

A Guy Named Nudie

by Tim Dye



Nudie Cohen

This story touches on a lot of things and covers a lot of ground. I could not come up with a title that encompasses them all, instead settling on one that I thought would grab your attention. I will, however, not leave you hanging too long. However, you can bet that there will be a Pontiac somewhere at the heart of the matter.

There were many discussions about cars in my family when I was growing up and some of the details of those discussions I remember to this day. Oddly enough, this story has its roots in one such conversation.

My mother worked for a time as a waitress at a Howard Johnson's restaurant in our home town of Lima, Ohio. It was located where interstate Highway 75 crosses state Highway 309. The time period was around 1967; just before my little brother was born in April of the following year. I would have been 7 years old at the time and one of my favorite things to do was count the tips that came from Mom's apron pockets each evening when she came home. It was mostly change in those days, not much of the green stuff. She would have a story once in a while, mostly about customers, either ones that were extremely generous tippers or those that were extremely rude. I don't remember now the details of any of those stories except one and it was about a car, imagine that!

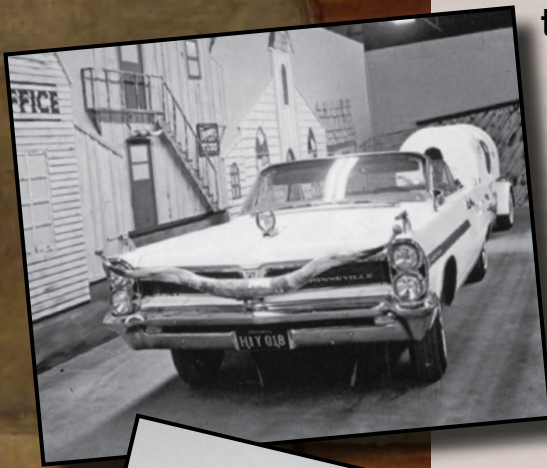
A custom car of some sort had pulled into Howard Johnson's parking lot and the passengers who are now forgotten entered for a meal. Mom said "everyone went outside to look at the car." I remember two

things she said about it; there were silver dollars lining the interior and a pair of large horns mounted on the front. These were not the kind of horns that honked or go beep, but rather the kind that came from a long horned steer.

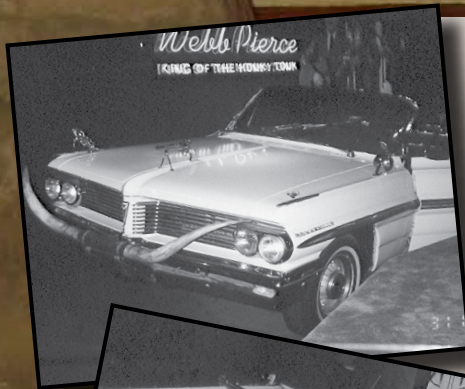
For most people this would have been the end of that story, but not me. Years later I would be watching a re-run of the Beverly Hillbillies and in this particular episode a rich and flamboyant relative would come to visit the Clampets. By this time I was a dyed-in-the-wool Pontiac enthusiast, and immediately identified the car as a 1964 Bonneville convertible. It was white, customized with long horned steer horns on the front and guns mounted in several places and silver dollars throughout the interior. Jethro thought this would be an excellent chic magnet and when nobody was looking got behind the wheel and took off. He must of been right because in a later scene it showed him driving down the road with the car full of girls. Of course when Jed found out, Jethro had to turn the car back over to its rightful owner and get rid of all the girls, poor Jethro.

Upon seeing this I recalled the story Mom had told and I thought this must be the car she saw.

There could not be two cars like this, right? Sometime after that we went to Irvine, California for the POCI national convention. One of the stops was the Roy Rogers and Dale Evans museum in Victorville, California. There to my surprise on display was a white Bonneville



Left: Five pictures of the 1963 Bonneville convertible Nudie Cohen customized for Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. This car could often be seen in parades as three of the photos show. The other two pictures are from post cards showing the car on display at the Roy Rogers Museum in California.



convertible with horns, guns and silver dollars on the interior. Roy and Dale had used it for a parade car. The only thing, this was a 1963 not a '64 like I had seen on the Beverly Hillbillies. I still did not think much of it other than it was neat to see this car in person and that it was a Pontiac.

In recent years a couple of things have happened that brought the cars back to my attention. First, the 1963 Bonneville along with the entire Roy Rogers Museum moved from California to Branson, Missouri. Then in early 2006 the 1964 car sold on January 24th at the RM auction in Phoenix, Arizona for \$214,500.

This prompted me to ask my Mom about her recollection of the car she had seen and try to figure out which of the two it was. She did not know which one it was, but she was a big country music fan in those days and says if it would have been Roy Rogers car she would have remembered that. That being said, I assumed it must have been the 64 she saw, it was made for Audrey Williams, mother of Hank Williams Jr and later it would be his car. She said Jr. was nobody back then and it made sense that it was his car. The plot

Left: The top two pictures show the 1962 Pontiac that once belonged to country music star Webb Pierce. The third photo from the top shows the 1964 once belonging to Hank Williams Jr. This was the one in an episode of the Beverly Hillbillies. Fourth from the top is a 1958 Pontiac customized by Nudie. This is the oldest car I could find that he did and may be his first. I have yet to find out who he did it for. The bottom photo shows a 1960 Pontiac in a parade, I have no information on this one either.

thickens; my Mom must have thought about it awhile and dug up some pictures she had taken on a trip to Nashville. She emailed me pictures of the car she thought she had seen, it was on display at the Country Music Hall of Fame Museum. There it was; guns, horns, silver dollars and all, but hold the horses, it was a white Pontiac Bonneville convertible alright, but it was a 1962.

This was too much, now there were three cars. I was content in my knowledge of the two cars but this third one threw me over the edge. I just had to do some research to find out where these cars came from. The '62 was made for Webb Pierce another country music star of the 1950s and '60s. It has been on display at the Country Music Hall of Fame Museum since 1994 but has since been donated to the museum by the family in 2005. These cars were all very similar in design and were all Pontiacs so it would seem that they all came from one source. I hit the internet to get to the bottom of it and found Nudie Cohen had designed these three and fifteen others. From what I could tell, all were Pontiacs except two. These were both Cadillacs, one for Elvis and another for his wife. The Cadillac for Bobbie, Nudie's wife was a 1975 and probably the last car he customized. The oldest Pontiac was a 1958 and



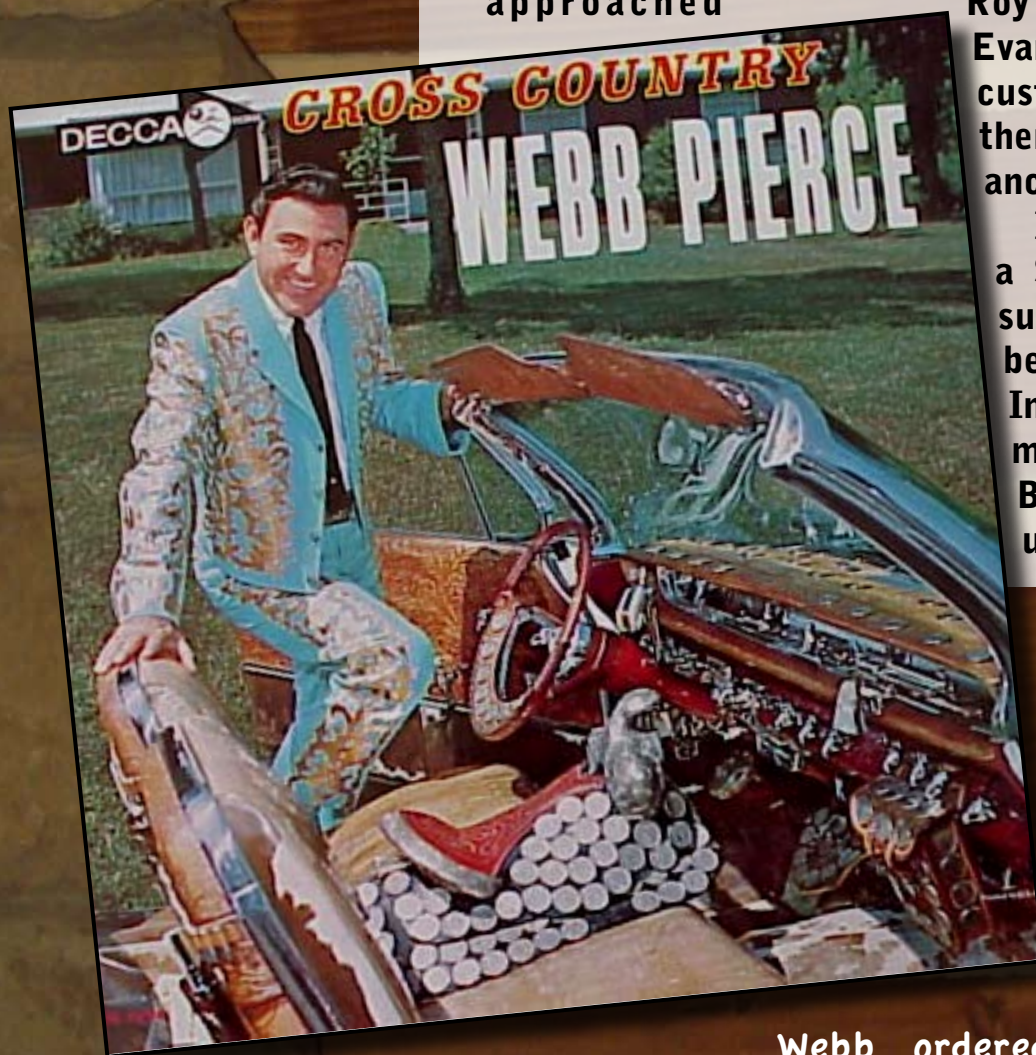
Left: The top picture shows a Nudie Cohen custom 1966 Pontiac that appeared in an episode of Batman. Cliff Robertson portrayed the villain "Shame". The second picture depicts a 1968 Pontiac during the filming of the movie "Head" featuring the Monkees. This was the newest Pontiac I could find that Nudie did.

the newest one a 1968, all white convertibles. Most of his clients were in the country music business. This is because Nudie was the tailor for many of country music's biggest stars.

He was born in Kiev, Russia in 1902, and decided he would become a tailor. He moved to the United States in the 1930s, traveling until he ended up in New York. There he started off making G-Strings for show girls. In the early 1940s he moved to California with his wife Bobbie where he started making clothes out of his garage. Folks like Spade Cooly, Cliffie Stone, Lefty Frizzell, Tex Williams and his band gave him a chance that set him on his course. Nudie then moved to a shop on the corner of Victory and Vineland in North Hollywood, California. In the early 1950s he approached

Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, becoming their custom tailor, suiting them for every appearance.

In 1957 Nudie made a \$10,000 gold lame' suit for Elvis which became very famous. In 1963 the shop was moved to Lankershim Blvd. Here he continued to clothe a who's



This is an album cover from Webb Pierce. It is a good shot of the interior of his 1962 Pontiac. It was said that

Webb ordered a new suit of clothes from Nudie everytime he had a number 1 song.

who of country music singers and actors such as John Wayne, Gene Autry, Cher, Ronald Reagan, Elton John, Robert Mitchum, Tony Curtis, Glenn Campbell, Hank Snow, Porter Wagoner, Pat Buttram and many more. Nudie is credited with being the first man to put rhinestones on clothing.

Nudie died in 1984 at the age of 81. His wife and granddaughter kept the shop open for another ten years before closing the doors. He left behind a legacy of clothing and cars. I don't know exactly how he got into customizing cars. I can only guess that one of his customers asked him if he would do a little work on the interior. Since Nudie was a tailor, this is the part of his cars where most of the time was spent. The exterior would get some guns and horseshoes mounted here and there, and of course the steer horns on the front, but it was the interior where nearly every square inch got the Nudie touch. Cowhide seat covers, a pistol for a shifter, a saddle for a console and of course leather door panels with inlaid silver dollars everywhere. Roy Rogers 1963 Bonneville is said to have 500 silver dollars on the interior.

Many of the cars went to famous people and many would show up in movies and television shows. I already mentioned the 1964 that was on the Beverly Hillbillies, then there was a 1966 that was in an episode of Batman. It belonged to the villain "Shame" played by actor Cliff Robertson. There was a 1968 Pontiac in a Monkee's movie named "Head", I will have to admit I never heard of that one until I uncovered it in my research.

A lot of this information was new to me and as I researched, I found more and more. I still have questions such as, how were Pontiacs picked as the subjects for Nudie's customizing? Now that we know Nudie did 18 different cars, and most all of them predating 1967 we may never know for sure which one it was that my Mom saw at the Howard Johnson's in Lima, Ohio. As with most things that I look into, there is always more to it than you think, that's what makes it so interesting. I am sure we will run across more information over time, and who knows, maybe we will see one of Nudie's Cowboy Cars in person as we pursue and preserve Pontiac history.



Nudie chats with Audie Murphy in his shop. Audie is one of many stars Nudie designed cloths for.