

An Inside Look at the Inside Look



By Don Keefe
Photos courtesy of GM Media Archive

Over the years, Pontiac showed its production offerings in innovative ways that not only highlighted their technological offerings, but also added a dramatic splash to their car show displays. As far back as the 1930s, the Division was using

cutaway models to show off new features and advancements to showgoers and they never failed to please.

Generally speaking, workers at GM would take a pilot line or early production car for the conversion. These cars had to be as close to

final production specifications as possible, yet be built early enough to have them ready in time for the new-car show season.

One of the more popular styles for cutaway cars was to take a moderately optioned sedan and cut it in such a way that it would

A Pictorial History of Pontiac's Cutaway Display Cars



Preceding page and above: Perhaps the most dazzling and elaborate cutaway car Pontiac ever built was "The Clam," a 1964 Grand Prix that was cut horizontally just below the beltline. When closed, the GP appeared like any other production version, but as the top half opened up, the bottom half tilted up on the passenger side, giving showgoers an optimal viewing angle for the engine, interior, and cavernous trunk. Hydraulic lifts inside and under the car provided lifting action as well as the dramatic "clam" effect.

appear unaltered on three sides, but would be completely cutaway to expose all major components from the passenger side. This would allow viewers to put into perspective exactly what features were being showcased. In most in-

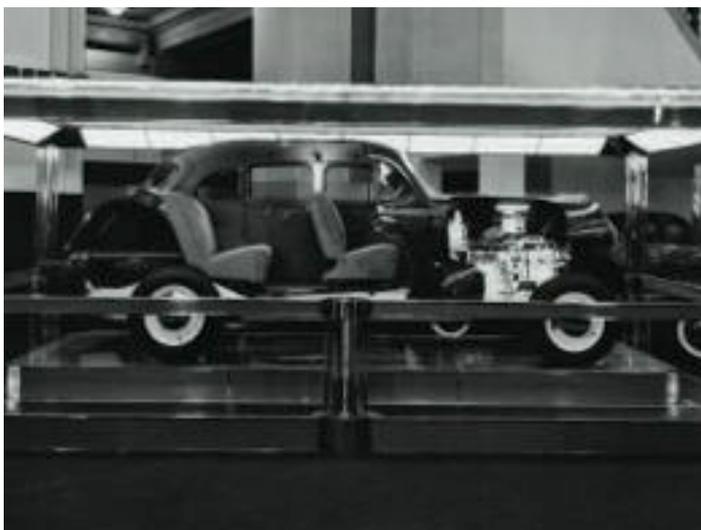
stances, major mechanical components were sectioned out themselves, giving further detail to observers. Often, these mechanical components were painted in bright, non-stock colors or even chromed to draw further atten-

tion.

It was a very involved process getting these display cars ready for show duty. If the engine and transmission were to be sectioned out, it was necessary to remove and disassemble them, section the



In these rarely seen photos from GM Media Archive, we see that the color shots depict a Nocturne Blue Grand Prix with a dark blue interior. However the black and white shots clearly show a lighter-colored car with a parchment interior. Were two vehicles built? While no surviving records say for sure, it is certainly possible that there was more than one car built, especially with multiple show openings scheduled close together.



This 1937 Pontiac sedan was one of the stars of the GM Industrialist Luncheons, held at the Waldorf Astoria in New York. GM designed these luncheons to draw the focus of New York's financial community toward the Corporation. They were later developed into the highly successful Motorama shows of the 1950s and 1960s. This particular '37 sedan was cut in the "traditional" fashion, where three sides appeared unaltered, but the passenger side was scooped away. Special paint and lighting drew attention to the engine compartment.



A second 1937 cutaway design was even more severely altered than the first car. This version gave the impression of having been bisected lengthwise with a bandsaw- hopefully those young ladies were not in the car when it happened! Inner details of the engine were revealed and the passenger compartment was fully exposed. Since there were wheels only on the driver's side, the vehicle was supported on the cut line by heavy sections of steel piping that was fastened to a support structure.

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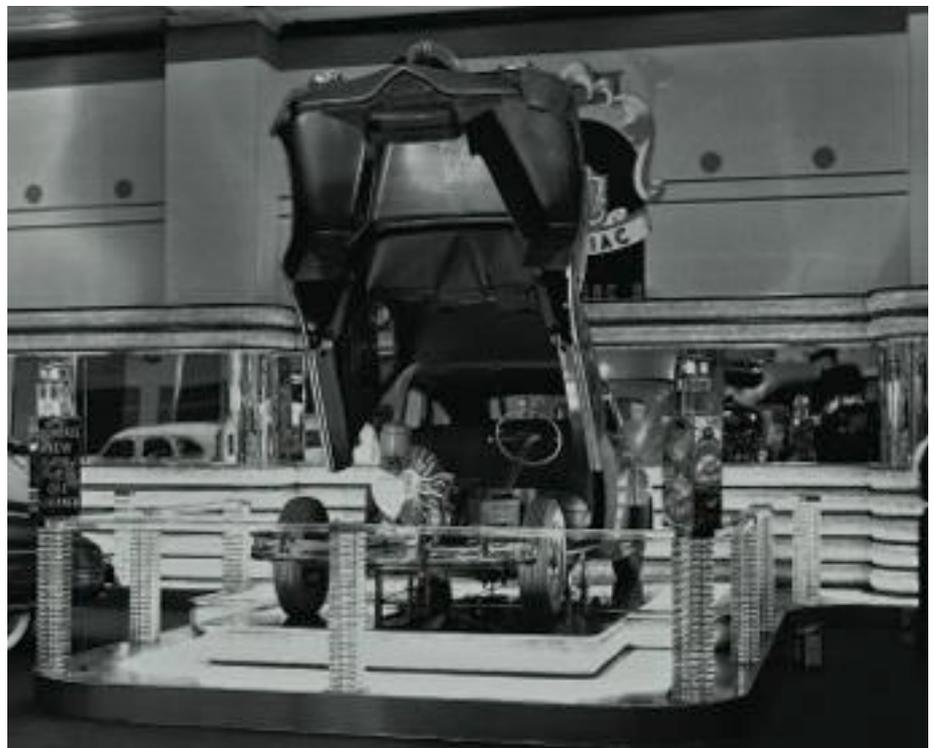
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castings out using an industrial bandsaw, machining off any rough or jagged surfaces. They would then be plated and/or painted before being reassembled and reinstalled in the completed car.

The car itself would be treated in a similar manner, but the finishing would be even more elaborate. All cut surfaces, such as sheetmetal, frame members and even glass and would be smoothed out or "hemmed" to avoid cutting anyone's skin. Upholstery would also need to be finished at the ends to prevent unraveling and the cushion foam would need to be cut very evenly to achieve a proper appearance.

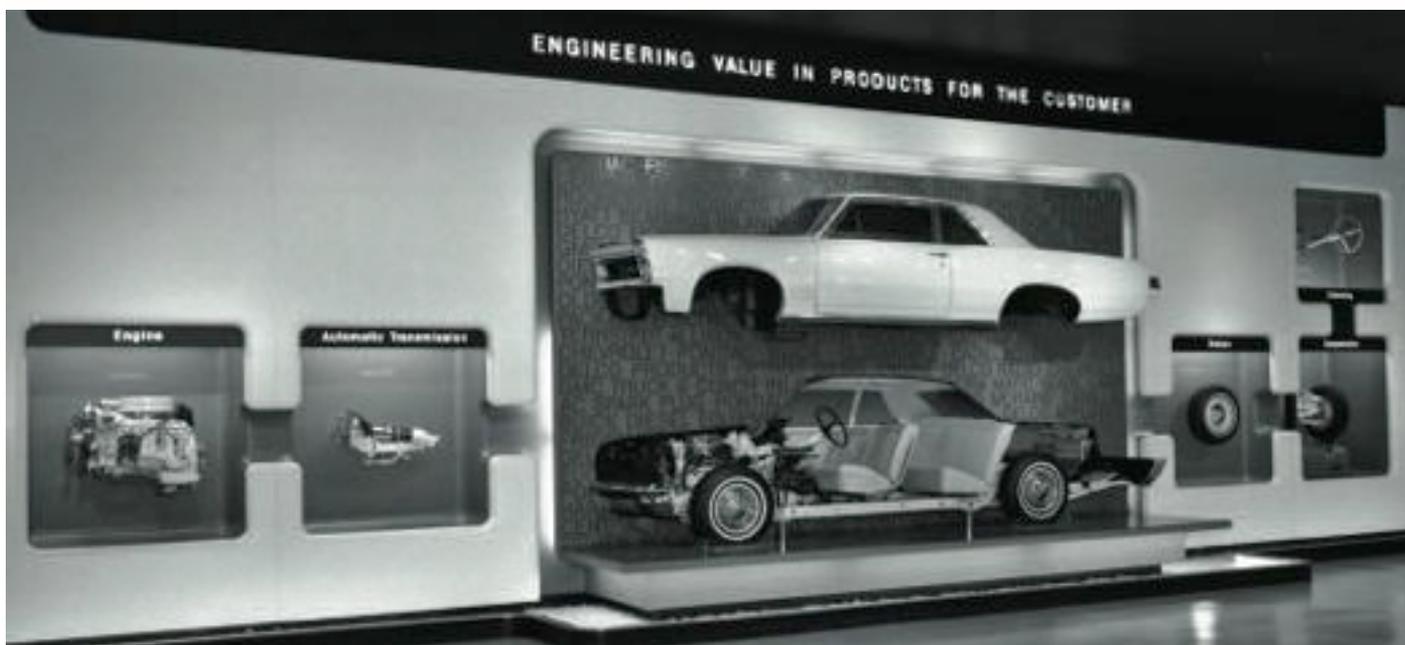
In some cases, even the wheels and tires would be cut to complete the cutaway effect. In these instances, two-thirds of the wheel's



For the 1941 show season, a Pontiac sedan was cut so that the outer body ahead of the rear doors flipped up to reveal the engine and the front half of the passenger compartment, both of which were intact. Allegedly, this design was prompted by an ad campaign that was promoting the optional straight-eight as a modestly-priced upgrade over the standard six.



In addition to the regular production cars and the beautifully-styled 1953 Parisienne Dream Car that graced the 1953 GM Motorama, Pontiac also showed a Chieftain sedan that was cut in the traditional "scooped out" passenger side fashion.



For the 1965 show season, Pontiac displayed a 1965 Tempest that looked very much like a giant model kit. With the phrase "Engineering Value in Products for the Customer," spelled out in large block letters, the display's mission was clearly defined. The left half of the body was cut apart from the rest of the car and suspended above it, fastened to a large wall. The rest of the car was set into the wall, exposing the drivetrain, chassis and interior. The silhouette of the outer body was cut into the wall, giving an "X-Ray" effect. On either side of the Tempest were major components, such as the six-cylinder engine and 2-speed automatic transmission (dressed up with chromed and polished components) on one side and a mounted tire and steering column with wheel on the other.

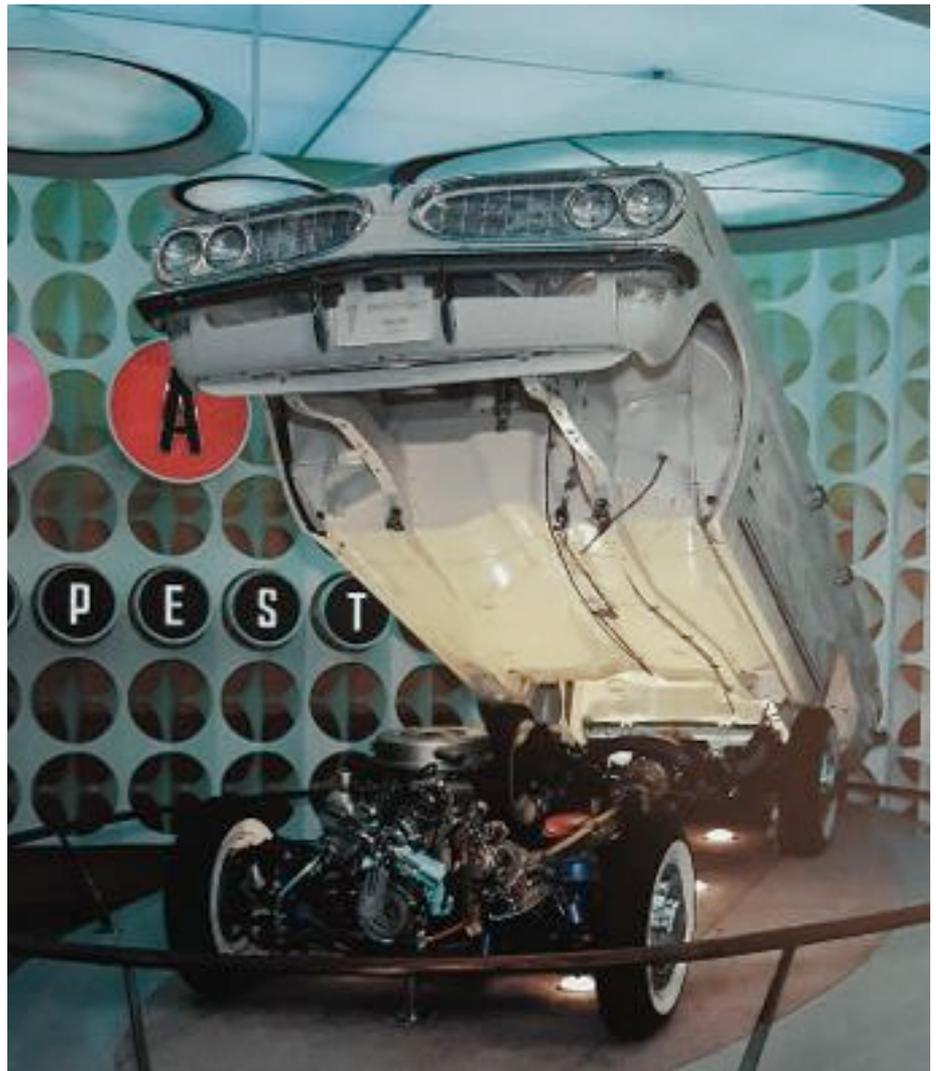
outer circumference would be removed, but the center hub area would be left intact. The wheel over would be similarly cut, and the remaining section of tire would be filled with a solid substance such as cement. This would allow the wheel to support the car, but of course, it would not be able to roll. All of this preparation made these unique display cars extremely expensive to complete.

Other types of display cutaway cars were also designed. Some were fairly conservative, such as the bare chassis shown during the 1940 season, while others, like the 1961 "Alligator Jaw" Tempest and the 1964 Grand Prix "Clam," were very dramatic, as the accompanying photos show. GM knew, even then, that the car-show business was as much show business as anything coming out of Hollywood and drama is wherever you find it. These cars were built to capitalize on that notion.

While these partially dissected Pontiacs drew many admiring glances from showgoers, their ultimate fate was one highlighted by very quick disposal. While it is unfortunate, the reasons are many.

First off, they are very difficult to move and store, making them difficult to deal with in a warehousing situation. More importantly, they represent an exposure to legal liability associated with injury as a result of a cut up car collapsing or pieces coming off.

Presented here are several interesting cutaway vehicles that Pontiac showed over the years. While this is not a comprehensive history



For the final GM Motorama, Pontiac displayed the 1961 "Alligator Jaw" Tempest sedan. This unusual display car was built to show off the new Pontiac Y-body's revolutionary drivetrain, which included a slant-four engine, curved driveshaft and rear-mounted transaxle.

Since the unitized body was dropped over the free-standing drivetrain and suspension during assembly, it could be built on the same assembly line as a full-sized Pontiac. This drop-on assembly procedure allowed for the body and drivetrain to be easily separated for display purposes. In this case, the body was hinged at the rear to tilt up like today's funny-cars.

The actual Tempest used for this display was serial number one. The underside was painted white to match the stock exterior and the engine was brightened up with some non-stock chrome and paint. Incidentally, the serial number two Tempest, an unaltered green sedan, was also displayed at the 1961 Motorama and is now a part of the GM Heritage Collection.

(several sets of photos from the 1950s and '60s are missing from GM's Archives), this will nonetheless provide a good idea of how things were done then and how they are done now. Although the

cars have changed, the cutaway concept remained pretty much the same, along with clever approaches to the sectioning and high quality of finish- after all they were show cars!

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