

## These perfectly preserved '74 Super Duty T/As have storied histories and are gleaming examples of Pontiac's last knockout punch of the musclecar era

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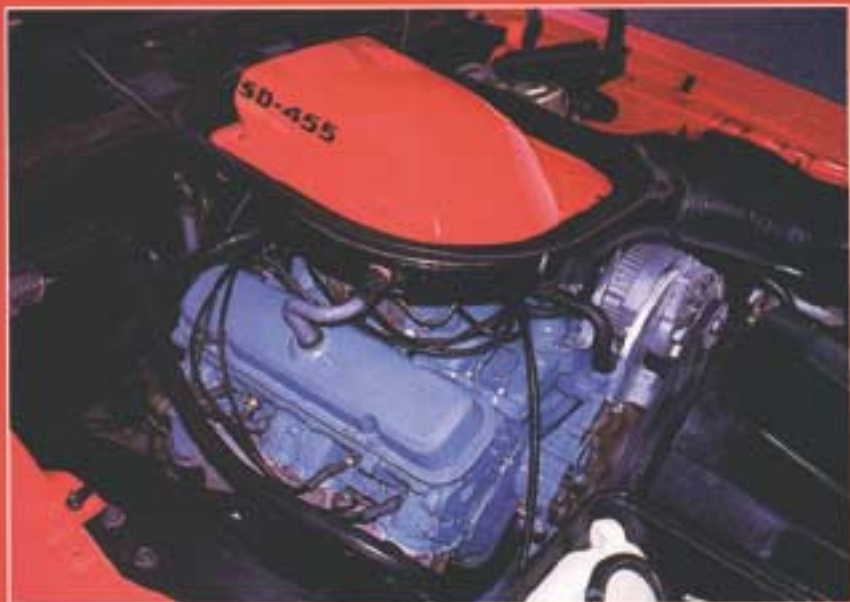
Pete Curatolo's '74 Firebird Trans Am sports up some parts that the day after, Don't Feed The Birds.

# The Cruiser And

Luckily for us a handful of Pontiac designers and engineers and initially reluctant management had the courage not to succumb to the day's politically correct atmosphere of corporate engine downsizing and emissions concerns. Perhaps they realized that this political correctness was just oppression with manners and that Pontiac had a long legacy of performance expectations to live up to.

Whatever the reason, it should be noted that in building the Super Duty, Pontiac had the courage to do something unpopular that would prove to be a historically significant move. You see in this case, popularity really did prove to be history's pocket change and courage, it's true currency. I mean, do you ever hear about the legacy of the Vega or the Pinto? Heck no! It was the Super Duty's oasis of power in a desert of downsizing that garnered the automotive performance accolades of the time and it is why we are still mesmerized by it almost thirty years later.

Fortunately for Brian Buses and myself, dream



The SD-455 engine in Curatolo's T/A is pretty on the outside but has the heart of lion that is capable of 13.48 quarter mile times.



*Brian Buses' SD-455 T/A was an executive express for the likes of two Pontiac general managers.*

# The Company Car



*Laden with A/C, the engine compartment gets busy in a hurry. But the hand-built SD (by GM engineering no less) has the oats to overcome the weight of luxury options without even breathing heavily. Note, the engine color is from the later 1975-76 455s.*

time is over and automotive life is a visceral reality that only the Super Duty can provide. Brian Buses of Barrington, Ill. is what you call lucky ... very lucky. He was originally in the market for a Mopar but instead bought this low mileage beauty (with the black interior) from a dealership for twenty grand with an unstamped block.

The dealership had speculated that the VIN on the block had possibly been ground off during a water pump or timing cover repair or was due to some type of corrosion. In any event, the dealership promised a full refund if it was ever found out that the engine was swapped at any time. That said, Brian decided to make the purchase. Before leaving the dealership, he asked for and received a list of the previous owners. Two of the names were Alex and Steve Mair ... yes, that Alex Mair, the General Manager of Pontiac Motor Division from 1975 to 1978 and Steve is his son.

And the discoveries don't end there. After writing to the Mair family, Brian found out that this was not only Alex Mair's car but that this Buccaneer Red Bird

# The Cruiser



A most interesting feature of Pete's SD is the contrasting white standard interior with red accents.



At the rear, the correct twin exhaust tips emit the raucous tones of the torque monster SD-455 with the sound tuned by a Flowmaster muffler.



Need we say more?



Rally IIs and T/A Radials comprise the rolling stock.



Here is a collector's item that any Ponchophile would covet.



Black deluxe interior fills out the cabin of Buses' executive machine. And there was a special surprise for the optional 8-track.

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# The Company Car

## The Cruiser And The Company Car

was originally built for Martin Caserio who preceded Mair as the General Manager of Pontiac Motor Division in the early seventies. Brian quickly sent out for a comprehensive documentation package from Pontiac Historic Services for complete authentication. Sure enough his was a documented PMD company car with no dealership designation on the manifest invoice. Instead it only stated that the Bird was a company car. This may be the only General Motors company car that was driven by two Poncho GMs.

According to Brian and Pontiac Historic Services, Martin Caserio had vivid memories of it. PHS has also related that the engine in Brian's SD developed a water leak while it was in Mr. Caserio's possession. Here's where it gets good. After visiting the company car garage and then the engineering garage, the original Super Duty engine was replaced with the unstamped hand-built version that currently resides in Brian's T/A. Can you say one-of-a-kind? Needless to say, Brian enjoys his heavily optioned automatic trans equipped T/A.

The 3.08 gearing provides more than ample pull and he is able to keep cool with the factory air. Though he never took his Bird to the track, he bought an onboard computer to measure performance. The T/A was able to achieve an impressive 5.7 second zero to sixty mph time and produced a net horsepower number of 328 according to the computer. So much for the watered down 290 factory horsepower rating.

Surprisingly, or maybe not so surprisingly for this Pontiac, Brian found an original 8-track cartridge with a factory part number of 9794818 in the glovebox and on it were various artists of the day. However, there was also something called "Breakaway Theme." This may have been Pontiac's advertising jingle in '74. The tune, like everything else about the SD-455 T/A, was ahead of its time and appropriately named. Brian, or anyone else who drives this Trans Am, will have no problem doing just that.

Who says you don't save the best for last? Just kidding, Brian. The other half of this duo is my '74 Buccaneer Red SD-455 Trans Am. I grew up with Pontiac in my blood here on the Jersey Shore and haven't wavered. Maybe it was those steamy July nights on the Seaside Heights Boulevard or the torque battles out of the Garden State Parkway toll booths or those top end showdowns over the Seaside Bridge.

Who's to say what or when it happened for any one of us? I'm talking about that moment of automotive bliss that is forever etched in the enthusiast's mind. When "it" happened to you, you knew you would never forget that car! I could sit here and rehash these T/A memories but I'd rather share the story of my latest and easily my greatest Trans Am. About fifteen years ago I got really tired of walking through Pontiac shows around the country, salivating like a one-eyed dog in a butcher shop. It was not long before I devised a master plan not to recycle the less than stunning '75 Grand Prix and rusty '79 T/As of the world and begin a search for a timeless classic.

My Super Duty Trans Am was purchased in upstate New York in early 1997 in almost completely restored condition. The T/A came with extensive documentation and the only real work I performed was replacing the headliner. The upholstery and the hood bird were professionally installed. Interestingly, there were receipts found under the seats from Thanksgiving Day in 1974 and July 4th in 1975. I figured that this was a good omen and kept the receipts with the rest of the documents and trophies.

A curious aspect of the T/A is its interior. According to the SD-455 Registry's September 1997 edition, this is the only registered Super Duty Trans Am with the interior trim package of Cameo White standard seats accompanied by a red console, dashboard and carpeting. This particular T/A was also one of the last ones produced. A build date of 7/23/74 adorns this Pontiac's PHS documentation packet. Only three were documented in the registry as being built in August of '74 and one of those resides outside the United States. This Super Duty has no air conditioning but came well equipped with a Turbo-400 transmission and 3.42 gearing which enables it to break the tires loose at 55 mph. The Pontiac is completely stock with the exception of a specially fit Flowmaster 80 Series Muffler. (I still kept the original muffler.)

My T/A has been to the track one time only where it ran an impressive 13.48 at 100.2 mph. This ET was achieved after a show with those tank-like Honeycomb wheels and street tires. I show it with its nice shoes on and leave the Rally IIs home. Suffice it to say it's not exactly an Aesopian tortoise. The T/A was featured on Hemmings On-line Car Show last June and in 1991 it took first place in the East Coast GTO Regionals All Pontiac Open, sponsored by Performance Years.

Turning heads wherever it goes, the rapid red F-body still does quite well in the local shows. It's very clear to see that these two Super Duty 455 T/As have remained true to their heritage and are excellent examples of another automotive time that has long since passed. 🐢

## A Few Words With Martin J. Caserio, Pontiac's Man in Charge During the Super Duty Era

*Martin J. Caserio was the General Manager of our beloved motor division from October 1972 to October 1975. The entire Super Duty engine production run came under his command. Recently, I was fortunate to speak with Mr. Caserio about the Super Duty and other related topics tied to his tenure as the top man at Pontiac. Here are some highlights of our conversation that I think you will find both informative and entertaining.*

**Q.** Originally, you were reluctant to get the Super Duty engine into production even though there were some orders taken and parts were available to build them. Was this primarily due to the corporate environment of engine downsizing, emissions concerns or skyrocketing insurance premiums?

**A.** It was a combination of the three factors you just stated. In '73 and '74, the publicity attention and the focus of GM was on increased gas mileage. There was a focus on downsizing from corporate headquarters so this was not a popular time to introduce a performance engine. As an example, this is when Pontiac introduced the economy minded Vega-based Astre model.

**Q.** You were the general manager during some unique and challenging times. What were some of the most difficult issues you dealt with?

**A.** We had to meet the CAFE (Corporate Average Fuel Economy) standards in 1974 and we had to spend millions of dollars to do that, which took a lot out of the performance market sector. As a result, there wasn't too much time spent on performance engines. We were constantly fighting the imports. All of the U.S. automakers were. We also had the oil embargo to deal with, which only increased the emphasis on downsizing and gas mileage improvements.

**Q.** How do you feel about the Super Duty engine today and its place in Detroit automotive performance history?

**A.** It was one of the best. Pontiac was recognized as GM's performance division. I feel that we were able to live up to that reputation in tough times, while still handling the emissions issues.

**Q.** From a marketing perspective for the Firebird model, what was one of the more significant events you remember?

**A.** One very significant event was that of the United States Air Force Academy's graduating senior class ordering Firebirds and Trans Ams. They got very good prices from our Colorado Springs dealership and it was a great story for us because previous classes bought other cars when they graduated but for performance, back then, you had to buy a Pontiac.

**Q.** Do you have any special memories of your former company car, the Buccaneer Red Super Duty Trans Am?

**A.** That was my favorite company car.

*Special thanks to Mr. Caserio for sharing his time and insights with our readers.*