

Little Known Facts about Pontiacs – Number 3

“The Pontiac Silver Streak”

by Bill McIntosh

As all Pontiac faithful know, the two most iconic images associated with the Pontiac are its “Indian chief” and the “silver streaks.” While a future article will tackle the subject of Chief Pontiac, this article deals with the latter. Pontiac enthusiasts know that the “silver streaks” refer to either the chrome or the stainless steel trim running down the center of both the hood and the trunk, do you know who designed them? When were they used? When and why were they discontinued?

In late December 1934, Harry J. Klingler, general manager of Pontiac, assembled the automotive press corps to announce the introduction of the 1935 Pontiac. Dubbed “the most beautiful thing on wheels,” the 1935 model was indeed dramatically new compared the 1934 model. The new Pontiacs had all-steel-roofed bodies (so called “Turret-Top”), built-in luggage space, front-opening “suicide” doors, concealed spare tires, “vee” windshields, and hydraulic brakes. Offering little-changed six and eight cylinder engines, the car did have the Dubonnet front suspension on deluxe models, and an I-beam front axle on the least expensive model.

As impressive as this new Pontiac was from an engineering standpoint, it also ushered in Pontiac silver streak styling. As reported in *Automobile Topics*, they described this styling as “a wealth of horizontal lines running along the hood and trunk giving an effect of fleetness without awkwardness, while the vertical lines of the radiator grill create the impression of narrow sleekness.” The automotive press collectively concluded that the silver streak styling was frightfully daring and unusually effective. The idea of chrome trim strips had been conceived by Frank Hershey (a protégé of Harley Earl) who worked in Earl’s Art and Colour studio. Hershey’s idea was inspired by a photograph of a Napier automobile he had seen in the magazine *L’Auto Carrosserie*.



The First Silver Streak Pontiac – 1935 Model

The silver streak strips took many forms and designs, and were either chrome-plated or stainless steel but always stayed with the general approach of the original design. The greatest deviation from the original concept was in the 1954, 1955 and 1956 model years where, instead of a cluster of strips centered on the hood and trunk, the silver streaks were in two parallel pairs. Silver streaks were a remarkably long-running phenomenon used on Pontiacs from 1935 through 1956 model years -- 19 production years (Pontiacs were not produced during WWII years of 1943 through 1945.)



The Last Silver Streak Pontiac – 1956 Model

Surprisingly, the “Silver Streak” moniker was not used as a model, engine or other name on the cars themselves until 1948, when the name “Silver Streak 8” (the badge actually read “Silver8Streak”) appeared on models equipped with an eight-cylinder engine. This badge continued to be used on 1949 and 1950 model years, but was dropped in 1951 in favor of the badge “Pontiac Eight.”

The silver streak era abruptly ended with the 1957 model year -- and the individual responsible was the recently arrived new general manager Semon E. (Bunkie) Knudsen. It was the summer of 1956 and the 1957 Pontiac was just a month away from production. He walked around the new model and pointed to the silver streaks and said, “Take those things off.” The immediate response to that command was, “But it was your Dad that put them on!” A former general manager of Pontiac was “Big” Bill Knudsen, father of Bunkie. Bunkie said again, “Take them off.” The era of the silver streak Pontiac had suddenly ended.