's sales potential and that was that.

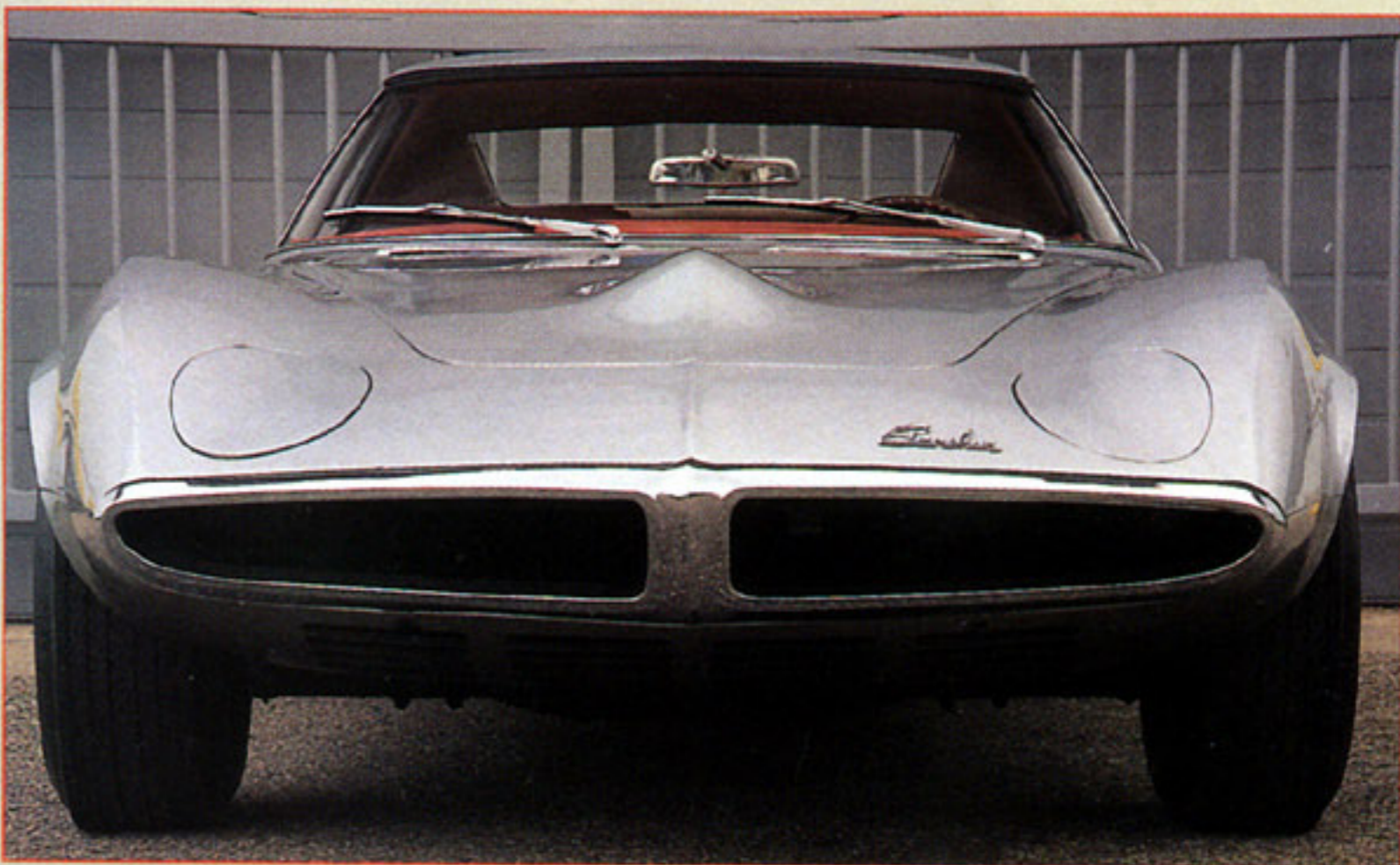
DeLorean continued to push the XP-833 until the F-car was literally forced down his throat after an argument with GM Executive Vice-President Ed Cole in March of 1966. The late return to the F-car program necessitated that the Firebird be released after the Camaro, in February of 1967.

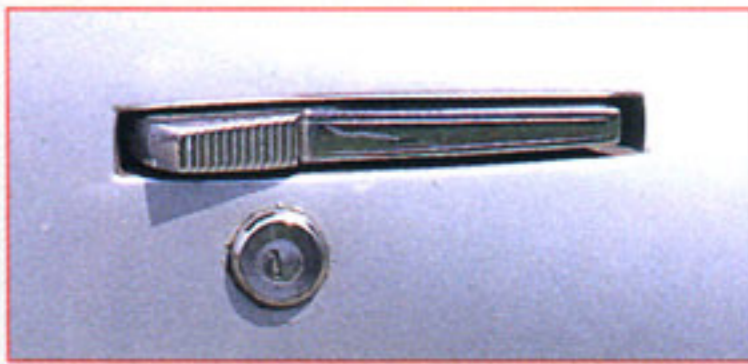
Though beautifully executed and fully functional, the pair of XP-833s, now wearing



Its styling featured soft, flowing lines, with bulging fenders and wheelwells. It resembled the upcoming 1968 Corvette, but with different side sculpting, as well as an integral split-bumper/grille, and slotted taillamps, which would become trademarks of the early Firebird. Its actual size was more in line with the later Opel GT, which would feature pop-up headlamps virtually identical to Pontiac's prototype two-seater. Depending on which engine was used, the hood bulge would supply air to the carburetor of the V8 car, or provide engine clearance for the front of the OHC-6. Both coupe and roadster versions would be built, the former with a removable hardtop, the latter used a conventional convertible top.

The XP-833's interior was a tasteful combination of custom seating and dash panel peppered with off-the-shelf Tempest pieces, such as the vent openings, window cranks, radio and heater controls. Its seats were fixed with adjustable pedals and steering column. The interior's visual effect reinforces the impression that the XP-833 is indeed





The door handle closely resembles a unit used on the 1969-72 Grand Prix.



The pop-up headlamp design was used almost without change on the Opel GT. The "Banshee" script resembled a design used on 1960s-era Catalinas and Tempests.

"Banshee" nameplates, had outlived their usefulness. They were both put in a warehouse, where they gathered dust, but thankfully were never destroyed, as unfortunately is the case with most non-production cars at GM. They remained there until 1974, when engineers Bill Collins and Bill Killen were granted permission to purchase them. This was a major coup for the two gentlemen, as this practice hardly ever happens, with liability issues looming so large over non-production vehicles such as these. Collins took possession of the V8-powered roadster and held onto it for dozen or so years, later selling it to Chicago dream car collector Joe Bortz.

Mr. Killen held onto the six-cylinder coupe for the rest of his life, passing away in March 20th, 2000. His widow, Dorothy, now owns it. "He was proud of that car and really loved it," she said. It looked so much like a Corvette." To date, the little coupe has racked up only 1,467 miles.

This author had a chance to view the vehicle in person for the first time in March of this year and it held quite a few surprises. Two of the most obvious came when the hood was popped open. Though one would expect that the engine bay would hold one of Pontiac's high-performance Sprint six-cylinders, the reality of the situation was

that it was fitted with the base Tempest I-barrel version, which dutifully kicked out 165 horsepower, not the 207 that the 4-barrel Sprint was good for.

Searching for other details under the hood, one will find two master cylinders, a dual unit for the 4-wheel drum brakes and a single unit to operate the hydraulic clutch. The hydraulic clutch saved the engineering team from having to develop a specific clutch linkage and also made for a clean, easy installation.

Inside, the Pontiac cues are everywhere, from the familiar A-car heater controls and radio to the fitted carpeting, which uses the loop-pile so popular during that period. To a diehard Pontiac fan, the effect is surreal; it's almost as if the car was beamed in from a parallel universe where the Corvette didn't exist.

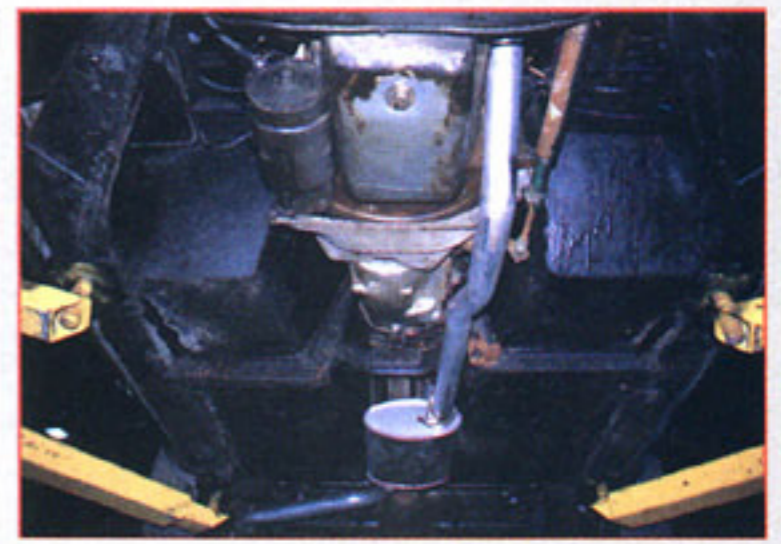
From the underside, one sees more of the A-body influence, again arranged in a strangely different context. The custom lower control arms are open in design and plainly visible, though like the rest of the undercarriage, they are covered in a protective layer of undercoating. The only bright metal to be found underneath is the simple single exhaust system, which passes under the driveshaft, bending very close to the right rear wheel and exiting at the right rear corner.

Though it is almost unheard of today to have a fiberglass car with a metal floorpan, the practice was actually quite common in the 1950s, when the composite material was used by non-GM carmakers building prototypes and dream cars. As most of the custom-bodied showcars of the period were actually regular production cars under their sexy new skin, they were usually constructed by pulling a new car off the assembly line, cutting the outer body away and bonding and/or bolting the fiberglass panels to the metal inner panels. The assembly method greatly simplified the procedure of assembling such vehicles and dramatically lowered their cost.

As it had in the past, the use of a steel floorpan on the fiberglass-bodied prototypes did simplify their assembly and, as an additional benefit, increased the torsional stiffness of the chassis, particularly helpful in a performance-oriented design such as this.

The Banshee coupe's exterior holds a few surprises as well. The door handles predicted the swing-out design

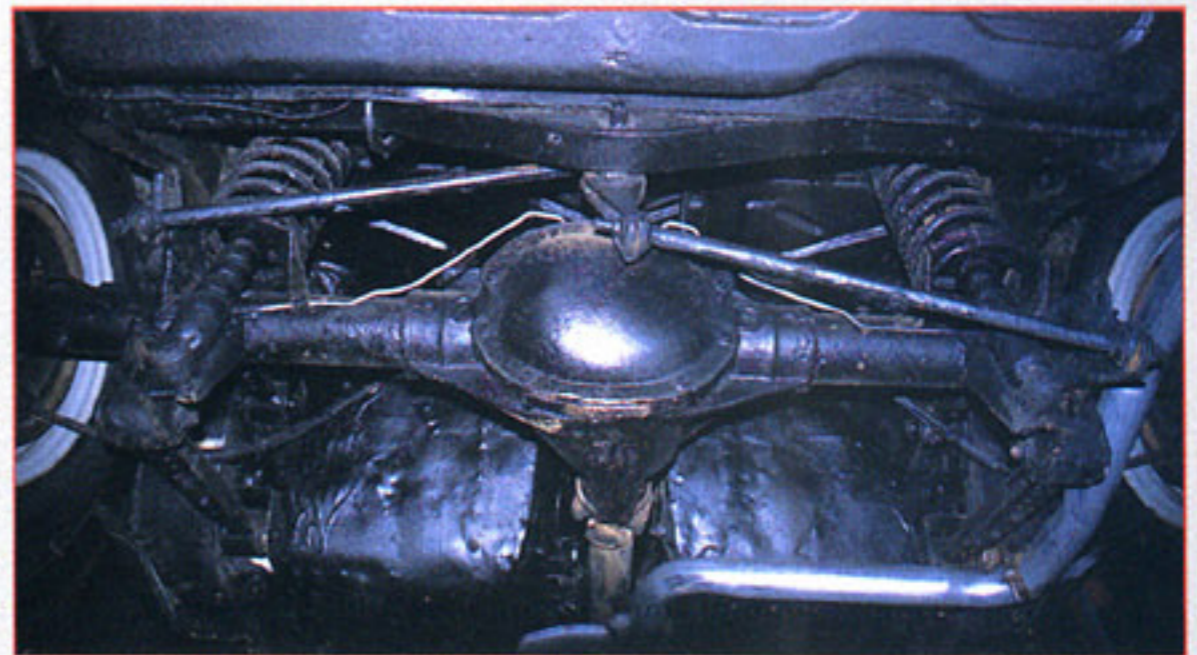
Front suspension uses a variety of off-the-shelf A-car pieces, though upper and lower control arms were unique, as were coil-over shocks.



Unlike many later fiberglass-bodied cars, such as the Corvette, the XP-833s used metal floorboards, inner rear wheelhouses, even door sills and jambs. This practice was used on many non-GM prototypes of the 1950s to simplify construction and it gave additional rigidity to XP-833's perimeter frame.

used by the 1969-72 Grand Prix. Though both cars were originally shown with Rally I wheels, the coupe is now fitted with an early set of Rally IIs shod with redlined F70-14 Goodyear Polyglas tires.

XP-833's hardtop is removable and most likely would have been offered as a two-topped car like the Corvette was. The rear decklid used on the roadster was removable, offering additional cargo



Rear suspension used a Tempest rear end with custom rear suspension components that look remarkably like the four-link systems used in modern drag cars. The exhaust system closely snakes around the right rear suspension and wheel.

capacity with the top installed; though the coupe, as built, does not have one.

In the end, the Corporation won over DeLorean but, in reality, he benefited from the critical acclaim and the strong sales the Firebird brought to the Division. He later admitted that the Corporation made the right decision, but one can only wonder what might have been with a production two-seat Banshee in the Pontiac lineup. Would it have been a success and would that success have come at the expense of the Corvette, as many had predicted?

We'll never know for sure, but one thing is plainly evident—John Z. DeLorean's dogged persistence led to the building of two incredible examples of his vision, which survive for us to enjoy and whose place in the world we continue to ponder. Maybe that parallel universe is out there somewhere ...

