

Grand Prix

A potent and pretty package —
in the Pontiac tradition of high performance

by Jim Wright, Technical Editor

EVER SINCE S. E. "Bunky" Knudsen took over the Pontiac operation back in 1956, exciting things have been happening to the once-sedate, family-type car. The Pontiac has developed into one of the cleanest-lined, most functionally designed cars on the road — and on top of that it's been one of the hottest performers in recent automotive history. In fact, for the past several years Pontiac has been *the* car to beat.

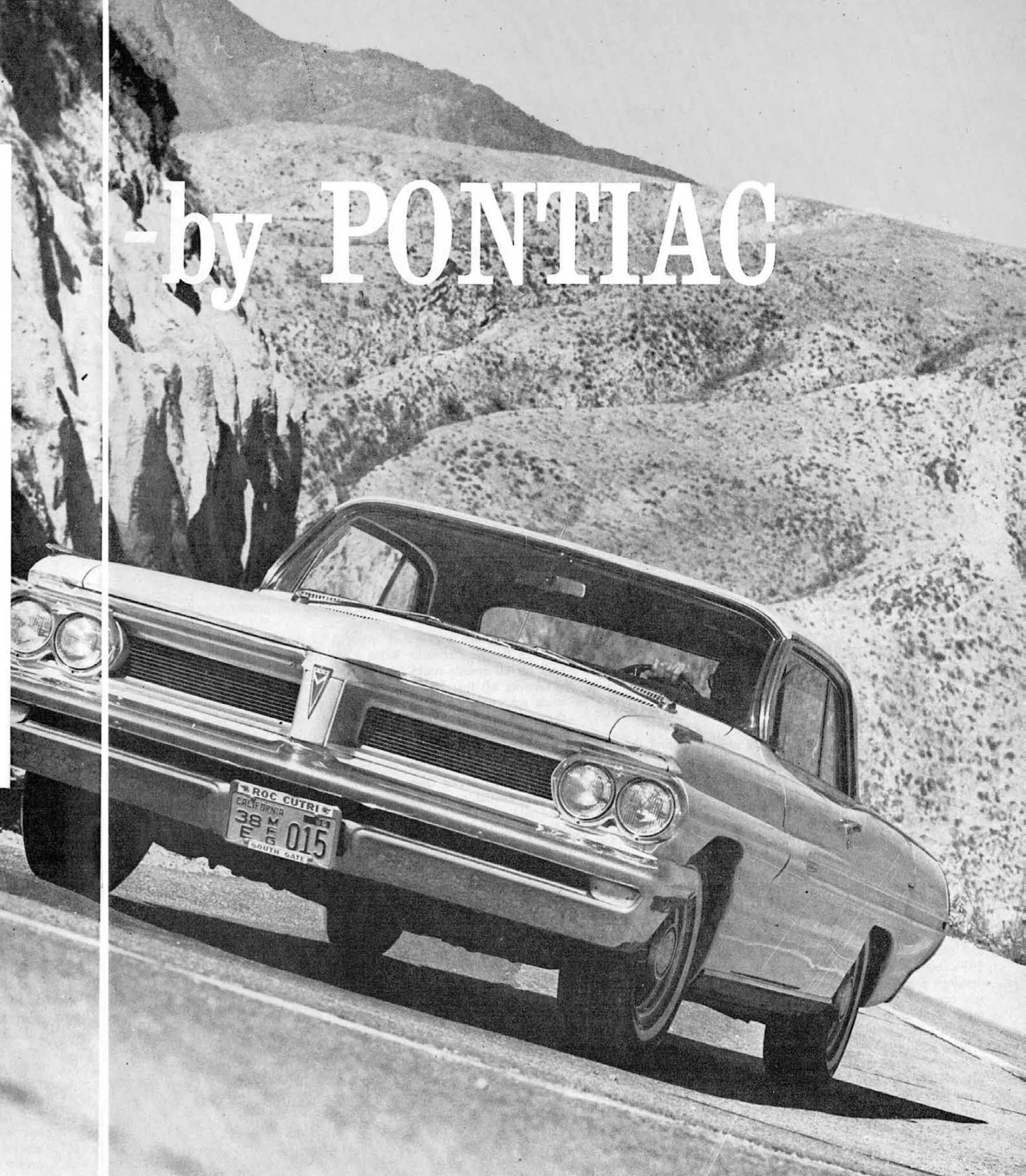
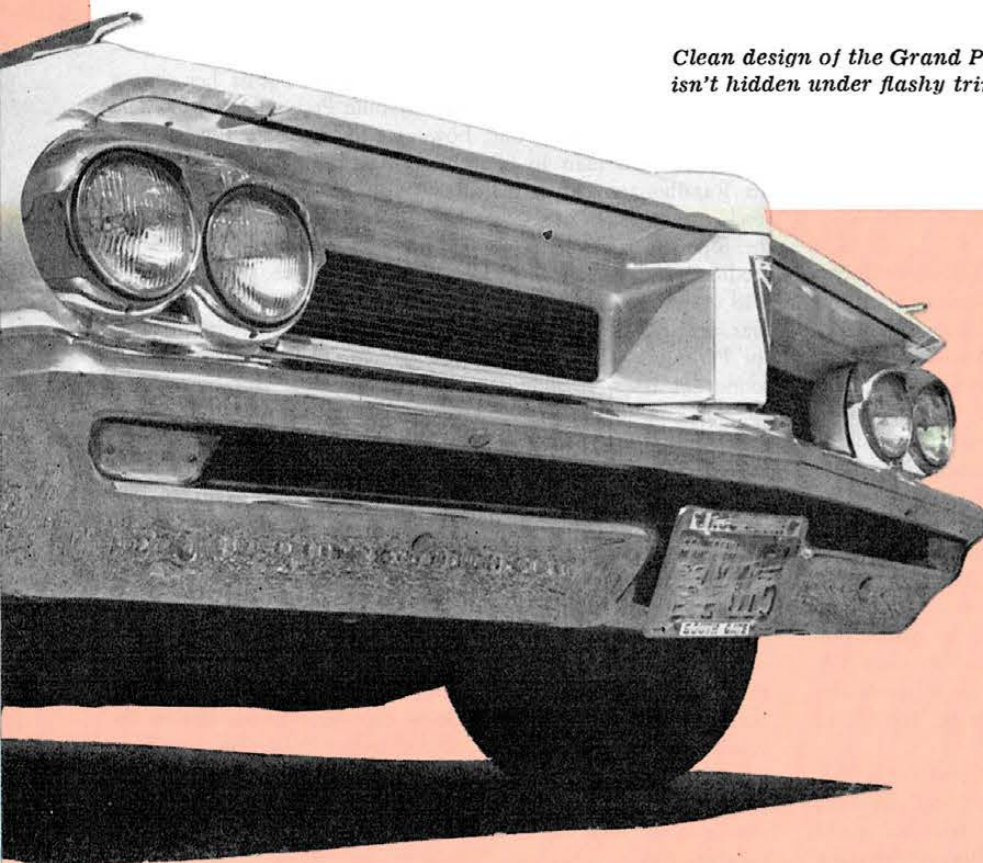
This year's Grand Prix model, Knudsen's last and possibly best offering before moving over to the Chevrolet Division, promises even more in styling, comfort and performance than any of his previous creations.

In case you missed the complete styling story in the October MOTOR TREND, the Grand Prix replaces the Ventura in the company lineup and is offered only as a two-door hardtop. Style-wise and price-wise it competes directly with the Thunderbird. Performance-wise it's in a class by itself.

The basic styling hasn't changed much from last year. The wheelbase has been stretched an inch to 120, and the overall length is up 1.6 inches to 211.6. What they've done mainly is to design a new, more luxurious sports car-oriented interior and clean up an already exceptionally clean exterior design. As a result

*Clean design of the Grand Prix
isn't hidden under flashy trim.*

PHOTOS BY BOB D'OLIVO





THE GRAND PRIX HANDLES WELL ON ROUGH, LOOSE SURFACES BUT COULD BE GREATLY IMPROVED WITH STIFFER SPRINGS AND BIGGER SHOCKS.

Grand Prix by Pontiac

continued

the GP appears to be very well-proportioned without a trace of bulge or heaviness of line anywhere.

For some reason we were especially pleased to find that the Pontiac nameplate appears only once on the exterior and then it is in small letters below the deck lid. Too often in past years other manufacturers have turned otherwise clean designs into rolling billboards with large, garish, oft-repeated nameplates. If a car's not distinctive enough to be recognized by its lines alone . . . The Pontiac certainly is — so off the soapbox and into the driver's seat!

One nice thing about Pontiac is that with all the options they offer, you can just about get anything you desire in horsepower and gearing combinations. The MOTOR TREND test car came equipped with the 303-hp version of the well proven Trophy V-8. Dual exhausts, four-barrel carburetor and 10.25-to-1 compression ratio are standard refinements on the GP. The 389-cubic-incher reaches its horsepower peak at 4600 rpm and develops a generous 425 lbs.-ft. of torque at 2800 rpm. The test car was geared through an optional three-speed Hydramatic and standard 3.23 rear axle, which in our estimation make a pretty good combination for average city and highway driving.

Even with the rather numerically low rear axle and two-ton-plus weight of the fully loaded test car, our performance figures were only slightly less than amazing. The 0-to-30, 0-to-45 and 0-to-60 mph times were blasted off in 2.7, 5.2 and 8.0 seconds,

Even with the driver's seat all the way back, there is still plenty of rear seat legroom. Doors are wide enough to allow easy entry and exit to the rear area.

respectively! We cut a very quick 17.2-second, 85-mph trip through the quarter-mile. With a little practice we think the c.t.'s for all speeds could be slightly reduced.

Getting all that horsepower hooked up to the ground with stock suspension and tires can be kind of tricky. Too much throttle and the tires really light up — not enough and you lose even more time. So all you have to do is find the happy medium — and go!

If you don't think the 303-hp mill will be suited to your own personal needs, there are three higher-performance option engines available. All are based on the 389-cubic-inch block. The addition of three two-barrels and an increase in compression to 10.75 to 1 brings the horsepower output up to 318



at 4600, with 430 lbs.-ft. of torque at 3200. A different cam, single four-barrel and 10.75-to-1 compression give 333 hp at 4800 with no increase in torque over the standard 303-hp engine. The most potent option uses three two-barrels, 10.75-to-1 compression and cam to produce 348 hp at 4800. Torque output of this engine is the same as for the 318-hp engine — 430 lbs.-ft. at 3200.

To round out the option picture, Pontiac also offers a variety of gearing combos. Available is the three-speed automatic (as in the test car), a three-speed manual (standard) and the four-speed all-synchro manual. Available rear axles range from the 3.23 unit, as installed in the test car, upward through ratios of 3.42, 3.64 and 3.9 to 1. Also available on special order are all-out racing ratios up to 4.89 to 1.

Fuel consumption can either be awfully good or just plain awful, depending on how you drive the car. Our figures range all the way from nine mpg recorded during acceleration tests and hard stop-and-go city driving to a top of 17 mpg for moderate city and freeway cruising. The big secret is not to cut in the secondary barrels on the carburetor any more than necessary. It's a temptation, because you can really feel them come on. In fact, above 70 when the throttle is floored, the resulting acceleration is almost comparable to dropping into a passing gear. Even with the standard 303-hp engine, we think that on long highway trips, with a minimum of stops and a light right foot, figures of 20 mpg are possible.

If you're really on an economy kick order your Grand Prix with the 230-hp version of the 389-incher and either the 3.08 or 2.69-to-1 rear axle. With a two-barrel, 8.6-to-1 compression (regular gas) and milder cam this one should be a real mileage miser.

We would have really preferred to have the test car equipped with the four-speed transmission, but as we got the car shortly after it had been introduced, this option wasn't available. There were several things we didn't like about the three-speed Hydramatic. This unit was introduced last year and differs from the old unit in that it employs a torque converter instead of a fluid coupling. The basic gearing in low range is 2.97, but due to the torque converter, total multiplication is 3.56 to 1, which is way too much.

On normal starts the car gets under way with a great racing of the engine and what feels like excessive slippage in the transmission. Possibly the unit in the test car needed adjustment because the shifts weren't at all positive. Smooth yes, but the changes seemed to take forever. Also, the shift control lever, while placed conveniently on the console between the driver and passenger seats, was completely lacking in precision. Without looking, which means taking your eyes off the road, it is almost impossible to tell whether or not you have put it in

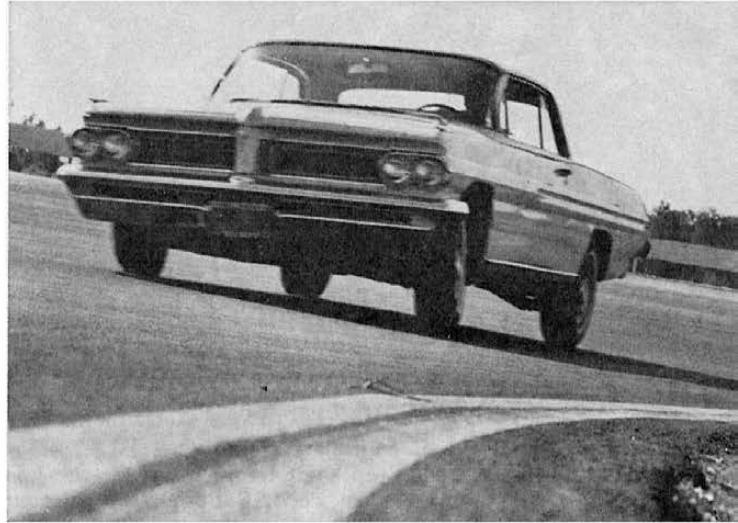
the proper position. It should be redesigned so that the lever clicks positively into each position.

Pontiacs in the super-stock class have been turning speeds in excess of 100 mph in the quarter-mile. With the powerplant/rear axle options available, there's no reason why the Grand Prix can't do the same, or better.

It goes without saying that for a car as fast and heavy as the Pontiac, something above the average in the braking department is called for. We think the aluminum drum/power-assist setup that our test car was equipped with is just about the finest being offered in America today. The pedal pressures required in the Pontiac system are feather-light. Personally, we prefer the kind that requires a little heavier foot because that's just what we have (foot, not braking system). Once we got used to the Pontiac pedal we found that we could make quick, sure stops *without* plastering our passengers all over the dash and windshield — much to their relief.

The big (11-inch) finned aluminum wheel hub/drum units leave nothing to be desired either in looks or functional ability. They did an excellent job of dissipating any heat buildup that occurred during our braking tests and on our last run we experienced the same quick, no-swerve stop that we did on the first. There was absolutely no fade, pedal hardness, or tendency to lock the wheels. This is one option that is definitely worth the extra dollars you have to pay for it.

The suspension has been softened a bit this year, which makes for a nice comfortable ride — for the passengers. If you're a driver who has definite ideas about suspension and handling characteristics, you might possibly want to firm up



Rugged 3/4-inch stabilizer bar at front end keeps GP fairly flat under most cornering conditions.

FAR LEFT: All sizes and shapes should be comfortable in the front seat. Steering wheel is well located, as are controls and most instruments.

LEFT: Console-mounted tachometer looks nice but is almost impossible to read from driver's position. Shift lever is well located but movement is not precise.



Grand Prix by Pontiac

continued

the ride with stiffer shocks or even heavier springs. At high speeds on level, fairly smooth roads the low-rate coil springs produce a floating sensation that we find undesirable in any type of car. But as we mentioned, the ride is comfortable and even though the driver might psychologically feel that the car isn't completely hooked up with the road — it no doubt is. On really rough roads the car has a tendency to bottom easily and the light shocks keep it from recovering quickly. Surprisingly, the GP corners rather well. A $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch-diameter anti-roll bar on the front end is standard equipment and does a good job of keeping the car flat under most cornering conditions.

The Pontiac is basically an understeering car, but if the surface is smooth it can be pushed through most curves at above-average speeds without ploughing or front end break-away. Our test car had power steering which was both light and responsive. One big advantage of the power unit is that it reduces the turns required from a ridiculous 5.5 turns lock-to-lock down to a more realistic 4.25.

Exterior detail work on the Pontiac is excellent. All the panels and doors are well aligned and fit flush as they should. The acrylic lacquer finish looks hard and deep and should even stand up well under the attacks of the type of pollutants we have in our air here on the coast. On the inside the same excellent detailing is evident.

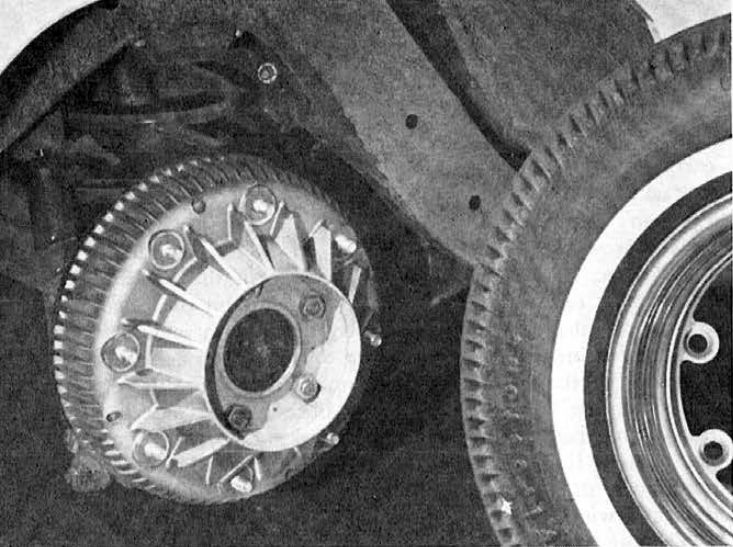
The safety-padded dash is attractive and what instruments it contains are easily read from the driving position. An ammeter, speedometer (no trip mileage register) and gas gauge are provided, but the most important functions like oil pressure and water temperature are signalled by the little red lights that Detroit loves so much. All controls are easy to reach and operate, as is the glove box which is located toward the center of the dash. Two ash trays are also provided, one for the driver and one for the passenger. For once we were able to hit it without taking our eyes off the road.

Not so conveniently placed is the 7000-rpm tachometer, which is located well forward (under the dash) on the console between the front seats. We think the addition of a tach is a real good idea, but for all the good that this one does, they could have just as well left it off. To read it you not only have to take your eyes off the road, but you also have to turn and cock your head slightly. If it were up to us, we'd send the stylist responsible for this piece of idiocy back to the women's undergarment industry, from whence he probably came.

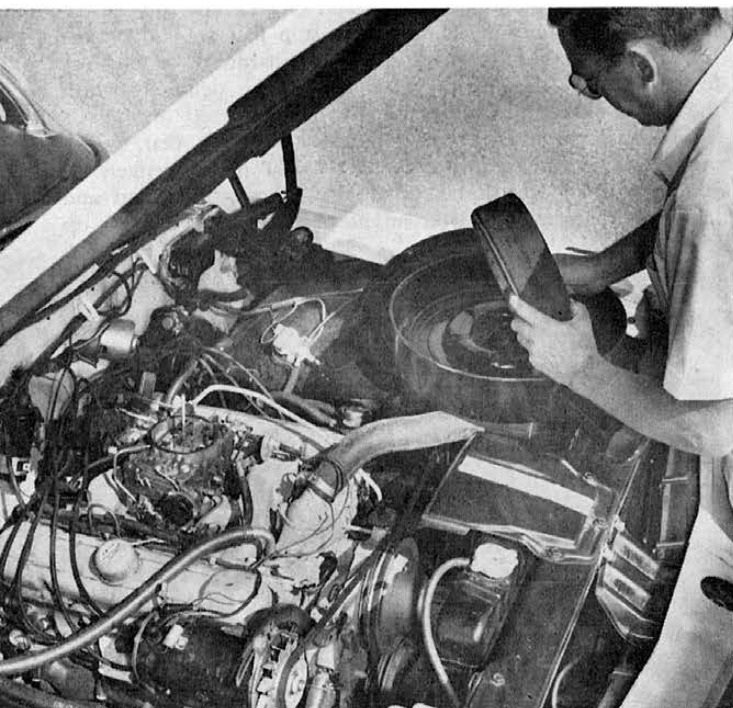
The steering wheel is comfortably placed and allows good over-the-wheel vision with plenty of clearance under it for the driver's legs. Leg-, hip-, and head-room in both the front and back seats are more than adequate even for tall types. Fore-and-aft adjustment of the comfortable, well-contoured buckets allows the driver to choose just about any position he, or she, wants. Our test car was equipped with solid black upholstery and carpeting which added to the luxurious look of the interior. The upholstery material, a pre-stretched vinyl, is called Morrokide and has the look and feel of top-grade European glove leather. It requires none of the care that leather does and looks as if it will last the life of the car.

Forward and sideward visibility is good, but we found we had a little trouble seeing through the rear-view mirror. The top line is a little low in the vicinity of the rear window. Under-the-hood accessibility is average with power accessories, but everything can be reached for servicing without too many contortions. The trunk area is very large, 33.2 cubic feet, with the spare in place, and the lip is low enough so that it doesn't interfere with loading or unloading procedures.

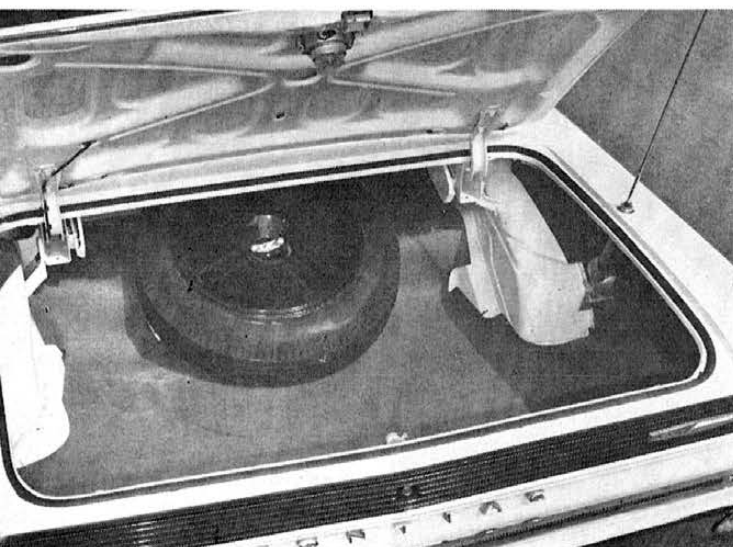
To sum it all up, the Pontiac Grand Prix is a top-quality car that offers the ultimate in luxury, performance and value. It's going to be a real challenge to Elliott M. Estes, new Pontiac Division head, to come up with an encore. /MT



Big, finned aluminum hub/brake units do a great job of providing maximum braking with minimum heat build-up.



Power accessories take up their share of under-the-hood space. Metal guard (below Tech. Editor's arm) discourages contact with fan. Trunk is a roomy 33.2 cubic feet.





PONTIAC GRAND PRIX

2-door, 5-passenger hardtop

OPTIONS ON CAR TESTED: 3-speed automatic (Hydramatic)

ODOMETER READING AT START OF TEST: 2513 miles

RECOMMENDED ENGINE RED LINE: 5200 rpm

PERFORMANCE

ACCELERATION (2 aboard)

0-30 mph	2.7 secs
0-45 mph	5.2
0-60 mph	8.3

Standing start 1/4-mile 17.2 secs. and 85 mph

Speeds in gears @ 4400 rpm

1st	35 mph	2nd	67 mph
3rd		103.4 mph	

Speedometer Error on Test Car

Car's speedometer reading.....	31	47	52	63	73	83
Weston electric speedometer.....	30	45	50	60	70	80

Observed miles per hour per 1000 rpm in top gear.....23.5 mph

Stopping Distances — from 30 mph, 30 ft.; from 60 mph, 153 ft.

SPECIFICATIONS FROM MANUFACTURER

Engine

Ohv V-8
Bore: 4.06 ins.
Stroke: 3.75 ins.
Displacement: 389 cubic inches
Compression ratio: 10.25:1
Horsepower: 303 @ 4600 rpm
Horsepower per cubic inch: 0.779
Weight to power ratio: 13.14:1
Ignition: 12-volt coil

Gearbox

3-speed Hydramatic

Driveshaft

Open tube (single)

Differential

Hypoid Semi-floating
Standard ratio: 3.23:1

Suspension

Front: Coil springs with upper and lower control arms — direct-acting 2-way shocks and stabilizer bar.

Rear: Coil springs — direct-acting 2-way shocks, torque being taken by control arms.

Wheels and Tires

Steel disc — 8 bolt
8.00 x 14 4-ply rayon cord tires

Brakes

Hydraulic, internal expanding 2-shoe, single anchor. Ribbed aluminum air-cooled drums, with bonded cast-iron braking surface. Effective lining area 173.7 sq. ins.
Front and rear: 11 x 2.50.

Body and Frame

Perimeter type — boxed
Wheelbase 120 ins.
Track, front 62.5 ins., rear 62.5 ins.
Overall length 211.6 ins.
Dry weight 3984 lbs.
Steering 4.25 turns lock-to-lock

IN STYLE AND PRICE THE GRAND PRIX COMPETES DIRECTLY WITH THE THUNDERBIRD — PERFORMANCE-WISE, IT'S IN A CLASS BY ITSELF.

