

343 CUBES



AT THE DAWN OF THE MUSCLECAR ERA IN 1964, IF THERE WAS ONE COMPANY LEFT AT THE GATE, IT WAS AMERICAN MOTORS, A COMPANY WHOSE ADVERTISING TAGLINE WAS "BECAUSE THE ONLY RACE RAMBLER CARES ABOUT IS THE HUMAN RACE." IT SERVED THEM WELL IN THE 1958 RECESSION AND ON UP TO 1963 WHEN THE ENTIRE AMC LINE WON *MOTOR TREND'S* COVETED "CAR OF THE YEAR" AWARD.

But with the industry-wide emphasis on performance combined with the introduction that same year of the Ford Mustang, AMC was put at a competitive disadvantage. By 1967 the company was teetering on the brink of insolvency, the result of a series of disastrous product decisions, first deciding to compete head-to-head with the Big Three and most visibly compounded by the introduction of the ungainly fastback Marlin in the Spring

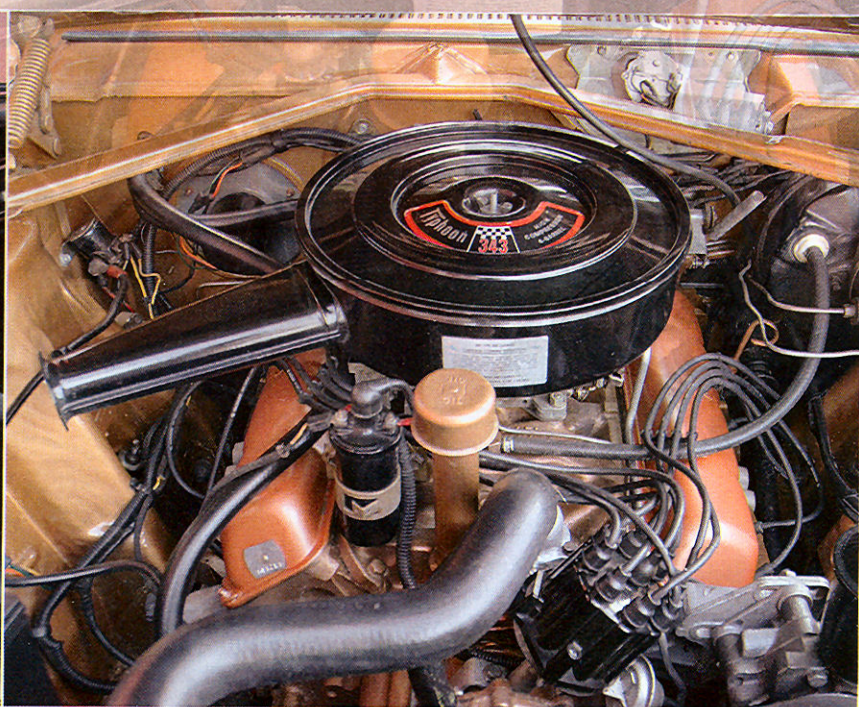
of 1965. During this troubled period, though, AMC's product planners were making some sound decisions. The first was already underway—the development, under the direction of engineer Dave Potter, of a modern, lightweight, thin-wall construction V-8, first introduced in the compact American in the spring of 1966 at 290 cubic inches. This was such a sound design that it enabled AMC over the years to offer it in a variety of bored and stroked

versions, displacing 304, 343, 360, 390 and 401 cubic inches.

The second decision was to develop for 1968 two new cars, a pony car (Javelin) and a two-seat sports car (AMX) off of a heavily revised version of the American platform introduced in 1964, vehicles that effectively competed in the exploding musclecar marketplace. (AMC's lack of a small V-8 in 1964 was one of the primary reason that the Marlin was built

AMC's limited production 343 Rogue finally put AMC in the musclecar business and was a precursor to the wild 1969 SC/Rambler

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICHARD TRUESDELL



on an intermediate-sized platform; AMC's available 287/327 V-8s were too large and heavy to install under the hood of the compact American.)

In the fall of 1965, just as the 290ci version of the new V-8 was introduced, AMC announced a special edition for the spring of 1966, a half-year model called the Rogue. It would become the top model in the American series. (The first 1,700 V-8 models, one for each dealer, were all a two-tone Sun Gold and Black combination, the black covering the roof and trunk lid.)

Potter was already working on a larger version of the new V-8. It would displace 343 cubic inches and would find its way under the hood of AMC's new-for-1967 mid- and full-sized offerings, the Rebel and Ambassador as well as the Marlin in its final year. At the same time someone at AMC made the decision that it would be a good idea to offer it in the compact American/Rogue line since the engine would be available in the Javelin, which was under development. The original development car for this program survived (see sidebar) as AMC's engineers knew

that the American/Rogue unibody shell would need reinforcement to handle the additional torque that the 343 would produce. First advertised in December 1966, AMC dealers would offer the 343 in a four-barrel, 280-horsepower (gross) version on any American/Rogue (except the station wagons) and only with a four-speed manual transmission. No longer would the Rambler be just for driving Grandma to church on Sunday mornings.

That brings us to the 1967 AMC Rambler Rogue pictured here, a Sun Gold, 107,147-mile beauty that has known just a single owner over the last 37 years, Larry Blatt of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Blatt ordered

his car from Edward W. Gegnas Rambler on February 28, 1967. It was fully equipped; 343 four-barrel, four-speed stick, 3.54:1 Twin Grip rear, handling package, Firestone Wide Oval tires (his original spare still resides in the trunk), HD cooling and electrical system, dash mounted tachometer, sports steering wheel, headrests, black vinyl roof, electric wipers and washer and



the light group. "About the only items I didn't tick off on the option list," says Blatt, "were the remote outside mirrors, bumper guards and air conditioning."

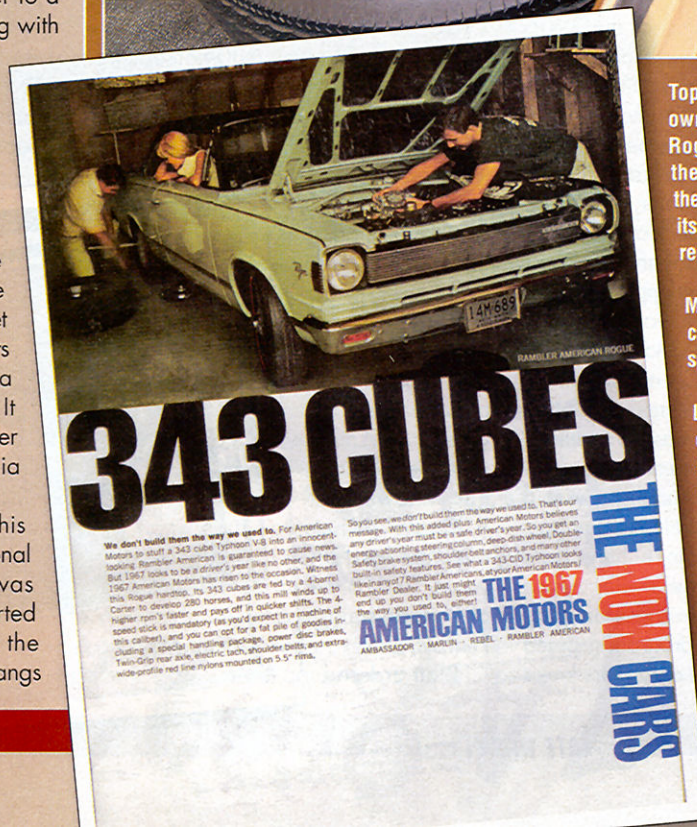
Blatt took delivery of his Rogue on March 31, 1967, which set him back the princely sum of \$2,960. A drag racing enthusiast, Blatt immediately took his new car to Atco Dragway and right off the showroom floor, running in the D/Strictly Stock class, it ran 15.70 ETs. Not bad in its day but not competitive. The big problem was finding second and third gears, as the factory shifter was terrible. Blatt contacted

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Hurst Performance in nearby Warminster, Pennsylvania, and he received, what he was told, was the first Competition Plus shifter ever for an AMC car. (Needless to say, this same part found its way into the Hurst SC/Rambler two years later.) After installing the shifter and rejetting the primary and secondary jets, he started running 15.50s.

The next step was to play with the ignition timing and changing over to a colder heat range spark plug along with a Chevy-style advance weight kit for his Delco distributor. That picked up another tenth of a second. Removing the advance spring from the distributor got the little Sun Gold Rogue down to 15.20. Blatt knew that wheel hop was a problem and his Rogue came with only a single exhaust. With the installation of dual exhausts and a set of aftermarket traction bars the results were immediate; 14.82 ETs with a trap speed of 95 miles per hour. It had to be the first 14-second Rambler anyone had seen in the Philadelphia area.

Further tweaking and refining his off-the-line technique yielded additional improvements, and the Rogue was turning consistent 14.70s and started taking home hardware, much to the chagrin of his friends with their Mustangs



Top: Larry Blatt, original owner of the 1967 343 Rogue shown here, pilots the compact muscled car on the New Jersey Turnpike. In its early days, the car was a regular at local dragstrips.

Middle: Blatt's Rogue still carries the original Redline spare tire.

Left: AMC's first 1960s-era effort at building a muscled car centered around the Rogue. The 290 V-8 debuted in 1966; the 343 followed a year later.

and GTOs. One night, when everything went perfect, Blatt registered a 14.61 at 97.82 mph, on street tires. Until the introduction of the SC/Rambler almost two years later, this was about as fast as one could take a street-legal AMC compact.

A factory-equipped 1967 Rogue

with the 343 is a rare bird indeed. The best available information states that 58 Rogues, 55 American 440s and either five or seven convertibles were produced. An unknown number of two- and four-door sedans were also produced. In any condition it's a

worthy candidate for restoration; you'll end up with one of the rarest factory-built musclecars. The end result will be that you'll end up with a unique car, just like the one Larry Blatt has owned for almost four decades. ■

JOHN GOERGEN'S 1966 343 PROTOTYPE

Judging by the mail we receive, some of our readers have a hard time believing that American Motors has any sort of muscle or performance car heritage. Actually, AMC offered what some people believe to be the very first muscle car, the 255-horsepower 1957 Rambler Rebel. With the exception of the 1957 Corvette, it was the fastest production car offered in North America that year. It might have been better known had AMC been successful in their attempt to offer it with Bendix fuel injection.

Until the introduction of the 343 Americans and Rogues in the spring of 1967, AMC had no serious performance cars available, hindered by the reality of having only the large and heavy 287 and 327 cubic inch V-8s available. All that changed in 1966 when the first V-8 Rogues were offered with the 290ci version of the new AMC small-block V-8.

Offering the higher-powered 343 V-8 in the lightweight Americans and Rogues necessitated additional development work as the V-8's extra torque had the nasty habit of cracking the windshield, especially on the pillarless hardtop models. In the spring of 1966, AMC engineers pulled a beige six-cylinder Rogue off the line and installed a developmental version of the 343. This enabled the engineering team to refine the

rear suspension and determine where the unit body American and Rogues should be reinforced on the planned production version.

Normally these engineering mules, after their work was finished, were sent to the crusher but such was not the case with this Rogue. In the tradition of wasting nothing at the old AMC, the car was sold to a member of the engineering team, Bernie Turco, who drove the car for a number of years. During his period of ownership, he installed its current engine, a 390 cubic inch V-8, which makes his 343 development mule, in essence, the very first SC/Rambler. His 390 had AMC's advanced ported heads, which gave the engine very good breathing characteristics.

In 1971 Turco installed a set of header-type exhaust manifolds, welded up to the 1968 heads. In a touch that first attracted our attention at the 2002 100-year anniversary of the Rambler held in AMC's hometown of Kenosha, Wisconsin, Turco installed a set of Stewart Warner oil, voltage and vacuum gauges in a spare American air conditioning



register under the radio. At some point in the mid-'70s, the car was sold to Don Peronekin and today, the car is owned by John Goergen of Racine, Wisconsin. In its current state of tune, it runs consistently in the 12s when it ventures on to the strip—not bad for a 38-year-old street legal car on pump gas and street rubber.

Goergen's car is a rare survivor, a development car that escaped the fate of so many others like it. And it is more than a historical oddity or an automotive footnote. It was the forerunner for the 343 Americans and Rogues, which in turn was the immediate precursor to the 1969 Hurst SC/Ramblers.

