



## '58 PONTIAC ON TRIAL

*A Motor Trend Research Report by William Carroll*

**WHAT'S WITH PONTIAC?** is the wrong question to ask this year. In '58 there's little that isn't *with* Pontiac. It's a wholly new car, with nothing left over from '57 except the wheels. Using Fisher's "A" body shell (shared with Chevrolet), Pontiac people simply set out to build the best car. After samples were approved, production specialists tried to figure out how it could be built to sell for a low price, but in the end they failed. Some Pontiacs are more expensive than comparable models of Buick, Dodge or Mercury. But the slight price differential shows up in handling, economy and performance—which are Pontiac's strong points.

Four series bid for attention and what you get under Pontiac paint depends on what you want, and pay for. Lowest priced is the Chieftain series, which includes a Catalina (hardtop) two-door coupe for \$2707 at the factory. This is Pontiac's basic car on a 122-inch wheelbase with 240-hp engine and two-throat carburetor. A synchromesh transmission you can shift yourself is standard on all models. Personally I like the Chieftain best of all. There's little chrome outside, wall-to-wall carpet inside, an ultra sharp convertible, and "live-it-uppers" can turn the inex-

pensive sedans into more expensive appearing models with \$48 worth (Decor Group) of chrome trim.

One step up the ladder is their Super Chief series, with a Catalina two-door for \$2880. The \$173 more than a Chieftain buys the longer 124-inch wheelbase, deluxe steering wheel, deep pile carpeting color matched to the interior, a selection of eight interior colors and a grand slam of 120 exterior paint possibilities. A larger trunk, too. Engine, dash and general trim are similar to the Chieftain but comfort is improved in the Super Chief due to the longer wheelbase and increased use of sound control materials under the hood and inside the car.

Selling well inside the medium price field, Pontiac's end runner is the Star Chief series' Catalina two-door at \$3122. The bite is \$242 more than a Super Chief. But what you get for the money shows. Jewel-like colors are available (92 color schemes) in new Lucite acrylic lacquer which remains glossy long after conventional colors have tired. Besides it needs only washing, which eliminates that Sunday polish chore. Custom wheel discs, star-flecked carpets and beautifully done interiors make the Star Chief a lush dish. Under the hood is a four-



### OUR TEST CAR

A Star Chief Catalina two-door with Tri-Power carburetion, Hydra-Matic transmission, radio, heater, dual exhausts, power brakes and steering, plus a collection of pleasant accessories. It weighed 4160 pounds, ready for the road.

throat carburetor boosting horsepower to 255 with the synchromesh transmission.

In the Bonneville, Pontiac goes all-out to build a top-quality car. Prices are high (\$3481 for the sport coupe, \$3586 for the convertible) but you get the whole works. Custom loomed upholstery, center armrest in the coupe, creases in the deck lid, foam cushions, bucket seats for a few extra bucks, hand-buffed glove leathers in color-matched interiors, and elimination of the word Pontiac. Only hubcaps remind observers of the bomb's origin; for at front, side and rear the Bonneville label has been applied with a heavy chrome hand.

High on Pontiac's list of changes from last year is the tubular center X-frame, said to be the strongest frame Pontiac has ever made, a radical departure from last year's four-way cantilever frame. The ball-joint front suspension system with compound anti-dive control has both suspension and steering actions combined in one strong drop-forged assembly. Some of the industry's biggest changes have been made in the rear, where Pontiac's system of rear suspension incorporates what is known as a basic four-link suspension, with rear axle upper and lower control

arms forming the four links. Instead of conventional leaf springs trying to support the car and absorb axle stresses, steel coil springs cushion the car while solid control arms hold the axle in position. The additional "A" frame between differential and frame combines with a high roll center to provide stability not often found in Detroit products.

An optional Ever-Level air suspension (at \$188 extra) maintains the car at a constant height, regardless of the load and road conditions. For example: Station wagons are usually sprung to handle a thousand-pound load without much trouble. Over that, steel-sprung cars drag their rears and become almost unsteerable. Air suspension keeps the wagon level, no matter what the load or its location on the rear deck.

Rear axle assembly of the '58 has been changed to accommodate the upper and lower control arms for the rear suspension and provide for use of the optional (at extra cost—\$53.75) Safe-T-Track differential. The driveline is now a two-piece assembly with center bearing support to eliminate vibration and permit a lower floor line.

Horsepower for Pontiac's 1958 Tempest 395 engine (the 395 is pounds-feet of torque at 2800 rpm with a four-throat carburetor) has been increased by a larger cylinder bore and improved breathing. V8 engines used in all models have a piston displacement of 370 cubic inches (347 in 1957) provided by a 4 1/16-inch bore and 3 3/16 stroke. A new camshaft that provides smoother engine performance (it holds the valves open longer) is used in all Hydra-Matic-transmission-equipped engines. The 10 to 1 compression ratio engines (standard with Hydra-Matic) require premium fuels; the 8.6 to 1 compression ratio used with synchromesh transmissions operates on standard grades. Varied compression ratios are obtained by use of differently-domed pistons. You can check the compression of your 1958 Pontiac engine by looking for an L with a circle around it (8.6 to 1 compression ratio) on the serial number pad of the engine. A stronger forged steel crankshaft replaces last year's cast job.

Manual shift, synchromesh transmissions are standard in all series, have an 11-inch clutch this year compared to the 10 1/2-inch clutch used in 1957. A new lighter transmission uses all helical gears machined from drop-forged steel gear blanks, heat-treated and shot-peened for strength and long life. Shafts are machined from high grade steel, heat-treated and ground to close tolerances.

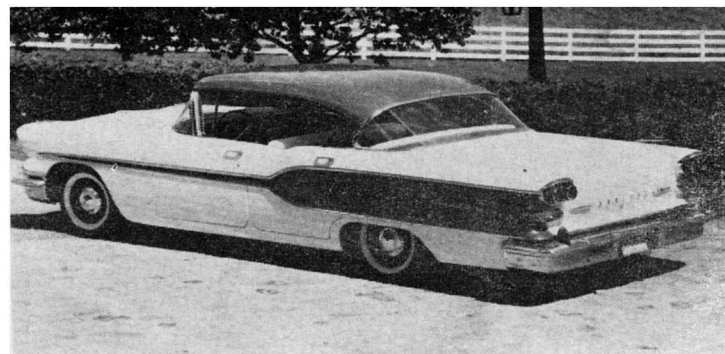
Automatics are the reliable Dual-Range Hydra-Matic (\$231 option) which has been carefully tailored to specifications of the Pontiac engine. L and R are next to each other, making the job of rocking out of sand or mud an easy one. Fortunately for careless drivers the designers incorporated a blocker valve in the transmission to keep ham hands from pushing through to R while traveling forward at high speeds. We tried it on purpose. No success! The selector lever would not move to R until car speed slowed to about three miles an hour. continued

PONTIAC FOR '58 COMES IN FOUR SERIES—CHIEFTAIN, SUPER CHIEF, STAR CHIEF AND BONNEVILLE—RANGING IN BASIC PRICE FROM

\$2573 TO \$3586. LIKE MOST OTHER '58 LINES, PONTIAC OFFERS NUMEROUS EXTRA-COST OPTIONS FOR ADDED PERFORMANCE, COMFORT.



CHIEFTAIN FOUR-DOOR SEDAN



SUPER CHIEF CATALINA FOUR-DOOR HARDTOP



STAR CHIEF CATALINA FOUR-DOOR HARDTOP



BONNEVILLE SPORT COUPE



# '58 PONTIAC

continued

Tire sizes are up to 8.00 x 14 (were 7.50 x 14) with 22 pounds pressure recommended when cold or 27 pounds when hot. We like them a little firm and added two extra pounds, which improved handling during our higher-than-usual test speeds.

Even the electrical system has been upgraded to keep with other changes in the car. Larger batteries, located in front of the radiator to keep cool, come in three sizes to meet specific demands. There are two starters (depending on compression ratio), three generators (extra-cost options), two regulators (regular and air-conditioned cars) and two completely different sets of ignition components depending on whether your engine has a high or low compression ratio.

In the list of factory- or dealer-installed options is everything anyone needs except a built-in chamber pot. However, a local dealer assures us this could be arranged. But a word of warning on options: Buy only what you want and forget the so-called "groups." There is no money saved through purchase of a collection of accessories, just because the salesman says they come all together. They don't either! Pontiac is happy to install anything you order, one item or all 58 of them.

Free-for-nothing options include a 3.08 to 1 rear axle ratio for Hydra-Matic cars (not bad in flat country where it saves gas); a 3.64 to 1 option for synchromesh-equipped cars (for mountains, pulling trailers or draggin'—it raises Cain with gas mileage); and a front license plate bracket in those states where wearing two plates is the proper thing to do.

After putting our foot where our mouth has been during MOTOR TREND's comprehensive test program, we'll tell you about the Pontiacs we've driven.

## THE FIRST FEEL

**EXIT AND ENTRY** Bending six-foot-two-inches of driver into the seat of the Pontiac Star Chief Catalina bumped no heads, though I had to practice a couple of times to get my right knee under the steering wheel without trouble. At that, I'd much rather have the wheel in my lap, than in my eyes. The Pontiac has lots of space between the high forehead and headliner. Both door lock and ignition switch use the same key in the same direction, a big help to those of us equipped with five thumbs.

**INSTRUMENTS AND CONTROLS** Lots of drivers will sing of happy days when they notice that Pontiac uses instruments instead of flashing lights to indicate engine condition. Personally I don't see what all the fuss is about. Both methods work. Heater pushbutton controls are easy to operate and there's plenty of heat when you need it. The two fresh air vents (on each side near your feet) are jewels and dump floods of cool air where you need it. I particularly like the full horn ring you can hit from any angle, and a double-jointed rear view mirror which can be raised or lowered a full 2½ inches.

A safety engineer would blow his brains out over the Pontiac instrument panel. The gaudy collection of rimmed clusters, ash trays and tormented bars was pulled from a GM dream car by Pontiac General Manager Semon Knudsen, who wanted a panel reminiscent of airplane instrumentation. That it looks like! But there's not a single part of the panel you could bang into during a collision without hurting yourself more than necessary. The optional safety pad (\$19.35) is a *must* for the Pontiac I would own.

**STARTING** With the selector lever in P or N the ignition key turns right to give a fast start every time. If you should have trouble with hot starts, open the throttle about halfway and hold it; the engine will start immediately. Warm-up is rapid and quiet as the hydraulic lifters maintain zero clearance at all times.

Even the transmission has provisions for cold starts and gives a smooth shift no matter what the temperature.

## DRIVING IN TOWN

**DRIVING POSITION** Fisher Body's pillow-style seats are soft enough, but the position of the backrest bothered me, even after only several hours of driving. After so much time in the wonderfully firm Edsel seat, Pontiac's pillow-like cushions and "way back" position seemed off balance. Everyone else who drove the car likes the seating position "as is" which only goes to show you that sometimes the rest of the world is really wrong. I never did get used to it and would block the seatback forward for continuous Pontiacing. A local dealer mentioned that provisions have been made to move the seat forward or backward by relocating the mounting brackets. If your Pontiac doesn't feel right, ask the dealer's service department to change the seat.

**GENERAL FEEL** Vision's good, particularly around the forward slanting windshield posts. Thank goodness it's almost impossible to hide a pedestrian behind them! I still like the driver's view from Chrysler products better than anything except a scooter. The Pontiac windshield wipers have been set to wipe glass right up to the top in the area most of us look through. The sweep is not overly wide, but no worse than competitive cars.

Town driving was a delight. The Catalina does not have the ponderous feeling of a Mercury or large Edsel and the point of vision seems to be from a higher position than Dodge or Plymouth. Handling at low speeds is excellent with GM's power steering still running second (in this man's preference) to Chrysler's full-time assist.

There's little excess overhang to worry about while parking, but try not to hit steep ramps at high speed. We banged a bumper on our driveway hump, by turning in at the usual "too fast" speed. Turning radius seems adequate for city streets, lock-to-lock being 4¼ turns for power assists and five turns for the manual steering setup.

**BRAKES** At five to 10 miles an hour, the brakes are super-sensitive, but react normally at average speeds. The throttle and brake pedals are so close together we'd suggest you not try to "heel and toe" the combination. There's plenty of room to learn to use your left foot for braking.

Pontiac brakes are among the largest in the field (12-inch front drums) and seem adequate for average highway use. Using our standard fade test, which consists of a series of repeated slowdowns from 60 to 20 mph at a rate of 15 feet per second squared, we noticed some odor from the brakes on the fifth cycle and a tendency to swerve to the right. On the sixth and seventh slowdown the rear right wheel locked up. On the eighth cycle we encountered sudden and severe fade. This is a somewhat better-than-average performance when related to all cars tested in 1957.

If you are ever forced to use the Catalina brakes to a point of dangerous fade, you may take some comfort from the fact that the car has the type of emergency brake which is not only a parking brake but can also stop you in a crisis. The emergency brake (push it with the left foot) slows the car down evenly and well. It was almost impossible to lock the rear wheels through use of the emergency brake on dry pavement. Such a stop, however, could never be classed as the "panic" type, as we found it required 87 feet to bring us to a standstill from 30 mph.

**TRANSMISSIONS** What can you say about manual transmissions? They shift, the lever is long enough, the gears are quiet and it's been reported they'll save you a gallon of gas every now and then. We like automatics. On the Pontiac, the extra-smooth Dual-Range Hydra-Matic has R and L (Reverse and Low) next to each other for help in rocking the car. A blocker valve in the transmission prevents hitting Reverse until car speed falls below three miles an hour. We know. We tried it at 50. Full-throttle upshifts are at 70 mph—but you can't feel

them. Maximum kickdown speeds are 35 mph at part throttle, or below 65 mph if you push through the last notch. You can pick up engine braking in the mountains any time below 60 mph by moving the selector to Low.

## AT THE DRAGSTRIP

At the dragstrip (Riverside International Motor Raceway) we had an opportunity to measure results of Pontiac engineering. With no leaf springs to wind up (our car had steel coil springs—air suspension cars act the same) the axle reaction arms did a terrific job of keeping tires on the pavement. If you're dragging for a short run, start in L then pop to DR about 55 (this chopped a few tenths off our short-run times). For longer pulls, put the selector lever in DR, floor the throttle and leave it there. You'll be past 80 in the quarter, and well over 100 in the half-mile. An automatic upshift in the transmission prevents overspeeding the engine, eliminating the chance of valves and pistons trying to occupy the same space at the same time. A throttle notch which shifts the transmission to its hottest gear is way down in a hole. Push hard.



## '57 with 270-bhp engine

From Standing Start  
0-45 mph 5.6 0-60 mph 8.8  
Quarter-mile 17.9 and 83 mph  
Passing speeds  
30-50 mph 3.9 45-60 mph 3.2  
50-80 mph 8.6

## '58 with 300-bhp engine

0-45 mph 5.4 0-60 mph 8.2  
Quarter-mile 17.1 and 88 mph  
30-50 mph 3.9 45-60 mph 3.2  
50-80 mph 8.2

## ON THE DYNO

Rear-wheel horsepower—Clayton dynamometer showed:  
73 road hp @ 2000 rpm and 25 mph 82 road hp @ 2000 rpm and 47 mph  
94 road hp @ 2500 rpm and 31 mph 110 road hp @ 2500 rpm and 58 mph  
116 road hp @ 3000 rpm and 58 mph 138 road hp @ 3000 rpm and 74 mph

## USING IT FOR TRIPS

**LUGGAGE SPACE** The 42-inch-wide trunk is wonderful. Unfortunately a spare tire (where else could they put it?) narrows the floor space to about 34 inches. But as the floor is only 3½ inches below the sill, it's still among the handiest we've seen.

**ON STRAIGHT ROADS** The car handled like a teenager's technicolored dream—at high speeds, in wind up to 54-mph gusts during a storm, on curving mountain roads and on crowded secondaries. Up to 95 or 100 the softly-sprung chassis felt

fairly secure. Over that I was wishing for stiffer shocks and anti-sway bars which are presently available for police or taxi use. Appreciated was the lack of lightness at speed. Instead of flying high, the little coupe just squatted and ran.

Until I got used to it, driving the Pontiac was just too darn effortless. The speedometer was always far above the legal limit, until I managed to latch onto a comfortable throttle position which resulted in a nominal 55-mph cruising speed.

**IN TURNS** Nothing happens in turns. You just go around. Gentle turns don't exist. You just think around them. Progressively faster cornering at the Riverside Raceway only showed that eventually all four tires would noisily protest, the car could be drifted and you couldn't break it loose at any speed under a full bore "let's turn it over" corner bending. Sure—the front end dives a little, the rear comes up, but trailing arm rear suspension and high roll center keep wheels on the ground and all 4160 pounds under control.

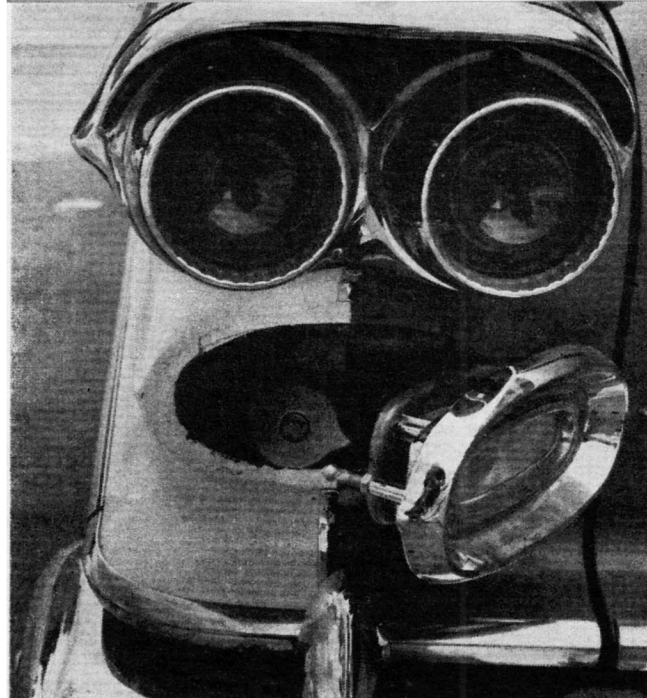
In fact, control is probably what Pontiac has the most of. Next to performance, that is. We were cornering on dirt for the photographer's benefit. Faster and faster we bent the coupe until

screaming four-wheel slides were throwing up huge clouds of dust. Even then, when other cars might have spun out, the Catalina needed only a twitch of the wheel and touch of the throttle to pull into a straight line on the rough dirt. It's nice work, when the car will let you.

**ON ROUGH ROADS** Here the Pontiac is less of a problem than some other '58 cars we've driven. We accidentally dropped the Pontiac into a chuckhole deep enough to jar our teeth, but it caused no loss of control or change of car direction. Pulling off the highway at speed onto dirt shoulders was no trick, nor was 45 mph on a sandy rutted road. There was little pitching as wheels kept busy fighting the ground to keep the body on an even keel. Clearance (6.25 inches) was adequate, road noise about average, and dust sealing for the body and trunk satisfactory. On dips the front end appears to dive heavily and I worried about the low bumper digging in, but nothing happened as the car recovered poise quickly without excessive jouncing. Air suspension jobs are quieter under all conditions and give a softer, more controlled ride on extremely rough roads. On washboard air takes over in great style, while for pavement duty the difference between air and steel is more of quietness than noticeable ride quality.

For some reason there was a lot of vibration in the steering





**GAS TANK FILL-PIPE**, hidden behind left rear back-up light, was guarded by the ragged-edge hatch cutout.

## '58 PONTIAC

continued

wheel. I tried to find the source, but it seemed to be a combination of body and road vibration between 50 and 60 mph. However, road shock and bumps were not passed through the car, which leads me to believe an out-of-balance wheel may have been "sending" movement through the car at moderate speeds. The floor of the coupe lets the seat vibrate more than I enjoyed, which calls for tighter mounting or a better bracket.

**ON HILLS** Select a safe speed on any hill and you have it made. Slow trucks and roadhogs are no problem, as surplus power and useful transmission kickdown gearing make passing a snap. Less powerful models should perform nearly as well as the Tri-Power, for most hill climbing is done at slow speeds.

**HEAT AND VENTILATION** It was a relief to use the front window ventilators and find they were not responsible for excess wind noise. A Pontiac touch shows in metal trim of the Catalina windows. A tiny drip ledge catches any water running over the top of slightly lowered windows and drains it down through the door. At last, no more water inside the car from rainy day driving. No air leaks either. The windshield has no overhanging visor lip, which does away with noise at that point.

Separate controls for the fresh air vent are on the driver's left, easy to find, easy to use. The heater operates from a pushbutton panel, equally simple, illuminated at night and exceptionally effective on cold mornings. Both sets of buttons project below the bottom of the instrument panel and can hurt your knees if you bang into them. Wide defroster vents across the base of the windshield keep steam from forming, a job they are helped with by added blower capacity when the "Defroster" button is pushed.

**RIDE** Front and rear passengers were seemingly comfortable, at least none complained and there was plenty of room for tall people in the rear seat. All series and body styles are equally roomy. The medium soft ride seems to be a good compromise, though for continual highway traveling I would prefer slightly stiffer springs and shock absorbers.

### FUEL ECONOMY

'57 Super Chief	'58 Star Chief
Stop-and-Go Driving	14.6 mpg for 157 miles
Highway Average	17.3—18.6 mpg for 370 miles
Overall Average	16.9 mpg for 527 miles
14.2 mpg for 883 miles	Fuel used: Mobilgas Special
*All mileage shown together in overall average.	

### SERVICING

**ENGINE AND CHASSIS** Stand back when you open the hood, while springs lift it wide and high for easy access. Exhaust manifolds are below the plugs, for which praise be! But only a deep plug socket will do a complete removal job as two on the left bank are hidden under a pump bracket. The crankcase dipstick is on the right side, low down, but there's no burn danger. Not so for the transmission dipstick. It's hidden under the heater blower, near the exhaust connection. Remove the air cleaner to reach the distributor and learn some new cuss words to work on the fuel pump. It's buried way low in front on the left. Belt adjustments are easy as generator and steering pump are high on the block. Unfortunately air suspension and air conditioning pumps clutter up the engine compartment no end. Their inclusion is a tribute to Pontiac engineers who found space for pumps, tanks, idler pulleys and assorted plumbing.

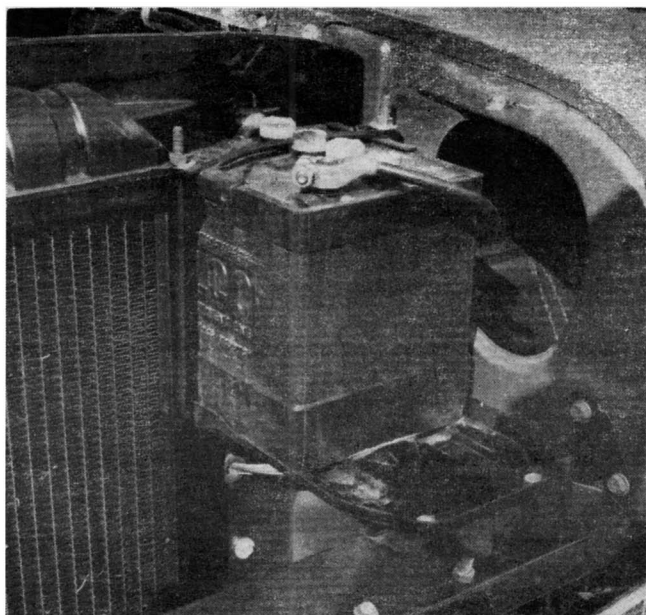
**BODY REPAIR** The expense of body repair is no more than for any other car of recent vintage. Almost all new cars have gigantic body panels which if damaged can be repaired with smaller service sections from the factory. Bumpers stand out from the body a reasonable distance and access to interiors for panel beating seems on a par with other GM cars. The die cast grille is in two parts; only damaged section need be replaced.

### CONCLUSIONS

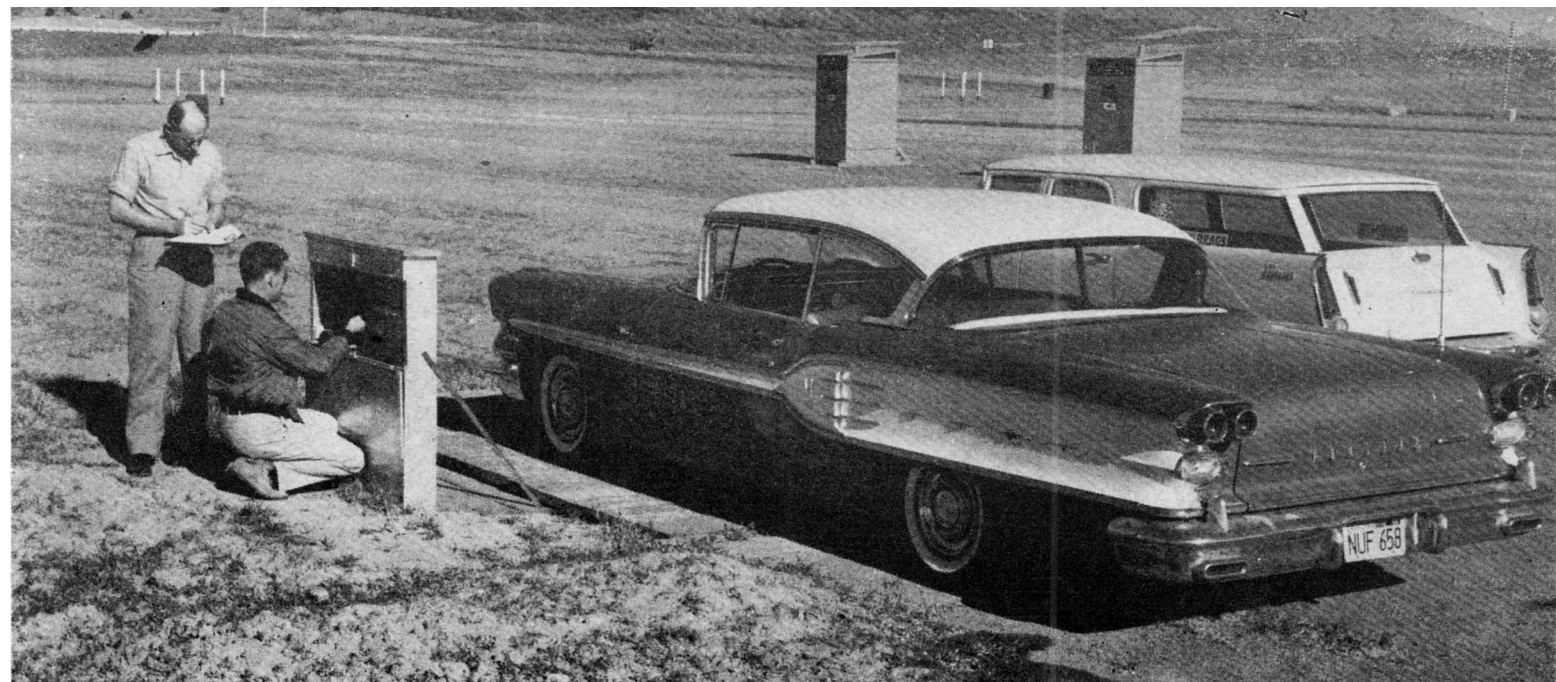
**ITS BEST POINTS** There don't seem to be any particular ones, for all its points seem good.

That it performs is evidenced by a 1957 Daytona record: Pontiac at 131.747 mph.

That it handles you can find out for yourself by borrowing a '58 for a few minutes.



**NEW BATTERY POSITION**, up front to the left of the radiator, helped keep it cool, facilitated servicing.

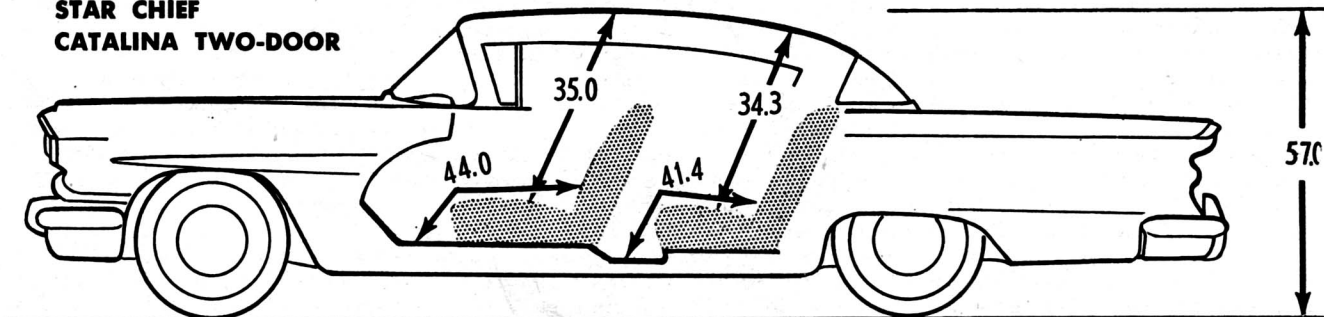


**WEIGH-IN** at the Riverside International Raceway scales revealed test car weighed 4160 lbs. (55% front, 45% rear).

And I like the combination of an economical, moderate-size car offering traffic agility with the plush interior of more barge-like transportation. First cost seems high, particularly if you compare Pontiac with Chevrolet (which uses the same body shell) and make only a paperwork comparison. Eyeballing the two cars will disclose reasons enough for the price differential. Pontiac's more comfortable wheelbase, bigger tires, larger diameter brake drums with more square inches of lining, plus some of the most tastefully designed interiors in its field are worth the extra money. Then, too, you may favor its "high" seating position as compared to the "low" position of a Dodge or DeSoto. Some people (including Carroll) like the massive appearance of an Edsel as compared to the feminine roundness of a Pontiac. But my pocketbook had the last word: it mentioned the 17.3 to 18.6 miles per gallon of Mobilgas for highway driving at an average speed of 58.25 mph.

**CHECK BEFORE BUYING** Have someone clip loose threads off the interior trim, take a good look at fit of the upper and lower rear corners of rear doors on Chieftain sedans and the upper rear window molding on Chieftain two-doors. We found awfully rough body work in these specific areas on some of the 20 cars given a careful quality inspection. Some assembly plants are having trouble fitting fenders, side and rear doors to station wagons. Give them a close check and water leak test with a garden hose just to be sure. Carburetor floats set to specifications may be on the high side. If you smell gasoline right after cornering, ask the mechanics to lower the level to its minimum specifications and save a little gasoline. In general we found Pontiac to be among the best of its class for quality of assembly, and if your dealer pre-delivers the car as you are paying him to do (pre-delivery charges are a part of the car's price), you should have no problems. Only fun. /MT

### STAR CHIEF CATALINA TWO-DOOR



### SPECIFICATIONS OF TEST CAR

**ENGINE:** Ohv V8. Bore 4.06 in. Stroke 3.56 in. Stroke/bore ratio 0.88:1. Compression ratio 10.5:1. Displacement 370 cu. in. Three 2-bbl carburetors. Advertised bhp 300 @ 4600 rpm. Bhp per cu. in. 0.81. Piston speed @ max. bhp 2729 ft. per min. Max. bmepp 160.3 psi. Max. torque 400 lbs.-ft. @ 3000 rpm.

**TRANSMISSION:** Hydra-Matic automatic four-speed planetary gearbox with fluid coupling; ratios: 3.97:1, 2.55:1, 1.55:1, 1.00:1.

**CHASSIS:** Front suspension—-independent coil springs with upper and lower control arms. Rear—coil springs with control arms. 8.00 x 14 tubeless tires. Power steering, recirculating ball, 4.25 turns lock-to-lock, overall ratio 22:1. Rear axle—conventional differential, ratio 3.08:1.

**DIMENSIONS:** Wheelbase 124 in., overall length 215.5, overall height 57.0, front tread 58.8, rear tread 59.4, rear overhang 57.0. Weight with gas, oil and water 4160 lbs. (55% front, 45% rear), weight/bhp ratio 13.9:1.

**PRICE:** Factory-suggested retail price of test car equipped as described including federal tax but not state and local taxes, delivery charges or freight \$3869.

**ACCESSORIES:** Hydra-Matic S231, power steering \$107, power brakes \$40, dual exhausts \$31, heater and defroster \$96, radio \$101, Sportable radio \$196, power windows \$107, Safe-T-Track differential \$54, air suspension \$188, tinted glass \$37, air conditioning \$430.