

ARIZONA DRIVER

THE ENTHUSIAST'S GUIDE TO LIFE BEHIND THE WHEEL

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Black Grilled Beauty

By Joe Sage - Photos by Randall Bohl

“We found the car in Georgia,” says Beverly Brower. She and husband Kefton were on vacation, and this 1935 Pontiac two-door sedan was offered by sale—in running, driving condition—by a high school principal in the area. “The first time we saw it, I just fell in love with it,” she says.

Its paint was two-tone blue, with dark fenders and a light blue roof, clean chrome and a tweed interior.

FOR WANT OF A NAIL...

Bev and Kef live in Chandler now, but when they bought the car, 16 years ago, they still lived in Columbus, Ohio. They would put three, four, five thousand miles a year on the old Pontiac, much of it driving between car shows. While driving back from the Street Nationals in 1999, they stopped on a rain-slicked highway and the car behind them did not, crushing the driver's-side fender.

The good news is that a friend was able to repaint the whole car for the insurance money, and this led to the gorgeous color scheme we see today—satin Nissan Charcoal and Chrysler Bright Platinum with a very subtle green base to it. “The end result is better,” says Kefton, “but you’d never want to go through that again.”

But first, they had needed a replacement fender. “It’s so funny,” says Kef. “We’d been coming to Arizona for years, but the year before the accident, I had actually scouted old Wiseman’s junkyard in Casa Grande. They had one of these cars, but by phone had said, ‘oh everything on it is junk; there’s really nothing salvageable.’” It seemed a routine dead end to a nonspecific mission.

“Then we had the accident,” Kef continues, and while in Arizona on another visit, he “called him again and he said ‘yeah, the car’s still sitting there, it has the fenders on it, but they’re junk.’ I thought, well, I can’t find anything; maybe I can fix that.” He drove down, walked out back, came at it from the passenger side, “and that fender was just like someone had taken a ball peen hammer to it—it was beaten to a pulp!” On the driver’s side, though, the fender was good other than a little tear in the back from being lifted and moved. Kef took the fender home to Ohio. “That car sat in that junkyard here for 30 years,” Kef muses, “waiting for me!”

“These cars are very rare,” he reminds us. “Any time I find extra parts, I buy them.” The Browsers moved to the Valley in 2001. And their home in Chandler now has an extra pair of fenders up in the attic, in case any of this ever happens again.



IT'S WHAT'S UP FRONT THAT COUNTS

While we admired the Pontiac, Kef Brower remarked that “usually with this car we don’t get too many who photograph the whole car. But every time we’re here, we get a dozen or so who take pictures of the hood ornament.” It goes well with the Pontiac emblems on the grille and the sides of the engine compartment, with the overall paint job and with the grille. That grille, a beautiful black, looks as though it could be anodized.

“It’s the original grille,” says Kef, “but they would have been chrome. That’s one thing I didn’t do stock. When we bought the car, it was two-tone blue, and the grilles were done the same way. I stripped them and looked at them. They were rusted pretty good. It would be \$1600 just to chrome that—and this was 15 years ago. We didn’t mind it the way it was, so we redid it the same way, painted.” But black. Beautiful. And we figure it’s one reason people go straight to the hood ornament.

Kef says “even with these bumpers, friends we follow to shows will say, man, I had to keep turning the mirror,” due to the chrome. As for the grille, “if it were chromed, we wouldn’t be able to see at all,” says Bev.

On balance, the ‘35 Pontiac is “completely stock on the outside,” says Kef, “just the way it would have come from the factory. And then it has a modern drivetrain, so you can drive it.”

MECHANICS OF A MODERN ‘35 PONTIAC

The Browsers bought their ‘35 Pontiac sedan in 1995 and put its new motor in the next year—a 350 Chevy crate motor. The car had had a Corvette motor when they bought it, but it “wouldn’t run on pump gas; we just had a lot of trouble with it,” says Kef. So he just went to the Chevrolet dealership and bought that hot rod staple, a crate motor. The car has Mustang II front suspension, an 8-inch Ford rear end and 4-wheel disc brakes.

The transmission is also 350 Chevy. “I kind of went old school, says Kef. “If you look inside this car, the floor is almost perfectly flat. It sits up on the frame rails, so that gives you a nice flat floor. But the 700Rs and R4s or 4L60s now are a much bigger transmission, and you’d have to put a hump in the floor—which can be done, but I like that flat floor. It’s just more comfortable.”

That Mustang II steering is manual rack-and-pinion instead of power. “Now they’ve got it where it doesn’t matter. You can put any pump on that you want,” says Kef, but “back when this was built, they had trouble with the Chevy motor and the Ford rack. The power steering pump made too much pressure and had a real light feel.” He says you miss power steering “when you’re backing into a parking spot, but anywhere from a 10-mile-an-hour roll on, you’re good.”

It’s a great road car. The rear end has 2.79 gears, “so



it drives real nice down the highway. We drove it from Ohio out here. We drive it all the time.” They will take it on a buzz up the highway, or just out to eat.

“In 16 years, it’s got about 30,000 miles on it. When we were in Ohio we drove it more. Here because the shows are so far apart, and in the summertime it’s so hot, we just don’t go to as many, especially far away. Hopefully when we’re retired we’ll drive it more, but we’ve been putting about 1000 miles a year on it here.”

AT THE CONTROLS

The instrument panel includes what would have been an original radio face, though it’s not a working radio; an aftermarket radio is installed in the glovebox. A tach is added that matches the other gauges. The dash pods—instruments and glovebox—are originals, but were sent to Texas to be refinished in exotic Brazilian woods, then the holes recut for modern gauges. Kef has set aside the original dash pod for the instrument side—a single speedometer with water, temp and volts around that. This was designed to look like that.

Factory locations for the headlight switch, ignition switch, throttle and choke have been adapted to air conditioning controls and such. “I tried not to get rid of anything,” Kefton says. “The Pontiac plate you see on the glovebox was the original radio block-off plate, so I just moved it over. And when I found that radio, I just liked it. It lights up with the lights and it just looks cool.”

Atop the dash is a traffic light finder, a little glass lens. The car does not have a very tall windshield, and you sit very upright, so you can’t always see overhead traffic lights. “Here in Arizona, we have traffic lights on the side, so you can see them, but in Ohio they were all up high, so you needed this. Then without straining your neck, you could just sit back in your seat, look in that lens and see the traffic light when it changed.” This one is a reproduction. It was not an option specifically for this car, but in the ‘30 and ‘40s they were widely used because a lot of cars had sun visors along the top of



KEEP RIGHT >>



partly-completed gas tank replacement wrapped up.

"It had a little surface rust here and there," he continues, "but it had all the chrome, the interior was intact, it felt good, it had all the mohair, all the dash, the motor. It was complete, original, had never been messed with and was straight as an arrow. You could probably even buff up the black paint, other than the rusty spots, and for an Ohio car that was rare.

"The floorpans were solid. These cars have wood in the frame, and the one I own here has 90 percent of its original wood. But that one had 100 percent of it and it was all in excellent shape.

"But we were moving out here."

With a possible purchase in mind, he looked into having the second Pontiac shipped, which would cost \$1500. Then the shippers threw him a curve, asking, "well, it's driveable, right?" Well, yes, it is. Why?

"So if we just get it to, say, Lincoln, Nebraska and we don't have a truck coming this way, we can just drive it down to Arizona?"

This plan was not shaping up well. "No, you can't drive my car," Kef told them. "If it's going to be driven, I'll drive it. Why would I pay someone \$1500 to ship my car, and they might drive it partway?"

So they went with the path of least resistance and just passed on the whole opportunity.

A year later, after the Browers had settled in Arizona, one of Kef's friends in Ohio saw a friend of the owner of that second Pontiac. He thought it would be a cool surprise to buy that car, build it up, call Kef and say, "Hey, I've got a '35 Pontiac, too!" So the friend of a friend—a wheeler-dealer who figured he could get a better price than \$3500—checked on the car and reported back.

"You won't believe it," he said. "I went back and asked him if he'd come down on the price. The guy had sold it for six hundred dollars! No-one wanted the car. I don't think he ever advertised it. He was just going word-of-mouth, a guy came in and offered six hundred dollars and drove it away."

Needless to say, Kef would have bought it for that, with headroom for proper shipping to Arizona. "Even if I never did anything with the car," he says, "the parts that it had that this one didn't...." Of course we figure it would be so compelling, he would have ended up looking for a third one, for parts for both of these. So it goes.

their windshields.

THE ONE THAT GOT AWAY

Before the Browers moved to Arizona, they had found another very original 1935 Pontiac two-door sedan in Ohio. Someone had seen their existing car and pitched them a mate, so they took a look. It was "bone stock," says Kef. The car had been purchased in an estate sale, and the owner had bought it new.

Beverly took photos of the car and its parts, in great detail, which Kefton keeps in his garage. He used these for years to identify any missing parts, in hopes that he could find them, and he has over the years.

We wondered why he didn't buy that car, suggesting that it sounds irresistible. "It was!" said Kef. "But we were moving out here, and that's a story in itself.

"He wanted \$3500 for it, and that didn't seem bad. I didn't want an original car, but with this car, when you hit the starter button, you couldn't even hear that 6-cylinder run, it ran so smooth." It only needed to have a

PONTIAC LOYALISTS

As far as the Pontiac brand exiting the marketplace, Kef shrugs and says, "yeah, you hate to see that, but it doesn't really make any difference for this. I didn't really like the newer ones. I like the old Pontiacs." He has also had '64, '68 and '71 GTOs.

He says "you will not find another '35 Pontiac two-door in this whole state. I guarantee it. There is not one. In the whole country, there might be a couple of dozen or so." This 1935 Pontiac Sedan has memories and is not likely to leave the family any time soon. When Bev's mom was alive, she would accompany them to the shows, bragging that "my son-in-law built this" and pointing out its details. And their first dog would ride to shows, sitting up people-style, a real crowd-pleaser.

"I buy other cars and bring them home," says Kefton Brower. But each time, Beverly "says, 'nope, I want to keep the Pontiac.' And that's what we've done." ■

