



# THE AMC DEALERSHIP THAT COULD

Those looking for a hot AMC went straight to Mesa, Arizona, to find Randall AMC

AS TOLD TO RICHARD TRUESDELL

PHOTOGRAPHY FROM THE RANDALL FAMILY COLLECTION AND MARK FLETCHER

**FOR CHEVY FANS IT WAS YENKO OR BALDWIN-MOTION, FOR FORD ENTHUSIASTS IT WAS SHELBY AND FOR MOPAR ADDICTS, IT WAS MR. NORM. THESE TUNERS ALL EARNED LEGENDARY REPUTATIONS BUILDING SOME OF THE ERA'S MOST FONDLY REMEMBERED MUSCLECARS, MANY OF THEM WITH INDIRECT, OR IN SOME CASES, DIRECT HELP FROM THE FACTORIES. BUT WHAT ABOUT AMC? WAS THERE A DEALER WHO ADDED SOME EXTRA MUSCLE TO THE CARS FROM KENOSHA?**

Oh yeah.

This story starts in Mesa, Arizona, a growing suburb on the east side of Phoenix, at a Nash, Rambler and AMC dealership founded in 1954 by Mel Randall. This enterprise would go on to campaign some of the best known AMC drag cars as well as build two limited series of vehicles, 401-powered Gremlins and Pacers — yes, Pacers — that redefined street performance when the genre was all but abandoned by the Big Three.

For fans of AMC performance, mecca was 1350 West Main Street in Mesa. Three generations of the Randall family contributed to the growth of the business. "It started out as a gas station as was common in the buyer's market that followed World War Two," says Mel Randall's grandson Mike. "My grandfather got into the business of selling new cars and was awarded a Nash franchise. Along with his sons Grant and Skip, they built it up to be one of the most important AMC dealerships west of the Mississippi. Along the way my brothers Dave and John and myself were sucked into the business. Together we flew the AMC banner until the company was absorbed into Chrysler in 1987."

If you have any familiarity with the performance cars that AMC offered, the first

thing that usually comes to mind are the successful Trans Am cars campaigned by Roger Penske and driven by Mark Donohue, and rightfully so. But long before Penske and Donohue came on the scene, the Randalls made a habit of successfully running a wide variety of AMC products, especially a notorious 343-powered American business coupe that won the 1968 Winter Nationals, as an adjunct to their successful AMC-Jeep dealership.

"The car was given to us by American Motors Corporation," relates Mike. "We were told by the AMC representative that they wanted to keep it under wraps. At the time they were not into racing and wanted no embarrassment from a dealership in Mesa. The car was almost immediately a success."

This American, which consistently showed up bigger displacement Big Three competitors, was just a prelude of things to come, especially after the 1968

introduction of the Javelin and AMX. Due to the fact that they were an authorized AMC dealer, they had inside access to the factory and this paid dividends in several ways. First, they could get increased allocations of hot-selling cars like the Javelin as well as the ability to pick up the phone, and on engine matters, talk to in-house AMC engineers like the late Dave Potter, father of the AMC small block V-8. The AMC V-8 had a long lifespan, from 1966 all the way up to 1991 when the last of the type was installed in the final Jeep Grand Wagoneer that rolled down the line in Toledo, Ohio. Along the way, this design, which started out with a lowly 290 cubic inches, eventually got punched out all the way to 401 cubic inches.

This close relationship to the factory led to one of the strangest instances of a pedigree AMC car passing through their hands, specifically, the big-displacement Breedlove AMX. As has been reported in our feature of the Breedlove AMX (February '05 *Musclecar Enthusiast*), Mike showed up at the AMC zone offices in El Segundo, California, where he inquired about a muddy AMX in the warehouse. It turned out that the car in question was the big-displacement Breedlove AMX from the Bonneville effort. When Mike inquired with AMC's Zone Manager, Bill Benson, if he could buy the car, Benson asked, "Do you have a trailer?" To which Mike again asked, "How much?" Again a question was answered with a question, "Do you have a trailer?" It was then that Mike realized that Bill just wanted the thing towed off the lot (and off of his books in all likelihood).

Over the next two years the car, now powered with a Randall-built 343 cubic inch V-8, led a very successful life as a drag car. Another AMX, driven by Grant Randall, enjoyed a degree of success in road racing on a number of tracks throughout the Southwest. While all of this was minor league compared to the Penske Trans-Am effort, it had the tacit approval of AMC management back on Plymouth Road in Detroit and it kept the Randall name out in front of the public as they prepared to introduce what ultimately would be their calling card, the 401-XR Gremlin.

In addition to the AMX, the Randalls



1



2

**1** Called the Super American by some in the AMC community, this 343-powered Rambler caused quite a sensation when Skip Randall won its class at the '68 Winternationals. Originally it was a below-the-radar attempt by AMC to get some needed performance car experience prior to the introduction of the 1968 Javelin and AMX.

**2** Over in the AHRA, going back as far as February 25, 1966, Randall Rambler Americans showed that AMC was getting ready to ditch its stodgy economy car image. The class is F5 J/S, the time is 14.62 at 90.09 mph, the driver is Skip Randall.

campaigned a Javelin Trans-Am in SCCA events. This car started life as a first generation 1970 Javelin and in 1971 was refitted with the humpster-style body of the 1971-1974 Javelin. With AMC's involvement at the time, Mike's brother Dan convinced AMC to send them all of the sheet metal that was needed to build the car. Dan made this project happen with great success. The car set track records at Phoenix International Raceway and Hotteville Airstrip in Southern California.

### BIG ENGINE, SMALL CAR

Starting in 1972, AMC offered the

304 cubic inch V-8 in the subcompact Gremlin, which shared its chassis with the larger, compact Hornet, which had offered a V-8 since its introduction in the fall of 1969 as a 1970 model. Because all of the AMC V-8s were dimensionally the same, it didn't take a brain surgeon to realize that it would be a no hassle swap to replace the 304 with AMC's biggest, most powerful motor, the 401.

As a prelude to the introduction of a "production" 401-powered Gremlin, third generation Randall, Mike, campaigned a Gremlin on drag strips throughout the Southwest. The American Hot Rod Association made a stock class strictly



for the 401 Gremlins. “We ran the car very successfully at Beeline Driveway and Mel Larson’s Raceway in Arizona, Orange County Raceway in California as well as Denver Raceway in Colorado,” remembers Mike. With Ed Beard handling the wrenching chores, the 401 Gremlin could turn consistent 12.12s on high octane pump gas. It was immortalized by Floor in a series of drag racing trading cards, number 7 of 74 to be exact.

Having proven that the 401 Gremlin was a viable proposition, the Randalls set out to engineer a street version. Under the Randall Engineering banner, they set out to secure a suitable supply of engines. Because of their close relationship with the factory, getting 30 401s to get the party started presented no problem. The FOB price for each motor was \$389. The program started with Randall AMC ordering factory 304 V-8 cars since they were already equipped with the required crossmember along with the optional heavy duty suspension, larger brakes and AMC 20 rear differential stout enough to handle the available 255 horsepower (net) on tap.

When combined with the light weight of the short wheelbase (97-inch) Gremlin, it was a potent car right out of the box. With an advertised base price of \$2,995 (the same as the 1969 SC/Rambler), the Randalls promised that the 401-XR could run 13.90s right off the showroom floor, blasting through the traps at between 103 and 106 mph. Even by contemporary standards (a 271-horsepower Dodge Neon SRT-4 Stage II will cover the same distance in 13.30 seconds at a trap speed of 105.6 mph) this makes the 401-XR a damn quick machine.

But the Randalls weren’t satisfied to let it end there. As the Trans Am program produced a number of go-fast parts, including high rise manifolds, carburetors that could inject more air, hotter cams, headers and much more from the AMC Group 19 parts catalog, along with beefier driveline components, the Randalls could outfit a Gremlin that could run in the mid-12s and trip the timing lights at 114 to 117 mph in a street- and emission-legal (for its day) Gremlin. If one eschewed the 401-XR graphics, this would be the ultimate Q-ship, able to fly under the radar with ease.

The 401-XR project got a huge boost in 1972 when after the first cars were built, major features ran in both *Car Craft* and *Super Stock* magazines. In



**3** Mel, Skip and Grant Randall standing in front of the family’s AMC dealership at 1350 West Main Street in Mesa, Arizona, once home of the Winternationals. Judging by the signage and the Jeep Commando, this undated photograph was taken between 1966 and 1967.

**4** With its radiused rear wheel openings, this is the Breedlove car, which Mike Randall got from AMC based on the fact he had a trailer. Upon its arrival in Mesa,

it set out on a successful career as a drag racer, here at Beeline Dragway in Mesa, Arizona, once home of the Winternationals.

**5** A second AMX, this one driven by Grant Randall, showed off AMC’s red/white/blue “hash” paint job in a variety of road racing venues well into the ’70s. Here it’s in action at Phoenix International Raceway, sometime in the early ’70s. This car was later handed over to his son to be abused.

the case of *Car Craft*, Grant Randall allowed the editors to drive the 401-XR from Mesa back to Los Angeles where they proceeded to twist the rear axle, but not before running some 12.40s at almost 115 mph. After the rearend was replaced and some tweaks applied, the 401-XR ran 12.22 at 115.97 mph.

The guys from *Super Stock* magazine, in a session at Beeline Dragway outside of Phoenix, had their chance to flog the car as well. They came away with a best time of 13.56 at 103 mph, with an unmodified "stock" 401 running street tires. Uncorking the headers and installing a fresh set of plugs got things down to 13.22 at 105.76 mph. Overall, they were very impressed while watching a second, prepared 401-XR driven by Jim Happ reel off run after run at around 12.80 at close to 110 mph.

This led to a short run of "production" 401-XRs running into 1974, although Mike Randall says they didn't use up their entire allotment of 401s on Gremlins. After AMC started to offer the 304 in the Pacer, Randall built a couple of customer-order 401 Pacers.

We asked Mike if there was any way to authenticate a Randall 401-XR. "Probably the only way he could verify if a car was indeed a 401-XR would be to look at the firewall," Mike says with a laugh. "I wasn't as sophisticated as I am now and pounded on the firewall to gain clearance for the bigger-cased 727 TorqueFlite which was a recommended option with the 401."

## HEADING OFF ROAD

From the late '70s and into the '80s the Randall family turned their attentions to off-road racing and enjoyed a degree of success and some notoriety in running a team of specially prepared Jeep J-trucks in a variety of events. With backing from BFGoodrich and Jeep Racing, the team (Skip, Mike, John and Dan) continued to fly the AMC banner in sanctioned off-road events, almost always finishing on the podium in spite of competing against better funded efforts from Chrysler and Ford. It should be noted that the Jeeps benefited from the Randalls' close association with Bobby Allison's NASCAR Matador Coupe effort, as the Jeeps ran a modified version of the NASCAR head.

By the late '80s, the Randall performance story had its curtain closed. With AMC being absorbed by Chrysler, the first thing they did was eliminate the Jeep pickup line, concentrating on

**6** What makes this image so interesting is not the fact that Grant Randall is leading a USRRC-style McLaren sport racer, but on the straight behind the two cars, partially concealed by the cactus, is a Ford GT40.

**7** Grant Randall looking over the delivery of 30 401 V-8s that would form the foundation of the 401-XR Gremlin program. The 401s

carried an FOB price of \$389 making this the crate motor buy of the century (in 2005 dollars these 401s would cost \$1,854).

**8** Believe it or not, this is the front side of a drag racing bubblegum trading card issued by Fleer of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, showing Mike Randall reeling off a time of 12.25 at 115 mph in a car that could literally be driven to the strip.





9



10



11



12

the XJ Cherokee, Wrangler and Grand Wagoneer. In a Chrysler consolidation move, the Randalls relinquished their Jeep franchise and concentrated on their expanding boat dealership, which to this day is still housed in the family's showroom on West Main Street in Mesa (with some of the AMC signage still visible).

Our connection with Mike Randall first came at the 2004 AMO Nationals held in Scottsdale, when he was reunited with the Breedlove AMX for the first time in more than 20 years. It was an emotional reunion as he was quite pleased with the way Bill Kotula had returned the car to its past glory. Our conversations continued on a long layover at Phoenix's Sky Harbor Airport, on a trip back from Germany where Mike and his wife Jackie, who is the family historian, met me for a dinner conversation and handed over to me some of the family's photos to be scanned for this article.

The Randall family still owns many of the vehicles they raced, stored at their facility in Mesa, including their race transporter emblazoned in red, white and blue with Randall, AMC and BFGoodrich logos. All have held up surprisingly well in the hot, dry Arizona climate. In addition Mike has shared with me that two years ago he and his son Ricky located a documented, original 401-XR and as soon as he gets the chance, it will be restored to its former glory.

The Randalls are a throwback to an earlier era where a small dealership could make a huge impact. Such dealers built some of the most coveted cars of the musclecar era. Maybe a few more of the 401-XR Gremlins have survived and in time will get the respect that they are due. In reality, they are among the last dealer-built specials of the musclecar era and deserve their day in the sun or at least at some big name auction at some point down the road.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

This story wouldn't have happened without the help of the very active AMC community in Phoenix, better known as the Cactus Cruisers, especially Mark Fletcher, who was able to get some photos of some of the vehicles that made Randall AMC the icon it is in AMC's short but proud high performance legacy. If readers know of the existence of any big block 1972-1974 Gremlins that might be 401-XRs you are invited to contact me at [autotronic@aol.com](mailto:autotronic@aol.com). I will attempt work with Mike Randall to authenticate their history. ■

9 Team Randall, circa 1978 (judging by the Concord D/L on the showroom floor). Skip, Mike, John and Dave Randall posing with their Jeep J-Truck in front of the Mesa showroom, after turning their attention to sport of off-road racing, then growing in popularity.

11 Not seen since the Randalls ran the car in vintage events in the early '90s, here is the 1970 Trans Am Javelin which was later rebodied into a humpster-style second-generation Javelin, parked along side the carcass of an off-road CJ in front of the Randall Racing trailer.

10 Driven by John Randall, this Jeep J-10, heavily modified for the rigors of off-road racing, gives the spectators a thrill, getting some air at an event held at Riverside Raceway about 60 miles east of Los Angeles. The site is now a shopping mall.

12 Bringing the story up to date, Mike Randall poses with two of the AMXs he still owns. Needless to say he still holds a fondness for the cars from Kenosha and it's reported that he still has a few more stashed away.