

GM's Canada-Only Lovechild Was Born of Chevelle SS & GTO parents

By Richard Truesdell



Conroy's Cheetah

“You could consider the dealership as a Canadian counterpart to Nickey, Yenko or Berger”

This story started with a phone call from Kenn Funk, a well-known muscle car collector whose cars have appeared in several issues of *MCR*. “Rich, you have to see my friend’s car. It’s a Cheetah,” said Kenn.

“A Bill Thomas Cheetah?”

“No, no,” Kenn replied. “It’s a Conroy Pontiac Cheetah, one built from a 1967 Beaumont SD. You know, the Canadian GM intermediate that’s a cross between a Chevelle SS and a GTO.”

I asked Kenn what was under the hood, and he said it was a very rare 427 conversion. He said, “And best of all, he drove it down from his home in Vancouver, British Columbia, 1,500 miles, to display it at the Hot Rod Reunion in Bakersfield.”

When I arrived at our photo location, the iconic Blair’s Speed Shop in Pasadena, Kenn and his friend George Pappas were waiting for me. The Cheetah is a dark Verde Green with red stripes. George is the kind of guy who not only owns a piece of muscle car history but also has the passion to document his car, making my job a dream.

George filled me in on the history of Conroy Pontiac. In the GM muscle car hierarchy, you could consider the dealership as a Canadian counterpart to Nickey, Yenko, or Berger. It was *the* dealer-

ship in Western Canada where you went if you wanted the fastest car on the street.

Beaumont History

But first, what exactly is a Beaumont? Because of the cross-border trade agreements in place at the time, the Big Three produced the cars they sold in Canada in Canadian manufacturing plants. This led to many unique models sold by GM’s Canadian Pontiac dealers that were often “dualled” Buick franchises. (In Canada, Chevrolet dealerships were typically dualled with Oldsmobile franchises. Ford had a similar arrangement producing unique-to-Canada models for its Mercury dealers.)

Starting in 1962, Canada’s Pontiac dealers sold the Acadian, a rebadged version of the Chevy II. Starting in 1965, it launched the Beaumont, an intermediate-sized car that was a mashup of the U.S. Chevrolet Chevelle SS and Pontiac GTO.

The Beaumont had a Chevelle exterior with a unique, Beaumont-only grille and some Pontiac trim elements. It had an interior that mostly mimicked that found in the U.S. LeMans, was powered by Chevrolet engines, and was mounted on the Chevrolet version of the GM intermediate chassis, not the Pontiac. Con-

fused? It was just the way things worked in Canada until the two countries signed the Canada-United States Automotive Products Agreement in 1965, which eliminated most cross-border tariffs. By the 1970 model year, the Beaumont marque was retired as Canada’s Pontiac dealers would sell most of the LeMans, Tempest, and GTO models available south of the border.

Conroy Pontiac-Buick in West Vancouver was established in 1963 at just about the time when the Mission Raceway dragstrip opened. Another GM dealer, Mander Chevrolet-Oldsmobile, also in Vancouver’s suburbs, capitalized on the performance craze of the mid-1960s. Like Conroy, it had two drag racers on staff. A healthy rivalry ensued.

At Conroy, Sales Manager Mike Carmichael was the point person for the dealership’s high-performance activities. Like his contemporaries producing dealer specials in the United States, he came up with a name for the dealership’s special-edition cars. Cheetah was the choice, as it connoted speed. It was applied to a series of performance-oriented, intermediate-sized Beaumonts.

Carmichael would order every car, typically the high line SD (Sport Deluxe) model, from the factory with a number of specific options. This would usually include the biggest possible V-8, in

this case the Chevrolet 396, mated to a Muncie M20 four-speed manual transmission. Other typically specified options were 12-bolt Positraction limited-slip differentials and heavy-duty suspension and brakes. A tach, mag-style wheels from Buick, and dealer-installed racing-style mirrors rounded out the Cheetah package.

Once the cars arrived at Conroy, they received specific Cheetah badging. In 1966 through 1968, 10 Cheetahs received a dealer-installed, blueprinted L72 427 V-8s that produced a reported 450 (gross) horsepower. To reach this output, L88 and ZL1 parts were used.

In 1969, with the A-Body Beaumont’s six-year production run about to end, the Cheetah moved down market with just budget-priced two-door post sedans offered that year. In 1970, the Beaumont became an orphan, as GM Canada started building the LeMans and the GTO in Canada.

Muscle Cars Canadian Style

Growing up on Vancouver’s Main Street in the 1960s, George Pappas wasn’t much different from other young car enthusiasts across North America at the dawn of the muscle car era. “My father would take me to the local Pontiac-Buick dealer every

September to view the new cars when he had work done on his Pontiac," recalls George. "There was a nearby park where I spent a lot of my summer holidays, and on Saturdays and Sundays the teenagers with cars were driving cars from 1949 to 1954. By 1967, I started seeing some newer cars, from 1955 to 1957—you know, the

classic Tri-Fives as well as some mid-'50s Fords. Although my wheels consisted of a bicycle, I started to help the older guys fix up their cars, many of which ended up at Mission Raceway. At the time there were seven speed shops locally where I watched so many of these hot rods entering and exiting. It didn't take long for me, at just

15, to have my own cars, stored in a rented garage: a straight-axle 1955 Chevy, a 1960 Chevy [George's first car, which he owns to this day. —Ed.], and a 1966 Nova. It was a great time."

What about the Cheetah? "I acquired the Cheetah in a private sale from a local seller in Vancouver," says George. "I paid what I



■ American Racing TorqThrusts mount Uniroyal Tiger Paws on George's Cheetah.

■ Like their U.S. cousins, many of Conroy's Beaumonts were converted to Cheetahs to run at the dragstrip. Here's a 1969 model at the Mission Raceway east of Vancouver.

■ George still owns his first car, a 1960 Chevy Biscayne he bought when he was 15.

■ Like Yenko, Nickey, and its other U.S. counterparts, Vancouver's Conroy Pontiac-Buick replaced the Beaumont's 396 big-block with a 427-inch L72, performance tuned to deliver 450 hp.



■ Beaumont interiors were trimmed more like a Pontiac LeMans than a Chevelle. Note the Cheetah and 427 dash plaques added by Conroy. The Hurst shifter is attached to a M20 four-speed.



GEORGE PAPPAS PHOTOS



AT A GLANCE

1967 BEAUMONT SD CHEETAH

Owned by: George Pappas, Vancouver, B.C., Canada

Restored by: Owner

Engine: 427ci/450hp L72 V-8

Transmission: Muncie M20 4-speed manual

Rearend: 12-bolt with Positraction

Interior: Black vinyl front bucket seats

Wheels: 15x6 front, 15x8 rear American Racing

Tires: F70x15 front, G70x15 rear Uniroyal Tiger Paws

Special parts: L72 Cheetah conversion done by Conroy Pontiac-Buick

believe to be a record price for any Cheetah. I had been watching this Cheetah for 15 years. And you know the story. It was never for sale when I had the money, or when it was for sale I didn't have the money. It had traded hands a couple of times before I was able to get it in 2008. I did a frame-on restoration of all running gear, suspension, the gas tank, brakes, and wheels. The body didn't need much attention, just a few touchups. It was in great shape overall."

At the 2014 Hot Rod Reunion in Bakersfield, dedicated to nostalgia cars from

1972 and earlier, George's Cheetah was displayed next to two other Vancouver cars: a 1940 Willys Gasser and its matching dragster. "We were in the area called the Grove," says George. "The response was great towards the Cheetah, and I talked with a lot of really informed car guys and ladies who shared some great stories from back in the day."

When asked about gas mileage en route, George just smiled. "If you have to worry about gas mileage, you shouldn't own a car like my Cheetah." **MCR**

GEORGE PAPPAS PHOTO



■ Though his Beaumont is one of just 10 with the Cheetah conversion, George isn't shy about driving it. He took a 1,500-mile trip from his Vancouver home to California for the 2014 Hot Rod Reunion.



■ **D** stood for Sport Deluxe, a high-end model in the Beaumont line. Here, too, Conroy dressed the car with Cheetah badges.



■ The Beaumont's grille was among the pieces on the car that wasn't shared with a U.S. Chevrolet or Pontiac model. It definitely gives the car a distinct look.

“10 Cheetahs received a dealer-installed, blueprinted L72 427 V-8”

■ Though it looks like a Chevelle, a Canadian Beaumont is a hybrid of Chevrolet and Pontiac parts along with some pieces unique to the make. George Pappas' Beaumont Cheetah is one of just 10 with a dealer-installed 427.

