

PRECIOUS TIN

TIMELINE



Seventy-Five Years and Counting Part III: 1975-1989

BY DON KEEFE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE AUTHOR AND GM

Our celebration of Pontiac's 75th Anniversary continues with the third installment of HPP's Pontiac Timeline. We'll be covering the ups and downs of the 15 years that followed the GTO era, ranging from the glory days of the Second-Gen. Firebird in the late seventies to Pontiac's reversal of fortune at the dawn of the Reagan years. We'll also take you through the 1980s where the onslaught of competition from overseas chinked the armor of the American auto industry by chipping away at the Big Three's market share. Read along as we continue to delve into Pontiac's past.

1975 Federally-mandated catalytic converters appear on most models. Pontiac's answer to the fuel crisis comes in the form of the Astre, a badge-engineered Vega. Many full-sized models get new rectangular headlamp treatment. The full-sized convertible makes its last appearance this year and this year's Firebird features a new wrap-



around backlight and slightly revised front and rear fascias. The 455 Super Duty is gone, leaving the Trans Am with just a 400 until a late-season passenger car 455 becomes optional and is dubbed HO without ever earning the name. Grand Am is dropped after the 1975 selling season due to slow sales. The Ventura is redesigned and shares much chassis componentry with the Firebird, though a 350 Buick is the top engine offering.

1976 The 455 makes its last appearance this year, though it is available in most A-, B-, F- (Trans Am only) and G-bodies. It puts out a rather anemic 200 horsepower. A new low-cost



version of the Grand Prix comes through with a bench seat and 350 power and proves very popular. Joining the Pontiac stable is the Sunbird, a derivative of the Chevy Monza. It is available only as a notchback coupe this first year. The Firebird gets a mild freshening up, which includes new body-colored urethane bumpers. Formulas get a bold new graphic treatment. Pontiac celebrates its 50th Anniversary with special Grand Prix and Trans Am models.

1977 In response to tightening emission standards, General Motors is forced to substitute engines from other divisions, causing much frustration for consumers. The 455 is gone, though a special T/A 6.6 engine puts out 200 horsepower. It is available in the Formula, Trans Am and the Can Am. The Can Am is a limited-production LeMans with a shaker hood and unique striping. Pontiac introduces the new 301 V8 (2-barrel only with 135 hp) and the 151 Pontiac "Iron Duke" 4-cylinder, which share some bottom-end componentry. Firebirds receive a new "Batman" nose treatment. Special Edition Trans Ams, finished in black and gold, are especially popular following the success of the Burt Reynolds movie "Smokey and the Bandit." New aluminum Snowflake wheels replace the heavy Polycast honeycombs on the option sheet. The Grand Prix records its best selling year, with 288,430 units built. Sunbirds get a fastback body style and a "Formula" option. Grand Ville is dropped and the Catalina and Bonneville are based on a new smaller, but roomier full-sized platform with V6 and V8 powerplant choices. Pontiac's Phoenix makes a late-year introduction and replaces the Ventura. They are essentially the same car, save for the front-end treatment and trim. Alex C. Mair becomes Pontiac's general manger, replacing Martin J. Caserio.

1978 New-generation LeMans and Grand Prix models are based on the new downsized GM "Metric" platform. The Grand Am also returns on this platform. Powerplant choices run the gamut from a 231 Buick V6 to a 301 Pontiac or 305 Chevy. Sales of these cars plummet, particularly the Grand Prix, which dropped by almost 60,000 units. The downward slide in sales would continue to accelerate with these models. Firebirds on the other hand are selling quite well, with a total of 187,285 units sold, nearly half of which are Trans Ams. Though the outside of the Trans Am is nearly unchanged, the optional T/A 400 engine now boasts 220 hp and the WS6 suspension option with harder durometer bushings, a larger rear stabilizer bar and handsome 15X8-inch Snowflake wheels, making the flagship Pontiac performer a top notch road car. Special Edition T/As for 1978 were painted gold instead of black and the hood bird was larger and different from the other T/As hood decal.

1979 Essentially a carryover year, the Firebird receives its final facelift on the second-generation body. Due to availability and emission reasons, the 220-horse 400 Pontiac engine is



only available in 4-speed Firebird Formulas and Trans Ams. All other "6.6-litre" installations use the 403 Oldsmobile engine rated at 185 horsepower. Even the 301 engine in 4-barrel form at 150 hp can be had in the Trans Am. Despite the limited availability of the 400 Pontiac, Firebird posts its best sales year ever, with 211,454 units sold. Fifty-five percent of them were Trans Ams. Four-wheel disc brakes are offered for the first time on the F-body, either as part of the WS6 suspension package or separately under code WS7. Pontiac released a silver and charcoal Trans Am with special exterior graphics and interior upholstery to celebrate the model's 10th Anniversary. Much of the option list was standard on the 10th Anniversary and the price was \$10,619, making it the most expensive T/A up to that point. Grand Am received minor trim changes.

1980 The Nova-based Pontiac Phoenix is replaced with a new front-wheel drive X-Body model bearing the same name. It is actually introduced in April 1979 as a 1980 model. Two body styles are offered, a two-door notchback coupe and a four-door hatchback. Power comes from a base 2.5-liter "Iron Duke" 4-cylinder, with a 4-speed manual transaxle. Optional powerplant choices include a new 2.8-liter V6 and a 3-speed automatic transaxle. Other new entries include a new 120-horsepower 265 cubic-inch V8 based on the 301 and a new turbocharged version of the 301, available on Firebird Formulas and Trans Ams. It produced 210 horsepower. The 1980 Trans Am is chosen as the pace car for the Indianapolis 500 and a commemorative edition of the Trans Am is offered. Firebird sales nose-dive to 107,340 units, less than half of 1979's total and nearly 10,000 units below 1979 Trans Am sales alone. Robert Stempel briefly becomes the new General Manager and is replaced by William E. Hoglund.

1981 The Grand Am does not return; though a badge-engineered Chevette joins the line and is named T-1000. It is available in two and four-door hatchback body styles. The Firebird line remains essentially unchanged, though the 265 becomes the base engine for the Formula (though we have never seen one in a Formula). LeMans receives a new nose treatment, vaguely reminiscent of the 1977-78 Firebirds. The 1981 model year will be the last for the Catalina and the full-sized Bonneville, as well as for the rear-drive LeMans, the Second-Gen. Firebird and the traditional Pontiac V8, which had been in continuous production since 1955. General Manager Hoglund announces Pontiac's return to racing. The Grand Prix gets new more aerodynamic sheetmetal, making it a player in NASCAR. Richard Petty comes to Pontiac and campaigns a Grand Prix.

1982 Pontiac introduces the Third-Gen. Firebird, which for the first time features a 4-cylinder as the base powerplant. V6 and V8 engines are optional. Esprit and Formula models are gone, replaced by the Firebird SE. Trans Am features a 145-horse LG4 305 four-barrel with a dual throttle-body injected "Cross-Fire" version of the 305 making 165 horsepower on the option list.

Other new entries include the J2000, a front-driver, which replaces the Sunbird and the mid-sized 6000, which is based on the same platform as the Phoenix. Pontiac begins its long-running "Driving Excitement" campaign. Pontiac Engineer John Callies leads the new Motorsports Engineering Technical Group and develops new a Super Duty parts program for four-cylinder Pontiac and later GM Corporate small- and big-block V8s. A Grand LeMans with a more formal nose is the basis for the new Bonneville Model G. The full-sized Pontiacs are gone. This infuriates dealers; some start importing full-sized Parisiennes from Canada.

They are essentially Chevy Caprices with a Pontiac-style grille and taillamps. Pontiac engineer Malcolm R. "Mac" McKellar, responsible for much of Pontiac's high-performance hardware, retires from Pontiac after 45 years of service.

1983 Pontiac gets the message and introduces the full-sized Parisienne as a regular domestic offering. The T-1000 and J-2000 are renamed 1000 and 2000 and a new 2000 convertible hits the showrooms, the first drop-top Pontiac in eight years. The 6000 STE arrives



and is intended as a competitor to the current crop of European sport sedans. It gains critical acclaim from journalists. Firebird's 305 4-barrel gains five horsepower to 150 and the Cross-Fire 305 jumps to 175, a gain of 10 horsepower. The T/A paces Daytona for 1983.

1984 The big news for 1984 is the introduction of the 2-seat, mid-engine Fiero 2M4. The Fiero boasts a number of engineering firsts, including space-frame chassis structure, impact-resistant plastic body panels and laser-guided "mill and drill" body panel alignment. Though the frame and body are leading edge, the suspension and driveline were, for the most part, off the shelf pieces, including the Chevette front suspension and rack and pinion steering. The 2.5-liter 4-cylinder manual and automatic transaxles are sourced from the Phoenix/6000 line and are mounted behind the driver. Only two colors are initially offered, red and white, and power steering is not available. Pontiac manages to sell 136,840 Fieros in its debut year, the all-time high. The 2000 is renamed 2000 Sunbird and a tur-



bocharged 1.8-liter 4-cylinder makes 150 horsepower, dropping 0-60 times into the 8.5 second range. The Fiero is chosen as the pace car for the Indianapolis 500 and three special Fieros with 272-horse Super-Duty 4-cylinders are built for the job. Richard Petty records his 200th career win, driving a NASCAR Pontiac Grand Prix. The optional L69 HO 4-barrel 305 engine at 190 hp is mated to a Borg Warner 5-speed transmission or a 700-R4 overdrive automatic in the Trans Am. In a corporate restructuring, Pontiac becomes part of the new C-P-C (Chevy-Pontiac-Canada) Group, and general manager William Hoglund is replaced by J. Michael Losh.

1985 More performance for the Trans Am comes in the form of a new Tuned-Port injected 305, developing 205 horsepower. The Fiero also muscled up a bit with a new GT version, which features the nose of the Indy Fiero Pace Car and a 2.8-liter V6, good for 135 horsepower. Parisienne gets a "new" tail treatment, using the rear quarters, bumper, taillamps and rear fender skirts from the 1981 Bonneville. Pontiac resurrects the Grand Am nameplate on its new front-drive N-Body sport coupe, which came standard with the 2.5-liter "Tech IV" or a 3.0-liter V6. Sales are strong for the first year, with 82,560 units sold.

1986 In a bit of model reshuffling, the previous Fiero GT returns as the Fiero SE and the GT designation is given to a restyled 1986 1/2 Fiero with flying buttress rear sail panels, a new tail section and a beefed-up WS6 suspension. Power once again comes from a 2.8-liter V6. Power is down a bit from the Trans Am's 5.0-liter Tuned Port V8, to



190, thanks to the substitution of the milder LG4 cam for the '85 5.0 TPI's hotter grind. In order to homologate a more aerodynamic body for NASCAR racing, Pontiac introduces the Grand Prix 2+2, a slope-nosed coupe with a fastback-style rear window and unique graphic treatment. Motivation comes from a 165-horse 305-4-barrel. Just 1,118 were built. This is the last year for the Bonneville Model G and the 4-door Parisienne. Pontiac unveils its first concept car in several years, the

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Trans Sport, a futuristic minivan with a turbocharged V6 and a variety of comfort and convenience features.

1987 A new-generation Bonneville makes its debut. It is a front-driver with an emphasis on performance and handling, in the best European tradition. It is powered by a 150-horse 3.8-liter V6. The Firebird line is revised this year. The 4-cylinder in the base car is dropped, as is the SE model. The Formula makes a reappearance. Like its predecessor, the new Formula is a stripped-down performance machine. Base power is from a 305 4-barrel, with tuned-port versions of the 5.0- and the 5.7-liter TPI engine optional. Previously offered only



in the Corvette, the 5.7 is only available with the 700R-4 automatic. The 5.7 is also the standard engine in the new Trans Am GTA, the luxurious top of the line model. A larger 2.0-liter turbocharged engine hooked to a new Getrag 5-speed makes 165 horsepower and is now standard on the Sunbird GT and is available in the Grand Am. The full-sized, rear-wheel drive Safari wagon soldiers on without its sedan counterpart and this is the last year for the rear-wheel drive Grand Prix. Pontiac's concept this is year is the Pursuit, a teardrop-shaped, aerodynamic sedan of the future with all-wheel drive and all-wheel steering.

1988 The big news for 1988 is the introduction of an entirely new Grand Prix, a front-wheel drive personal luxury/performance car. Built on the GM W-body platform, the Grand Prix shared suspensions, drivelines and body structures with the Olds Cutlass Supreme and Buick Regal. They share no outer body sheetmetal though, giving each a unique look. Power comes from a 2.8-liter V6. Bonneville adds a new SSE model with unique body cladding and the balance-shaft equipped 3800 V6 standard. The Grand Am now offers the 2.3-liter "Quad 4" engine as optional equipment. The LeMans name, last seen in 1981, returns on a badge-engineered Opel Kadette that was assembled in South Korea by Daewoo. It

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replaces the 1000. The 1LE, a little-known option on the Firebird Formula and Trans Am, appears for the first time. Intended for SCCA Showroom Stock racing, the package was available on both 305 and 350 TPI cars and includes 12-inch brakes, aluminum driveshaft, specially-baffled fuel tank and other features. Air conditioning could not be ordered. Although the Fiero received redesigned front and rear suspension systems and a new performance-oriented Formula model, this year proved to be the end of the road. Pontiac General Manager J. Michael Losh announces the Fiero's discontinuation in March. Pontiac unveiled the radically-styled Banshee showcar. Said to incorporate features that could become available on future Firebirds, the Banshee featured 4-wheel independent suspension and was powered by a 230-horse 4-liter DOHC V8 engine hooked to a 5-speed Getrag transmission.

1989 Turbocharging was the name of the game in 1989. The limited-edition 20th Anniversary Indy Pace Car Trans Am was powered by an upgraded version of the intercooled Buick Grand National V6, underrated at 250 horsepower. It was hooked to a 200-4R automatic and becomes one of the hottest Trans Ams ever, with 0-60 times in the five-second range and quarter-miles in the high 13s at over 100 mph. The ASC-McLaren Grand Prix was also a limited-edition. Its 3.1-liter engine was turbocharged and developed 205 horsepower and was available only with an automatic. The 6000 STE becomes the first all-wheel drive Pontiac



production car. Powered by a 3.1-liter V6, the STE sets new benchmarks for handling in American sedans. The Grand Am got a freshening up in the style department and a late-season High Output Quad 4. This is the last year for the full-sized Safari wagon. Pontiac unveils its new concept vehicle, the Stinger. It accurately predicts many features of current sport-utility vehicles. Power comes from a special 3-liter DOHC Super Duty Pontiac 4-cylinder. John G. Middlebrook replaces J. Michael Losh as general manager.

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