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The American Musclecar's MUSCLECAR

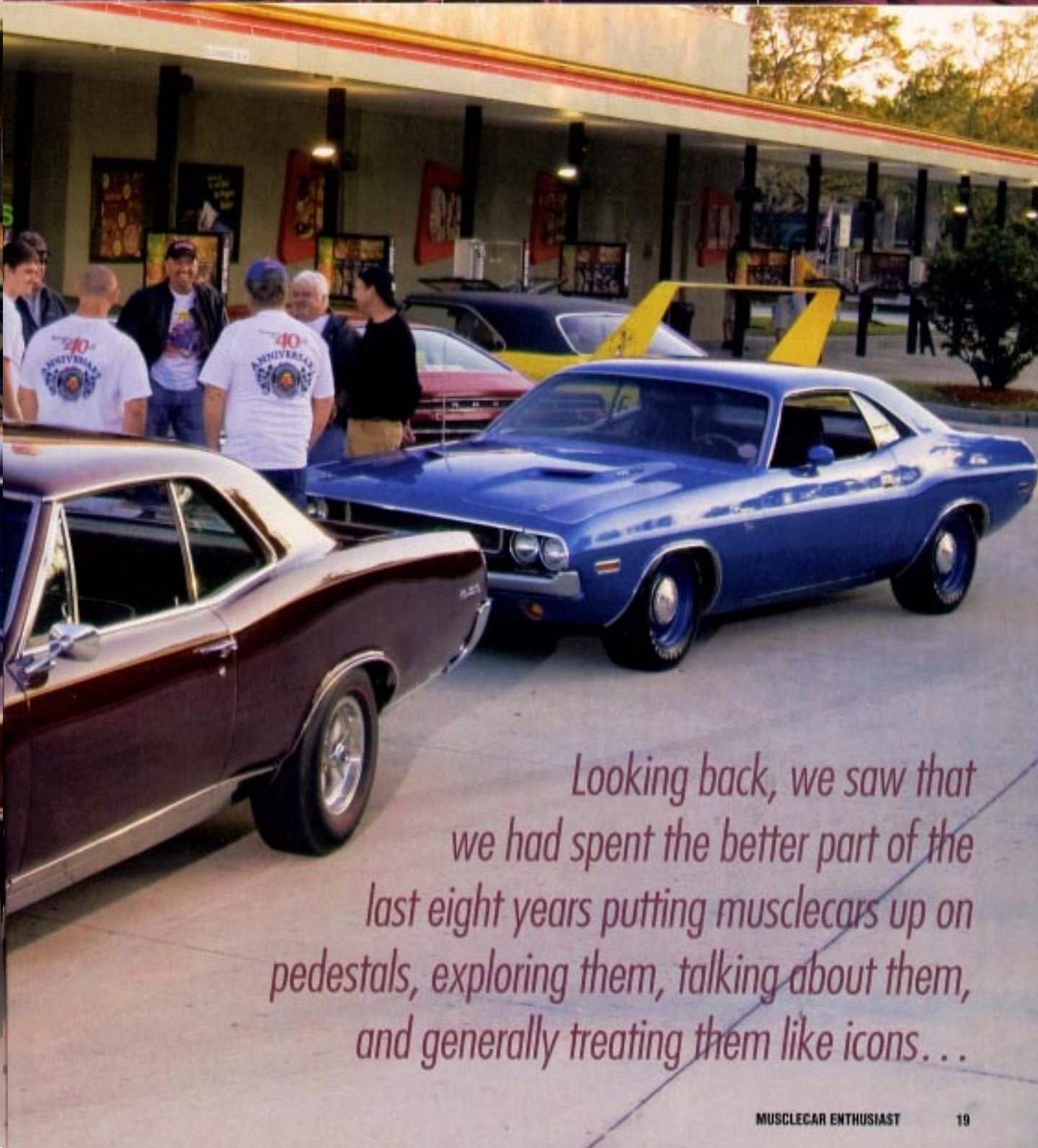
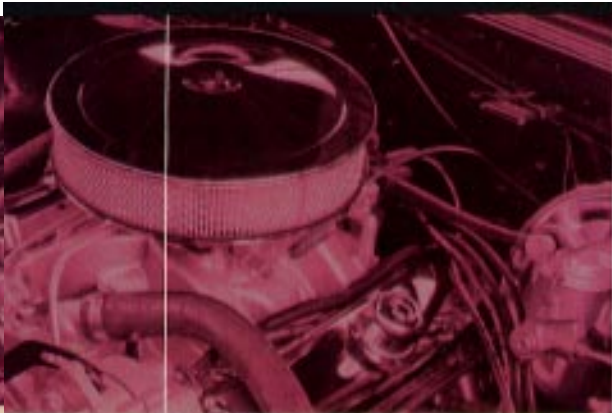
What do the producers of *Speed's American Musclecar* series do when they're not making the TV show? They make a musclecar!

BY STAN RARDEN / PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHUCK JAMES AND STAN RARDEN

EDITOR'S NOTE: When we received word of a new TV show being developed by the producers of *The American Musclecar*, we asked the show's creator, Stan Rarden, to give us his personal take on the development of the show. What follows is his first-person account of the show's creation and the construction of the show's GTO mascot.

BACK IN 1998, WHEN *THE AMERICAN MUSCLECAR* PREMIERED, WE HAD HIGH HOPES FOR A LONG RUN. AT THE RATE OF ONE FEATURED MUSCLECAR PER WEEK, WE FIGURED TO BE ON THE AIR FOR A WHILE, IF OUR AUDIENCE LIKED WHAT WE DID AND COULD FIND US ON THE WEE CABLE CHANNEL CALLED *SPEEDVISION*.





Looking back, we saw that we had spent the better part of the last eight years putting musclecars up on pedestals, exploring them, talking about them, and generally treating them like icons...

Well, eight years later, that great idea called *Speedvision* had become *Speed*, part of Fox's television universe, and a permanent fixture in nearly 60 million homes in North America.

A vital ingredient of this program, it seemed to us, was a musclecar of our own. To our way of thinking the best way to experience a cruise is to get right in the middle of it, and that's the point of view we wanted to give our audience.

The American Musclecar was still around, but after 58 episodes, our show had finally run out of cars to showcase. It was a day we never envisioned. The production team observed a moment of quiet reflection (actually more like six

seconds), and then dived headlong into developing another series for *Speed*.

Looking back, we saw that we had spent the better part of the last eight years putting musclecars up on

pedestals, exploring them, talking about them, and generally treating them like icons... and deservedly so, judging by the audience's approval. But we discovered that after eight years of looking at these cars, we now had a

burning need to drive them! So... what if there was a show that took these cars down off those pedestals and put them back on the streets again, cruising, going places, and being part of the street scene, just like we did when they were new?

It took a few months of bouncing ideas off each other, concepts being flown and shot down, but finally we had a new idea. We call it *The American Musclecar's Cruisin' USA* – a program that shows musclecars, both yesterday's and today's, in their natural habitat... cruisin'! This new show picks up right where *The American Musclecar* left off, and will take the audience to some of America's best cruise nights, showing musclecars doing what they do best.

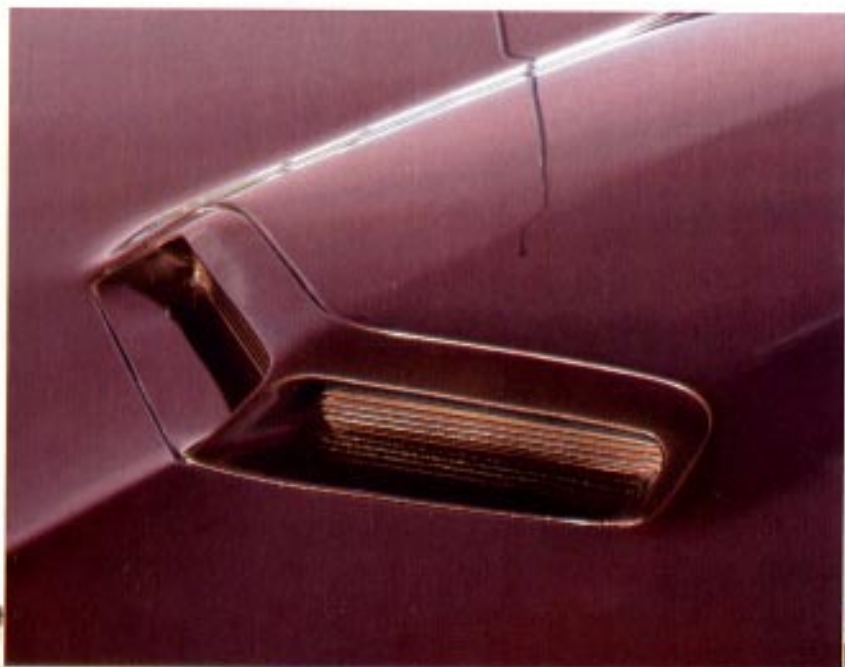


Here's the best part — we'll do it all from the driver's seat.

A vital ingredient of this program, it seemed to us, was a musclecar of our own. To our way of thinking the best way to experience a cruise is to get right in the middle of it, and that's the point of view we wanted to give our audience. So while we were putting the finishing touches on our show idea, we started to build *The American Musclecar's* musclecar.

THE RIGHT WHEELS

A few months earlier, during shooting on a 5th season episode of *AMC*, we visited *Pro Toyz*, Todd Werner's huge collection of classic musclecars (see our profile last issue). His showroom was





FAR LEFT: Peg-leg 10-bolt, complete with econo 2.93 gears, will be stashed somewhere where we won't trip over it.

LEFT: The 12-bolt rear axle features Moroso Brute Strength carrier, Richmond 3.73s, Ratech bearings and shims, Moser pinion yoke and C-clip eliminators and urethane bushings. Ought to light up those redlines pretty nicely!

OUT BACK

Our 12-bolt rear is a welcome replacement for the '67's single-side

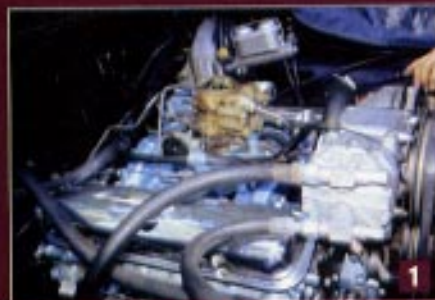
packed to the rafters with everything from Hemi 'Cudas to Shelys. Way in the back we spotted a burgundy '67 GTO hardtop. A closer once-over revealed a unique car. This GTO was equipped with a bench seat with fold-down armrest, column-shift automatic and the low-compression 255-hp 400ci engine.

Importantly, the GTO was kosher from bumper to bumper, according to Pontiac Historic Services. This burgundy beauty even had 1967-vintage aftermarket air conditioning

Importantly, the GTO was kosher from bumper to bumper, according to Pontiac Historic Services. This burgundy beauty even had 1967-vintage aftermarket air conditioning which still worked.

which still worked. At the time, Todd mentioned that this car "might be for sale," a phrase which made this Pontiac lover light right up. So now, when we needed a car, I called Todd. The deal was made and *The American Musclecar* now had a set of wheels.

For the next few months, our production studios in Tampa, Florida, did dual duty. In the editing suite, new show promos and other ongoing video projects were proceeding. In the studio area in the rear of the building, our GTO project car was being disassembled



ENGINE BUILD

The Musclecar dictionary defines "rare option" to mean "not many people wanted one of those back then." So even though our GTO's low-compression, 2-barrel 400 was a "rare option" — just 2,967 '67 GTOs were produced with this engine — our first move was to replace this numbers-matching boat anchor with something a little more rowdy.

Ken Simpson's engines power many stout Pontiacs in the southeast, including "Chief Whampum," his 9-second '63 Tempest, so it was a happy day when he welcomed us to his garage in Unionville, North Carolina. Ken designed exactly what we were hoping for, building around a 1974-vintage 455 block and crank, and some race-proven parts.

The machine work was done by longtime Pontiac racer Ken Keefer, from Ken's Speed and Machine in Brooksville, Florida, who

bored the block to 4.180-inch, cut the pistons, fitted the pins and balanced the rotating mass. The shortblock assembly was done by Dale Nichols at Nichols Engineering in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Ken Simpson assembled the engine with ARP head studs, Fel-Pro gaskets and a dozen of his own proven speed and longevity secrets, like a custom-modified Melling oil pump which produces max volume, not just gauge-pegging cold oil pressure. Simpson also fabricated many things to make our engine installation look clean and well-engineered, such as the sanitary aluminum lines for the TCI heavy-duty tranny cooler, mounting the Be Cool radiator and creating a factory-appearing fan shroud which actually works, from pieces of the stock shroud and Year One's '66-67 radiator air baffle kit.

Our cooling system received special consideration. From years of racing and cruising in the southern U.S., we knew that

even in brand-new condition, Pontiac's stock heavy duty cooling system would barely handle our blistering hot summer days. So with a bored 455, a high-duration camshaft and lots of ignition advance, we reasoned that extreme measures would be necessary to make sure our Cruisin' Mobile didn't go off like Mount St. Helens the first time traffic slowed to a crawl. We called Pat Staton at Year One, Inc. and asked his advice. He relayed our needs to Mitch at Be Cool, who specified their 4-row "short core" unit, which fit perfectly in our GTO's short, non-A/C core support. We sacrificed some "stock appearing" points for the comfort of seeing our water temp gauge in the no-worries range, even after idling for long periods. With a coolant recovery system and a 160-degree 'stat, we think we're ready for summer. Incidentally, these Sunpro gauges are some of the most accurate instruments we've ever used, and they mimic Pontiac's

with its "Bonneville Salt Flats" 2.93 gear ratio. With all that new Ken Simpson-built torque now under our foot, we could just hear driveline parts breaking. So we poured the best goodies we could find inside this powder-coated housing.

We used the stock 30-spline axles, which are plenty tough, and hung this rearend with Year One's boxed upper and lower control arm kit,* which features urethane bushings on all eight joints. Delco gas shocks and Eaton Detroit Spring's one-inch taller-than-stock

custom-wound units, also from Year One, Inc., complete the rear suspension.

We kept the GTO's stock drum brakes, but we replaced all the brake lines and friction parts, and we also treated the driveshaft to heavy duty U-joints. To top the whole thing off, we gave in to vanity and slapped on a Summit Racing aluminum differential cover. By the time whoever we're racing gets a look at this thing, we reasoned, he'll have figured out our Cruisin' '67 is "slightly upgraded" from stock trim. Besides, this piece isn't

just shiny, it actually provides stiffness to the differential bearing caps, plus it gives us a handy drain plug.

**Here's a tip for those of you who are planning a 12-bolt swap into your early GTO: Make sure you order Year One's control arm kit for the 12-bolt housing, not the one for your GTO. The "car side" of both kits is the same, but the 12-bolt housing's mounting points are different from the 10-bolt, thus you need the control arm kit made for the 12-bolt.*

and rebuilt into a cruiser-mobile. But finally, our cruisin' mobile was ready to hit the streets, and it carried with it the legacy of eight years of doing *The American Musclecar*.

CRUISIN' BLUEPRINT

During that time we learned a lot from the car owners who appeared on our shows. The biggest lesson we learned was that cruising, racing and street-driving 40-year old cars calls for a large investment in reliability. The majority of musclecars we showcased

on our programs through the years were "drivers," which meant they needed to do all things well, not just be pretty. This is what we wanted for our car. So from the beginning our emphasis was on safety, reliability and performance, even if it sacrificed numbers-matching correctness.

One of the first decisions made was to replace that lo-po 400 with something with some oomph, so Ken Simpson of Unionville, North Carolina, was called upon to build us our cruisin' motor. While we were busy with

TV production, Ken tailored a 455 expressly for our needs (see sidebar), which hit all the bases, from looking box-stock to blazing the tires at will to idling for hours in 100-degree summer cruisin' traffic.

Chris Casperson from Performance Years' subsidiary, Pypes, spent time with us to select the perfect exhaust system, and it sounds great. The specialists at Year One, Inc. were right on with advice, product knowledge and the best resto parts to make our '67 ready for anything come cruisin' season. And



stock gauge appearance.

One more component spoils our bone-stock underhood look. You've probably already spotted the HEI distributor and the ACCEL 300+ 9mm ignition wires. Good for you. Now see if you can find the Crane Hi-6 Ignition box! Hint... it isn't under the hood.

To top off our engine, persisting with the el-stock subterfuge, Simpson selected an Edelbrock Performer RPM intake manifold, milled off Edelbrock's lovely raised script (no offense, Vic) and painted it Pontiac metallic blue, so to the casual observer it appears we're running GM's stock 4-barrel intake. Ken Simpson also tricked out a QuadraJet for us, and custom-bent some more aluminum tubing for the fuel and vacuum lines, so unless you're pretty savvy on 1967 GTO underhood appearance, you might think Mr. Mc Kellar's good old 360-horse 400 still lives there.

1 Here's the original lo-po 400, complete with Rochester 2-bbl carb and 40 lbs of York aftermarket air conditioning compressor.

2 The 1974-vintage block is .030-over, features Marty Warden-massaged 670 heads, Eagle stock length rods, BRC lightweight pistons "dished" 22cc for a 9.23:1 CR, with Speed Pro rings and custom full-floated lightweight pins, and a Comp Cams 041 "blueprint" cam (.516 lift, 308/320 duration [230/240 @ .050]), installed at 109.25 degrees, driven by a Jim Butler timing set.

3 Marty Warden's cylinder heads handle the breathing for some of the south's fastest Pontiacs, so when he agreed to do a set for us, we were delighted. Marty ported a set of date-correct 670 heads for our engine, and completed these with Ferrea Valves, and Comp Cams springs and retainers. Warden's super-slick heads were opened

up to 80cc to help achieve a reasonable street compression ratio, and also feature blocked heat riser passages. Heads were port-matched on the intake side.

4 Bottom end is pure Pontiac. As Simpson says, "A 5,500-rpm motor don't need a lotta trick stuff."

5 The new bullet, ready to load up. That's an Edelbrock Performer RPM intake manifold, painted Pontiac Blue, in case you were wondering.

6 Year One repro H.O. exhaust manifolds were ceramic coated to stay pretty for life.

They are teamed with a Pypes exhaust system designed for our car by Chris Casperson from Performance Years. For our car, Chris spec'd 2 1/2-inch pipe in and out, with Pypes' "X" crossover, super-low restriction mufflers and their own '67 GTO chrome exhaust tips.

THE AMERICAN MUSCLECAR'S CRUISIN' USA COMES TO YOUR TOWN.

We know that the best cruisin' in America happens in your city, and we want to show America how you do it! If you'll invite us, we'll come, bring our cameras and hosts (and the Cruisin' Mobile) and show the rest of the world what Cruisin' is all about according to you and your gang. We'll meet you, see your cars, partake of the happenings and generally let America know that your cruise is the best one from coast to coast.

HERE'S HOW IT WORKS: If you've got a great local cruise, or you're planning a big blowout, send us an invitation. In a hundred words or less, tell us why America needs to come to your cruise. If your invitation is so convincing, and your cruise looks like the world's greatest blast, hey, dude - we're there, and (through the miracle of television) we'll bring the rest of the Cruisin' world with us.

Along with your invitation send pictures or maybe even a Quicktime movie, a video clip, or something that shows us where you cruise, how many people show up, what kind of cars come out, and how much fun you have. Each week we'll read your invitations on the air and our hosts will decide where we'll go next. Remember - a picture is worth 10,000 words. Without pix, *Cruisin' USA* would be a radio show.

Make sure to include the location of the cruise, the dates, names of the usual suspects and anything else you think we need to know (like where to buy 104-octane leaded gas).

Send your invitations to:

THE AMERICAN MUSCLECAR'S CRUISIN' USA
c/o Restoration Productions
4515 George Rd., Suite 320
Tampa, FL 33634

even though our GTO had a great body and interior, and the prettiest set of floor pans I've ever owned, dozens of little things needed looking after before we could take this car anywhere. Through it all, though, it was a work of joy, and we felt a real sense of kinship with our

Since musclecar projects are never really finished, over the next few months we intend to continue working on our GTO. On our To-Do list is a complete front suspension rebuild with new shocks, springs and bushings, a front-disc brake conversion and a few other items.

audience through the years. It felt great, "walking the walk," and not just "talking the talk."

We rolled the car out for the first time

on a cold Saturday night in January and were joined at the Sonic Drive-In in Oldsmar, Florida, by our friend Todd Werner and a few of his musclecars for the Cruisin' GTO's coming out party. Sonic Drive-Ins are home to several car club cruises in this area, so it seemed the perfect place for our car to take its maiden voyage.

Since musclecar projects are never really finished, over the next few months we intend to continue working on our GTO. On our To-Do list is a complete front suspension rebuild with new shocks, springs and bushings, a front-disc brake conversion and a few other items. Since our "neat" add-on air conditioning was lost in the engine swap, we're looking into a Vintage Air kit for the days when the mercury hits the century mark. Also, after a few hundred miles with 3.73 gears, I'm already looking for a 700R4 tranny swap. This thing seriously needs overdrive!

So watch for our new program on *Speed*, and if you don't see it right away, drop them a line and tell them you'd like *The American Musclecar* to cruise your town. And if you see a bunch of guys and gals with TV cameras

rolling down the road in a burgundy '67 GTO, smile and wave, and show us where the action is in your town!

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

A project like this can bring out the best, and the worst, in friendships. Well, in our case we found out we had some very good friends! Here's a big American Musclecar thank you to David Hinson, Bruce Nash, Jesse Anderson and George Huntley.

These folks, all members of the Carolina Classic Pontiac Club, "came a-runnin'" when they heard this project was going down in Ken Simpson's shop. They provided, not necessarily in this order, a selection of torque converters, carburetors, and everything from brackets to pulleys to moral support to pizza and beer, along with strong hands and a wealth of "learned-it-the-hard-way" Pontiac knowledge. Without them, and the folks mentioned elsewhere in this article, The American Musclecar's Cruisin' Mobile project would have taken a lot longer, and the whole process wouldn't have been as much fun. ■

SOURCES

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