

PONTIAC

still the hottest entrant
from the GM stables

FEW auto makers ever underestimate themselves the way Pontiac did last year. When the '59 models were introduced, the company announced it was aiming for fourth place in sales. Instead, it wound up in third! It was the one medium-priced car that successfully bucked a trend away from its field.

The reason is not hard to find. Pontiac, once the most conservative General Motors product, now had the features people really wanted in a big car. Engine options covered almost every driving need, roadability was improved without any sacrifice in riding comfort and overall design was among the year's most glamorous. Testing a '60 Bonneville proved these are still the strong points of the car's appeal.

The Pontiac engine is a simple, rugged V-8 of 389 cubic inches, available this year in horsepower ratings from 215 to 348. As normally fitted to the Bonneville, it has 281 hp with a manual transmission and 303 hp with Hydramatic. The test car, however, had a 318-hp option with three two-barrel carburetors and a 10.75-to-1 compression ratio. Variations in the last two specifications, plus valve timing, account for the different characteristics. The 215-hp version, for example, has a single two-barrel carburetor, an 8.6-to-1 compression ratio and short timing to provide maximum economy on regular fuel.

A major improvement this year is the balanced cooling system which reduces hot spots by pumping equal amounts of water to each cylinder block. It has the additional advantages of being simpler and lighter than the unit it replaces.

Most other details of the engine and its accessories show similar care in design, though one serious defect does stand out.

With air conditioning, the generator drive is geared faster than usual to produce a strong current even at low engine speed. When the engine is revved near its maximum, the belt connecting the crank and generator pulleys travels faster than its material can stand. It breaks and puts the generator out of commission.

Nor do problems end there. During the acceleration tests, the generator belt broke and, as it thrashed loose, forced the power steering and air conditioning belts off their pulleys. These were damaged in turn, so all three had to be replaced.

All this cannot be dismissed as unique to the hotter engine options with their higher rpm's. It is latent in every air-conditioned Bonneville. Even the standard 281- and 303-hp engines peak at 4400 and 4600 rpm, respectively, the precise range in which the belt comes undone. Admittedly, it does not occur at normal operating speeds but owners who cannot take their engine potentials on faith had best carry a few extra belts.

The latest Hydramatic transmission is smoother than ever. During normal driving, shift points are just perceptible enough



PONTIAC'S SUCCESS was an unexpected phenomenon to most persons, both experts and average motorists. Looking back the reasons are not hard to determine. The 1960 version still emphasizes many of these virtues but the test car was not without faults.

for the attentive driver to be aware of them. Unfortunately, they do not take place at speeds high enough to take full advantage of the fast revving engine. With the hotter options, they are raised only slightly to avoid excessive clutch slippage.

Performance testing brought this out clearly. A 0-to-60 time of 8.6 seconds is certainly good for a 4600-lb. car but it is a bit slow for one that does 0-to-45 in 5.8 seconds. This is because of too early a shift from second to third between 45 and 60 mph which prevents the car from reaching the latter speed as quickly as it might. Even in the lower driving ranges, it takes place too soon. If it could be held off until the engine reaches a higher rpm, a 0-to-60 time under eight seconds could be expected.

Still, the Bonneville is a hot car by any standards. For one of its size and power, its fuel consumption is not too high, either. The overall test average was 13.5 mpg, which means it should deliver between 12 and 15 mpg under normal conditions.

A particular appeal of Pontiac performance is that it is complemented by exceptional roadability. Much of this can be attributed to the wide-track wheels which are offset to extend both front and rear treads to 64 inches. The idea is not really new; Lincoln used it several years ago for the Mexican Road Race. It simply provides the benefits of a wider tread without the expense of redesigning the whole chassis.

There are disadvantages, of course. Because the tires are set

farther from the kingpins and spindles, manual steering is harder and bearing loads are greater. This has not caused any serious problems, however, during the year the feature has been in use. The only frequent complaint from '59 Pontiac owners has been that their cars will not fit the tracks at a normal car wash.

The value of a broad tread is added stability with relatively soft springing. In corners or on straightaways, the Pontiac is remarkably steady. Combined with precise steering, the wide track wheels put it with the top American passenger cars in the area of high speed handling.

Cornering, in fact, is even better than that of the '59 model. There is less rock and quiver, apparently due to a change in shock absorber design.

Coil springs are used on all four wheels. At the rear, the springs and axle are located by trailing links that are so designed they counteract torque thrust and prevent rear end squat during sudden acceleration. The rear does bottom easily on sharp dips, though, due to the low rate springs used for a soft ride. This is the only major criticism that can be made of the entire suspension system.

The Bonneville tested was a four-door hardtop with a body shell similar to the Oldsmobile and Buick reported on elsewhere in this issue. Its general layout is the same as described for those cars.

Pontiac's individual treatment of it adds richness as well as distinction. The particular car had a metallic red finish, much like the customizers' candy apple, that was matched by an unusual upholstery sheen. Across the dash was an inset panel of walnut and, on the passenger side, there was a Corvette-like grab handle.

Instrumentation is especially good by today's standards, white markings on black faces. Warning lights are used for oil pressure and water temperature but a good old fashioned ammeter has reappeared this year. Perhaps this is a discreet admission of the generator drive troubles mentioned above.

For the most part, Pontiac's virtues outweigh its vices by a considerable margin. Those who respect its limitations will find it one of the finest highway cars made in this country. ●



WIDE CHOICE IN POWER TEAMS and accessories are one reason Pontiac's popularity curved sharply upward. Two disadvantages are apparent, however, a cluttered engine compartment, the other a more serious problem, seems to be an engineering oversight.

MOTOR LIFE TEST DATA



1960 PONTIAC

Test Car

TEST CAR: Pontiac Bonneville
BODY TYPE: four-door hardtop
BASIC PRICE: \$3331

Maneuverability Factors

OVERALL LENGTH: 220.7 inches
OVERALL WIDTH: 80.7 inches
OVERALL HEIGHT: 54.8 inches
WHEELBASE: 124 inches
TREAD, FRONT/REAR: 64 inches each
TEST WEIGHT: 4610 lbs.
WEIGHT DISTRIBUTION: 55 per cent on front wheels
STEERING: 4 turns lock-to-lock
TURNING CIRCLE: 42.7 feet curb-to-curb
GROUND CLEARANCE: 5.76 inches

Interior Room

SEATING CAPACITY: four to six
FRONT SEAT—
HEADROOM: 32.9 inches
WIDTH: 65.2 inches
LEGROOM: 45.2 inches
TRUNK CAPACITY: 40 cubic feet

Engine & Drive Train

TYPE: ohv V-8
DISPLACEMENT: 389 cubic inches
BORE & STROKE: 4.06 x 3.75 inches
COMPRESSION RATIO: 10.75-to-1
CARBURETION: triple two barrel
HORSEPOWER: 318 @ 4600 rpm
TORQUE: 430 lbs.-ft. @ 3200 rpm
TRANSMISSION: four-speed automatic
REAR AXLE RATIO: 3.23

Performance

GAS MILEAGE: 12 to 15 mpg
ACCELERATION: 0-30 mph in 3.7 seconds, 0-45 in 5.8 seconds and 0-60 in 8.6 seconds
SPEEDOMETER ERROR: Indicated 30, 45 and 60 mph are actual 28, 42.5 and 57 mph, respectively
POWER-WEIGHT RATIO: 14.5 lbs. per horsepower
HORSEPOWER PER CUBIC INCH: .82