

Cheese Whiz

Pontiac's hot '63 "Swiss Cheese" Catalina

text and photography by Thomas Glatch

Back when stock cars were really stock, the racing was incredible. Whether on the ovals of NASCAR and USAC or the NHRA dragstrips, it was Ford and Mercury against

Chevy and Pontiac against Dodge and Plymouth. And when the dust settled, the victor was often Pontiac.

After dominating racing, Pontiac was predicted to continue its domination from 1961-'62 into 1963. Allen Hunt, writing in the July '63 issue of *Car Life* magazine, remarked, "There's no question that Pontiac is offering the most complete and carefully engineered dragstrip package coming out of Detroit this year. Not only have they lightened the weight radically, but the entire suspension system is specifically tuned for traction, the weight distribution is much better, and a number of improvements have been made." It looked like the best just got better.

Under the '63 hood was the familiar Pontiac Super Duty engine. The 421ci 390hp and 405hp Super Duty V-8s had the compression ratio raised to 12:1, with an ultrarare 13:1 engine offered to a few well-connected racers. Also new were better-flowing 9771980 heads with bigger ports. Electronic ignition was standard on the 390hp engines, with all other Super Duty mills needing a special order for this revolutionary option. To save weight, the bellhousing was an aluminum Ansen unit, and the cast-iron exhaust could be replaced with unusual, free-flowing aluminum units. The exhaust was a single, lightweight, large-bore tailpipe and muffler, which owners immediately discarded anyway. Officially rated at 405 hp, the 421 SD installed in the "Swiss Cheese" cars actually developed a world-beating 500-plus horsepower at 5,500 rpm. Owners generally ran the cast-iron headers, switching to the aluminum pieces

only for important final runs (the aluminum exhaust would actually be melting at the end of a 12-plus-second race).

Weight was the enemy, and the Catalina's diet continued in other serious ways. Racers could order an aluminum hood, front fenders, and front and rear bumpers. Aluminum was also used for the differential carrier, bumper brackets, radiator-core support, inner fenderwells, and the alternator bracket. Stripping all insulation, sealer, and sound deadening saved another 100 pounds. Finally, for the Catalina Swiss Cheese race cars, the sturdy box-section frame was radically lightened, with the lower edge of the "box" cut away and the sides of the frame bored with many large-diameter holes. These frames were so flimsy they had to be supported by 2x4s on the Pontiac, Michigan, assembly line until mated to the body. Allen Hunt in *Car Life* remarked, "The frame looks like so much Swiss cheese." The nickname stuck.

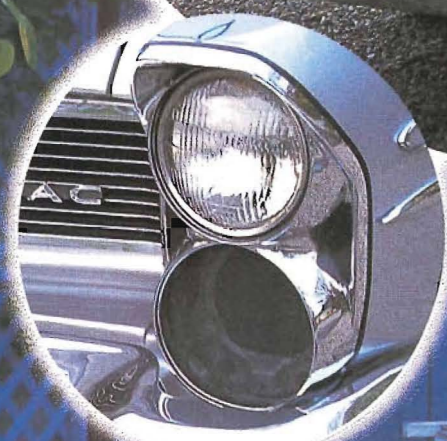
Getting the power to the ground included using 90/10 shocks in front and 10/90 shocks in back, along with softer coil springs to aid in weight transfer. The battery was also relocated to the trunk to further shift the weight to the rear tires, with a total weight distribution of 53.5/46.5 front to rear. Though common techniques today, the Super Duty suspension was revolutionary in 1963.

So the '63 Swiss Cheese Pontiac should have taken up where the '62 Super Duty left off. The '62 SD weighed in at more than 3,600 pounds and was starting to lose its edge. The superlight '63 was 3,363 pounds, and with its superior power and suspension, it should have continued the tradition. It didn't.

The year 1963 was a Mopar year, and Pontiac was no longer a contender. What happened? First, General Motors ended its support of all racing in January 1963. All U.S. manufacturers signed an antiracing agreement in 1957, but by the '60s most had ignored the pact. With threats of the government breaking up the General Motors giant, top management and the board of directors reinforced the racing ban in 1963. Only 12 Swiss Cheese cars were built before the January ban, all painted Frost Silver with blue interiors. With the end of factory support, the engineering needed to continually improve the SD ended.

Then there was the weight problem. Despite the heroic efforts used in the Swiss Cheese cars, the Pontiacs were still too heavy. The Mopars were smaller and, with unitbody construction, a few hundred pounds lighter. And every 100 pounds was worth about 0.10 seconds in e.t.

There was also the issue of delivering more than 500 hp through the 7-inch slicks of the era. Tom Hoover,



1963 Swiss Cheese Catalina
Owner: Judie Miller

Cheese Whiz

head of the Dodge Ramcharger team in the '60s, called racing on 7-inch slicks "like driving on ice." Hoover equipped his cars with automatic transmissions, which delivered less of a jolt to the slicks when the lights turned green. All Super Duties were equipped with four-speeds. *Car Life* magazine did a side-by-side test of two Max Wedge Dodges—one with an automatic and one with a four-speed. The slushbox proved to be 0.25 seconds quicker. The Mopars also had superior 51/49 weight distribution, which aided in shifting weight to the rear under acceleration. Even Pontiac's sophisticated suspension couldn't compete with that kind of advantage.

Finally, the NHRA didn't help. Originally intended to be a Super Stock racer, the Swiss Cheese Super Duty would have competed against the Z-II Chevys and Max Wedge Mopars. Instead, based on its weight and power, the Swiss Cheese Pontiac was placed in B/FX, which made it hopelessly outclassed.

Had the antiracing ban not intervened, perhaps Pontiac could have restored the Super Duty's superiority. Instead, the Swiss Cheese Catalinas became a fascinating close to Pontiac's era of domination.

The Van Winkle Pontiac

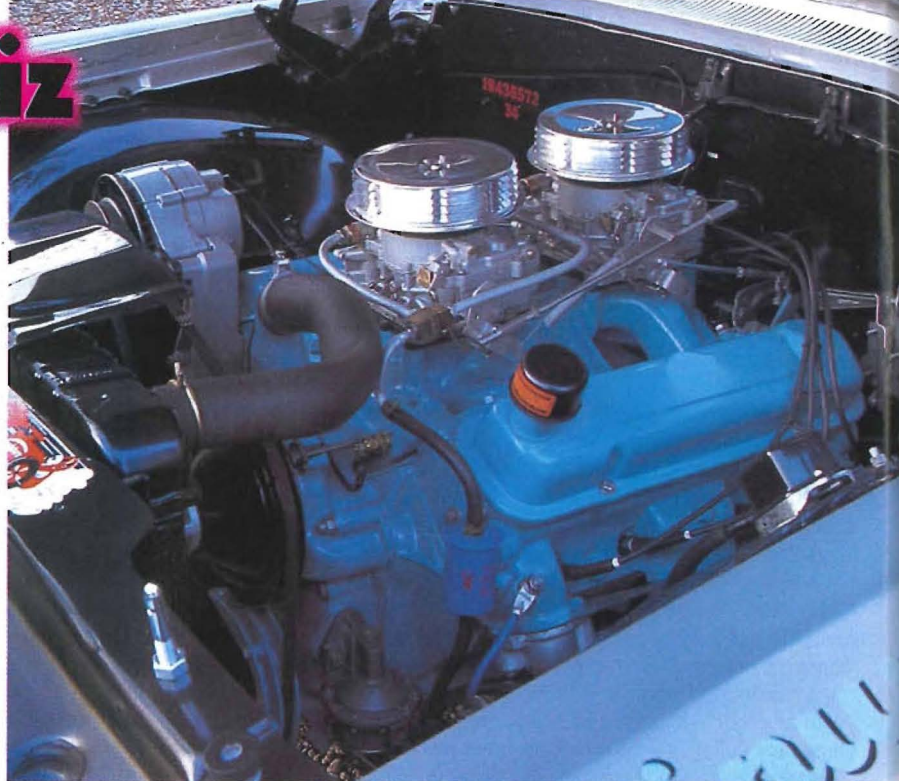
Only 12 '63 code 997 Swiss Cheese Super Duty Catalinas were built between January 9 and January 21 before the racing ban halted production. The super-powerful code 13-5 421 engine also ended production at the same time. Enough parts were left over to secretly build two more Super Duties after the ban, both painted Silver Mist Gray. Most of those original 12 cars went to well-known racers, such as Mickey Thompson, Arlen Vanke, Arnie "The Farmer" Beswick, and Royal Pontiac. The fifth car built, VIN 363P99733, was sent to Van Winkle Pontiac, a Dallas dealership. General Manager Monk King used racing to promote Pontiacs and his dealership. He also spent a few years working with the legendary Smokey Yunick, whose Pontiacs dominated NASCAR for years. He knew Pontiacs, and he had connections.

King raced the Van Winkle Super Duty throughout Texas and neighboring states with fair success. It changed hands many times over the years in Texas, finally ending up in the collection of Pontiac expert Bill Blair. It was purchased in 1988 by Judie Miller, a Midwest musclecar enthusiast. Though the dealer who sold the car claimed restoration was supposed to be nearly complete, "it was only about one-third done" and Miller had to invest much more time and money into the car. John Demorrow of Three Oaks, Michigan, was given the job of restoring the Van Winkle Pontiac to its original state, with Top Gun Auto, also of Three Oaks, doing the paint. While the engine and most of the car is original, "finding the rest of the parts needed was a long, involved process," said Demorrow. "We had to look for a lot of small parts. For example, the aluminum exhaust manifolds and collectors were very difficult to locate."

Attention to detail went as far as the original window decals and the Frost Silver paint. "Today's paint is too glossy, compared to '63 vintage paint," said Demorrow. "We gave it a bit of 'orange peel' and actually took down the gloss a little to match the original paint." The lettering was completely done by hand and brushed with the quick one-shot method, just like the original.

It took almost a decade to do right, but the Van Winkle Pontiac is a dazzling and accurate look at the last of the great Pontiac factory racers.

MCR



VAN WINKLE '63 PONTIAC CATALINA SUPER DUTY

SWISS CHEESE

ENGINE	
Type	Overhead valve cast-iron V-8
Model	13-5
Bore & Stroke	4.093 in x 4.00 in
Displacement	421 ci
Horsepower (factory rating)	405 at 5,600 rpm
Torque	425 at 4,400 rpm
Compression ratio	12:1
Camshaft	McKeller No. 10
Carburetion	2x4-bbl Carter

BODY / VIN TAG	
O1 B	Pontiac, Michigan
Style	63-2347
Body	PO 8180
Trim	233
Paint	"Special"
ACC	2H-5A
Body	Fisher 39-2
Build Date	January 10, 1963
VIN	363P99733
Engineering Number	3341

SWISS CHEESE EQUIPMENT

- Aluminum front fenders
- Aluminum hood (dealer-installed scoop)
- Aluminum inner fenderwells
- Aluminum radiator support
- Aluminum front and rear bumpers
- Aluminum bumper brackets
- Aluminum alternator bracket
- Aluminum exhaust manifolds
- Aluminum collectors
- Single exhaust (passenger side)
- 421 Super Duty engine 13-5 code
- Three-speed transmission (four-speed dealer-installed)
- 3.90 or 4.1 0 rear-end ratio
- 14-in wheels (15x7-in NASCAR wheels, dealer-installed)
 - Battery in trunk
 - Radio delete
 - Heater delete
- Sealer and sound deadening delete
- Frame bored with large holes
- Ansen clutch shield (dealer-installed)
- Special Silver Frost paint code A3
- Blue interior code C223
- 8.00-14-in blackwall tires (7.75-15-in front and 9.0-28-15-in M&H rear, dealer-installed)
- Hurst shifter and linkage (dealer-installed)

- RESTORED BY
- John Demorrow, Three Oaks, Michigan
 - Top Gun Auto, Three Oaks, Michigan
 - Pro One Polishing, Hobart, Indiana
 - Ames Performance Engineering, Marlborough, New Hampshire
 - East West Auto Parts, Tulsa, Oklahoma

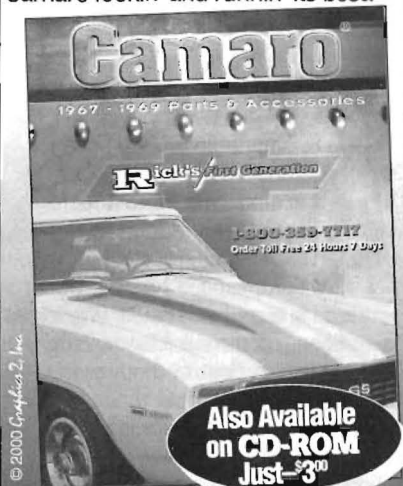
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