

Grand Prix Predecessors



There are many interesting sidebars on the long road to bringing a particular car to production. In the case of the Pontiac Grand Prix, the story goes back to the late 1950s Bonneville, the limited-edition, top-of-the-line model that was as much about where Pontiac was going as a division as it was a flagship.

By the time the new-generation '59 Pontiacs had hit the street, it

was obvious that they were getting bigger and losing some of their sportiness. Though the wheelbase had remained constant at 124 inches, the overall length had jumped from 215.5 in '58 to 220.7 inches in '59, over 18-feet long. The lower-line Catalina, like the earlier entry-level Pontiacs, had a smaller 122-inch wheelbase and a shorter 213.7-inch overall length, which put it back in the

same "sporty-size" territory as the early Bonneville.

Pontiac General Manager Semon E. "Bunkie" Knudsen was keenly aware of Ford's upsizing the Thunderbird in 1958 into a four-seat coupe and what it meant. Ford's market research had shown that a four-seat car had much more sales potential than the two-seater. As one would expect, while enthusiasts bemoaned

Pointing the Way to Pontiac's Luxury Performer



By Don Keefe

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the loss of the two-seater, actual Thunderbird sales soared, from 21,380 in '57 to 37,892 in '58. Whether or not it meant to, Ford can be credited with creating a whole new market segment in the process- the personal luxury car.

Knudsen knew that a competitor to the Thunderbird would work for Pontiac, but it would be even more successful if it had a serious dose of performance. This was the

genesis of the mindset of a Knudsen-led Pontiac- bring not only high performance to the market but a performance image. Knudsen knew that having a really fast car that looked like a taxicab was not going to cut it. The image of the car was as important as the specifications. The early Bonnevilles proved that the plan worked, now it was time to extend its reach.

By the close of the 1950s, it was clear that it was time for Pontiac to craft a more affordable, more accessible and more practical car, one that offered the panache of the early Bonnevilles, yet within the budget of a much broader market. The division started experimenting with different variations on the theme of Catalinas trimmed out with upscale Bonnevilles interiors. This can be seen



The 1959 Ventura prototype clearly shows that the basic elements of the Grand Prix had been established. In addition to the use of the shorter Catalina platform, this concept car features a formal roofline, an absence of side chrome and a tastefully restrained overall appearance. The soft bulbous designs and the abundance of chrome were being abandoned in favor of sharper, crisper lines and less trim. Clearly, a new generation of design was taking hold.

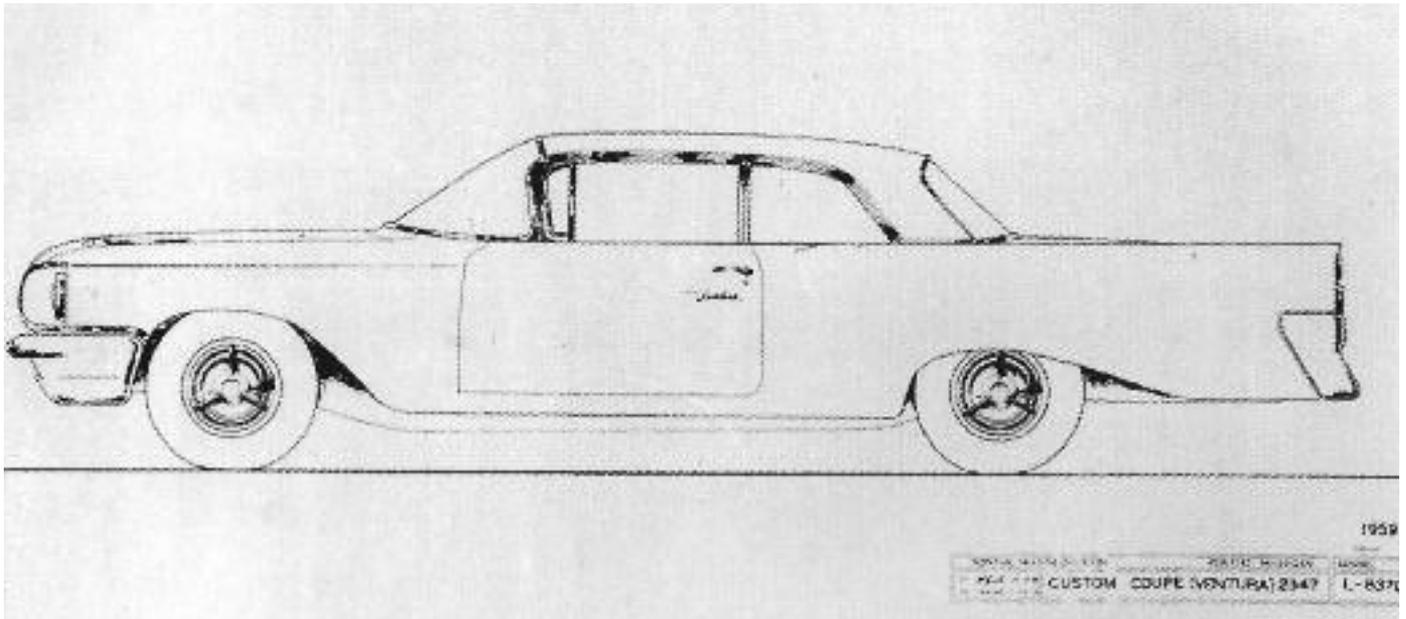


This shot of the 1959 Ventura Custom Coupe was taken on November 21, 1958, and shows the blend of production and non-production elements used. The hard-shell bucket seats featured cloth and Morrokide upholstery, the former appearing to be a pattern similar to what was used on 1959 Chevy Impalas. Note the power wing window controls, a detail that would not reach production until 1963.

in cars like the Pink Lady and the X-400s. Now it was time to apply the formula to a production car.

At the time, the trend in styling was moving away from the soft, overinflated styling of the 1950s into crisper, more squared-off lines. Rooflines were just beginning to move away from the bubbletop contours. The Thunderbird in many ways, pointed to the future, with its more squared-off styling, quad headlamps and formal, notchback roofline.

A GM Styling design drawing for a proposed 1959 Pontiac shows what is the earliest known piece of the Grand Prix development program. It is described as a 1959 Ventura Custom Coupe, assigned the non-production bodystyle number of 2347.



This GM Styling drawing from 1958 shows a 1959 Ventura Custom Coupe, bodystyle 2347. This is the earliest known document found for what would become the 1962 Grand Prix.

Though the lower body and windshield A-pillar looked just like any other 1959 Pontiac, the roofline was not the production bubbletop design. Instead, it used a squared-off, more formal design that is actually similar to the roofline used

on the 1959 Ford Galaxie two-door hardtop. It featured a slightly curved backlight design and pointed to a new design trend—the simulated convertible top.

A prototype was built from a 1959 Catalina and was finished in

black. Little is actually known about that car, as few photos survive and no other records about it have been uncovered. It is likely that the car was built from a convertible, as the roof was actually constructed of fiberglass and as



Though the roofline would not see production on the 1959 Pontiac, the idea of a notched-back roofline certainly did take hold. By 1962, a similar roof design, complete with faux convertible top bows, had reached production. The Grand Prix debuted that year and a revolution in personal luxury cars was born.



This shot of the 1960 version of the 2347 bodystyle was photographed on January 22, 1960, and shows a car that could easily have been approved for production. It was painted in the same Cadillac Firefrost Blue as the X-400 showcar and was used for a time as a daily driver for Pontiac General Manager Semon E. "Bunkie" Knudsen. Note the Bonneville side trim adapted for use on the shorter wheel-base car, the lack of a front fender callout and the GM Styling tag just ahead of the door. At some point after these photos were taken, it was fitted with 8-lug wheels.

such, would not have been a structural component, necessitating the convertible's additional bracing. That car was seen driving around the Detroit area that year.

A second car was built in 1960, using the very same roof from the black '59. That car was actually built as a driver for Knudsen. It

featured the tried and true 389 4-barrel engine, four-speed Hydramatic transmission and 8-lug wheels, all relatively common items. What really separated this car from its production counterparts was the fiberglass roof, the special chrome-plated plastic headlamp bezels and Cadillac Fire-

frost Blue paint, as well as the buckets seats, finished in a non-production cloth and Morrokide upholstery design. Though the car had bucket seats, it did not have a console and used a column shifter. It appears that there was some sort of design tie-in with the 1960 X-400, as both were painted the



The interior was similar to the '59 version in that it had hard-shell buckets with Morrokide and Chevy-style cloth upholstery. Interestingly, this car did have power windows but not power vent windows like the '59.



The same interior of the same car shows what years of neglect can do. It was found in a western New York salvage yard, where it had been sitting since 1965. It was photographed in November of 1988.

same color and had the plastic headlamp bezels.

The car was used for an unspecified length of time before it ended up as a company car for Pontiac's Buffalo, New York, zone sales office.

Sometime in 1965, the engine threw a connecting rod and was offered to the late David Howard, a salvage yard owner from Hopewell, New York, near Canandaigua. In a 1990 interview with the author, Howard said that he paid \$400 for the car. It came without a title and a warning from the seller, a GM employee, that it could not be resold. The car remained in the yard until 1990, when it was dismantled and crushed.

The author snapped some black-and-white photos back in 1988. He had noticed the car in 1987 while searching for parts to restore his 1966 Grand Prix. After noticing that the roof didn't look



At the time that the car was photographed in 1988, all of the non-production glass was still intact. The car was known to local Pontiac fans as the "fiberglass roof car." The item on the rear deck was a non-production plastic headlamp bezel, the same type as used on the 1960 X-400.

like other 1960 Pontiacs, he did some research and uncovered the GM Styling drawing for the Ventura Custom Coupe and realized that it was an early Grand Prix prototype. The GM Styling tags on the front fenders confirmed the car's provenance.

This car's demise was an especially unfortunate situation, as it actually had escaped the normal fate of crushing by the factory, only to have its fate completed when the land the salvage yard was on was sold some 25 years later.

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There is no question that the car seen here is the same car shown in new condition on the previous page. After Styling was done with the car, it was used as a company car for the Buffalo Zone Office until the engine blew in 1965. It was junked after that and was crushed in the first week of 1990.