

My Two 1960 Pontiacs – Part 1 of 3
History and Background of the 1960 Pontiac
by Bill McIntosh

This is a three-part story about my small, two-car collection of 1960 Pontiacs. Before I tell our readers about these two particular cars, I have to start my tale with a review of the background and history of these wonderful cars and the forces within GM and Pontiac that brought them to market.

The history of Pontiac dates back to 1926 when the Oakland Motor Company, a division of General Motors, launched the Pontiac. Of course, the Oakland Motor Company was transformed into the Pontiac Motor Company in 1932 when the Oakland car was taken out of production. One year later, its name was changed to Pontiac Motor Division. The Pontiac Division was GM's attempt to sandwich in between Chevrolet and its more expensive brands a "slightly upscale" product. While sixes were available off and on in the early years, Pontiac's real claim to fame was offering an eight-cylinder engine at a relatively low price. Much of Pontiac's success was also the result of the leadership provided by Harry J. Klinger, a salesman's salesman, who took the helm as general manager of Pontiac in 1933.

Despite all of its success, the Pontiac had a distinct image in the marketplace as a "little old ladies" car – solid, well engineered and reliable – anything but a performance automobile. In spite of significant engineering advances in the mid-50s, its image was anything but exciting. So, in June of 1956, top management decided that Pontiac needed a new general manager. That general manager had the assignment of shaking up the Pontiac Division and adding excitement to the product and the brand. The man who got that job was Semon Emil ("Bunkie") Knudsen. He was the singular force to reshape Pontiac with a lasting influence until the demise of the brand as recently announced by GM. While I will mention a few of the famous stories of his transformation of Pontiac, it should be remembered that it was Bunkie that turned Pontiac into the number three brand in the industry (the industry, not just GM)!

It all started in 1956, when Bunkie was appointed general manager. Having carefully analyzed the situation, Bunkie concluded that Pontiac's problem was image, and so he set out to change the image of the Division and the car with real determination. He realized that an image is closely related to the symbols. Many of Pontiac's old symbols had to be buried before he could change the image of the Division. He started by eliminating the most well-known image of the Pontiac – the silver streak – the chrome strips that ran down the hood and trunk of all Pontiac cars since 1935. Later, he eliminated the equally famous Indian-head hood ornament as another symbol of the past. With the symbols of the past, sedate image of Pontiac quickly being set aside, Bunkie had to set a new direction for the Division. Having thoughtfully decided, Bunkie set out to create an image for the company that can be summed up in one word: "performance."

Bunkie re-staffed Pontiac's major departments with new managers who could execute his vision of performance. Most importantly, he hired Pete Estes (actually Elliott M. Estes) to take the position of chief engineer at Pontiac. Estes would eventually become President of GM, but, while at Pontiac, he was the driving force behind the development of all aspects of engineering that would transform Pontiacs into high performance automobiles. In addition to understanding the importance of building high performance automobiles, Bunkie also understood that he had to show the public that these new Pontiacs were high performance cars. So, Bunkie broke with the gentleman's agreement in the industry to keep automobile manufacturers out of organized racing. While not the focus of this article, his efforts to demonstrate Pontiac performance on the track netted Pontiac three (3) NASCAR wins in 1958, one in 1959, six (6) in 1960 and thirty (30) in 1961! In the 1960 and 1961 seasons, sixteen (16) of the winners were 1960 Pontiacs!!

Skipping over three most interesting model years of 1956, 1957 and 1958, I have to spend a bit of time on the 1959 model year for two reasons. First and foremost, the 1959 Pontiac was the culmination of Bunkie Knudsen's drive to remake Pontiac into a performance automobile. While each year since his arrival as general manager he had directed changes in the car, it was the 1959 model that reflected his and his new staff's complete range of ideas. By 1959, the only thing left of the old Indian chief image was the high-beam light indicator on the dash. Secondly, the 1959 Pontiac is most closely related to the 1960 model year.

The 1959 Pontiac was almost a complete departure from previous models – totally re-engineered from top to bottom. A complete new body design, it was the lowest, widest and longest Pontiac in history. Because of that, the engineers moved the front track out to 64 inches so the car did not look like it had a funny narrow track on this very wide body. Thus was born the first “wide-track Pontiac.” Engineering improvements and changes for 1959 were wide ranging and included:

- A larger displacement V8 engine, bringing it to 389 c.i. It was the longest running Pontiac engine in the history of the Division.
- A large range of engine horsepower ratings from the economy Tempest 420E at 215 h.p. to the top of the line Tempest 420A at 345 h.p., sporting three two barrel carburetors.
- New intake manifolds with passages of equal length and shape.
- New front suspension that included new lower control arms, larger diameter coil springs with lower ride rates and recalibrated shock absorbers.
- New Saginaw power steering with rotary valve and fail safe system.
- Revised braking system with heavier brake drums and new brake booster.
- Electric windshield wipers replaced the old vacuum system.

The 1959 Pontiac was a most successful model year as 382,000 cars were sold and Pontiac's market share was increased to 6.33 %. Pontiac took fourth place in sales behind Chevrolet, Ford and Plymouth. And that sets the stage for introduction of the 1960 Pontiac, the real star of this story.

It was October 15, 1959 when Pontiac built its 7,000,000th car – a 1960 Bonneville Vista – a car just like one of my two. The product planning staff had set out to break another sales record and lots of changes were in store for the 1960 model year. To begin with, Pontiac introduced the new Ventura line, a step up from the Catalina. That meant that Pontiac offered four model series: Catalina, Ventura, Star Chief and Bonneville. The chart below details the dizzying array of models:

Pontiac Models for 1960

<u>Series</u>	<u>Models</u>
Catalina	Sports Sedan (2-Door Hardtop w/ Pillar) 4-Door Sedan Sports Coupe (2-Door Hardtop w/o Pillar) Convertible Coupe Vista (4-Door Hardtop w/o Pillar) Safari Station Wagon 6-Passenger Safari Station Wagon 9-Passenger
Ventura	Sports Coupe (2-Door Hardtop w/o Pillar) Vista (4-Door Hardtop w/o Pillar)
Star Chief	Sports Sedan (2-Door Hardtop w/ Pillar) 4-Door Sedan Vista (4-Door Hardtop w/o Pillar)
Bonneville	Sports Coupe (2-Door Hardtop w/o Pillar) Convertible Coupe Vista (4-Door Hardtop w/o Pillar) Safari Station Wagon 6-Passenger

While substantially all of the sheet metal was changed, the look of the 1960 was that of a 1959 model with a major face lift. Gone were the fins and the two-piece grill from 1959. The 1960 model brought a new distinctive one-piece grill (actually two separate castings), which many now call the “shark-nosed” grill. It appears that designers missed an important clue as to the importance of the split grill and its relationship to the “wide-track” Pontiac performance image. This would be rectified in 1961 as the split grill was brought back and for years to come thereafter.

All 1960 Catalina and Ventura models, as well as the Bonneville Safari wagons, were built on a 122-inch wheel base. Star Chief and Bonneville models sported the 124-inch wheel base. While appearing as a “re-done” 1959 model, the 1960 Pontiac had extensive engineering changes and improvements -- a total of 47, including body modifications. Major engineering improvements included:

- The new Equa-Flow cooling system including a new water pump.

- A redesigned Hydra-Matic transmission. Smaller and lighter, it allowed the hump on the floor to be one inch lower and two inches narrower.
- Revised rear suspension, including large rubber bushing for quieter ride.
- Shocks now had nylon-sleeved pistons and variable viscosity fluid.
- Power steering units were improved for better ease of service.
- The 1960 model year offered Magi-Cruise – a device for maintaining the throttle at a fixed opening.

For the first time in 1960, Pontiac offered the “Daytona” package, the first super-duty chassis package sold by the Division. This gave those racing Pontiacs a car that could literally be taken from the showroom to the track. Earlier in this article, I mentioned the unparalleled success that the 1960 Pontiacs had on NASCAR tracks taking, 16 wins in the 1960 and 1961 seasons combined. These great cars also did very well on the drag strips around the county, as exemplified by Jim Wangers gaining fame with his winning NHRA championship races at Detroit Dragway. His car, which looked like a perfectly stock Catalina model (with the exception of tires and other legal modifications), reached 100 miles per hour before reaching the end of the quarter mile track!

Three basic engine configurations were offered for 1960, including the Tempest 425 w/ 2-BBL in both a 8.6:1 and 10.25:1 compression ratios, the Tempest 425 w/ 4-BBL in both 8.6:1 and 10.25:1 compression ratios and, finally, the Tempest 425 w/ Tri-Power (3 2-BBL) and the high compression heads with a ratio of 10.75:1. The lower compression ratio engines came equipped with standard transmissions, while the higher compression engines came with Hydra-Matic transmissions. Either transmission could be ordered with the Tri-Power set up.

The option and accessory list was as dizzying as the model line-up, with 84 different options available according to the salesman’s “Pocket Facts Book.” In addition, Pontiac offered Accessory Groups, grouping the most popular factory-installed accessory groups. Popular Accessory Groups included the “Basic Group”, “Lamp Group” and “Décor Group” the latter being offered on Catalina models only.

In my next article, I will discuss my first Pontiac acquisition, a 1960 Pontiac Bonneville Vista 4-door pillarless hardtop. Many of you have seen this car at our shows.

Acknowledgements: I could not have completed this article without the information provided in the book *Pontiac 1946-1978 – The Classic Postwar Years* by Jan P. Norbye and Jim Dunne. For those of you who don’t have the book, I strongly recommend that you get a copy from Motorbooks International. In addition, I used as sources many of the printed materials available in 1960 including the “Pocket Facts Book” and the “Color, Fabrics and Accessory Binder,” the latter used to help customers pick out exterior colors, interior appointments and accessories for their 1960 Pontiacs.
