

## 1967 to 1969 THE FIRST GENERATION CAMARO

Some 29 months after the wildly successful launch of the 1964 ½ Mustang, Chevrolet Motor Division took to the streets with the next level of pure pony car. Earlier, Chevrolet had been sitting in the wings while the 1964 ½ Mustang exploded onto the youth marketplace selling over ½ million cars in the first year. Chevrolet was now determined to get a piece of the pony car pie. Some of the top brass at GM believed that the newly designed 1965 Corvair would compete in the sales fight against the Mustang. However the Corvair, by design, didn't lend itself to the increased performance levels necessary for this competition. The final blow came when Ralph Nader's book, *Unsafe At Any Speed* was released. The success of this book removed any chance that the Corvair had in competing with the Mustang or Barracuda. Chevrolet knew they needed to develop something fresh and cutting edge for the young at heart. The first response to the Mustang was a concept car called the Super Nova. Developed in early 1964, many of Chevrolet's leaders thought this sleek designed version of the existing Chevy II would compete with the Mustang. Luckily, clearer minds prevailed and a new direction was taken, introducing an entirely new vehicle to combat the Mustang. GM was ready to take a stand and fight for their part of the market and the new Camaro was going to be their response.

When the 1967 Camaro first hit showroom floors on September 21, 1966, Chevrolet was hoping for a big success. Nineteen sixty-six had not been a great sales year for Chevrolet with total sales down almost 10% from 1965. Chevrolet's hope that the redesigned Corvair would do well faded after the Ralph Nader book. GM realized they urgently needed to bring a highly competitive car to the pony car market. The new car was to be called the Camaro. Twenty nine months in the making, the Camaro was finally ready to be presented to the masses. GM launched a public relations effort to inform the public of this new and exciting pony car, which included a Jim Handy produced half-hour movie about the Camaro. The movie showcased the development and history of the car along with information about the engineering and styling highlights. The production was shown in theaters and on television nationwide to increase interest. Chevrolet took it a step further and introduced a new line of women's dresses known as the *Camaro Collection*. The dresses were available in 450 stores nationwide at a cost of between \$20 and \$40.

The public loved the Camaro's unique design. It looked like nothing else on the road. While similar in size to the Mustang, the Camaro was more refined and dignified. The Camaro was initially built in Norwood, Ohio but as sales increased the Van Nuys California plant was added as a second assembly plant. The base Camaro was modestly priced at \$2644 for the coupe and \$2704 for the convertible. A buyer had a choice of ordering a standard Camaro, Camaro Rally Sport (RS), or Camaro Super Sport (SS) and by mid-year, the now famous Z28. With an incredible long list of 81 factory options and 41 dealer options, the customer could order a car exactly how they wanted it.

Styling of the first year was smooth and flowing with sheet metal that formed graceful yet muscular lines. With a perfectly sloped 'C' pillar and a long horizontal feature line traveling front to back at mid body, the Camaro looked longer than it actually was. A variety of exterior options allowed each Camaro to have its own personality. The standard Camaro was handsome enough with limited glitz but yet had a sporty car look. Taking it a step further, the Rally Sport option outfitted the car with a special grille and electrically operated hide-away headlamps, parking lights that were moved to the lower front valance panel, special tail-lamps that graced the rear end and back-up lights that were moved to the lower rear valance panel giving the car an entirely new look. The Super Sport option gave you a bumblebee stripe that surrounded the front-end sheet metal and included special SS emblems on the exterior. SS cars that were powered with the 350 cubic-inch engine received special ribbed non-functional hood ornaments. If a buyer ordered the 396 cubic-inch engine, different style ornaments graced the hood. In addition, an RS/SS package was available and included everything in both the RS and SS equipment list. Other exterior options included pinstripes, lower body side moldings and vinyl roof covering. The public went crazy for Chevrolet's new car and 220,906 people swapped their hard-earned cash for a new breed of car.

For 1968, the Camaro looked much like its predecessor. The body was for the most part carry-over however a few key changes identified a 1968 from a 1967. Gone were the side vent windows, replaced by one piece side windows with an 'Astro' Ventilation system. Also new for 1968 were side marker lamps, a requirement courtesy of the United States government. The 1968 grille was redesigned slightly, with the prior years RS electronically controlled hide-away headlights replaced with vacuum operated units.

Taillights were revised on non RS cars and now featured a taillight vertically separated by a horizontal bar in the taillight bezel. RS cars had a revised taillight that added a horizontal bar to lights. Parking lights were restyled and a new rectangular exterior mirror replaced the round mirror. For the first time, a front and rear spoiler became available. While the car appeared similar to the 1967 model, sales increased to 235,147 units.

Nineteen sixty nine brought major changes to the Camaro's exterior including newly styled front fenders, door skins, quarter panels, grille valances, hood and taillights. While the Camaro looked all new, it was for the most part, very similar to the 1967 in its underpinnings. The 1969 Camaro had a much more aggressive look with a recessed grille and the wheel openings to have a less rounded but sleeker design. The fenders and quarter panels featured a horizontal crease that created a look of the car moving while still standing still. The new style hood featured an optional ZL2 cowl induction system that allowed the hood to draw cool outside air from the base of the windshield. The RS option included a new front end, much different than the 1968. Body-color headlight doors replaced the painted headlamp doors of 1968. For most part 1969 was considered the peak of styling and performance for the Camaro and 243,845 cars went to new owners during the 1969 model year.

During its first generation, Chevrolet Camaro offered a plethora of power train options. The base engine was the tried and true 230 cubic-inches straight six that provided 140 horsepower. For a few dollars more, a larger 250 cubic-inch six, 155 horsepower six cylinder was available. The next step in more horsepower was the 210 horsepower, 327 cubic-inch small block engine. Originally, Chevrolet intended to make the 283 cubic-inch V8 the standard engine for the Camaro but at the last minute they changed their minds and decided to offer the 327. If the base 210 horsepower engine didn't have enough power, a 275 horsepower 327 cubic-inch V8 could be checked off the option list for more "go" power. When the Camaro's was first launched, the largest engine available was a new 295 horsepower 350 cubic-inch V8 designed specifically for the Camaro. This engine, when combined with the available four-speed transmission provided more than adequate performance for almost any enthusiast. The small block wasn't enough for the upcoming muscle car wars and Chevrolet wasn't taking a back seat to the big FE block Mustangs and Barracudas. In an effort to keep up with the competitions new muscle cars, Chevrolet began to offer a 396 cubic-inch,

325 horsepower big block and later in the model year, added the powerful L-78, 375 horsepower engine to the option list. Chevrolet wasn't done for the model year as the legendary 302 cubic-inch, 290 horsepower V8 became the standard engine for the new Z28. Grossly underrated, this screaming beast of an engine was designed to compete in SCCA Trans Am events and boy did it compete. Depending on the type of car ordered, the customer could select either a 3-speed manual, 4-speed manual, PowerGlide or a Turbo-HydraMatic transmission.

Little changed in the engine option list for 1968. Most engines were carry-over, but Chevrolet did manage to release two new performance powertrains, one being a 350 horsepower 396 cubic-inch V8 and the other an ultra rare, L89 aluminum head big block V8. It's said that a few COPO (Central Office Production Order) cars were built with the 427 cubic-inch engine but officially it appears that this did not occur. Two new transmissions were added for 1968, the M22 close-ratio Muncie four-speed and a very rare MB1 semi-automatic transmission. The semi-automatic transmission was available only with a six-cylinder engine.

The 1969 powertrain line-up carried over the basic six-cylinder. Mid year, Chevrolet decided to introduce a new 307 cubic-inch V8 to replace the aging 327 V8. The 350 cubic-inch 225 horsepower LM1 was replaced by the L65 250 horsepower, 350 cubic-inch V8. Camaro's previous years 295 horsepower L48 small block had its horsepower increased to 300 for 1969 with a few tuning changes. The Z28 continued to provide excellent performance and for a nice chunk of change, buyers could have Chevrolet toss a cross-ram induction system in the trunk along with optional headers for those wanting added performance. The big block engine options remained the same as in 1968 but officially you could now get a 'COPO' 427 factory car either with the L72 cast iron engine or the very rare all aluminum ZL1 engine. Only 69 ZL1 cars were produced and today are considered the holy grail of muscle cars. Transmission choices remained the same as in 1968 with the exception of a revision to the heavy-duty three-speed transmission.

The interior of Camaro was well thought out and exceptional in appointments. Originally offered in two trim levels, the 1967 interior provided a more than adequate level of comfort. The custom interior included molded door panels, improved I/P controls and upscale emblems.

Vinyl bucket seats were standard and an available Strato-Back front bench seat was offered with a fold down center armrest. The Camaro came standard with a column shifter which was a requirement with the bench seat. The back seat offered a fold down seatback with a carpeted area to increase cargo size. A console was available as was a special 3-dial gauge cluster that could be ordered in any V8 equipped Camaro.

The first generation Camaro proved to be a big success for Chevrolet. It hit every mark in styling, comfort and performance. The performance of both the small block and big block powered over both Ford and Chrysler in its early years. General Motors had hit a home run and the competitors knew it. The public loved the Camaro and the new GM pony car was on a roll. Not to be left in the cold, the designers and engineers were working feverously to add a new level of style and performance to the next generation Camaro. However the public had to wait until mid 1970 to see what Chevrolet had up its sleeve. After seeing the 1970 ½ Camaro, most felt the wait was well worth it and the second generation Camaro was born.