

A Visit to the 2014 GM Nationals at Carlisle

By George Burbage

The 2014 GM Nationals at Carlisle, Pennsylvania were held June 20 through June 22. Although still an enjoyable event, it has declined significantly over the past two or three years. A vendor and attendee I spoke with independently claim the biggest blow was a couple of years ago when the American Camaro Association pulled out of the event. It's unclear what the exact cause is, but they mentioned the problem started when the folks at Carlisle placed the club's vehicles in locations that were less than desirable. Their national meet is now held in Maryland.

The weather, although slightly gloomy for late that Saturday morning and early afternoon, didn't diminish the enthusiasm of those in attendance. People seemed to be buying plenty of stuff, especially larger items like glass and fenders. All makes and just about every model of GM product were represented.

Other goings on during the weekend included troubleshooting and product seminars, Maguire's live infomercials, autocross rides, a tribute to the Bandit, the car corral, and Cacklefest – essentially a demo of funny car engines. And what Carlisle event would be complete without the ever-present public-address announcer giving the loudspeakers the workouts of their lives?

What distinguished this year's Nationals was their celebration of the GTO's 50th birthday. The occasion was marked throughout the weekend with special lectures, personal appearances by people who played key roles in bringing our favorite sports car to life on the drawing board and the track, and vehicle displays.

I decided to glean some general information from a number of online secondary sources to help with the stories, especially with the '73 GTO Colonnade.

Marking the Occasion

As I mentioned, there were lectures, personal appearances, and vehicle displays. Although I was unable to see or attend everything, I hope this small sample will at least give you an idea of what took place. Carlisle Events really deserves credit for the planning and execution.

One of the featured speakers was Tim Dye, founder of the Pontiac-Oakland Museum and Resource Center (POMRC). His lecture and slideshow centered on the Museum's collections and how he acquired some of it, and some Pontiac history. One of the stories he told involved a contest (type unknown) Pontiac held in 1967 where the winner could pick any car in the lineup and specify whatever options they wanted. The winner was a Wyoming real estate agent who ordered a beyond-loaded 4-door Bonneville; he used it to haul around clients. Tim even showed a slide taken around 2005 of the original owner's widow with the car. Turns out, the car wound up in the Museum's collection.

One of the things which struck me was the actual capacity of the organization. The Museum itself is large, but there are also several offsite storage areas. That's actually a good thing because one of the Museum volunteers who was there said they rotate their exhibits regularly,

keeping everything fresh. Visitorship continues to grow with over 20,000 folks dropping in last year, including a large number of foreign patrons.

Unfortunately, I was unable to attend one of the roundtable discussions with Ben Harrison, head of Pontiac's Product Planning Division; Russ Gee, an engine specialist who worked as an engineer on the GTO development team; and Bill Collins, another engineer who worked on the GTO project.¹ I can only imagine the stories and behind-the-scenes perspectives they have. I hope these gentleman and others like Jim Wangers, Milt Schornack, and Arnie "The Farmer" Beswick have oral histories already done or in the planning stages. Milt was in attendance, spending a good deal of his time signing memorabilia, speaking with folks, and getting his picture taken. More information on Milt is later in this article.

The car show portion of the weekend had much better attendance on Saturday over Friday. Although I have no direct evidence, it appeared as though the Pontiacs with the best showing were, in no particular order, Trans Am, GTO, and Fiero. Oddly, I noticed only one GMC product over the show's first two days: a 1972 Sprint.

Here are a few pictures from show field taken that Friday. Luckily, there was a 1922 Oakland in attendance owned by a gentleman who's had it since 1944 (wearing the red cap). Amazingly, his was the only "antique" car on the show field I saw. It seemed he always had folks around his car and it was good to see. You have to agree with our Secretary Dick Stover when he says, "Let's...show the heritage of the brand."



The 1922 Oakland with its owner since 1944



A stunning 1958 Bonneville



Family transportation: 1962 Catalina

The GTO-related displays for the weekend were well done. For the early Goats, the POMRC had in its tent a 1964 post car, red with white interior. One of the open-ended buildings housed the “Goat Pen,” a place where non-Concours vehicles need not apply as quite few displays had

mirrors on the ground and very watchful owners. There were the usual early model years in there plus a yellow '74. The Monkeemobile was also in that building, but getting close enough for a clear picture was impossible; it was a car receiving the rock star treatment from the fans. The 60s music playing in the background was actually a nice touch. (Looking at that car reminded me of the article in the March 2014 *Smoke Signals* which revealed that the blower is a fake.)

Special Guests

What follows is more detailed than I originally intended, but some of the cars at the event I think warrant the attention.

Not in the “Goat Pen” were three exceptional cars which on their own would be the highlight of almost any car show: the '69 Ram Air V GTO Royal Bobcat, an original '64 GTO Royal Bobcat, and a beautiful '73 GTO Colonnade.

The Ram Air V GTO was built by Milt Schornack, a pioneer of the Ram Air system, under contract with Pontiac for NHRA racing for the 1970 season. Pontiac followed Milt when he opened his own shop, Royal Automotive, after Royal Pontiac discontinued its performance program in the latter half of 1969. The dealership closed for good shortly thereafter. Ironically, Pontiac cancelled the Ram Air V program as soon as the car was finished because they wanted to concentrate on the 455 as it was cheaper to get into production. Roughly 200 engines were built, though.² This Goat has a 428 bored out to a 440, producing 465 horsepower. Even though the car runs mid 12s, Milt contends with today's improved tires and tuning technology it would run in the high 10s.



1969 Ram Air V GTO Royal Bobcat

More technical specifications from the sandwich board:

- Camshaft: General Kinetics solid roller 251/257@0.050, 0.645/0.645 valve lift with 1.5 rockers, 112 degrees C/L
- Intake: Ram Air V aluminum with a modified 850 Thermoquad carburetor
- Exhaust: Original JR headers with a Performance Years 2 ½" X-pipe system
- Transmission: Original TH 400 with a 2000 stall converter built in 1969
- Rear: GM 10-bolt, 4:11
- Suspension: stock except for Hurst shocks installed in 1969 and rear air bags added in 2005
- Wheels: original 1969 Fenton Hustlers, 14x6 front and 15x6 ½ rear
- Paint: Espresso Brown and Hurst Gold

The finishing touch to the display was this: "We dedicate this 69 Ram Air V Royal Bobcat to the distinguished memory of John Z. DeLorean, the father of the GTO and the muscle car era."

Not too long after Schornack became a mechanic at Royal Pontiac, the Bobcat option package was available to the public. He didn't invent the package (A lot of that credit goes to Frank Rediker.³), but he definitely made it quite a bit better through things like metal lock nuts, shaved cylinder heads, and thinned head gaskets. The resultant compression ratio was just over 11:1.

The package, which was also available mail order, included among other things:

- Rocker arm locking nuts
- New rocker cover gaskets
- Thinner head gaskets, by .022-.025 inches, to increase compression
- Push rod cover gasket
- Blocked heat riser gasket
- Carburetor re-jetting
- Distributor re-curve kit, which included Mallory points and condenser, and a new advance stop with lighter weights and springs
- Two Royal Bobcat emblems⁴
- Champion J10Y spark plugs
- "GR-RRR" license plate and Royal Pontiac license plate frames⁵

What was the price for this performance? According to Royal's brochure it was "...much less than the disappointment of running second." They actually cost between \$120 and \$150. Additional costs were incurred for things like milling the cylinder heads.⁶



1964 GTO Royal Bobcat

Now I may be mistaken, but I'm pretty sure over the course of the weekend I saw several people standing in front of this car with their heads bowed in silent adoration.

The final car of note shared the tent with the '64 Bobcat: a '73 GTO Colonnade. Although not a legendary machine like the previous two in this article, it's a rare car that's deceptively strong in a time when the muscle car era was coming quickly to an end.

The GTO package in 1973 was an option on the Le Mans Coupe.⁷ Styling was greatly affected with this intermediate A-body, due to Federal bumper requirements and growing crash safety concerns. The cosmetic changes received only lukewarm reviews, but dual National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) ducts did help. And of the ten fully functioning NACA system cars produced, only one is reported to be remaining. All the other cars with NACA ducts used them to merely direct air into the engine compartment, not the carburetor (via ductwork in a Ram Air setup).⁸ Handling improved thanks to a revised suspension geometry using the typical GM unequal-length A-arm setup in front and a four trailing-arm arrangement with coil springs in the rear.⁹ In fact, the online material I reviewed for this article was unanimous in their praise for how well the car handled, especially in wet conditions.

No convertibles were available because GM attempted to get the jump on other Federal safety standards that never materialized. Put another way, they outsmarted themselves on this one. Further emasculation occurred via emissions controls achieved by lowered rear axle ratios (see the features list), elimination of chrome rocker arm covers and air cleaner lids, aluminum intakes, and HO exhaust manifolds.¹⁰ Production was just 4,806 units.



1973 GTO with the “A” Ram Air System

Some other noteworthy items on this beauty include:

- “A” Ram Air system
- Available power included the standard 400 L78 code engine which produced 230hp and the optional 455 L75 code D-port V-8 with a 250hp rating. Only 544 cars rolled off the assembly line with the 455.¹¹ (The SD 455 should have been available with its 310hp rating, but was cancelled by new VP and GM Martin Caserio in the name of fuel economy.^{12 13})
- Transmissions: 3 or 4-speed Muncie manuals or TH 3-speed (the only choice with the 455)
- Rears: 3.42:1, 3.23:1 (standard), and 3.08:1
- Wheels: 15x7, Honeycomb or Rally II

The “A” Ram Air feature on this car could be one of one or possibly the only survivor in an actual vehicle. Due to noise standards, it was not placed into production except for a few parts sets that may have been released into the GM parts system and obtained “under the table.”¹⁴

Regardless of what you think of these colonnade cars, they really are quintessential 70s! It also makes me wonder if anybody tried to go a COPO-like route to get one of the SD 455s in a '73 Goat.

In Closing....

If you've never been to an event at Carlisle, especially this one, please try to attend even if it's just for a Friday or Saturday afternoon. As my academician friend aptly puts it, “Going to events

like this is a study in American material culture.” Call it what you want, but the car show alone is well worth it; the vendors and people watching are bonuses.

Notes

¹ Carlisle GM Nationals Official Event Guide, 5

² Ibid., 6-7

³ Frank Markus, “1962 Pontiac Catalina Royal Bobcat

Muscle Royalty [sic]: How a suburban-Detroit dealer helped establish Pontiac's "Excitement" Image,” January 28, 2013, http://www.motortrend.com/classic/features/12q3_1962_pontiac_catalina_royal_bobcat/specs.html (6-23-2014)

⁴ George Mattar, “Milt Schornack: He put the GET-UP-AND-GO into GTOs,” *Hemmings Muscle Machines*, April 2007, http://www.hemmings.com/mus/stories/2007/04/01/hmn_feature23.html (6-22-2014)

⁵ Kevin Shaw, “Muscle Cars You Should Know: ’69 Royal Bobcat Pontiac GTO Ram Air V,” September 3, 2010, <http://www.streetlegaltv.com/new/muscle-cars-you-should-know-69-royal-bobcat-pontiac-gto-ram-air-v/> (6-23-2014)

⁶ http://www.motortrend.com/classic/features/12q3_1962_pontiac_catalina_royal_bobcat/specs.html

⁷ Staff, “Performance Car of the Year,” *Cars Magazine*, April 1973, 21-24,

http://www.pontiacserver.com/c73gto_1.html (6-22-2014)

⁸ Mike Bumbeck, “1973 Pontiac GTO,” *Hemmings Muscle Machines*, February 2011,

http://www.hemmings.com/mus/stories/2011/02/01/hmn_buyers_guide1.html (6-22-2014)

⁹ http://www.hemmings.com/mus/stories/2011/02/01/hmn_buyers_guide1.html (6-22-2014)

¹⁰ George Mattar, Jeff Koch, “Forgotten Goat – 1973 Pontiac GTO,” *Hemmings Muscle Machines*, March 2005,

http://www.hemmings.com/mus/stories/2005/03/01/hmn_feature9.html (6-23-2014)

¹¹ http://www.hemmings.com/mus/stories/2011/02/01/hmn_buyers_guide1.html (6-23-2014)

¹² http://www.pontiacserver.com/c73gto_1.html (6-22-2014)

¹³ Joe Oldham, “The Car of the Year that Wasn’t,” *Hemmings Muscle Machines*, October 2011,

http://www.hemmings.com/mus/stories/2011/10/01/hmn_opinion2.html (6-23-2014)

¹⁴ <http://www.pontiacpower.org/1973ramair.htm> (6-25-2014)