

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 6 inches of extra frame in the front end, and a GTO drive-train. That was my college car, and my girl-friend Diana and I dated in it 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 been painted back in 1990, but brought back home from Jim Novelli's shop and left un-finished when my car funds ran out. Just as I had gotten several thousand dollars saved up to try to finish it, we got a call from the original owner of a 1970 GTO convertible (Gary Williams from the Perry 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 the car up.

On a Sunday after church about a week after his call, we loaded the kids up in our van and went to see the car. Walking up dirt road towards a corn field, passing 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 it's resting place on the field's edge. As we got up to the level of the field, we could see the bare nose of a 70 GTO sticking out from under a body covered with the blue/silver tarps. The tarps were required, as the top was shot (there was tape patching the rips on the top) that were added each year to keep the water out of the car. Uncovering the car, the front clip was off, the interior was out, and the rear clip looked

like most Missouri cars with the usual rust in the usual places. The rust was so bad on the right hand rear quarter that several times when I'd brush the edge of the fender when walking by it that I'd snag my pants on the sharp rusty edges of metal.

A quick review of the car and his garage showed that almost all the parts were there, but I was still a bit unsure 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 Gary wanted, and upon my reply stated "John, if this was a Firebird Convertible, we'd be loading it up".

Needless to say, I purchased the car. It was summer, and as Paul was a teacher, he was off and looking for 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, as I would after work or on a day off, and finally the car was mostly 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.

One day when I was at work, Paul and Johnny wired up the electrical system. 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 and a filter added in-line, 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 be restricted.

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

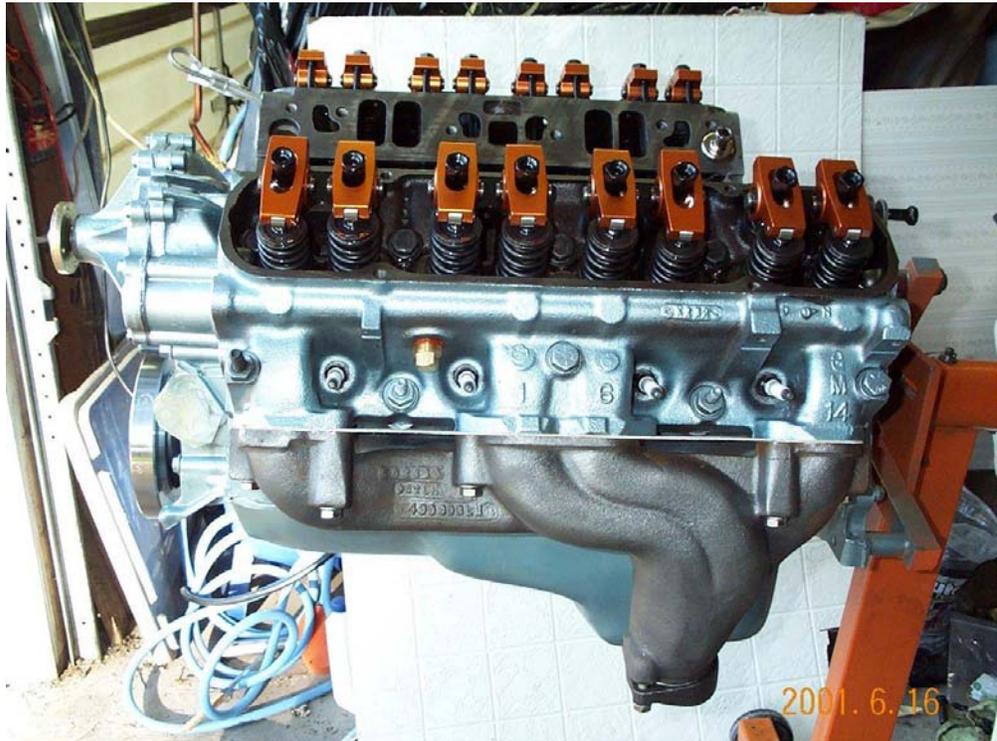


We drove the car in this configuration for a couple of years, and learned that the manual drum brakes were not too good, the 4-speed shifted poorly, and the motor was so loose that when we'd rev it up past about 2,500 RPM the timing chain would sling out so wide it would rub against the insides of the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

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

In the summer of 1997 we learned that the GTO Nationals would be hosted by the 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 in 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 first time I'd ever had a GTO at a GTO Nationals. We had a blast there, despite the car dumping us on a cruise when it got hot and wouldn't start for about an hour.

Obviously it was time for a new motor, but what would it be? Having lots of experience driving the 350-455 Pontiac motors, the decision was made to go big! A 4-bolt 455 block from a 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 heads had been previously refreshed by MBJ Machine and were added to a 1971 800-cfm 'single-ring' QuadraJet, a 1972 455HO intake and crossover. When the day came for the motor swap, once again Paul's services were used. The project went reasonable smooth, but we did notice that the previous owner that had installed



the '68 GP 400 motor had failed to insert the Muncie's input shaft bearing in the rear of the crank- no wonder the car's tranny was kind of balky! Driving the car with the big 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!



In the following years, the restoration of our 1969 GTO Judge took center stage, but that is another story. I can tell you that when it's time to take a break and go drive a GTO around town, it's Patches' keys that I grab. #

