

By Eric Dahlquist ■ When I was a kid growing up in New York, there was this Mrs. Wilson who lived down the road, and she had a dark green '39 Buick coupe. Every day she'd drive by, pointing that long slender hood toward town, and the deep color of the lacquer seemed a mobile pool of jade neatly defined by delicate chrome moldings. There was that special sound Buick straight-eights used to make and a sort of mechanical whirring effect 7.00 x 16's created on the macadam road. It was all part of the deal, and no matter how many endless summers of my youth Mrs. Wilson and her lovely green lacquered Buick automobile rolled past, it was always a redefinition of something called class.

And they've still got it — at least in their ads. Take the one with the airline captain standing next to the mirror-finished Riviera on a farm somewhere. In the background is this hangar with a neat Aero Commander twin inside, worth maybe a hundred grand. That's super-class, baby — for when you're older. For when you're younger, there's the Buick Gran Sport, which is just dripping with latent class. So latent, in fact, we almost totally ignored the car until the day a GS 400 was available for a test. You see, we got the car confused temporarily with the Skylark Custom series that has this chrome strip zooming big as life down across the side of the car — like suddenly it's 1953 again. Click! We were turned

About the only thing there's any controversy about on the Buick GS 400 is its style — and not much of that either



"WHEN BETTER CARS ARE BUILT..."

THE GS 400



off. But we were wrong and didn't realize by how far until we put in a couple of hours behind the wheel of a genuine GS.

It was Friday, the next to last day of practice for the Los Angeles Times Grand Prix (fifth stop on the Canadian-American Challenge Cup series) and we were going out to the track in Riverside, right? As we drove along the freeway, there came a growing awareness that something was wrong with the car — something was missing — something you become unwillingly accustomed to in far too many other machines today. There was no freeway hop! That little kalump-kalump-kalump accompanied by the rhythmic pitch of the whole car as first the front and then the rear wheels hit the joints in the cement (joints that are spaced ideally so at normal cruising speeds the slight rocking action wears you down like the Chinese water torture) had somehow been almost

totally eradicated. Even the wind noise was at whisper levels.

How'd they do that? Do what? Get rid of the freeway hop. Shortened the wheelbase, that's how. Back at new car announcement, you remember that all GM intermediates suddenly had two distinct wheelbases: 112 inches for coupes and convertibles, and 116 inches for four-doors and station wagons. At the time, all divisions announced that this bi-wheelbase system had two aims: to allow better handling because of more favorable weight distribution and to preserve a more sporting flavor. And that was true, as far as it went. Ford and Chrysler engineers drove us nuts trying to find out why GM would go to the huge expense of building two intermediate-sized cars just for style. Well, they didn't.

Somewhere along the line, GM's extensive high-speed testing uncovered the

fact that wheelbases of 112 inches (and above 116 inches) were the magic sizes in seriously reducing the "hop" condition, and that their 115-inch 1967 jobs were tuned smack in the middle of the wrong frequency band. But you couldn't very well cram a four-door or wagon into a 112-inch-wheelbase situation, and the coupes couldn't be stretched to 116 and still look right, so — presto! — two A-bodied wheelbases. With three full inches out of the '67 two-door wheelbase, four-and-a-half more could be lopped from the overall length, not only reversing the trend of ever more huge intermediate cars but allowing their jobs amazingly good maneuvering size. The first time you pull a U-turn on a narrow street you'll be shocked when you make it on the first try. Sorry, gang, but old Buick has done it again.

The GS had a driving feel all its own, unique in the way the GTO is, only different because it's more subtle. Part of it is the strength of a special, heavier-gauge, super-beef frame and some the result of stiffer springs, shocks, two stabilizer bars and the fact the rear suspension geometry is revised to reduce road shock and provide greater directional stability. Whatever they've done, you sort of rejoice every time the wheel hits a ripple because of the way there is that tautness and instant response, instead of a brief ride in the Goodyear blimp. You find yourself creating the most preposterous rationalizations just to drive another couple of miles so you can feel the firm but not harsh — no, not by any means — undercarriage working its way along, thinking that the wheel/tire/spring/control-arm assembly must be something like what John Frankenheimer gave us in Grand Prix where those Formula 1 setups looked like they were bonded to the asphalt.

In the damp, the Gran Sport's rear Goodyear Wide Tread tires were not bonded to the road, that is. Only in the water, mind you, but it's still a trifle daring doing "brodies" in rainy-day traffic. The rear end didn't mind a bit bottoming on just the right kind of bump, which can be more than a minor annoyance. But that will give us something to look forward to next year. That and the Saginaw power steering which feels like there is a molasses road-sense-damper through which the steering shaft must pass. It's a darned shame, too, because the car does so much better in a corner than you should expect from a Buick, if only there was a bit more of an idea what those beautifully-sprung skins were going over.

Gran Sport styling is an either/or proposition — either you like it or you don't — seemingly in a ratio of about 5-to-1 for. The machine doesn't have the Skylark custom chrome side strip, and that's a good thing. GM Divisions seem predisposed to bring out trend setters like the Riviera and then style the rest of their line after it. How well this tack works can be partially appreciated by a surprising

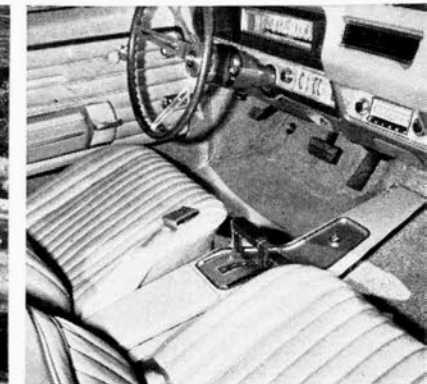
majority of casual observers who thought the GS 400 was really a '68 Riviera or at least some mini-sport version. The interior of our test car was furnished with Madrid-Grain vinyl in a color called Buckskin that went so well with the Burnished Saddle exterior lacquer that more than one viewer felt compelled to compliment the color combination. You knew his mind was motoring up some tree-lined driveway in East Egg all the way to the colonnaded mansion.

But some people in the Division are not entirely satisfied with the idea all their customers are well-established individuals who dig the GS 400 only because it looks like a better-handling Junior League Riviera. No, there are those who believe it's just as critical to have the hot dog as well. To step off in the right direction, last year they fielded a new 400-430-inch engine family (fully described in the Nov. '66 issue of HRM and practically unchanged since) that erased completely any trace of the old "nail valve" onus. At first it looked like they weren't going to capitalize on the obviously superior breathing qualities of the powerplant, but then some soul looked in the '68 dealer parts catalog and discovered a bargeload

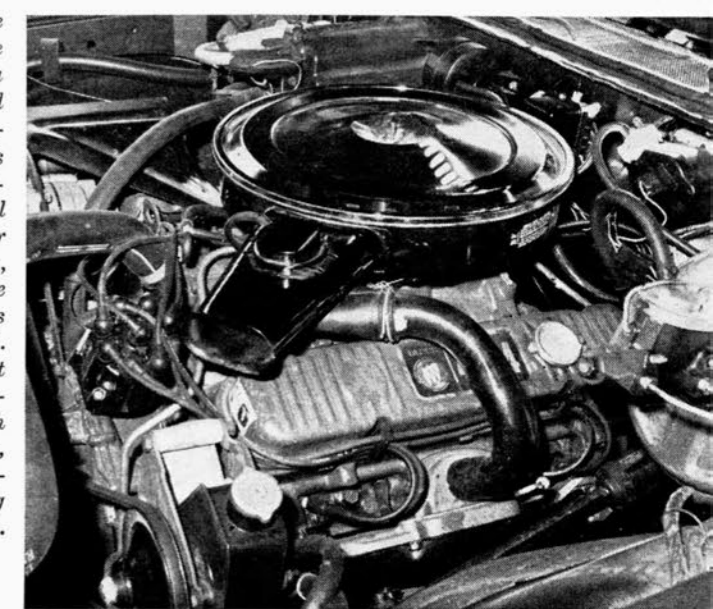
of rather specialized heavy-duty goodies that looked mighty like racing goodies. And they were — just guide your optics to the chart provided; see the awakening that is quietly going on in Flint.

Our test car had the 340-hp engine and 3-speed Super Turbine that is a re-named Turbo Hydro and doesn't have the variable-pitch stator from last year that you could hook up to work manually for a couple of extra mph in high gear. Even though the car weighed in at 3820 pounds, it felt nimble enough, thanks mostly to the addition of a 3.42 gear ratio. Out at Irwindale, the thing went 15.20-91.30 on the first session which, of course, is not even on the road to the ball park. This lackluster showing was due to an unpredictable shifting box which the able crew at Reynolds Buick in West Covina remedied quickly, giving the car a whole new lease on life. At the same time, a set of Wildcat mufflers were installed which not only have a neat tone but add seven quick horsepower. A set of properly-tuned headers (see chart) would have allowed a 40-horse improvement, but then that wouldn't be quite pure stock and would probably aggravate the already 5

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ABOVE — Would you believe it, droves of people thought the little old GS 400 was really a '68 Riviera. This can't be all bad. ABOVE RIGHT — Interior on our bus looked as if a bunch of European upholsterers stitched up the vinyl that could almost pass for leather. Dash, unfortunately, didn't carry on where the threads left off. GTO still sets the standard for sporty field. RIGHT — By the time they got all the stuff in the engine compartment, there wasn't much left for the engine. Plugs, however, were easier to service than most. Everything worked and nothing fell off.



photography: Eric Rickman

