

LONG HAUL Le MONS

Words And Photographs By Thomas DeMauro
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Ask Pontiac fans about the division's 1965 offerings, and the first thing you'll notice is a smile appearing on their faces. Even after 50 years, those cars remain exceptionally popular. Today, average sale prices of the intermediate-sized Pontiacs, like the GTO and Le Mans, at times outpace the same model other-year Pontiacs of the era, and it appears that they have been sought-after since their introduction. Inspired redesigns on all of its 1965 models propelled Pontiac ever closer to the forefront of American automotive styling. *Motor Trend* magazine recognized that accomplishment among additional attributes when it awarded the entire division its Car of the Year honor. Though not as extensively reworked as the full-size models, the intermediate lines did receive handsome front and rear revisions.

This, of course, included the sporty Le Mans, which was introduced on the 1962 Tempest. It graduated to its own series in 1963, and by 1964 had grown from a senior compact Y-body into a mid-sized A-body model.

One look at the 1965 Le Mans reveals why it was fashionable then and is coveted by collectors today. The stacked headlamps and recessed split-grille concept that made the 1963 full-size Pontiacs so admired was expertly integrated into the Le Mans and GTO. A new upscale wraparound taillamp treatment offered nighttime side visibility, and the rear featured wall-to-wall chrome trim that rendered the lamps nearly invisible when not lit.

Model year production for Pontiac topped 802,000 units, up from 715,261 for 1964. Le Mans two-door sales increased to 93,326 units from 80,186.

Given the division's steady advances in performance, styling and status since the late 1950s, by 1965, for many, Pontiacs were the cars to be seen in. That holds true today for Harry Timmermann, as he and his family regularly spend time in his Burgundy Le Mans convertible. In fact, he drove it over 1,200 miles from the St. Louis area to Pittsburgh and back again with-



Parchment Morrokide interior is more luxurious, thanks to a power driver's seat and windows, AIC, Rally clock, AM radio and Custom Sports steering wheel.

out incident in 2014, to attend the 2014 GTOAA International Convention.

According to Harry, a diesel mechanic from Trenton, Illinois (just east of St. Louis), taking extended road trips in this vintage Pontiac is almost commonplace. "We love driving our Le Mans," he says. "I drive it all over with my wife, Amy, and my stepdaughter Cristina-to local shows and to the national events. My granddaughter loves riding in the car as well. Some people think we're nuts-maybe we are-but at least we're having fun enjoying this fine Pontiac."

The circumstances under which Harry found the vintage Pontiac convertible back in March 2004 are also intriguing. "My sister called me about a captain in the Air Force who owned this car and wanted someone to work on it," Harry remembers. So, he prepared an estimate for his labor and instructed the officer to source the parts. The captain agreed, but after researching parts prices, he decided to sell the Le Mans and buy a motorcycle instead.

Harry asked if he could look at the Pontiac first. When he arrived, he found a complete and driveable 101,000-mile,rust-free, 1965 Le Mans convertible that was assembled at the Fre-



The original 326 H.O. V-8 Engine was bored .030 over and upgraded with a longer-duration camshaft and a 650-CFM carb during its rebuild



mont, California, plant and sold through Lang Webb Pontiac-Cadillac in Vallejo. It had mildly toasted upholstery at the seat tops and checked, but original Burgundy paint.

Also apparent was the fact that it was extensively optioned—a 326 H.O. V-8; a column-shifted automatic transmission; A/C; ride and handling package; H.D. brakes, with aluminum front drums; white stripe tires; wire wheel discs; Custom Sports steering wheel; tilt steering wheel; power driver's bucket seat, steering, brakes and windows; pushbutton AM radio with power antenna; padded dash; windshield washer and dual-speed wipers; electric clock; mirror and lamp groups; custom retractable seat belts; front and rear floor mats; Soft-Ray glass in all windows; door-edge guards; and spare tire cover. All totaled, the \$2,797 base price swelled to \$4,563 .95 in 1965 money.

Realizing its value and potential, Harry purchased the Le Mans on the spot. "I have always liked the mid-'60s General Motors cars, but I've owned mostly Chevrolets, so this was my first Pontiac and first convertible," he says enthusiastically.

Initially, Harry planned to "fix it up a little bit" and then enjoy it. However, though the body remained on the frame, by May of 2004, the rest of the Le Mans was disassembled for restoration. The shell was sanded and chemically stripped to bare metal, and then the panels were straightened and repaired. Fortunately, none of the body panels needed to be replaced. Light applications of Evercoat filler were used as needed, and the surfaces were sanded smooth.

Martin Senour Trio/Prime etching primer, applied to protect the bare metal, was followed by multiple coats of Complete Primer and block sanding, four basecoats of *Tec/Base* acrylic urethane in Burgundy, and three coats of clear. The clear finish was then wet-sanded with 1200- and then 1500-grade paper and polished using 3M products. "We painted, wet sanded and polished the body in pieces, so we wouldn't have any tape edges," Harry explains, but he laments, "putting it back together was stressful because we were trying to not chip the paint."

All of the original trim was polished and reinstalled, save for the right rear wheelwell molding, which was replaced. United Bumper in St. Louis rechromed the bumpers. By August of 2004, the Le Mans was on the road.

Harry's winter project, beginning in December 2004, was a complete brake rebuild. The 9.5 -inch drum brakes were retained and treated to new wheel cylinders, master cylinder, shoes, hardware kits, hoses and emergency brake cables. Why no front disc brake swap? "The Le Mans was an all-original, numbers-matching car with H.D. aluminum drums, so at the time I just wanted to keep it as stock as possible," he explains. However, knowing the Le Mans would be driven regularly, when he rebuilt and detailed the chassis the next year, Harry decided to make a few mild and somewhat hidden upgrades; polyurethane bushings and firmer Koni gas shocks were installed.

In the interior, Parchment seat covers and matching door panels from Legendary Auto Interiors were swapped in by Haege's Upholstery in Belleville, Illinois, along with a new black carpet. The original dash pad was redyed, and the door sill plates and all interior bright trim were polished, while the engine and tail lamp wiring harnesses were replaced with new harnesses from Lectric Limited.

Harry rebuilt the factory Super-Turbine 300 two-speed automatic transmission and installed a stock replacement torque converter. Ahead of that transmission was one of the 3,403 code-YP 326-cu.in. H.O. engines installed in the Tempest and Le Mans lines for 1965 (4,136 code-WR with the manual transmission). That original, 1 0.5:1-compression, 285hp, four-barrel V-8 was brought to MBJ Machine in Granite City, Illinois, where the block was bored .030-over, the stock crankshaft was machined, and the stock rods were resized and fitted with Sealed-Power hypereutectic pistons with plasma moly rings; a new Melling M54DS oil pump was installed.

Port work, hardened exhaust valve seats and a five-angle valve job were incorporated into the rebuilding of the cylinder heads. Sealed-Power 5/16-inch push rods, with 1.50:1 stamped-steel rocker arms to actuate them, are accompanied by an upgraded camshaft. Melling's Pontiac "068" spec grind features 212/225-degrees duration at .050, an advertised duration of 288/302-degrees and .409/408-inch lift. The factory Carter AFB carburetor was exchanged for an Edelbrock Thunder Series AVS 650-CFM carb on the original Pontiac cast-iron intake manifold, while reproduction spark plug wires add to the stock look.

Though he improved the Pontiac just about every year, including the rebuilding of the factory 3.23-geared 10-bolt open differential in 2010, after it was first finished back in 2004, Harry began cruising in it regularly. "There's nothing better than driving at night and seeing the stars in a convertible," he says. And he's seen plenty of them, piloting his Le Mans two or three days per week on average and racking up an additional 59,000 miles!

You may be under the impression, considering all its road time, that this Pontiac doesn't do too well at the shows. That would be an incorrect assumption. Despite some chips on the nose, some bugs in the A/C condenser and some non-stock parts, the Le Mans has earned many

awards. A member of the Metro East Muscle Car Club, Gateway GTO Association chapter of the GTOAA and Arch Chapter of POCI, Harry's Burgundy beauty has taken first in class four times at the GTOAA International Convention, with an additional two years in the Winners' Circle. It has also won three first-in-class awards at the POCI Convention and earned Concours Silver twice.

"Out of all the cars that I've owned, this one has been the best by far," Harry tells us. And we can see why. He drives it seemingly everywhere and still wins awards with it. Though he restored this Pontiac one project at a time over a span of about six years, Harry confides, "If I had to build this car allover again, I would probably take it down to the bare frame and do it all at once!" Nevertheless, the piecemeal approach worked for his budget and time constraints, and he's pleased with the results. "It drives like a dream," he says. What more could you ask for?

