

# The Story of my '69 Judge

By John Johnson



In early April of 1969, a Carousel Red Judge hardtop was delivered to Kelly Pontiac in Columbia MO. 50 years later, it's still in the Mid-MO area, with an interesting story to be shared.

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. For those of you not familiar with the 1969-72 Grand Prix's, they are essentially a GTO with 6 inches of extra frame in the front end, and utilized the GTO's drive-trains. This became my college car, and turned into 'our' car when Diana and I were married in 1978, and we still have it, waiting for me to win the big Power Ball to finance its restoration.

In the very early 1980's I had a chance to buy a Starlight Black 1970 Judge hardtop, which was my first GTO. The man that owned it lived north of Kirksville MO, and had it and a 1970 Olds Rally 350 sitting on the side of Hwy. 63 with "FOR SALE" signs on each. Turned out he didn't really care which one he sold, he was going to use the money from the sale of one to re-do the other. Since he had an Olds 455 in The Judge, we arranged a deal by which he kept the Olds motor and I got the Judge rolling chassis for a reduced price.

Several months after we got it home to Mexico MO, I signed up for Adult Education auto body-shop evening classes at the local Vo-Tech, put on rear quarter patch-panels, and repainted it from the orange it was to Starlight Black as it should have been. Once done, I ran ads in the local nickel-ad papers looking for a RAM AIR motor and other parts for the car.

On Thanksgiving Day 1982, while we had our family over for the big meal, I got a call

from the Jefferson City MO area. The young man calling said that he didn't have any motor parts for sale, but he did have a 1969 RA-IV Judge for sale, and would I be interested in buying it? Well, of course I had to get more info! It seems that he'd recently bought a Ford Special Edition Bronco and his parents said The Judge had to go (once again, the purchase of another vehicle set me up to get a Pontiac, a recurring trend which happened again years later when Diana was able to buy a SD-455 T/A, but that's another story).

As I'd previously discovered, a lot of people say they have a RA-IV when in reality they don't, so I asked the obvious question "how do you know it's a real RA-IV? His reply was the expected "...because that's what the decals on the hood say". Well decals are cheap so I pressed the issue, and what he said next lent a lot of credibility to the story. Seems like he'd hot-rodded the car a little and bent a push-rod. They went to the dealership to get a one and found the first one he'd bought didn't fit, they had to go back and special-order a different one. Since the RA-IV does require a unique pushrod, I knew I had to go see the car.

Several days later Diana and I drove to the young man's parent's home to see the car. As we walked down the steps to the basement garage, the right front fender and hood of the car came into view, and yes indeed, there were white RA-IV hood decals on the Carousel Red paint job. As we walked around the car, I noticed the car had black bucket seats but a white (Parchment) head-liner and door panels. I spied a clutch pedal wired down flat against the floor (which seemed really wrong) with an automatic shifter sitting on top of a very odd looking non-factory appearing console in between the seats. Another oddity was a 12-bolt rear end under the car, which meant someone had also changed that out at some point. When I asked about some of these unusual details, he said that's how he'd bought it.

He opened the hood and there were the tell-tale shapes of round-port heads with the correct short-runner exhaust manifolds, all sitting underneath a factory aluminum intake manifold, so there was certainly a lot of promise in the motor. Also noted was one of the largest dual-line, spread bore, double-pump, manual choke Holley 4-barrel carbs I'd ever seen!

After checking some #s and codes, I was sure the car had the correct 1969 RA-IV heads, intake and exhausts, but the block was a mystery as there is/was no visible block code on the front of the block. I also noted the block had 2 freeze-plugs (not 3) on each side as later blocks do, so my choices were a 326, 389, or 421.

Since the choice presenting itself was buying a RA-IV Judge hardtop that ran and drove, or keeping a rolling chassis/shell of a 1970 Judge Hardtop, with Diana's agreement we decided to make an offer on the '69, and that we would sell off the '70. I offered him \$ 2,000.00 for the car (he was asking \$ 2,200.00) and told him he could keep the big Cragar mags, but he told me no. His price was \$ 2,200, he didn't have anything that the mags would fit on, and that I knew that was a good price for the car. And that's what happened.

A few days later we came back and completed the deal, and I drove the car home. As a side-note, at the first stop light I hit outside of Jefferson City, I got challenged by an El Camino! As I had no plates and only a bill of sale, I declined, and he roared off on his own.

As time went on, I did a lot of investigating of the block to try to figure out what it was. The casting date was April 15<sup>th</sup> of 1965, but that was all I could tell. Eventually another Pontiac-er was able to verify for me the block's foundry casting # was for-sure a 1965 421, so that answered my question without disassembling the motor. During my investigations and calls, I ran across an another long-time Pontiac-er ( J. D. Roberts) in the Columbia MO area



who I was told has a secret formula for making the cast-iron Pontiac connecting rods live under race conditions. When I finally got his phone # and called, he asked why I wanted to know, was I racing, or what? When I told him I was going to be trying to restore a 1969 Judge I'd recently bought, he said in passing that he used to have one of those. I mentioned this one has black bucket seats and an otherwise Parchment interior, and used to be a 4-speed, and he said that must be his old car because he'd taken out the while interior because it got dirty too easy, and put in a TH-400 because he got tired of shifting!

Lots of fun facts quickly emerged about the car. It was the car that Kelly Pontiac in Columbia MO had used as a dealership-drag-race car in the summer of 1969. They went through the original RA-IV block plus 2 other service replacement blocks during the season. A quarter-mile time of 12.97 seconds was obtained once that year, the rest of the time it was running low 13's. The car was sold off after the racing season ended to its first titled owner in Auxvasse MO (just south of Mexico MO where we live, according to the Protecto-Plate card that was still in the glove box.

Mr. Roberts was a manager at the dealership when the car came back in for work in the early 1970s ( the motor was 'blown' again), and he bought it from the 2<sup>nd</sup> owner and dropped in the 421 bottom end, one that he had the block code obliterated from the front face of it so no one could tell he was cheating! I was able to connect the dots from the names he knew that had owned it before him and to whom he'd sold the car to. It was determined that we were the car's

6<sup>th</sup> owners, and that it had never left a 50 mile radius of Columbia MO for its ownership. (By the way, his 'secret formula' for connecting rods was to have the side-beams polished.)

We drove the car "as-is" for a couple of years, and even got a 5<sup>th</sup> place at a POCI show in Sapulpa OK, which was pretty good considering we had a flat on the way down and showed the car on its shabby looking spare tire! Finally in about 1991 we decided to have the car's body-work done and repainted. Jim Novelli did the work, and the car still wears that paint job to this day. However, in raising 2 boys, the car fund was quickly emptied, and after he'd finished his work, we brought the car home and it sat in the garage until 2006, unfinished. Some parts were collected over the years (interior, weather seals, motor parts, etc.) but the car just sat in our garage with its car cover on, and the interior was used to hide Christmas presents from time to time.

Fast forward to June of 2006- our youngest son Bryan volunteered his time that summer before he went off to college that Fall to help complete the car, and my Pontiac Firebird friend Paul Nixon (who had brought our 1970 GTO convertible project car back to life many years before) had just built a new 40x60 machine shed, and was once again interested in working on a project.

The chassis was completely taken apart, down to the last nut and bolt and bracket, and cleaned with chemical-stripper or a wire brush-cup drill attachment, or both. The body had the interior was re-done, and the body was mated back onto the re-done chassis in mid-December.



By year's end we had the car yard drivable with a rebuilt 400 CID service replacement RA-IV short block (rebuilt by MJB Machine) and installed underneath the original RA-IV top-end, and I drove the car (for the first time in 15 years) around Paul's parking lot.

The remaining details were wrapped up in April of 2007 and we got the car licensed and on the road just in time for the 2007 GTOAA Nationals, which were in Columbia



Ohio that summer. There the car scored a Silver Award in the Concours Modified Car Show, and we were thrilled us to no end with that result!

Over the next few years, we have taken it to other local shows, and a few other GTOAA Nationals, most recently the 2017 event hosted by the Gateway GTO Association in Springfield IL





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Future plans include a re-finishing-up of the undercarriage as it seems corrosion and rust never sleep! As for my first 1970 GTO Judge, we did sell it shortly after we bought the 69, but that's another story for a different day.



