

The Story of Patches

by John Johnson



I've been a long-time Pontiac-er, having learned to drive in my parent's 1964 Catalina 2-door hardtop back in the early 1970s. I moved 'up' in the car world in 1976 when my Dad and I went in 'halves' on a used 1972 Grand Prix that a local man put up for sale when he bought a new Jeep pickup (his loss, my gain!). For those of you not familiar with the 1969-72 Grand Prix's, they are essentially a GTO with several extra inches of frame in the front end, and a GTO drive-train. That was my college car, and my future girl-friend Diana and I dated in it 'way' back in 1977-78. It turned into 'our' car when we got married, and we still have it, waiting to win the Power Ball so we can have it restored.

Fast forward to 1995 - several GTOs have come and gone. What I'd said was to be my last GTO, a 1969 Judge hardtop, had its body work done and was re-painted back in the early 1990s. It was brought back home from Jim Novelli's shop and left un-finished when the car fund ran out. Several years later when we'd gotten several thousand dollars saved up to try to finish it, we got a call from the original owner of a Cardinal Red 1970 GTO convertible (Gary Williams from the Perry/Vandalia MO area). He was also the 3rd owner, having sold the car in 1971, and then buying it back in 1986 from the 2nd owner. He and his son had finally decided they were not going to get the old car restored, and instead of letting it sit any longer, they wanted to find someone who would fix up the car.

About a week after his call on a Sunday afternoon, we loaded the boys up in our van and went to see the car. Walking up dirt road towards a corn field, we passed a large tree with a wagon parked under it. The car's motor and 4-speed were in it (covered with a tarp), having been winched out of the car as it was being dragged up to its resting place on the field's edge several years prior. As we got up to the level of the field, we could see the bare radiator sup-

GTO of the Month

port of a 70 GTO sticking out from under a body covered with layers of blue/silver poly tarps. The tarps were required, as the top was shot (there was tape patching the rips on the top) and more tarps were added each year to keep the water out of the car. Uncovering it, the front clip was off, the driveline and interior was out, and the rear clip looked like most Missouri cars with rust in the usual places. The rust was so bad on the right hand rear quarter panel that several times when I'd brushed the edge of the wheel well opening when walking by it, my pants snagged on the sharp rusty edges of metal.

A quick review of the car and its parts stored in Gary's garage showed that almost everything was there, but I was still a bit uneasy, as I was not really sure about the convertible top mechanism. We went back home with the understanding I'd be back with another Pontiac friend who was more familiar with convertibles (although mostly Firebird convertibles), and as it would turn out, who would do a major portion of the car's restoration. Paul Nixon and I returned in the next week, and gave the car a good looking over. He asked me what price Gary wanted, and upon my reply he stated "John, if this was a Firebird Convertible, we'd be loading it up".

Obviously, Diana and I purchased the car. It was early summer, and as Paul was a teacher, he was 'on vacation' and willing to accept a project. It took 2 pickups, one trailer, and a station wagon to get all the parts brought back to Paul's garage, where the restoration was to occur. Our oldest son Johnny would go over to help work on the car ("Patches" as it became known) from time to time, and I would also help after work or on a day off, and finally the car was somewhat re-assembled (but not restored). The engine that came with the car turned out to be a 1968 Grand Prix 400, of unknown condition. The Muncie did turn out to be the car's original tranny, as was the Q-jet carb.

On one of my days at work, Paul and our oldest son Johnny were wiring up the front electrical harness. A battery was located and hooked up, and after a few checks of fluids and cables, Paul poured a little gas out of a Coke bottle down the carb, and told Johnny to "hit it". The old motor cranked, and surprisingly, tried to start. The gas line was blown out, new gas





GTO of the Month



and an in-line gas filter was added, and the carb was primed from the Coke bottle again. After a few attempts, the motor started and ran, which gave the project a new life. Now we had a chance to get the car back on the street before school started and Paul's time would become more restricted.

Brakes were fixed, a full dual exhaust installed, new tires were purchased, as was a new carpet and top, and the list went on and on. But the body and interior was left as-is. and so the car sported a tan nose, white front fenders from another '70 GTO, and the rest of the body was the car's original faded Cardinal Red, except where the rust and primered patches were. Finally, the car was inspected and insured, and was legal to drive.

We drove the car in this configuration for a couple of years, and learned that manual drum brakes are not too good, the car's 4-speed shifted poorly, and the motor was so loose that when we'd rev it up past about 2,500 RPM the timing chain would sling out so wide it would rub against the insides of the timing cover! We hardly ever left the city limits with it, but we had a running GTO Convertible!

When it was announced in 1997 that the 1998 GTO Nationals would be hosted by the GR-RRR-8R GTO Club in Wichita KS, this spurred our work to get Patches fixed up even faster, and money was set aside to get the car's body work done and painted. This was accomplished locally by April of 1998, and that July we took it on a trailer it to the show (I certainly did not trust that engine to drive that far!). The upholstery that came with the car was left alone except for a dash pad replacement (it was really bad). This was the first time I'd ever had a GTO at a GTOAA National event, and we had a blast there with it, despite the car dumping us on a cruise around the Wichita area when it got hot and wouldn't re-start for about an hour.

Over the next few years, many memories were made by our family with Patches. One highlight was several invitations to drive "Miss Missouri Queen Candidates" in the event's parades (the pageant is held here in Mexico MO annually. Also, in the weeks leading up to





GTO of the Month



Christmas, Diana, Johnny, Bryan and I would bundle up with our winter coats, grab some blankets, and drive around town in the evening, looking at the Christmas lights. The view from a convertible is excellent, and we certainly got our share of big stares from other people as we made our tour of the town!

Obviously it was time for a new motor, but what would it be? The original motor was long gone, but having lots of experience driving Pontiac motors from 350 to 455 cubic inches, the decision was made to go big! A 4-bolt 455 block from a salvage-yard 1970 Grand Prix had an external crack welded-up, and a sleeve pressed in. The crank was fitted with a set of SD-455 rods and “30-over” Venola pistons from an eBay auction I won. A set of 1973 SD-455 round port heads had been previously refreshed by MBJ Machine and were added to a 1971 800-cfm ‘single-ring’ Quadra-Jet, and a 1972 455HO intake and crossover. When the weekend came for the motor swap, once again Paul’s services were employed. The project went reasonably smooth, but we did notice that when the previous owner had replaced the GTO’s broken original 400, he failed to install the Muncie’s input shaft bearing into the ’68 Grand Prix 400 motor’s rear crankshaft hub- no wonder the car’s tranny was kind of balky! Driving the car with that 455 has been a blast, as you can imagine.

Many Gateway GTO-ers will remember our chapter hosting the 2005 GTO Nationals, and of course we had Patches there. As a side-note, the GTOAA’s official meet shirts have an image of Patches on them- quite a treat for us! The next year when the 2006 GTO Nationals were held in Louisville KY, we again took Patches to the Nationals, and we won our drag racing class!

Another interesting story happened during the fall of 2015. I was going to take Patches to the last local car show. Trying to get the car started and backed out of the garage

GTO of the Month



was not the easy task it usually was, it just would not run very well. That was attributed to it having sat a while, and besides, the aluminum intake is rather cold natured. Heading up the hill towards the show, the car was bucking, spitting, and backfiring like it never had before. A fowled spark plug or three seemed like a decent guess, so instead of heading to the show, a turn to the west and out of town was taken, to get up to highway speed, warm the motor up, and clear out the plugs.

That didn't happen. Getting about a mile away from the city limits sign, the backfiring became much worse. Finally there was a series of BANG, BANG, pop, BANG, pop, BANG BANG, and the more it happened, the louder it got! The car was shuddering and was losing power rapidly. The people outside the approaching gas station had all turned and were looking in my general direction, it

was so noisy. A right turn was taken onto the residential streets back towards home, along with a little prayer being muttered that we'd make it safely there. Using a widely varying amount of throttle, and doing California-rolling-stops through the intersections, home finally seemed to be a realistic destination. Diana was at home and called, the situation was explained, and a request to open the garage door was made, so if the car made it that far, rolling down the hill and making the turn into the garage could happen, and it did.

I took Diana's 1974 Trans Am up to the show instead, and didn't try to start diagnosing the GTOs problem until several weeks later. It remained a mystery to me for many months, but finally (the next spring) we determined the points were going/gone bad. The amount of the damage to the mufflers was amazing- the intense backfiring had literally can-opened the muffler body main seams, see the photo to the right.

As I finish writing this, the 4-month plus Covid-19 pandemic has all but cancelled out most car shows, both local and nationally. However, about a month ago, a bunch of owners just happened to get into their cars, trucks, and bikes all at the same time and went for a cruise by the local VA Nursing home here in Mexico (MO). The Vets were either outside along the driveways or inside at the windows, and seemed very happy to have us come by and give them a break in



GTO of the Month

the monotony that the lock-down has imposed on them. I had a good time having the car out, as I'm sure the other owners did, and who know, maybe we'll do that again in a few weeks or so. As I finish up this article, it seems to me that it's good day to get the old goat out and drive around town, and I think I'll do that now!

