Written by Double Dragon Friday, 08 August 2014 10:50 - Last Updated Wednesday, 20 August 2014 20:55

1959 PONTIAC Catalina- Gary Wichhart

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Cars remain while we move through changes or momentous events. Life changes associated with a particular car imbues that car with more meaning than mere 'transportation'. This 1959 Pontiac Catalina has been tainted by tragedy, but for Gary Wichhart it also resonates back to earlier happy times.



Gary has fond memories of double dating with the original owner of the Pontiac Catalina and was classmates with the son of the owner of the dealership where it was sold. The history of this car is intertwined with Gary's life.

In November, 1958 Gary was a high school student living on a farm in Keosauqua, Iowa near the big bend in the Des Moines River. Gary's neighbor Calvin Huff lived on a farm 4 miles away where his family raised sheep and corn beans. Calvin had saved his money. Calvin walked into Anderson

Implement Company which was a Pontiac and John Deere franchise in Keosauqua, Iowa to buy a brand new car. See a story on Anderson's filed under IOWA in the DEALERSHIP section of this website.

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Gary and Calvin both knew Ron Anderson from school. Ron's dad owned Anderson's Pontiac which must have made the buying experience a little easier for Calvin. Within minutes of the purchase the big news in town was out about Calvin's hot new Catalina.

Unknown to anyone at the time, the Catalina was also pretty rare. Gary states that only 12 'three on the tree' 2 door hard top Catalina's were built that year and to the best of his knowledge this is the only known surviving example. Calvin had a lot of power to shift through the awkward column mounted shifter. 1959 was the first year that Pontiac really turned their image around.

Division head Bunkie Knudsen had been pushing performance for a few years and scored a hit with the fuel injected Bonneville in 1957 but 1959 was the first year Pontiac sales really took off. In 1959 the Catalina was its own separate model. The name was first used by Pontiac to denote a hardtop version of the Chieftain in 1950. When the Bonneville specialty car started to gather momentum Pontiac reshuffled the names of their lineup. Bonneville was made the top model, and the former top dog Star Chief was demoted to second rank. Entry level Chieftain was replaced by the name Catalina.

The use of the name Catalina for an entire model was done to deliberately erase the old 'Chief' marketing which equated with old grannies and dependable cars. 1959 was the first year for 'Wide Track' and the split front grille. The big Pontiac 389 4 barrel was a significant step up from the biggest Chevy 348 engine.

Calvin's 389 never leaked oil, gave no problems at all and even delivered 16 MPG on the highway.



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Ar first glance the Catalina seems so huge that it's seemingly immovable bulk would overwhelm the 389. The Catalina rides on a 122 inch long wheelbase and stretches 213.7 inches long. Despite the size of this car, the shipping weight was only 3,900 pounds. The exceptionally light option load on Calvin's Cat enabled the 389 to move out pretty quickly.

The VIN 159Kxxxx decodes:
1= Catalina
59= 1959 model year
K= Kansas City, Kansas final assembly plant.
The final digits of the VIN are not shown here to protect owner privacy. The data plate fills in some more details:
Style 59- 2137= 1959 model year 2 door hardtop
Paint LC= L is Roman Red and C is Cameo Ivory
The Catalina is not an easy car to drive at low speeds. It lacks power steering or brakes. Precise shifts with a column mounted manual 3 speed are not achieved without care. The

Catalina wasn't available with a floor shifted 3 or 4 speed until the 1960 model year so many owners learned to do their best with the tricky column shifter. At high speeds manual steering

on Calvin's car is a welcome factor in controlling the car easily without steering wander.

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The only option on Calvin's new Catalina was a radio. However some of the basic amenities present in this car were 'extras' and only available as options on many basic cars offered by the competition at this time period. The Catalina glovebox door has 2 slots which serve as cup holders when the door is opened and allowed to lay flat. 30 years before cupholders became a big deal in SUVs Pontiac had already done it and named it the 'snackbar'. The heater and defroster was standard in this car but often an option in others. The standard full carpeting was also an option in lesser cars of this era as were the Catalina's lights in the glove box and trunk.



The Wonderbar radio is an AM unit with tubes that take a few minutes to warm up before you get full sound. Once warm, the radio has enhanced sound via a rear speaker which was as close to stereo as you could get back in those days. One speaker was located in the front dash and the second one in the rear creating a 'sort of' stereo effect, but the actual set up was 'mono'. What you get is a doubling up of the same signals which does create a fuller sound than what you could expect from a single speaker.



The rear speaker is located in the middle of the rear package tray above the two tone rear seat. The radio played its AM soundtrack to the expected pattern of cruising and of course, girls. Calvin and Gary double dated in the Catalina taking the girls to local burger joints in Keosauqua . Gary's date from those idyllic days eventually lost patience with him when he wasn't ready to

get married to her at an age that he felt was too young.



The front nose of the Catalina features the Pontiac signature design cue: the split grill. The grill endured decades of styling changes as a Pontiac trademark. 1959 was in many ways a big turning point for Pontiac. Aside from being the first year for the split grill it was also the first year of 'Wide Track'. When the wheels were moved out to the edges of the car in a styling exercise it was discovered that the handling was vastly improved. Pontiac launched a successful ad campaign built around the unique stance of the cars.



Viewed up close the ornate styling appears massive but standing back from the car the well integrated lines create a sleek, wide low looking car. The full wheel covers on this car were not part of the factory equipment. The basic Catalina came with 'poverty caps'. The full wheel covers were part of the 'Decor Group' which also provided for metal trim on the pedals and a deluxe steering wheel.

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