Leaving Little GTO In The Past

Anna Wells, Editor, IMPO

The first family car I remember from my childhood was a sea green Pontiac LeMans. It was a big boat of an automobile with all of the amenities of the 1980s — vinyl seats that took the skin off your legs in the sun, backseat windows that rolled down only halfway, and more ashtrays than cup holders. My parents have photos of my brothers and me, buckled in lap belts in the back seat, eating McDonald's in the carefree days before nutrition facts.

When we got a new car, my grandfather used the LeMans to haul things back and forth from his shop. All told, that thing ran and ran for nearly two decades, and hundreds of thousands of miles.

When I read that GM was killing off Pontiac, I was a bit surprised, considering it is GM's third highest selling brand. Digging deeper, news articles cited GM executives detailing what was actually a long-standing profit margin problem with Pontiac. But others didn't swallow the axing of Pontiac as easily as I did. A recent AP article on www.Manufacturing.net [1] alerted readers to the 20,000+ job cuts the U.S. would face with the demise of this automotive brand. It also briefly touched on the automobile's historical roots as a muscle car, and it's appearances in songs such as "Little GTO."

Beneath the article, readers had a chance to post their own commentary. There was an influx of responses, although I have to admit I was a bit stunned by the tenor of some of the debate. Much attention was paid to the merits of the Pontiac brand, based on the 'old days.' One reader described GM as "too stupid to know what models are their legacy cars." In the humorous words of one respondent: "GM did nail down the Segway deal, right? Surely the rock and rollers can dream up some lyrics about a kick-butt Segway?"

To coin a phrase even older than this automotive brand, it’s the end of an era. That said, we need to get over it. I say this with the best of intentions, specifically because nostalgia can be dangerous, especially now. This is a hard thing to swallow, considering many of us just want things to be the way they’ve always been.

From GM’s perspective, Pontiac was not a dying brand, but it was an unprofitable one. In my college writing classes we were always told to never “fall in love” with our own words. Translation? You can’t be afraid to cut or adapt in order to make something better, and that’s exactly what GM is doing. Pontiac has its place in America’s history, but it doesn’t, by default of it’s mere presence, necessarily have a place in America’s future.

Sometimes progressive steps come out of desperation, and I think there is a lesson to be learned here, especially since change is coming faster than we may be ready.

I recently read about a very progressive approach one floundering city’s municipal government was taking to save it. The infamous city of Flint, Michigan — practically the contradiction of progressive — is discussing the possibilities of streamlining the city itself. In an effort to help save the strapped utilities, mail, and waste management services on this city’s empty streets, municipal leaders are discussing the prospect of centralizing residents towards the heart of the city—essentially applying lean principles to its layout. This would mean scrapping entire neighborhoods, although ones that have been dwindling down to fewer and fewer residents as the population of this one-time industrial giant decreases.

Whether or not you agree with this plan for Flint — or this plan for GM — one thing is for certain: The past is a great historical document highlighting our successes and mistakes, but it can’t be held onto simply because we miss the feel of a sun-soaked vinyl seat. Progressive manufacturers, cities, brands, and people will be at the forefront of this great change. Will you be able to cut ties when the time is right and move forward? My family’s Pontiac LeMans ended up meeting its demise in a demolition derby in the mid-1990s, and I’d say it had a good run. But it was time for a change.

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Comments:

Dear Ms Wells,

I enjoyed your editorial in the May IMPO.

The US automotive market after WW II was like an isolated island in the Pacific Ocean. With many customers needing new cars and almost no foreign competition, Detroit could build junk and sell as much as it could make.

Cars got huge, flashy, and ugly; look what happened to Cadillac tail fins between 1948 and 1959. Small cars such as the Nash Rambler, Ford Falcon and Plymouth Valiant and intermediates like the Ford Fairlane and Chevrolet Chevelle were available, but these grew in size also.

Young male homo sapiens were attracted to smaller cars stuffed with big V-8s; they were fast and attracted (hopefully) the female of the species.

Then came 1973 and there wasn't enough food (gasoline) for the metallic dinosaurs and what was available became expensive. Small German and Japanese cars were bought because the got better gas mileage than most US makes.

Unfortunately, for Detroit, quality is a religion (and Deming one of the major prophets) to Japanese car makers and a lot of people turned away from the Detroit product in order to buy a more reliable vehicle.

Many US car buyers want large cars; when gas got cheaper sales of big cars climbed and Detroit was happy because a big car was more profitable than a small one. Unfortunately this removed the incentive for US car makers to produce a quality small car. Four-dollar-a-gallon gas put Detroit on the ropes.

The environment changed and Detroit failed to change with it and that's why it failed. I don't think Japanese and German automotive engineers are more intelligent than US engineers; but the companies' executives seem to be.

In the meantime, guys like me (born circa 1945) will fondly remember

"Take it out to Pomona and let 'em know
That I'm the coolest thing around
Little buddy, gonna shut you down
When I turn it on, wind it up, blow it out GTO"

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