

50th Anniversary Year

The 1961 Pontiac - Part I

The A-Body Models

by Bill McIntosh

The 1961 Pontiac would be Bunkie Knudsen's last of these three model years ('59, '60 and '61), which were truly Knudsen cars. He was about to become general manager at Chevrolet. Bunkie had transformed Pontiac from a somewhat imageless brand into one of performance, relying heavily on the "wide track" theme. To quote two former Pontiac executives, "He (Knudsen) was a good administrator and he was a real car buff. He knew cars. Knudsen wanted to build the best Pontiac in the world. He certainly got some good people under him, and they were doing everything they could to be first with the best in engineering, to have the best engineered car." So, the 1961 year was his last hurrah and arguably the best Pontiac yet.

Engineering and Design

As mentioned, the 1961 model was a significant departure from the previous two model years. The full-sized A-body cars were shorter, lighter and had a whole new styling approach. Gone was the X-frame (sometimes referred to as the "cruciform" frame). Instead, Pontiacs now had a new perimeter frame, which necessitated modifications in both the front and rear suspension. Overall, it was 4 inches shorter, 2 1/2 inches narrower and lower by almost an inch compared to previous models. This offered the many benefits of a lighter car, a more sporty feel, better handling and improved gas mileage.

With the new downsized A-body, weight was down 200 pounds from the 1960 models. Wheel bases were reduced a bit - Bonneville and Star Chiefs with 123 inches versus 124 and Catalinas and Venturas with 119 versus 122. Overall length was reduced from 213 inches to 210 inches. While the much-touted "Wide Track" remained, it, too, was reduced by 1 1/2 inches in front (62.5 inches) and by 1 1/2 inches in the rear (62.5 inches). Nevertheless, the 1961 models had a front track 2 inches wider than Chevrolet and 1.5 inches wider than Plymouth.

Model Line-Up for 1961

Model line-up for 1961 was almost the same as the 1960 Pontiac - seven Catalina models, two Ventura models, two Star Chief models and four Bonneville models. Notably, the Star Chief Sports Sedan (2-Door Hardtop w/ Pillar) was dropped from the model line-up in 1961.

Engines/Transmissions

Previously, Pontiac engines were dubbed "Tempest" V8s. Since 1961 brought the new Tempest compact car into the line-up, a new name was given to the venerable 389 V8, or so-called "Trophy" V8. Again, essentially the same options were made available in 1961 as in 1960 as follows:

1961 Pontiac "Trophy" V8 Engines

<u>Carburetor(s)</u>	<u>Compression Ratio</u>	<u>Horsepower</u>
2-BBL	8.6:1	215
	10.25:1	267 (Catalina & Ventura)
	10.25:1	283 (Star Chief)
4-BBL (Standard)	8.6:1	235
	10.25:1	303
4-BBL (Optional)	8.6:1	235
	10.25:1	287
Tri-Power - 3-2-BBL	10.75:1	318

Pontiac also offered 333 H.P. and 348 H.P. Trophy V8 'A' engines on special order. As far as engines were concerned, the big sensation for 1961 was the mid-year offering of a factory "Super Duty" option. The Super Duty was a racing engine that displaced 421 cubic inches, had a compression ratio of 11:1, solid valve lifters and two Carter AFB four-barrel carburetors. Pontiac rated the engine at 373 H.P. but it was widely known that it exceeded 400 H.P. with highly tuned versions reaching close to 500 H.P.

Transmission offerings for 1961 included the standard 3-speed, Hydra-Matic, and heavy-duty three-speed and a floor-mounted four-speed set up.

For Pontiac buyers who wanted performance at a budget price, they simply had to order the lowest price Catalina two-door sedan for \$2,390 -- and include options of the \$396 Trophy V8 Tri-Power V8 with 348 H.P., the four-speed manual transmission (\$338) and the Safe-T-Track limited-slip differential (\$43). This potent street performance sedan could be had for less than \$3,200!

Styling, Body and Options

The new body had smoother sides, less chrome, rounder more open wheel openings (especially in the rear) and, of course, Pontiac returned to the split-grill theme of 1959. The semi-recessed grill has frequently been described as a "waterfall" grill.

Two distinct, new roof lines were available. First, the rakish hardtop sports coupe came with C-posts that tapered to an extremely narrow base with the rear window wrapping around to almost meet the side glass (commonly known as the "bubble top"). Second, the new Vista model would no longer have the wrap-around rear window, but rather a more conventional rear window treatment with C-pillars taking the form of a sail. However, on two and four-door sedans, a modified wrap-around rear window was retained with the familiar "roof shelf" over the back window.

Curiously, Pontiac designers had a total of three tail light treatments for 1961: a three-light/lens for the Bonneville and Star Chief; a single-lens, two light affair for the Ventura and Catalina; and a completely unique, vertical, fin-like lens for all station wagon models.

Marketing and Sales -- Pontiac Moves to Number Three!

The Pontiac Division had a strong sales and marketing team in place in 1961. In 1960 sales had just missed the "400,000 cars delivered" milestone with 399,646 units sold. But due to the general decline in the economy (and the car market in particular) in 1961, sales for the year stood at 372,871 cars. Nevertheless, Pontiac's market share increased to 6.37 percent of the market. For the first time in the division's history, Pontiac captured third place in sales behind Chevrolet and Ford. It would not have been possible without the introduction of Pontiac's unique compact car, the Tempest (to be the subject of Part II of this article).

Racing

Continuing its winning ways of 1960, Pontiac won 30 NASCAR races in 1961. While 21 winning cars were 1961 models, the other nine were 1960 model Pontiacs. Clearly, both the 1960 and 1961 models were exceptional stock race cars.

Acknowledgements

- *Pontiac 1946-1978 -- The Classic Post-War Years* by Norbye and Dunne
- *Pontiac's Greatest Decade* by Paul Zasarine
- *Pontiac: The Complete History 1926-1986* by Thomas E. Bonsall
- *75 Years of Pontiac -- The Official History* by John Gunnell