

# Lesser-Known Rubber Burners

General Motors' Forgotten Children



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVE ALLEN

Jim Wangers under hood of 1969 GTO

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**H**ot-rodders knew long before John Z. DeLorean, designer of the first "muscle car," Pontiac's 1964 GTO, that stuffing a full-size engine into a mid-sized body would make for a throaty thrill to drive. But it took Detroit and an aggressive ad campaign to create the success that General Motors has enjoyed.

When DeLorean's gull-wing sports car of the early 1980s (featured as the time machine in the *Back to the Future* movies) sunk him financially, it led to his persistent legal troubles. He is reportedly

living in Manhattan now, bankrupt after more than one divorce and dealing in wristwatches. But Jim Wangers, the brains behind the ad campaign — and the person DeLorean nicknamed "the Godfather of the GTO" — is still involved in the car industry, not to mention waiting for delivery of his brand-new GTO, in Vista.

Wangers moved out here from Detroit in 1993. At age 77, he runs a company, Automotive Marketing Consultants, Inc., that does comparison tests of braking and accelerating on new cars, so that they can use the results in their ad campaigns. He also has a warehouse, "a sort of museum," as Wangers put it, full of the vintage Pontiacs whose images he helped create.

Alan Sugarman of north Poway, president of the San Diego Pontiac Club, speaks reverently of Wangers. Owner of a black 1970 GTO, he believes its nickname, the Humblar, has "Jim Wangers written all over it." The 57-year-old engineer owns another classic Pontiac, too, a bright-red 1963 LeMans. "That's my runabout," Sugarman said. "I got it six or seven years ago from a good friend. Maybe 12 or 18 months after I bought it from him, he got a call from the original owner, and she asked to visit it. So I took it over to her house, and we went for a little drive. Her husband had given it to her on Valentine's Day in 1964." Sugarman said he was too polite to pry into why she wanted to see the car again or why she had sold it in the first place.

Sugarman admitted that his cars are his own sort of time machines. "You know, when you sit behind the wheel and you turn on the Beach Boys and fire up that engine... They say you can't go back, but some of us get awfully close."

Jim Thomson of University City, who is 10 years younger than Sugarman and 30 years younger than Wangers, owns a 1968 Firebird — red body, black convertible top. The color scheme is SDSU's, and for the past two years Thomson has obliged the Aztecs by driving around their homecoming king and queen at halftime.

This weekend, Thomson, who is the Pontiac club's activities chair, will

exhibit his car at the San Diego Auto Show and Swap Meet, when the monthly venue features "The Forgotten Children of General Motors" — not only Pontiacs, but Oldsmobiles and Buicks. Asked why they are considered "forgotten," Thomson said, "They were always the lesser-known divisions of General Motors. Chevrolet was the best known and had the biggest share of the market. The BOPs [Buicks, Oldsmobiles, and Pontiacs] were always secondary. And GM wanted to keep it that way. When DeLorean was with Pontiac, he wanted them to come out with a two-seater sports car. But Chevrolet wouldn't let them do it because they didn't want competition for the Corvette. That's when Pontiac ended up coming out with the Firebird."

The year of that first one was 1967. Just last week, Thomson bought another, newer Firebird, a metallic blue 1999 with a hard top. A few strides have been made since the days of DeLorean, Thomson has noticed — the four-wheel disc braking system, the airbags, the sound system. "My '68 is restored to the original condition, which means I've got the original AM/FM radio in it, the original single speaker up in the front, in the dashboard. The '99 comes from the factory with a 500-watt, ten-speaker system."

Both new and old have a speedometer that goes up to 160 miles

an hour, but Thomson said he doesn't push the senior model beyond 80. "One of the things you've got to remember is, even though you can make them look brand new on the outside, you're still dealing with suspension and wheel bearings and everything else that was built 35 years ago. And nobody back then really thought that people would still be driving them now. You were expected to drive them for three or four years, and then you were supposed to do a trade-in."

When the '68 was new, it cost about \$3800. "Right now, in the [mint] condition that it's in," said Thomson, "it's worth between \$20,000 and \$25,000." For the '99, he paid \$13,500. "It's only got 30,000 miles on it, but it just doesn't have the collector value."

— Jeanne Schinto

**San Diego Auto Show and Swap Meet "Forgotten Children of General Motors" Sunday, June 29, 6:00 a.m.-2:00 p.m. Qualcomm Stadium general admission (including parking), \$5; kids under 13 free. To show and sell any vehicle, \$15; to rent a 24' X 20' swap meet seller's spot, \$30. Info: 858-484-9342; www.sdpci.com or www.carsnet.com**

## LOCAL EVENTS