“Has that MG got a Hemi…..? No an all-aluminum Fireball V8!!!!…”

By Philip Wiltshire

Recently, the Society of Automobile Engineers arranged a visit to the GM Heritage Center in Sterling Heights. I had heard about this kind of skunk works where a great many cars and items of automotive interest are stored in a factory unit. Visitation is limited. The Center is located just 2 miles from my plant, so I signed Ted Hight and myself up for the visit.

Once signed in at the Center, it was clear that this facility is much more than just a storage depot. Basically it’s an 80,000 square foot box factory unit containing a broad selection of mainstream and not-so-mainstream GM vehicles. There is a revolving collection of 200+ GM vehicles there at anytime, and it’s pure luck to see something that might be a personal favorite for you.

This is how it was for me. I’m always interested in any automotive history, but we turned a corner in the collection and came face to face with an Oldsmobile Jetfire sedan. In my 18 years in the US, I had never seen one before and was happy to see a production vehicle whose engine was the forefather of the MGB GT V8.

It is well documented how Buick/Oldsmobile Engineering designed and then introduced an all aluminium (Reynolds 356 silicon aluminium alloy) engine in the 1961 Olds F85 and Buick Special (with significant tweaks to differentiate the engine between the marques). Following on from this, the Olds Jetfire (1963) I saw at the GM Heritage Center, was introduced with an all-aluminum Fireball V8 Turbo Rocket engine. It’s name sure sounds hunkier than a Hemi… This was America’s first production car with a fluid-injected, turbo-charged V8 engine.

Anyway, after 750,000 units were produced, America and GM went back to cast iron; the muscle car era was upon us and engine internal strength was an issue. Plus, the advanced coolants that are standard in today’s cars and auto stores were, in the early sixties, expensive and only to be found at GM dealerships. So folk filled them up with water, releasing aluminium-silicone oxide from the metal, which quickly clogged the radiator leading to massive engine over-heating.

The legend has it that in 1963 William Martin-Hurst (the Managing Director of Rover in the UK) saw the small V8 engine at Mercury Marine. He had it shipped back to Rover as a possible unit that could re-energize Rover’s fortunes as a “middle-class” range of up-market vehicles. A license was agreed with GM and much extra work to the engines’ design carried out to make it more robust to manufacture and more reliable.

After the engine debuted in Rover vehicles, British tuner shops got the unit and tried it in various English sport cars. The first Rover V8 launch (The Rover 3.5 Litre P5B) coincided with the introduction of the 6 cylinder MGC and MGC GT and this was MG’s focus in the late sixties.

Ken Costello had one such tuner shop. In 1970/71, he dropped the V8 first into an MGB then a BGT. He made many Costello conversions (in 1986, I had the offer of one and turned it down – what an idiot!!!) MG eventually dropped the MGC and in an effort to refresh the very old B model, offered a V8 version from August 1973. They modified the body shells of MGB GT’s , only made right hand drive cars and only marketed them in the UK. Between 1973 and 1976, just 2591 production MGB GT V8’s were manufactured.

Of course, there is a thriving market for V8 conversions; we have some fine examples in our club. Nearly all conversions are made to B Roadsters; why MG never exported them to the US is beyond me. I often speculate about the fortunes of MG if V8’s had been exported to the US……

So, yeah, it’s not a Hemi; that thing’s got an all-aluminum Fireball V8.

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