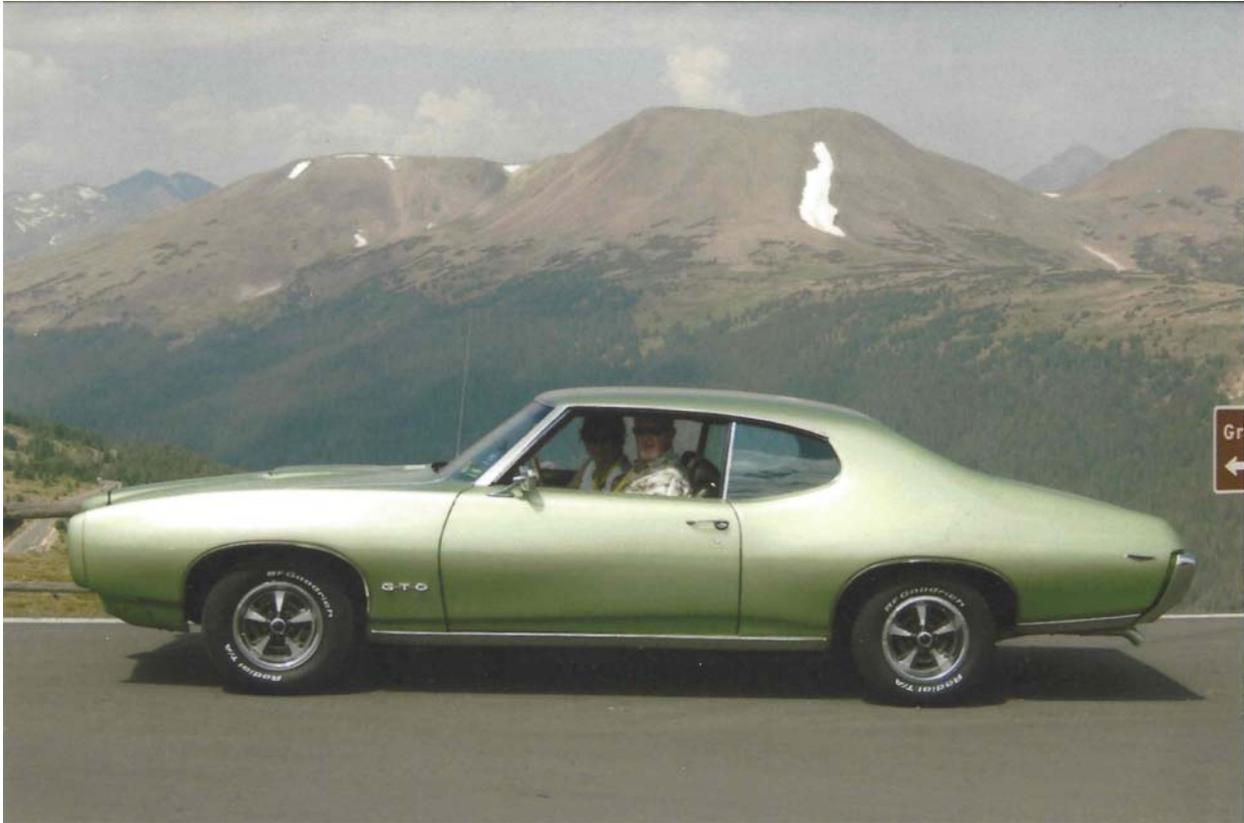


# My GTO Story

By Ron Wildebrandt



I'm Ron Wildebrandt and my wife, Sharon, and I are new members. We have a 69 Limelight Green GTO that we have owned for 15 years. I didn't just decide one day fifteen years ago to go buy a GTO. My connection and passion for GTO's goes way back and here is my story.

The fall of 1963 I'm a sophomore in high school counting the days until I'm 16 and get my drivers' license. I'm trying to decide what kind of hot rod I'll build. Of course, back then the roll-out of the new car models was a big deal in the fall and dealers usually had open house. Out came the 64 GTO. It was a while before I saw one as the closest dealer was 25 miles away but, I heard about them, saw them on TV ads and in the car magazines I subscribed to.

My Dad and Mom had always driven Pontiac's and at the time we had a 59 Catalina 2 door hardtop. I was hooked. I didn't know when but I knew someday I'd have a GTO. I just didn't think it would take as long as it did.

A couple years passed and it's spring of 66 and I'm graduating high school in a few months. The last couple years I'd worked after school, weekends, and during summer vacation and had saved some money. I didn't know if it was enough for a down payment on a new GTO or not. During this time I had bought a 55 Ford but it was blown up. All I had was a 49 Chevy my Dad had parked. My parents knew my plan to buy a new GTO when I graduated and I guess they also knew they wouldn't co-sign a loan with the probability of my being drafted before I



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could get it paid off so they offered a deal. They would buy a new car (Mom hated that 59-too big) and I could use it most anytime, if I paid every other payment, until the draft thing played out. I agreed and my brothers and I lobbied for a GTO but the best we could do was a new 66 Tempest Custom 326 2 Barrel. We did succeed in getting a 4 speed. This worked OK for a year until my next younger brother turned 16 and he wanted to use car too.

The previous fall (66) I'd been given a pre-induction physical and was classified 1-A so it was no longer if I'd get drafted but when (pre-lottery system).

In fall of 67, my brother totaled the Tempest so the family was without a good car. (Dad & Mom and I had beaters). My brothers and I found a dealer ad in Sunday Post that had a used 65 GTO. Somehow we got our way this time and it was purchased. It was a 335 HP, 4 speed, 3.55 Saf-T-Track. In a way, I finally had a GTO. (Same brother totaled that one about a year later.)

A couple months after we got the 65 GTO I received my induction notice and January 1968 I entered the army. The upside was I knew in a little over 2 years I would finally have my very own GTO.

Ever since the 64 GTO came out, I had read every magazine article I could find about GTO's. I'd written Pontiac for dealer advertising, option lists and anything else they could send me. I hated that I hadn't been able to buy a 67 GTO. I wanted one so bad because it was and still is my favorite body style. I thought they'd ruined the car with the "coke bottle" style of the 68. It was what it was and the Ram Air III and IV engine options of 69 were some consolation.

January 70 I was discharged and soon after I got home I started pricing new GTO's. Couple things had happened though. Prices had gone up and insurance had too, if you could find a company to insure you. The com-

pany my family had always used wouldn't insure a 21 year old single driver with a muscle car (they had a list). I found a company that would but rates were high. It soon became evident I was going to have to start dropping some of the options I wanted. I even looked for a used one equipped like I wanted from either dealer or individual without any luck. I was getting pretty desperate and really didn't want to drop down from Ram Air IV 4 Speed. I finally went to Pontiac dealer in Jeff City and his prices were about same. The salesman said I might be interested in something he had on the back lot. It was a left over new 69 Judge. It wasn't a Ram Air IV but it was looking more like I was going to have to drop to the base engine to be able to afford it. At the time, I wasn't aware the 4 HP difference between III's & IV's was grossly mis-advertised by Pontiac. It was an automatic car instead of 4 speed but everything else was pretty much like I would order one. It was Palladium Silver with black vinyl top and black interior. I had never been crazy about the Judge option though. Too flashy for me but the numbers he was talking were sounding a lot better than an ordered 70 car. Dealbreaker, though, was it didn't have Saf-T-Track. I told salesman he could have service department put that in but he said sales manager and dealership owner wouldn't do that. So I walked. Couple weeks later I got a letter from salesman saying they'd put Saf-T-Track in and he thought if I'd come back we could make a deal. I went back and we made a deal. After waiting almost 6 1/2 years I finally had my GTO.

Things around home had changed though. Very few muscle cars cruised the streets of the local rural towns. Out of town where we used to drag race on a lettered black-top highway and the starting line used to be solid black with rubber there were only a few black marks. Four wheel drive pickups were now becoming the "thing to have".

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Shortly after I got the Judge, a girl I knew who worked with Sharon set me up on a blind date. You'd have to ask her but, the Judge probably had something to do with my getting a second date. We dated throughout the year and at Christmas 1970 got engaged. There was a problem though. Sharon's from a large family and her next younger sister had gotten her license and sharing the family's number 2 car (her Dad didn't let the kids drive his number 1 car) wasn't working as Sharon had an irregular work schedule at Southwestern Bell. I let her have the Judge to drive. So after waiting 6+ years for a GTO I had it for less than a year. I was downgraded to a 52 Chevy 4 door automatic.



After getting married in June 1971 we kept the Judge but it became more and more difficult to afford.

Among other things, the insurance didn't go down after we got married and wasn't going to go down when I turned 25. Gas prices were on the rise and the threat of an embargo, which did happen. Leaded gas and high octane were going to go away and the hype that without lead in the fuel the older vehicles that were designed for it would be breaking down and clogging the shoulders of the road. (Of course that never happened). The 5 year/50,000 mile warranty was about to mileage out and we had used it a lot. The 400 transmission had a second gear squeal from pretty much new and the dealer went through it twice to no avail. They finally convinced the zone warranty/service rep to authorize a new case (they figured it had a crack they couldn't find or was porous and

the squeal was high pressure oil somewhere where it shouldn't be). At any rate case replacement fixed it. Twice the nylon toothed cam gear had shelled out (both times Sharon was driving and left her stranded). Pontiac kept putting nylon toothed gears back in and I was worried it would do it again after it was out of warranty (which it did to the next owner). So, in the spring of 73 we traded it for a new Ford LTD. After waiting all those years, I only had a GTO for a little over 3. (Not counting the couple months I got to drive the family 65).

With work, kids, building a new house it took a little while to miss not having a GTO. Over the years I'd look in the Sunday paper classifieds for one or in my travels see one in a lot or yard for sale. I looked at a few but we didn't have that much excess cash for a play car and most every one I found needed body work that I can't do.

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In 2004 I was off work recuperating from surgery. Retirement was something I was starting to think about in the not too distant future so I decided it was now or never to get another Goat. With the internet, the shopping market was so much bigger now so I got busy looking. At first, I started looking for something equipped like I would have ordered one back in 1970. High HP engine, 4 speed, no AC. Fortunately (the way we're using the 69 we have), I didn't come across anything like that that I could afford. Eventually I narrowed it down to the 69 we have that a lady in Webster Groves had for sale and a 68 Hardtop in south Georgia. My son, Eric, and I went and looked at the one in Webster Groves, drove it and the lady owner showed me lots of paperwork back to original owner. She also had a lot of spare parts as she'd had body work done and the car painted in late 80's early 90's. (Found out couple years ago at a cruise-in from her sister, that has one same color as ours, that they would scour salvage yards in the late 80's in southern Missouri and northern Arkansas for parts that they thought they might need). Everything worked on the car and it ran and

drove good but it just didn't "do it" for me. We left. I was more interested in the Georgia car. I talked with seller extensively and he faxed me a lot of pictures. I decided to buy, hooked up the trailer and my sons and I went after it. It turned out to not be as good as I thought it would be so we came home empty. On the way home my son, who had been with me in Webster Groves, said "Dad, for the money I don't think you're going to find a better car than the one in Webster Groves". When we got to St Louis, we went by and could see it was still in garage but the lady wasn't home. I called her the next day and made an offer and she turned it down. I left it out there and couple days later she called me and said "come get it". April 2004 we went down and got it and nearly 31 years to the day we had a GTO again.

I put a Pypes exhaust system on it and a set of tires. It came from the factory as a bucket seat, column shift, no console car (one of reasons it didn't "do it" for me) so I put in a factory console and shifter. Other than that for the next 3 1/2 years just went to cruise-ins, shows and short trips figuring out what direction to go. Back in "the day" we hadn't been





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able to afford to take the Judge on any trips or vacations. It was just our daily driver and was never out of Missouri. So we decided, with this one, we liked driving the most.

With that in mind, the winter of 2007-08 I pulled engine and transmission. Went through engine. It had been running fine but I wanted to know "what was what". I rebuilt for little more power and able to run on premium pump gas. Had transmission gone through and pretty much inspected, rebuilt or replaced everything from radiator to rear end. I upgraded suspension, steering box, brakes, cooling system, starter, things that I thought would make it ride better, handle better and be as reliable as I could make it. The AC worked but I went through it anyway. In August 2008 we took it to Branson for "Hot August Nights Cruise and Show".

The remainder of the driving season of 2008 and 2009 we continued test trips and I did some more tweaking and changing.

In June 2010 we went on our first long distance trip. Hot Rod Magazine Power Tour which was 3400 miles from when we pulled out of garage until we pulled back in. We were headed to Newton, Iowa for start of Power Tour and didn't get out of Missouri before we broke down. I thought "OK, here it starts, just what I thought, this isn't going to work". A tire had separated (my fault, tires looked like new and probably had less than 5000 miles on them but were 6 years old) lesson learned. No other troubles on that trip.

Since then we've been on 2 more full "Hot Rod Magazine Power Tours", 1 "Cruisin" "The Coast" at Gulfport, extensive trip to Colorado ending at 2012 GTOAA Convention in Loveland (picture was taken at Visitors Center on the GTOAA cruise to Rocky Mountain Park)(after that trip, during winter of 2012-13 I swapped out 400 transmission for overdrive), GTOAA Regional Show & Cruise in Pontiac, Ill. in 2012, GTOAA Convention in Springfield, Ill. in 2017, POCI Convention in Wisconsin Dells and on to Upper Peninsula of





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Wisconsin and Michigan in 2018, GTOAA Route 66 Street Legends Cruise & on to Santa Monica and up the Pacific Coast Highway to Monterrey over to Sacramento and home on US 50 from Sacramento through Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Kansas & Missouri in 2018, GTOAA Convention in Lawrenceburg this year and numerous shorter cruise-ins and shows around home. We've logged over 40,000 miles since we bought the car and broke down one more time (since tire in 2010). An upper control arm bushing (again my fault, when I rebuilt front suspension I didn't replace a "self locking nut" that was no longer self locking) and the Goat has been in 28 states. Other than rock chips and a windshield rock chip the only damage we've incurred was a passenger door ding and that happened at a cruise-in at Jeff City by a fellow cruiser.

Only thing we have planned right now is GTOAA Regional at Pontiac in September but something will turn up in the future.

It's been a "hell of a good ride" and we've enjoyed every minute of it. I think it's actually been better than if we could have done it with the Judge back in the 70's because then it was just another car. Now, as you all know, you're constantly gettin thumbs-up, horns tooted and people, at anywhere you stop, wanting to talk about our cars.

