

Doing It Right

Is Greg Johnson's 1972 T/A the finest Firebird restoration in the world?

Text and photography by Thomas Glatch

Buying that first car is one of those life-changing experiences that is never forgotten. For most of us, that first car was more trash than treasure. But Greg Johnson did things differently. He saved his money and bought the best car of its time, a '72 Trans Am.

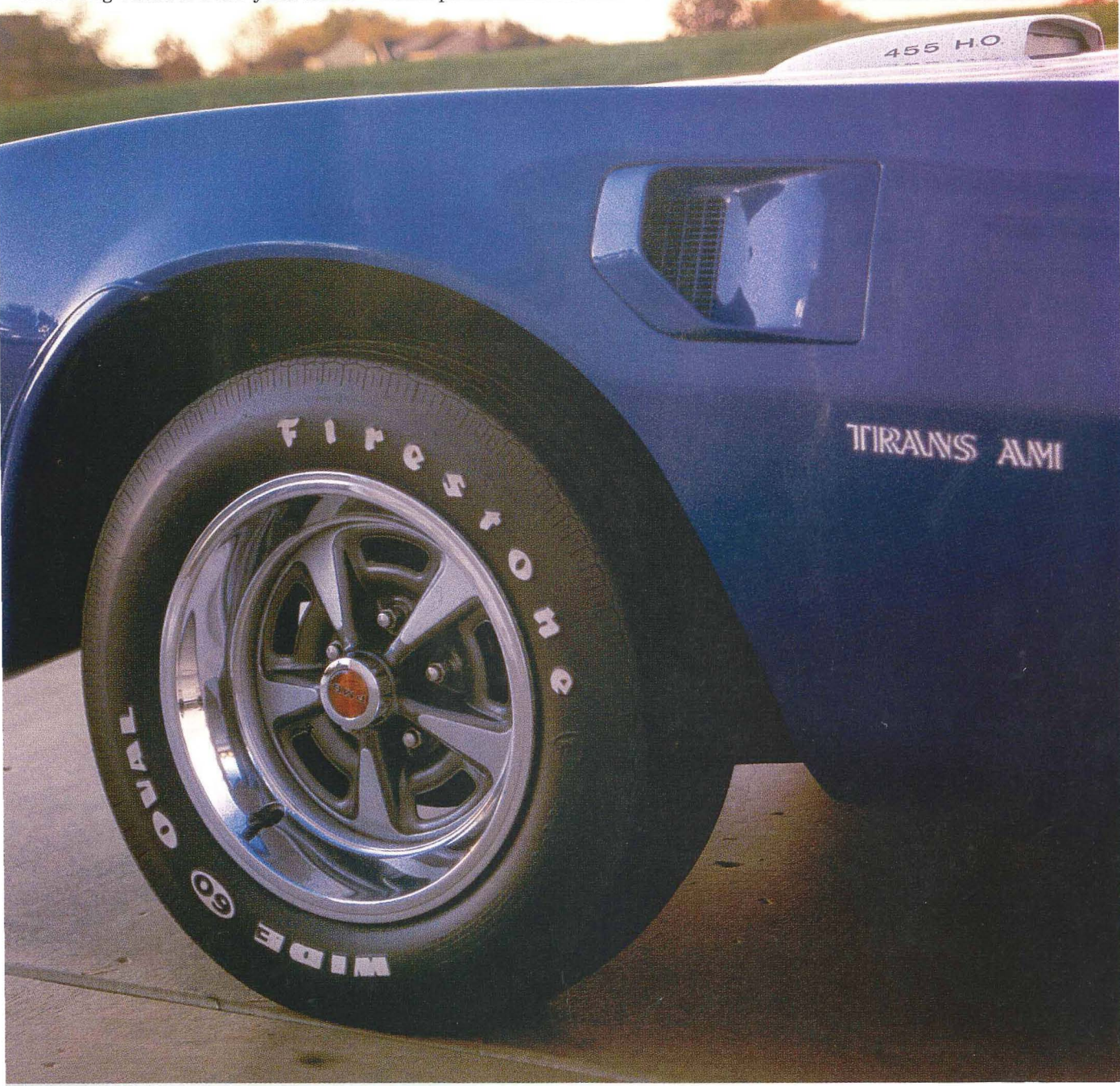
Doing things right seems to be a habit with Greg. His first car was not only a gorgeous Trans Am – it was also a very rare four-speed version dressed in Lucerne Blue. Greg owned it a few years before

getting into big-block Corvettes, which he bought in rough condition and then restored to world-class standards. Still, the thought of that first car haunted him.

"It took 8½ years to find another '72 Trans Am with a four-speed and white interior," Greg says. "I knew this was the car I wanted, and I knew sooner or later I'd find one." While waiting to find his special T/A, he amassed a collection of N.O.S. parts he knew would be needed for

a perfect restoration. Finally, in the fall of 1999, Greg discovered an exact match to that original Trans Am. The new T/A, a rust-free example with just 27,000 miles, was soon stripped and on a rotisserie.

While no restoration project is easy, in the Corvette world at least there is voluminous documentation on how the cars were assembled. Greg's Trans Am would have had far less documentation had it not been for some fortuitous circumstances. Before he sold his first





1972 455 HO Trans Am

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Trans Am, Greg took extensive photographs of his unmolested car inside and out. He also has a friend who worked on the Norwood assembly line in the 1970s, so he had a source of information few others have.

Armed with the experience of a number of Corvette restorations and the unique references he had, Greg attempted to bring his Trans Am to the same condition his first car had as it sat on the show-room floor. When Greg does a restoration, he does more than write large-denomination checks to a restoration shop. Instead, he does all the work himself or occasionally relies on help from a few talented friends. Body, paint, upholstery,

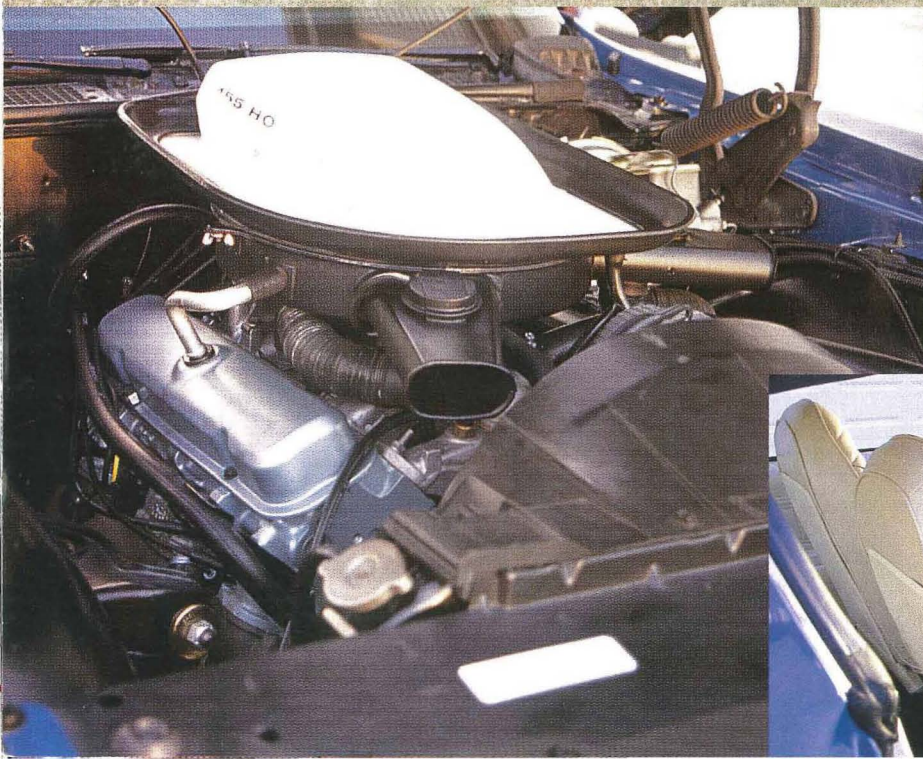
engine rebuilding – you name it, Greg can usually handle it. Not only is there a greater level of satisfaction when the job is complete, but also there is no one to blame if something is not right. On this project he enlisted the help of Bob Golenia to help assemble the car, Marty Zylokowski to apply the paint, and Fast Times Motorworks in Morton Grove, Illinois, for the 455 engine. Bob Johnson, Greg's brother, and Steve Welter supplied extra muscle when necessary. Greg also had the support and understanding of his wife, Mary, and his two young daughters.

When we first encountered Greg and his blue T/A at the Trans Am Nationals last year, the beauty of his car blew us

away. Then we found out what a rare piece he owns. Of the 1,286 Trans Ams built in 1972, only 458 were four-speed cars. Cameo White T/As outnumbered Lucerne Blue cars four to one, so there were about 91 four-speed cars painted blue. Then there is the code 121 Ivory vinyl interior. Pontiac decided to begin offering the white upholstery in the spring of 1972 along with the traditional blue or black options. But the Norwood plant went on strike in April of that year and because the work stoppage lasted into the 1973 model year, no more '72 cars were built. It is estimated there were no more than 10 or 11 Lucerne Blue four-speed Trans Ams built with the Ivory interior! Greg never realized what a rare bird his first car was, but he certainly knows now. Finally, when he offered to share the details of his restoration with us, we knew we had found a true Pontiac enthusiast.

Greg's first car was truly something to remember. His replacement Trans Am is something truly unforgettable. "As I got into the project," Greg says, "I kept thinking 'If I'm going to do this, I might as well do it right.'" That's an understatement if we ever heard one.

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The Devil's In The Details



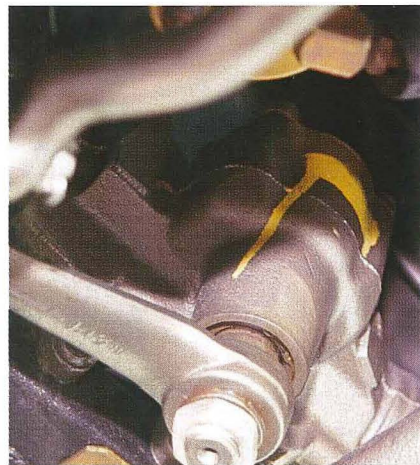
Is the "perfect restoration" possible? This 1972 Trans Am comes close!

Imagine working on GM's Norwood, Ohio, assembly line back in the early 1970s. Firebirds and Camaros travel by at a rate of 50 to 60 cars per hour. Your job is to inspect one or two critical components and make sure they are torqued to specifications. Once checked to your satisfaction, you dab a spot of paint with a brush near those components to signify they meet specs. The job must be done properly since the safety of the people who will ultimately occupy this car is at stake, but there is hardly time to be neat. Along that line, there are other inspectors checking different components. They use different color paint to show who did the job.

When an automobile is restored to as-delivered condition, these marks made on

Text and photography by Thomas Glatch

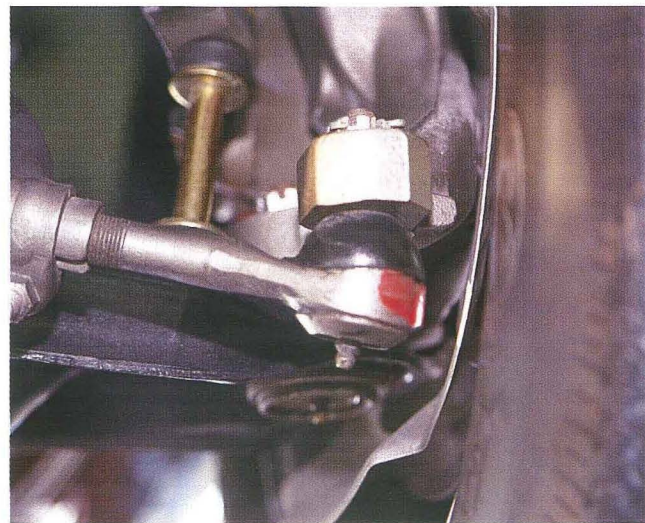
the car during the assembly process should be reproduced. Greg Johnson, who owns the magnificent '72 Trans Am in this issue (see page 41), spent years restoring Corvettes and winning the prestigious Bloomington Gold Certification for his work. Corvette restoration is dedicated to bringing the car back to the way it looked as it rolled off the assembly line. And that includes duplicating overspray and gaffes that occur on an automobile assembly line. All of the experience Greg has gained over the years restoring Corvettes to museum quality was applied to the restoration of his Trans Am. He was kind enough to share with us some of the tips, techniques and details that went into the restoration of his amazing '72 Trans Am.



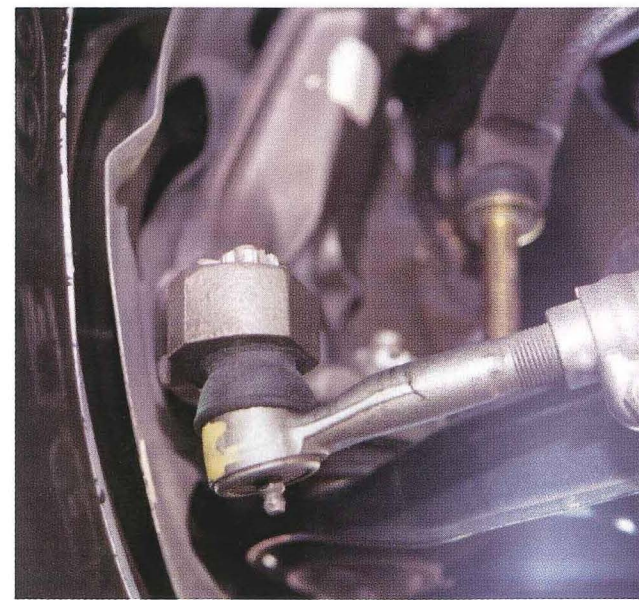
There is a yellow mark on the steering box indicating proper torque on the steering arm.



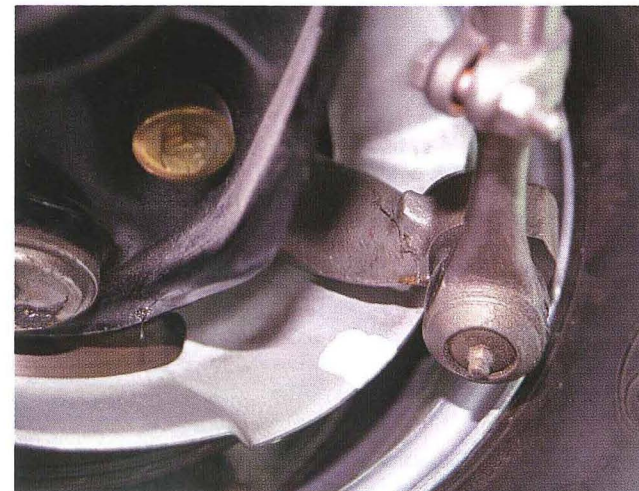
On the driver-side spindle there is a green mark near the top ball joint and another green mark near the tie-rod adjustment.



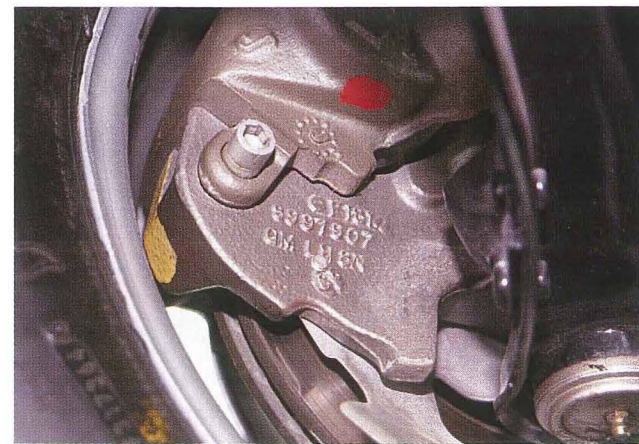
On the same spindle, there is a red mark on the tie-rod end.



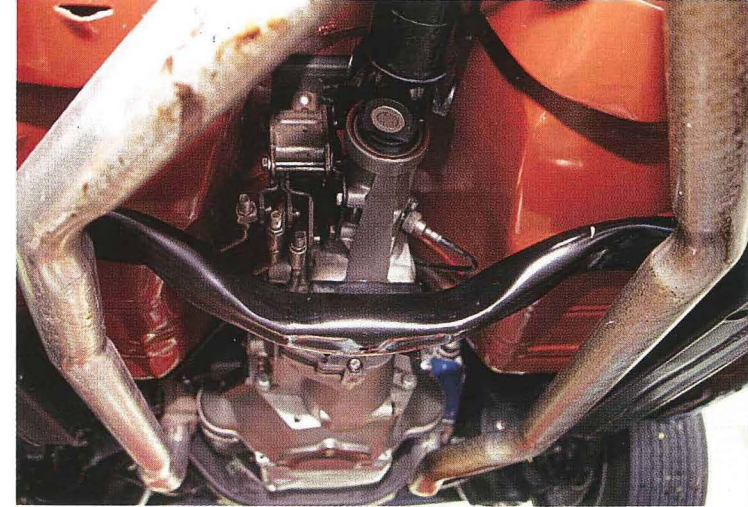
The passenger-side spindle has a green mark on the tie-rod end and a white mark near the top ball joint.



There is a white mark on the brake backing plate indicating the lower ball-joint torque was inspected.



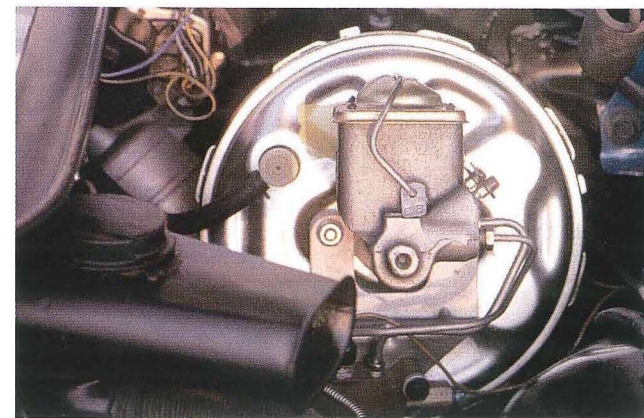
A red mark on the brake caliper and a yellow mark on the spindle show the upper and lower bolts were inspected. All cast-iron suspension components were blasted with stainless steel shot to achieve a natural finish and left uncoated.



The entire underside of the unibody is primer. Greg used a polyurethane paint for added protection from nicks. Although he chose not to, he could have dusted some Lucerne Blue overspray on the outer edges of the underbody, caused when the rocker panels were painted in the factory spray booth. Aluminum components, like the transmission case and the bellhousing, were shot-blasted to a natural finish and left uncoated.

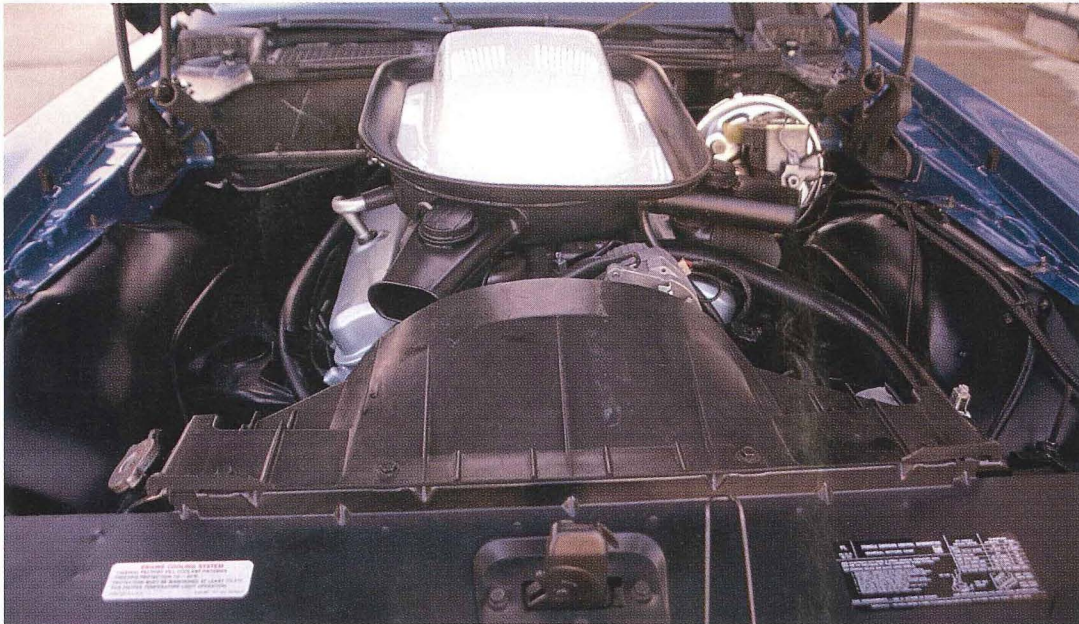


These white inspection marks are on the rear U-joint straps.

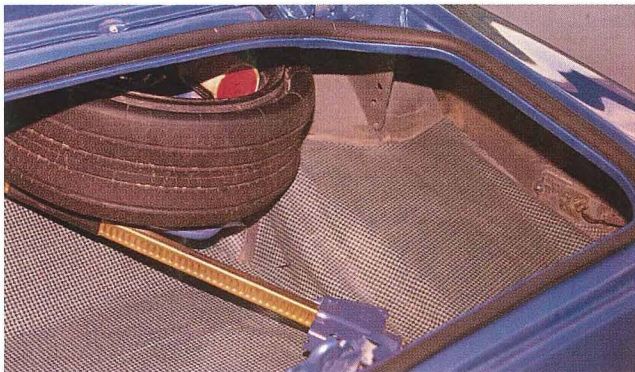


The power-brake booster is the proper cadmium finish. Note the small metal tag on the master cylinder cover clamp, which is stamped "EB" on Greg's car, is a date code. Greg bought four N.O.S. master cylinders just to get these tags.

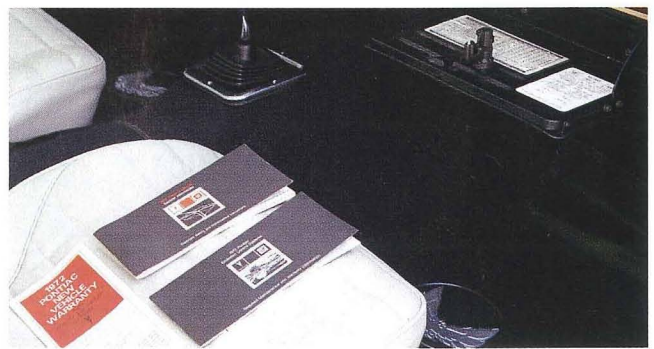
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Greg matched the "X" chalk mark on the firewall to those on his original '72 Trans Am. He shot-blasted the exhaust manifolds to the original finish and left them uncoated. This is correct as delivered from the factory. The correct emissions and cooling system labels are mounted on the radiator support.



The trunk is finished the correct speckle paint. Note the correct N.O.S. red canister on the "Space Saver" spare. These are incredibly difficult to find.

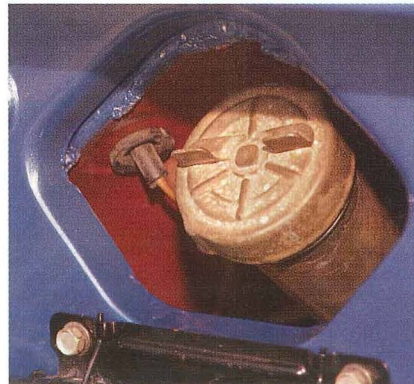


Greg's T/A is furnished with all the manuals, warranty card and maintenance information that a brand-new Firebird would have been delivered with. Also note the correct stickers on the glovebox door.



The Trans Am is shod in the correct Firestone "Wide Oval" 60-series tires (these are reproductions).

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On the Norwood assembly line, the Firebird's unibody was painted in primer before the outer body panels were installed. Note that the inner body surrounding the fuel filler is primer, not body color.



Even the headlights are the correct N.O.S. Guide "Power Beam" lamps. It's details like this that elevates Greg's Trans Am to the level of a Corvette Bloomington Gold Certification.

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