

The Way it Was

by Arnie Schweer

In 1965, I lived on a farm near Monee, Illinois. There were two homes on the property. I lived in one, while my cousin Irv lived in the other. Irv was nine years older than me and had raced a stock car about fifteen years earlier. Racing was in his blood.

At the time, I owned a 1956 Pontiac—red and white, a two-door hardtop. It was a great car, but my daughter was becoming school-aged, and since there were no school buses where we lived, we needed another car.

Back then, the Sunday Chicago Tribune was where you looked for cars. I was hoping to find a good deal—preferably another Pontiac—when these words jumped off the page:

"Bank Repo. 1964 Pontiac GTO. Call anytime."

So that Sunday afternoon, I called the number. A man answered and explained that he was selling the car for the bank.

"Well," he said, "it's a two-door hardtop with an automatic, eleven thousand miles on it. A police officer owned it, but he's getting a divorce and couldn't afford the payments, so we repossessed it. You can have it for \$1,800. If you've got good credit, we can finance it with \$350 down."

"What color is it?" I asked.

"Well... it's kind of a peacock."

I wouldn't have cared if it was blue with orange polka dots. "I'll take it."

The next day, the car was mine, with payments of \$74.59 a month. I drove it home, and my cousin Irv watched from his house as I pulled into the driveway.

Before long, he asked if I thought the GTO was fast with that automatic transmission, and whether I thought it could beat his 1964 Coupe DeVille convertible.

Well... duh.

We raced on Route 54, the closest paved road. Of course, the GTO just walked away from that heavy Cadillac. It was shameful.

Irv's dad was loaded—he owned a steel processing plant, and we both worked there. Irv could pretty much get whatever he wanted, and soon he showed up with a big old Lincoln.

"It's got the biggest motor you can buy—500 cubes—and it's going to whip that Pontiac's butt!"

Okay. Let's run 'em.

Once again, the GTO walked away from the Lincoln, and I wasn't even using full throttle. I was almost embarrassed for my cousin—but he wanted to race.

The Lincoln soon went into the dealer's shop for maintenance, and Irv took a company car while it was down. He picked out a brand-new 1965 Plymouth Fury. Now he was sure he'd beat that racer.

Back to Route 54 we went. Once again, the GTO nearly blew the Plymouth off the road.

"Let's try it on the gravel road," Irv said. "I can whip that thing on gravel."

Okay. Two out of three.

We lined up on the gravel road that ran past our houses. On the count of three, we were off—rocks flying fifty feet into the air. I didn't want the Plymouth cracking my windshield or chipping the paint, so I once again just walked away from him. Rocks flew everywhere from my rear wheels.

Two out of three. Both races, the GTO won handily.

In the last fifty feet, my cousin skidded into the ditch. Game over.

But wait—who's that driving up in a dark blue Plymouth? It was Irv's mother, my Aunt Cecelia, and she was furious. She let us both have it for being so childish and racing like we did. Who did we think we were?

I stood there with my head down while she scolded us. Eventually, she softened a bit, and I even caught a hint of a smile as she drove away to call a tow truck to pull the company Plymouth out of the ditch.

By then, Irv's Plymouth was steaming like a Stanley Steamer. The rocks kicked up from the GTO's rear wheels had punched plenty of holes in the radiator.

That ended our racing.

From then on, the GTO got the respect it deserved.

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