

Super Duty Emotions

The auction crowd included a “who’s who” in the Pontiac world, and they drove Randy Williams’s cars onto the stage together, with uncorked headers



Even standing still, Super Duty Pontiacs smoke the tires

In 1956, Pontiac was the dog of General Motors, and very near extinction. Public perception was that Pontiacs were solely for little old ladies or salesmen; they had no excitement, no flash—and no young buyers.

Even the new V8 introduced in 1955 didn't help. Pontiacs were as good as anything rolling out of Detroit, but without a strong identity and strong sales, you can't keep a division running.

Luckily, GM appointed a new General Manager to the Pontiac division in July, 1956, Semon “Bunkie” Knudsen. Bunkie had a trick up his sleeve for Pontiac, and it involved racing.

“P” ALSO FOR PERFORMANCE

Over the next few years, under Knudsen's leadership, Pontiac set out to be the performance division of General Motors. In 1960, Pontiac entered into what is now called the “Super Duty Era,” with their new Super Duty engine equipment package.

Available over the counter, the package consisted of a specially engineered 389-ci engine with forged connecting rods, forged crank, special cylinder heads, cast exhaust “headers,” and a Tri-Power set up. With an estimated 400 hp, Pontiac now had performance in spades. Super Duty-equipped cars went on to win in nearly every form of racing, from NASCAR to hill climbs.

By 1961, you could order a 389 Super Duty-equipped car from the factory, and by 1962 the SD engines grew to 421 cubic inches. Pontiac had the best engineers in the business, and the Super Duty cars kept getting better every year. Lightweight parts were developed, such as aluminum front ends, cast aluminum headers, and more.

“WIN ON SUNDAY” WORKED

Horsepower soared, with experts pegging the factory-rated 405-hp engines at 500 hp in reality. Along with the horsepower came racing success, and with the success came sales. Thanks to the Super Duty program, Pontiac was no longer the underdog.

In January of 1963, the music stopped when GM issued a company wide ban on any type of racing involvement for all divisions. The Super Duty era that was instrumental in saving Pontiac was forced to a close.

WILLIAMS IN RACE OF HIS OWN

One Pontiac enthusiast who truly loved the Super Duty cars was Randy Williams, a master machinist and mechanical engineer from Columbia City, Indiana. Randy's first car was a '66 GTO, and while looking for more power, Randy experimented with some old Super Duty parts.

Impressed by how well they worked, he started looking for original Super Duty cars. By the late 1970s, Williams had rescued the “Swiss Cheese” Packer Pontiac Super Duty drag car, and started what became the finest Super Duty collection of cars and parts ever assembled.

With some of the most important Super Duty cars ever built, and vast resources of new old stock parts, Williams was a Pontiac guy to the core. Diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor in 1999, Williams decided that it was important to him to restore his cars and preserve the Super Duty legacy.



With the help of renowned Pontiac restorer Scott Tiemann, Williams completed the restorations of five significant Super Duty cars before he passed away in 2004. Tiemann recalled that Williams's goal was to restore his cars to be benchmark examples, and wanted the most historically accurate, most perfect examples extant.

Randy Williams's wife Jean consigned the Super Duty collection to the Mecum High Performance Auction on October 7, 2006. It was an auction event like none I have seen before, and I doubt we will see the likes of it again.

The collection consisted of Williams's 1961 Ventura Super Duty "Bubbletop" coupe, a 1962 Catalina 421 Super Duty Factory Lightweight, a 1963 Catalina 421 Super Duty Lightweight that was the last SD car built before the GM racing ban, the 1963 "Swiss Cheese" Packer Pontiac drag car, and the 1963 Super Duty Tempest "Union Park Wagon" drag car.

Offered as a complete set, the Williams Super Duty cars failed to sell at \$1,550,000. Mecum then split the set to auction the cars individually, eventually reaching a total amount of \$1,880,550 with the 5% buyer's fee.

IT'S NOT ABOUT MONEY

The real story here is not necessarily the cars, nor is it the final bids achieved. What impressed me about this sale was the emotion, the dedication, and the passion shown by everybody in the room. Randy Williams put his last years into these cars for a reason; he wanted the history to live on.

The crowd that showed up for this sale included a "who's who" of the Pontiac world. Every one of the cars was driven on to the stage at once, with uncorked headers and special drivers in each car, including Arnie "The Farmer" Beswick, Jim Mattison of Pontiac Historical Services, Scott Tiemann, and Randy Williams's friends and family.

When the engines were shut down, the house erupted into a standing ovation. Dana Mecum, voice cracking with emotion, grabbed the microphone and announced that these were the finest cars he has ever offered at auction.

Standing on the stage, I watched tears rolling down the faces of people who may not have had any idea what a Super Duty car was, but could certainly feel the emotion that went into building this collection.

The entire Williams family was on stage, obviously struggling with the idea of selling the cars. Scott Tiemann, who was one of Williams's best friends and the man who had likely spent 7,000 hours of his own life restoring the cars, stood there watching as his work and Williams's vision was sold.

MORE THAN JUST METAL

These were cars that weren't restored for Williams's benefit; they were restored for future generations of Pontiac enthusiasts. Still, one couldn't help but feel saddened knowing this was not what Randy Williams envisioned would happen to his cars after they were restored.

In the end, this sale spoke to me of how our hobby is more than just nuts and bolts. Cars don't find owners. They don't fit new panels or rebuild their own engines; they don't scan classified ads looking for that last elusive part to complete their restoration.

The cars get the glory but it is the owners, the restorers, the people with enough vision and dedication to preserve automotive history, who really deserve recognition. Watching Randy Williams's dream hammered sold, I cheered and clapped with everybody else in the room.

And while carefully looking around to make sure nobody saw me shedding a tear as the cars rolled off the block, I caught a glimpse of Dana Mecum huddling with the Williams family. Not a dry eye in the group. And that, folks, is another chapter in Pontiac history being made. ♦

COLIN COMER is founder and president of Colin's Classic Automobiles and an avid collector and enthusiast.



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