

MY PONTIACS AND ME

By Doug Wollgast



January, 1975. My first car ride, home from the hospital in my mom's arms – dad at the wheel of the 1968 Pontiac Tempest sport coupe. Dad had received this car, brand new, as college graduation gift from my grandfather. It was basic. A 2 door sport coupe, flambeau burgundy metallic with painted white top and black interior, OHC-6, three speed manual, column shift, no options. It cost \$2333.00. This car served as everyday transportation until 1985 when my grandfather gave my parents a 1979 Dodge St. Regis. This car was fully loaded with every option that could be ordered and had very low miles. My dad sold the Tempest for \$900.00 to a man whose kid tore it up and sent it to the junk yard in about two years.

In 1988 I started to dream about getting a car of my own. I would have really liked to have had dad's Tempest but it was sold before I had a real interest in it. I tried to find it back, that's when I learned of its junk yard fate. This led me in search of a car thru the classifieds (this was before the internet and EBay) in which I saw many GTOs, Lemans and Tempests. Thru this research I realized what I really wanted was a GTO. This was not to be – as dad informed me that there was no way he would let me buy a 23 year old car for four or five grand.

I continued to mow lawns and save money and eventually in October 1989 I found a 1965 LeMans original owner car about ten miles from my home. I was more than a year shy of 16 so

my dad drove me to see it. It was a nice original car with a fresh paint job in the original cameo ivory. It had the original dark blue interior in very good condition. Under the hood was a 326 two barrel with a two speed auto on the column. Not exactly a GTO but it was a very nice car. We bought it in November, 1989.

Thru the next year dad and I proceeded to pull engine and transmission, rebuild and restore to 1965 specs. We pulled out the interior, cleaned thoroughly, and installed a new carpet and headliner. The underside of the car was originally undercoated from the dealer (Barton Pontiac on West Florissant Road) so I re-undercoated it to make it fresh looking. There were a couple rust spots in the trunk that I cut out and replaced with patch panels. Both rear inner fender wells had rust areas that I cut out and replaced. I had the bumpers, headlight doors, tail panel, and remote mirror re-chromed. I wanted everything to look like it did when the car was new – I was not into aftermarket or modifications at all. I read all the Pontiac books I could get and bought parts from various restoration supply companies. I made mistakes and had to redo some things a couple times to get them right.

In the fall of 1990 Dad drove me, in the freshly completed LeMans, to a car cruise at a pizza place near my house. It was a lot of fun as many people wanted to talk to us about the Pontiac. It was then as it is now – Pontiacs were usually in the minority at car cruises dominated by Chevrolet, Ford and Chrysler made cars. There was one guy there with a GTO that seemed very interested in the LeMans and its young owner. He couldn't believe that he hadn't seen this car before – as he knew almost all the Pontiacs in town. He was also surprised to see a “kid” who had the desire to restore a car the way that I did. His name was John Novelli. John lived a short distance from the pizza place and he told me to come by some time as he may have some parts that I could use for my car. I jotted down his phone number in case I did need something for my car.

About six months later I needed a part for my brother's 1968 LeMans we were working on and I called John Novelli. He had the part so I went to his house to pick it up and see what else he had. When I got there I was very surprised to see all the cool options, trim parts, tri-powers, 4 speeds – you name it, he had it and most of it was mint. Even more exciting than those things was a 1965 GTO, reef turquoise, post coupe, tri-power, and 4-speed with about 30,000 miles in the single car garage. I asked him if I could go for a ride in the GTO as I had never ridden in one before. There is nothing like the sound of a tri-power under full throttle acceleration. Couple that with John's power-shifting of the four-speed that just about ripped your head off at every shift! I was hooked forever! I hate to say it, but I knew at that moment the LeMans would eventually have to be replaced by a GTO. John wasn't interested in getting rid of his GTO and even if he was that car was way beyond my means. I would have to just dream.

I continued to enjoy the LeMans, but I was always on the lookout for a GTO. I continued to work and save money. I usually would stop by John's house every couple weeks to see the Sedan and see what other finds John had come upon. In the summer of 1992 John came up with a regimental red 1967 GTO, HO, 4 speed, air car. This car was like the 1965 Sedan – southern, rust free and beautiful. It needed a lot of detail work but it was all there and in very good shape. John informed me that he bought it for resale. I asked him to take me for a ride. The big Quadra-jet Rochester and 4 speed combo was very close to the sound and feel of the 1965 Se-

dan and at a much more affordable price. I asked him to drive by my parent's house to let them see the car. Dad thought it was nice but didn't see the need to make any hasty decision. A few weeks later John



asked me to get his mail and keep an eye on his house for the week that he would be away at the GTO nationals. Every day when I stopped by to get the mail I took time to stare thru the garage window at the '67. By the time John got back I had convinced my dad to loan me the money to buy the GTO. I was 17 yrs old. It was one of the best purchase decisions I ever made.

The GTO was good for me. It kept me out of a lot of the troubles that kids my age were involved with. I spent weekends working on the car. I kept my grades up as my parents would help me buy parts that I needed for the car or pay off what I owed on it. I was very careful with the car – I took very good care of everything as I had a lot invested and a lot to lose if I was careless. This did not stop me from power-shifting the heck out of it on occasion! My friend Mike Reifel and I would take it out on Friday and Saturday nights





for some fun with Mustangs and Camaros. It was an air car so it only had a 3.23 safe-track but in first gear you could stomp it to the floor and when the secondaries came open it would smoke the tires! I never did stoplight burnouts but I regularly spun the tires on the 1-2 up-shift!

All this time I continued to restore/detail the car to 1967 new car appearance. I added options as John would find them for me. John taught me a lot about GTOs. Even though John is 15 years older than me he didn't treat me like a kid, I would ask him for help with something and he would show me how to do it and many times would loan me the tools I needed. John's house was like a candy store of items that I would like to get some day when I had the money. Sometimes John just gave me the part I needed. He would loan me different wheel covers or wheels if I wanted to run them on my car and see how they looked. Kind of a loan-to-own program! Over the years I added many options to an already well optioned GTO. Many of those additions were with the help and advice from John.

During my college years I didn't have as much time to spend on the GTO. I parked it in my grandparent's garage. I sold the 1965 Lemans and bought a 1991 Mustang 5.0 to drive. I drove the Mustang a couple of years and in 1996 I ordered a brand new WS-6 Ram Air Formula 6-speed. I thought this was my chance to buy a modern day GTO. The Formula was a really cool and rare car that I pampered and never so much as drove it in the rain. In 1998 I graduated from college, got married and bought my first house. By this time the GTO and the Formula were rarely ever driven. My house had a two car garage so I moved the GTO from my grandparent's house to mine along with the Formula. My everyday driver was an 87 Ford F150. During this time John had sold the 1965 sedan, gotten married and moved much farther away to Illinois – we kind of lost track of each other for several years.

In 1999 while attending a car cruise at Dairy Queen (without my car) I saw a lady with a very original 1968 Tempest sport coupe with a for sale sign in the window. In my discussion with her I found out that she was the second owner of a very nice survivor car. It was an original

paint (meridian turquoise metallic) 350, two speed auto on the column. Everything was original, plug wires, T3 headlights, 34,000 miles. She was moving out of town to a place on a rock road and did not want to ruin the car. She wanted it to go to a person that would take care of it and not tear it up. I was the one to do just that! I called John Novelli, caught up on the lost time, and asked his advice on the car. I wound up negotiating a price and buying the car. I rented half of a neighbor ladies garage for the Formula and put the 68 Tempest in my garage. I converted the Tempest to H.O. specs with a quadrajet, 4-speed muncie and a 3.55 saf-t-trac rear end. I also added a hood tachometer. It looks factory original.

I attended the GTO nationals in St. Louis and met the couple from Indiana that had purchased John's 1965 sedan. I had thought that I would never see that car again. I asked them to let me know if they ever wanted to sell it! During the next few years I bought and sold a 1965 GTO and survivor



1965 Tempest four door. I moved to a new house out in rural Missouri. I was laid off from my job as a machinist in a mold shop. I got a new job at another machine shop – Planet Tool and Engineering – where I still work today. My wife Amie and I had two children, Megan in 2001 and Robert in 2006. It wasn't until 2006 that I started to get back into the 1967 GTO. I decided



that I really wanted to do a thorough job at detailing and restoring the car. The 1967 GTO was, in my opinion, too nice to require a frame off restoration but not nice enough to be a high-scoring points judged car. The undercarriage and drive train needed restoration. The paint was 20 years old but still very nice. The interior was original – just needing cleaning and a new carpet. I pulled the drive train and jacked the car up so that I could work underneath. It is a Texas car

so the undercarriage was very clean – really just in need of repaint. I cleaned and repainted the entire frame and underside of the body. I removed hardware, glass beaded and had re-plated. I rebuilt the engine, rebuilt the Hurst shifter, re-plated the linkage, installed a new clutch, repainted and re-plated everything. I had the front bumper re-chromed. I had the regimental red paint buffed out. I re-installed everything and finished it off with a Gardner exhaust. I took it to the GTO nationals/POCI show in Dayton and got Concourse Gold in the Restored Stock Class from both clubs. I was very proud of that car to say the least!

During the show in Dayton I saw Doug and Clancie Reno – the couple that bought John’s 1965 Sedan. I spent some time talking with them and looking over the car I had always wanted. Doug and Clancie had taken very good care of the GTO. They drove it a lot, but very carefully, as it now showed about 52,000 miles. It no longer had the checked original paint but had been very nicely repainted in the original Reef Turquoise complete with white pinstripe. The original turquoise interior still remained but now had a new carpet to replace the threadbare original. The AM/FM had been replaced by a standard push button AM radio. The deluxe wheel was replaced with an original custom sport wood wheel. In place of the dog dish hubcaps were a nice set of original Rally I wheels. The dash now sported a mint Rally gage cluster acquired from John. Other than those items the rest of the car was as I remembered it. At the end of the meet I reminded them that if they ever wanted to sell it to please let me know.



About one month after the GTO/POCI convention I received a phone call from Doug Reno in which he said that he wanted to sell the 1965 sedan and wanted to give me the first opportunity to buy it. It was great to have a second chance to buy this car, but at the time it came as a surprise and I was not prepared for a purchase of that type. I looked at the parts and things that I had that I could sell to come up with money to buy the car – this included the 1965 Tempest four door survivor that I had purchased a few years before. Doug and I agreed on a price and he

allowed me a couple months time to sell the 1965 Tempest and all the parts I could for money for the GTO. My dad again came to the rescue and agreed to loan me the rest of the money for the car. On October 31, 2009 my wife and I drove to Indianapolis to pick up the GTO. Doug and Clancie were sad to see the GTO leave for a new home – but they were relieved to know it would be well taken care of!



Back at home it was like I went back 20 years – except this time I was in the driver seat! The only things I’ve done are to find a nice AM/FM to put back in the dash and to reinstall the steel wheels and dog dish hubcaps with a fresh set of redlines. It brings back a lot of old memories – especially when the three deuces come open with that “WHOMP” and you feel your neck jerk each time you shift the tall chrome Hurst stick thru the gears!

There are several things I have learned during these years. 1. Sometimes you have to wait for a dream to come true. 2. There are second chances. 3. Much can be learned in the process of buying and owning an old car. 4. You can make a big difference and have a huge influence on a younger person buy taking the time to help them get started in the hobby. I would like to



thank my parents, Lee and Nancy for all that they did to make it possible for me to get where I am now. I would like to thank my wife Amie and kids for putting up with me and my cars. I also would like thank John Novelli for the time that he spent over the years as a mentor, and as a good friend to me. I also want to thank Doug and Clancie Reno for giving me the chance to buy back the 1965 sedan. Last, and most important, I want to thank God for allowing me to accomplish these things. I am looking forward to many more years in the hobby, God willing.

