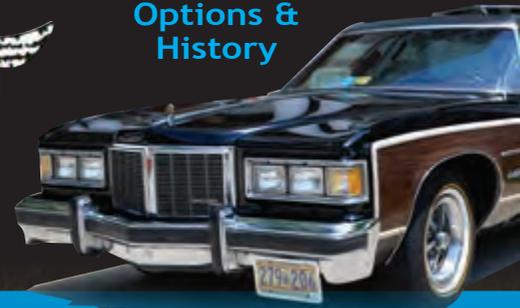


SMOKE SIGNALS



1976 Grand Safari
Loaded with
Options &
History



The Official Publication of the Pontiac - Oakland Club International

February 2017

Split Personality

This Trans Am has
a Hidden Identity



2017 POCI Board Election

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1975 GMC Gentleman Jim

Limited Edition Model Photo Feature



Event Coverage • Wichita & Wisconsin

First-Born Bandit

This unique special edition Trans Am is the
by Richard Price

In

the early '70s, General Motors Design Vice President Bill Mitchell was intrigued by the black-and-gold John Player Specials then racing in Formula 1. Being an avid motorcycle enthusiast, he had a pair of his personal bikes done up in this same color scheme and was pleased enough with it that he made a suggestion to Pontiac Design Studio #2 Director John Schinella that he apply it to a Trans Am.

Schinella requisitioned a Buccaneer Red 455 automatic '73 Trans Am which was delivered to the Design Center paint shop, where the entire car — including the rear bumper — was painted a custom black metallic lacquer with gold metalflakes mixed in. The tailpipes, grilles and headlight bezels were painted metallic gold and the Honeycomb wheels were covered with a genuine gold coating.

Gold pinstriping was then applied around the grille openings, wheel arches, rear bumper, the upper portion of the car, around all of the glass openings and over the roof. Finally, special one-off Trans Am decals (including the hood bird, made from a gold foil) were applied.



has Split Personality

earliest known production V82 in existence

photos - various contributors



Inside, the otherwise stock Trans Am Deluxe interior was redone in a light tan with a parachute-silk fabric on the horsecollar buckets.

When the T/A was finished, Schinella helped to secure his boss' approval by presenting the Trans Am and motorcycles together to Mitchell who was thrilled with the results. Mitchell drove the Trans Am for a time until a decision was made to update the Trans Am to a '74 model where it would be displayed at the major auto shows.

An immensely positive reaction to the car from the public proved that Schinella's execution of the black-and-gold scheme was going to be a hit. The decision was made to offer a production version as a 1976 Pontiac 50th Anniversary model.

To help promote the forthcoming Limited Edition, the '73 show car was once again updated by the paint shop at GM Design in 1975 to look like a production '76. The quarters were cut to accommodate the wraparound rear window and '76 bumpers and grilles replaced the '74 units. The car was featured on the auto show circuit and again generated lots of enthusiasm among attendees.

Limited Edition Trans Ams began rolling off the GM Norwood assembly line in the Spring of 1976, approximately midyear into Firebird production. According to Jim Mattison of

PHS-Online, the earliest known 50th Anniversary Trans Am produced was ordered as a Pontiac Company vehicle and built in Norwood, Ohio on March 25th, 1976, after which it was assigned to the West Coast Public Relations fleet in Southern California.

Being that this car was intended for promotional and executive use, it was well-optioned with air conditioning, 455 (requiring the 4-speed manual transmission), black deluxe interior, stereo radio, power windows, rear defrost, console and of course, the Y82 Limited Edition package—complete with Hurst T-tops. Although all of the L/E Trans Ams were originally slated to receive T-tops, only 643 received them and, of the 643, only 110 would carry the top-dog 455 powerplant.

The Trans Am generated plenty of attention and was loaned to various automotive publications for road tests and driving impressions. Unfortunately, by the time the press got to drive the '76, magazines were already preparing long-lead articles on the forthcoming 1977 models.

Since a major facelift was planned for Firebird and 1977 Pontiac models were slated for a September 30th introduction, the '76 models were already old news (more on that in a moment). A review of the 1977 Camaro Z-28 which appeared in the April, 1977 issue of *Car & Driver* features a driving comparison between the two F-car cousins, with author Don Sherman describing the Trans Am he drove in Los Angeles as having a "...black body decked out in a variety of gold stripes and decals, plus gold anodized alloy wheels and Hurst hatch sunroofs."

While the exterior photos accompanying the road test show a pair of F-cars painted white (1977 Z-28 and Trans Am) with Michigan plates shot inside a studio, the interior shots of the Pontiac clearly show 1976 Trans Am features like the 8,000 RPM tach and buckle escutcheons on the door pulls, plus black paint on the door sills. When one considers that the car was driven in L.A. and the option mix of the S/E featured in the *Car & Driver* road test is identical to those of our feature car (plus the timetable of the car's stint in the West Coast PR fleet coincides with the PHS documentation), it is logical to



Starting with a Buccaneer Red 455-powered automatic '73 Trans Am, Firebird Design Chief John Schinella had the GM Design Center paint shop bathe the car in metallic black lacquer, then cover it with gold accents, pinstripes and gold foil decals. The car was then driven around the Detroit area to gauge public reaction. The overwhelmingly positive feedback led directly to the release of the 1976 50th Anniversary Trans Am. (Photo by Mark Jordan)



The layout for the L/E's pinstriping was done in the Pontiac Design Studio by Bill Davis in 1974 with black stripes against a Cameo White Trans Am for maximum contrast. The arrows mark key bends, joints and contours around the car and serve as reference points for the suppliers to manufacture stripes for production cars. (Photo courtesy of Bill Davis)



▲ *At first glance, a knowledgeable observer might assume the owner of this '76 Y82 replaced the Honeycomb wheels with '77 Snowflakes — except it was modified by Pontiac and sold to a private owner this way. (Photo by Chris Wilson)*

◀ *Western Wheel supplied most of Pontiac's aluminum Snowflakes, but this early T/A wears a set of 15x7" Snowflakes produced by the Kelsey Hayes company. (Photo by Rick Deiters)*



Here's something seldom seen on a car in private hands. It's an emission exemption decal, officially giving Pontiac latitude to modify the engine as part of the Trans Am promotional mission. All emission controls have remained in place indicating that modifications were limited to the car's appearance, yet the decal was not removed by the dealership before the L/E was sold. (Photo by Chris Wilson)

conclude this is the very same car that Sherman drove.

During the L/E's tenure as a promotional tool, it was needed for another assignment — this time for Pontiac. To have literature ready to ship to dealers for a late-September introduction of the 1977 Pontiac models, all of the photography for the brochures and promotional items needed to be completed during the Summer of 1976. Production of 1977 S/E models wasn't scheduled to start until April, leaving Pontiac with two options: photograph the '73 prototype (which still featured non-production metallic paint and gold foil decals) or update an existing car.

As the photography was to be done in California, and the still-new '76 L/E was already there, the decision was made to update the '76 with 1977 features for the Pontiac catalog.

The task of updating the Trans Am fell to Pontiac Engineer John Callies, who was responsible at the time for prepping Pontiacs for show duty, magazines, TV and movie appearances or any other similar need within a facility in Van Nuys, California near the F-car assembly plant.

"I remember the car," Callies said in a recent *Smoke Signals* interview. "The photographer really wanted to get his hands on it, so I had to get it done quickly," he recalls of the project.

Due to the timeframe (late Summer of 1976), GM suppliers weren't yet mass-producing the '77 parts, but they were able to send an early (pilot) production stamping of the '77 hood along with the front fascia, grilles, lamp assemblies and air dam. The new-for-'77 aluminum Snowflake wheels were also shipped to Callies for installation on the Limited Edition.

Callies couldn't recall whether or not the fenders were changed to accommodate the mounting provisions of the new one-piece front fascia.

If the '76 fenders were left in place, the 50th Anniversary decals were re-touched in the promotional materials as '77 S/E versions lack the octagonal 50th Anniversary decals, which remain on the car.

Close scrutiny of the 1977 literature still reveals some details that weren't changed. In one dealer poster featuring

A mid-1976 photo shoot for the 1977 Pontiac catalog required a '77 S/E, but with none available, the '76 Trans Am in Pontiac's West Coast Public Relations fleet was pressed into service and converted. Miraculously, the car was not crushed as dictated by GM policy. It instead had its '76 sheetmetal reinstalled and was sold to a very happy customer by Bryant Pontiac in West Covina, California.



a 3/4 front left-hand view of the Trans Am shot in a studio, a rounded '76 shaker is evident, and the T/A-6.6 decal appears to be the squared-off 1978-up style instead of the Germanic font.

The photo of the same L/E in the 1977 full-line brochure is a right-front three-quarter shot with a driver negotiating a left turn against a mountainous backdrop. Here, the correct square shaker with the ridge is visible, although the retouched shaker decal is still the later square style.

Curiously, a '76 L/E Trans Am appears in the Astre Formula section

of the 1977 full-line Pontiac catalog, along with a red '66 GTO at a drive-in burger joint. Pontiac was really working hard to tie the Astre into Pontiac's established performance legacy!

Whether this '76 Trans Am shown with the Astre is the same car before being upfitted with the '77 nose remains pure speculation. It is also possible that the Trans Am still wore the '77 front end and Snowflake wheels when Don Sherman drove it, as he did make reference to "...the 1977 addition of a weird Batmobile grille treatment..." and "anodized alloy wheels" in his road test.

With the photography complete and the 1976 model year essentially over, the '76 Limited Edition's tenure in the press fleet had come to an end. Standard operating procedure for any car which has been modified or used for promotional purposes is to have it crushed, but this car somehow managed to avoid that fate.

Instead, it sat for a time until someone at a California Pontiac dealership discovered it in the course of searching for a 455-powered L/E for a customer. Upon hearing the story of the car, the customer reportedly became that much



The WX code 455 remains in place along with the requisite 4-speed manual. Only 110 Y82 Limited Edition Trans Ams were built with this combo in 1976. (Photo by Chris Wilson)

more interested in acquiring it!

On January 31, 1977, the Trans Am was re-invoiced to Pontiac Motor Division and sold to Bryant Pontiac, still wearing the '77 sheetmetal. Due to the mileage and the fact that the original purchaser had been Pontiac Motor Division, a Used Sales Contract was completed showing a sale price of \$6,999 on the \$7,250 Trans Am.

Finally, before the customer could take delivery, the original 1976 sheetmetal was bolted back on, but the Snowflake wheels were left in place. The original Honeycombs were given to the customer as part of the deal.

Today, the Trans Am remains well-preserved and the odometer shows under 45,000 miles. Still in place is the original numbers-matching drivetrain, exhaust system and catalytic converter along with most of the original options with which it was ordered.

The Trans Am is currently housed at Trans Am Specialties in Miami, Florida, where the body was treated to a cosmetic restoration with dents smoothed and fresh paint applied. While the S/E was in the body shop, fellow Floridian Burt Reynolds autographed the glovebox door as well as a copy of the '77 sales brochure.

Shop owner Rick Deiters opted to install the 1977 front end to present the Trans Am as it was photographed for the sales brochure, but he also has all the correct '76 parts to install should a seri-

The odometer currently shows less than 45,000 miles, and the underside serves to verify the T/A's relatively low miles were likely accumulated in fair weather. Other than a clear coat to protect bare castings, everything is as Norwood, Ohio assembly workers built it nearly 41 years ago. (Photo by Chris Wilson)



ous buyer make that request.

2017 marks the 40th Anniversary of the release of *Smokey and the Bandit*, fueling a resurgence of Bandit Fever and thus the value of quality Special Edition T/As — the car Burt Reynolds once described as “...the sexiest co-star I ever worked with!”

The Trans Am's popularity in television and movies certainly motivated car buyers to visit Pontiac showrooms in the late 1970s. An estimated 44,795 black Special Edition Trans Ams were built between 1976 and 1981, even prompting Chevrolet, Oldsmobile, Cadillac, Ford, Datsun and Lotus to follow suit and offer black-and-gold Special Editions of their very own. None were as iconic or commercially successful as Pontiac's Trans Am, however, making this particular Limited Edition all the more special. 🍷



► Hurst was an official supplier of T-tops (and installation services) for Pontiac in 1976, continuing until 1978. Shown here is the “First Design,” with full rubber weatherstripping. Many Firebirds received “Second Design” weatherstripping as part of a recall campaign, which did little if anything to stop leakage. (Photo by Chris Wilson)



◄ The interior remains factory original. All Limited Editions feature gold steering wheel spokes and gold instrument bezels. An 8,000 RPM tach and buckle-style door pull escutcheons help identify the 1976 model Trans Am interior. (Photo by Chris Wilson)