

**T**he Bandit Run is an annual driving event which pays tribute to the now-classic 1977 *Smokey and The Bandit* film starring Burt Reynolds and his iconic black 1977 Pontiac Trans Am. First conceived in 2007 by mega-enthusiast Dave Hall (owner of Restore A Muscle Car of Lincoln, Nebraska) together with David Hershey, its main goal has been to bring together a multitude of like-minded enthusiasts for a multi-state caravan — sometimes even retracing the exact same route traveled in the film from Texarkana, Texas to Atlanta, Georgia.

More-recent gatherings have forged new, different routes and experiences, added more participants, and welcomed look-alike players to help bring a greater level of fun to the caravan.

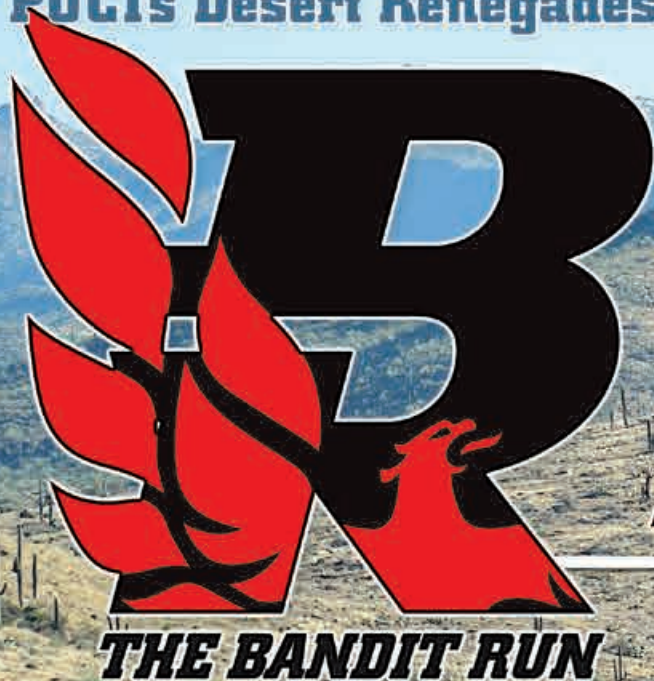
Even with the recent passing of star Burt Reynolds, the event's popularity hasn't waned. As evidenced, a group of seven cars from

our Phoenix, Arizona-based Desert Renegades Chapter tagged along for this year's 13th Annual Bandit Run festivities, held June 22-29.

While two of our group had participated in previous Bandit Runs, this would mark my first time. Riding together with my 21-year-old daughter Julia, we would soon become part of a 135-car procession of Trans Ams, Firebirds and a few other enthusiast vehicles.

This year's agenda called for "Runners" to first converge in Fort Worth, Texas for a week-long trek to Kansas City, Missouri. Pre-planned overnight stops would take us through Fort Smith, Arkansas and Branson, Missouri. Along the way, we'd be joined by some of the other famous characters from the film, including cosplayers *The Snowman* with his beer-hauling 18-wheeler, and an endearing "sumbitch" *Sheriff Buford T. Justice!*

**POCI's Desert Renegades members high-tail it to Texas!**



# **BANDIT RUNNIN' 2019**

**by Tom Knecht**  
photos by Julia Knecht & Tom Knecht





Our Arizona contingent of Pontiacs included:

- Tim Blattner, with his Martinique Blue 1978 Trans Am W72
- Marc Shutro, with his Starlight Black 1978 Trans Am 403
- Sean Fowler (a previous Bandit Runner), with his Starlight Black 1979 Trans Am 403
- Mike Naegeli (also a previous Bandit Runner), with his Atlantis Blue 1979 Trans Am 403 (Mike's co-pilot for the trip was Justin Fowler — no relation to Sean.)
- Brandon Kachel, with his 730-horsepower 535-cubed Buccaneer Red 1973 Trans Am (*at right*). (Brandon's co-pilot for the trip was lifelong friend Joe Gust, who flew from Minnesota to join us. Brandon had earlier purchased his Trans Am from event organizer Dave Hall's personal collection.)
- Paul Albinger (who was the focus of a recent "Dealership Memories" story here in *Smoke Signals*), with his Carousel Red 1969 Firebird convertible
- Tom Knecht (that's *me*, along with a very-willing 21-year-old daughter, Julia, as my co-pilot), with a Starlight Black 1977 Trans Am 400
- Pontiac fanatic John Kintonis (joined by son Michael) provided our "chaser car" with backup parts, tools and gear for the trip.
- Finally, club member Sam Hudson flew into Dallas and spent the first part of the Bandit Run sharing co-pilot seats with Marc, Tim and Sean. (Sam recently found and re-purchased his high school-era second-gen Trans Am, but for this trip he brought just a pair of front spindles in case they were needed. Funny note here, he went to the wrong airport for his return flight, but caught himself before getting out of the car. ...It's a *Southwest Airlines* thing, I guess.)



In a stroke of coincidence and desperation, each of our Trans Ams (with the exception of Paul's '69 Firebird) were "finished" and deemed roadworthy only the night before our scheduled departure. Special thanks to Tim, Frank Gostyla and Justin for their hard work in getting our cars ready. I think Tim had only four hours of sleep during the two days prior to our trip!

We officially began our trek by gathering at a Denny's Restaurant on the outskirts of Phoenix at 7:00am on Thursday, June 20. Each car had a walkie-talkie in case our mini-caravan was to become separated or if someone should experience a breakdown. We decided to take the scenic ten-hour route through Payson and Heber (in eastern Arizona) before cruising through Holbrook and Albuquerque, NM, en route to Amarillo, Texas for our first overnight stop.







The 10-hour first day turned into a *Gilligan's Island* “three-hour tour” kind of day. We only got as far as a half-hour outside of Payson before we experienced 200R4 transmission shift issues and a fried distributor cap.

Pulling off the highway, we were visited by an Arizona Department of Public Safety (DPS) trooper who took some “staged” speeding ticket pictures of our group with his lights a-blasting. (Little did he know, we probably deserved a few “real” tickets with Brandon and Sean burying their needles a few times along the way!)

We requested a lights-on escort back to Payson to acquire the necessary repair parts, but that was a “no go.” Well, at least we asked!

After an hour or so we were back on the road and able to meet up with Steve Wentworth — otherwise known as “Las Vegas Steve” — together with his wife, Sallie, and their Starlight Black 1978 T/A 403.

After a quick lunch, we once again were eastward bound but already some four hours behind schedule... and we still hadn't left our home state of Arizona!

About 30 minutes out of Holbrook, Steve's car began to lose power every ten miles or so. We thought maybe it was due to altitude or fuel issues, scrambling with all that for the next five hours while limping through Albuquerque and the local hordes of traffic. Steve and Sean stayed behind and eventually changed-out the coil and module.

Our original plan also included a rendezvous with a group of six additional Bandit Runners coming from Colorado during our

first overnight stop in Amarillo. The hope was to then get all 13 of our Pontiacs together for the final cruise to Fort Worth the next day, but our frustrating mechanical delays caused our six Phoenix cars to arrive in Amarillo some 20 hours later — at 3:15am!

Sean, Sallie and Steve made it as far as Tucumcari, New Mexico where they managed to get just two hours of sleep. They then managed to resurrect themselves enough to meet us in Amarillo at nine o'clock the next morning.

Whew... What a first day! Despite all the issues and, with only four hours of sleep, we still had a blast.

The next morning, our larger caravan of 13 Trans Ams and 'Birds were ready to roll, but suddenly Marc's '78 had no brakes. *What the...?*

Even the best-made plans can fall apart in an instant, so the Colorado guys decided to forge onwards while our Arizona gang sought out a local Firestone Service Center. It turns out that Marc needed both new front brakes and wheel bearings.

While waiting there, I opted to have a couple of tires balanced. My wife, who should be a comedian, texted me from back home and asked how we were enjoying our day inside a Firestone shop. (Apparently, the Location Tracker on my cell phone was turned on, and she had been monitoring our progress, or lack thereof.)

Anyway, we made everyone's day there and the crew asked us for a photo. We all lined-up under their Firestone sign for a few shots.

Once on the road, we made it to Fort Worth without further incident.





**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Beleaguered by brake problems, our group spent the day at a Firestone shop in Amarillo, TX. **ABOVE:** Gathered 'round The Snowman's rig! **RIGHT:** Tom Knecht "connects" with Sheriff Buford T. Justice. **BELOW:** Main sponsor Restore A Muscle Car's pace vehicles on display.







**TOP:** Bandit Runners formed a caravan outside their host hotel en route to the Texas Motor Speedway. **MIDDLE:** Desert Renegades Chapter members and friends gathered at the race track's infield.

Upon our arrival that afternoon, we met up with the whole group consisting of about 135 cars. What a sight to behold!

We spent the next two days in Dallas where I, too, ended up needing a new module. Between phoning a friend (Frank Gostyla) and, with Vegas Steve helping out, we got it changed in time for the big Saturday night festivities.

Saturday morning, though, we were greeted by Tim Phillips (a.k.a. "The Bandit") and Susan McIver (a.k.a. "Hot Pants Hilliard"). She's still dishing it out!

We spent Saturday night at Texas Motor Speedway where we were invited to take a couple of speed-controlled laps around the banked oval NASCAR track. They tried to keep everyone under 90, but Brandon still managed to hit 135 in one of the straightaways. Later, we were treated to a special showing of *Smokey and The Bandit* on the huge track-side "Big Hoss" screen.







**THIS PAGE:** POCI members who attended our 2017 convention in Fort Worth, TX will likely recognize the infield of Texas Motor Speedway.





Sunday brought us yet another fun adventure when our huge group was kindly welcomed at the famous Gas Monkey Garage by owner Richard Ray Rawlings and his staff. Thank you, RRR!

We managed to somehow squeeze over 100 cars into his parking lot and had the opportunity to tour his shop, meet some of “the Monkeys,” and check out their latest projects. A couple of the guys were mesmerized and “accidentally” wandered into a restricted area where they interrupted the taping of a *Fast and Loud* television episode. *Oops!*

When it was time to leave, each participant had the opportunity to have his or her car photographed underneath the Gas Monkey Garage sign. You can be sure that a lot of rear-wheel rubber was sacrificed on that pavement before heading back to our host hotel!

Leaving Dallas on Monday morning, our huge contingent of cars — again, comprised mostly of Trans Ams and Firebirds as it would be for the remainder of the event — cruised to Broken Bow, Oklahoma where we had special lunchtime arrangements at the Hochatown Saloon. The restaurant is typically closed on Mondays but was opened just for us Bandit Runners. The place was packed with folks checking out all the cars.

Following lunch (and, by the way... a *great* burger!) we had a leisurely and scenic cruise to Fort Smith, Arkansas. It was fun cruising with all the CB radios and Bandit chatter along the way.

While in Fort Smith we had a free day in town. Sean located Garret’s Body Shop whose owner graciously loaned us Arizona guys

his lift for the day. Everyone had a turn on the lift: Sean put on new front brakes; Brandon checked for last-minute issues; Tim inspected his front wheel bearings; Mike had a new A/C compressor put in by Garret’s friend’s shop, and I had an A/C issue which turned out to be a punctured evap cooler. No more air conditioning the rest of the trip for me!

Garret was a young 21-year-old with his own business, and what a generous offer. He only wanted a picture of all of us parked in front of his place for a Facebook posting.

That night, all 130 or so of us Bandit Runners made Fort Smith’s early evening news, with David Hershey being interviewed. Wherever we went, a crowd of folks would gather.

With a thorough check-up of our Pontiacs completed, we were all ready to head to Branson, Missouri.

Upon our arrival in Branson, we were hosted for lunch at Table Rock Lake State Park. There, we met up with Wayne Alderson (owner of The Snowman rig), plus Sheriff Buford T. Justice (Jackie Gleason) impersonator Sean Bailey. Sean is an awesome performer with his “Attention Getter.”

There was plenty to do in Branson, including tours, shows and even our own Bandit Run Car Show!

At the cruise, we met Brett, owner of the Indian Point Marina. He recently finished a restoration of his own Trans Am and invited us for a free pontoon boat ride the next day if we showed up. Of course, we Arizona folks took him up on his offer and we enjoyed a





couple hours out on the lake. Just like Garret in Fort Smith, we spent time with another generous car guy in Branson. Thanks, Brett for your gracious offer.

Also while in Branson, I got to see my Uncle George who I hadn't seen in 25 years. Good stuff!

The next morning we left for Buckner, Missouri, but first we stopped along the way at the Kelsey Car Museum. Mr. Kelsey personally hosted our Bandit group for lunch, followed by a tour of his private car collection. Such a cool day!

That night, the Town of Buckner opened up their downtown to us Bandit Runners for a well-advertised block party. We had a police escort from the hotel to downtown where organizer Dave Hall was given a key to the city. Even Bill E. Kid, the local House Representative, was on hand. Yes, *Billy the Kid!*

The following day in Buckner we all attended the town's annual picnic with yet another police escort and Trans Am parade to the park. Residents lined the streets to watch us drive by; they were so nice and enthusiastic. We truly enjoyed the attention.

Awards were handed out for whoever got a ticket on the trip, plus Longest Distance, Hard Luck (with the most car trouble), and other honors. This was a great way for us to wrap up the Bandit Run.

Paul Albinger drove on to Wisconsin while the rest of us headed back to Arizona. It was mostly an uneventful return trip other than some high-altitude carburetor power issues and a lack of air conditioning for a few of us.

Each of us covered nearly 3,300 miles on the trip, spending just shy of \$750 in gas. We parted with more of our hard-earned money at a Firestone store, a Discount Tire store and no less than 10 other parts stores along the way including the Summit Racing warehouse located outside of Dallas.

Before the next big road trip, I think a thorough pre-trip inspection would be best — maybe not waiting until the last minute.

For me, the week was about meeting some great folks and seeing firsthand the bonding code from fellow car fanatics who help out each other and don't leave anyone stranded. I also will always cherish the memory of experiencing a roadtrip with my daughter. Julia put up with all us guys talking cars 24/7 for nine days straight while expertly wrangling the GoPro video and still-camera shots.

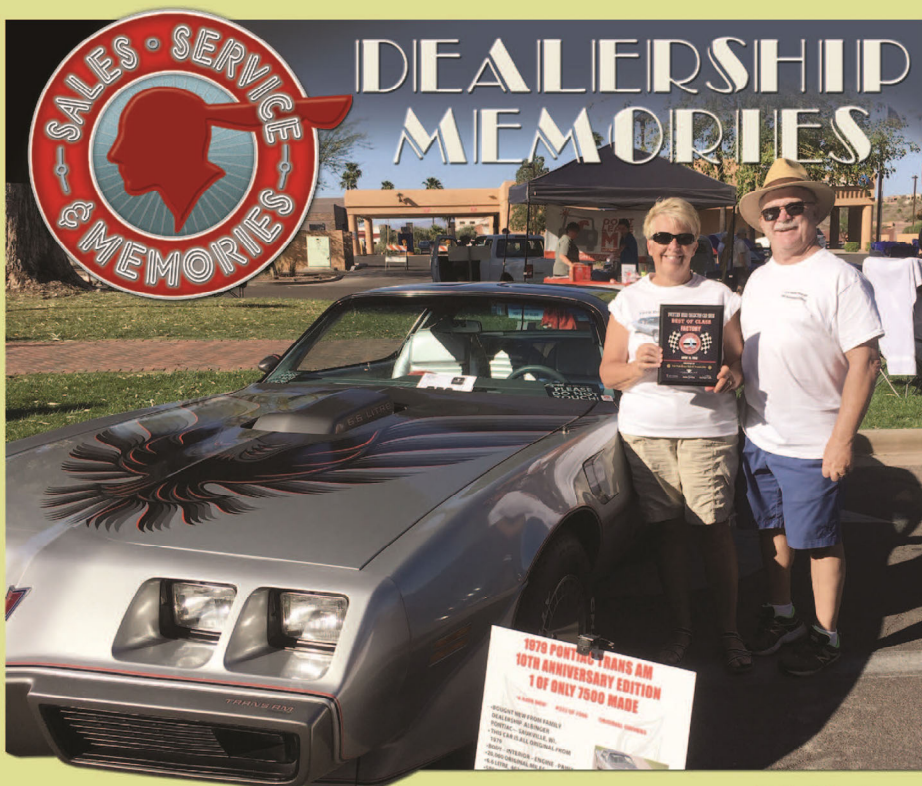
Thanks to my fellow Arizonans for sharing such a great time. Sean recalls that his favorite parts were in-between each of the events — times filled with laughs, misadventures and memories. For Brandon, it was speeding past Sean, whose needle was already buried, somewhere in Missouri!

We met some truly awesome folks. A special shoutout goes to Dave Hall and staff, Lori and David Hershey, Ric Rodriguez, Dillon Hardinger (the crazy photographer hanging out of cars) and Wayne Alderson. There are too many other folks to thank, with everyone making us feel welcome (especially the event's awesome sponsors.)

We all look forward to another Bandit Run. For those interested in joining us, check out [www.thebanditrun.com](http://www.thebanditrun.com) **SN**







by Mark Neumann

## ALBINGER PONTIAC • SAUKVILLE, WISCONSIN

Ask Paul Albinger, Jr. about his life story and he'll readily tell you about his happy childhood, growing up with positive family values, and later moving on to a chosen career as a firefighter while raising his own family. But perhaps the greatest memories stemming from his youth involve his dad's ownership of a Pontiac dealership.

"My dad started a Pontiac dealership along with his twin brother Clarence in the community of Saukville back in 1940," says Paul, who today lives in the metropolitan Phoenix, Arizona area and is a member of the Desert Renegades Chapter of POCI. His dad's business — located an hour north of Milwaukee, Wisconsin — was the town's first Pontiac dealership, an offshoot from an automotive repair business founded five years earlier.

"They started small, selling 50-60 cars, and then began to grow, adding more mechanics and staff. They became very successful," in the small town of 5,000 residents.

Those Wisconsin memories are punctuated by strong family ties for Paul and his two brothers. "As we got older, Dad brought us all into the business. I was in charge of tires, one of my brothers handled car sales, and another was a mechanic."

And, of course, that family connection brought a big advantage for Paul as an enthusiastic, car-crazy teen-ager. "My second car was a '64 Grand Prix — midnight blue with a blue interior with a 389 under the hood. It had every option!" That was a high school graduation present, and a step up from the '51 Pontiac he started driving. "That was more or less a 'farm car,'" Paul chuckled.

Thinking back to those formative years, Paul recalls how muscle cars "readily flowed" through the family's dealership, selling quite well with the introduction of the GTO in 1964 and the Firebird in 1967. Prior to that, the full-size Bonneville and Catalinas were the dealership's mainstays along with the smaller Tempests.

But there was one muscular Pontiac in particular that, once it graced the dealership's showroom floor in 1969, truly put a spell on Paul: a bright orange Firebird convertible with a white interior and black top.

"I was only 17 at the time and couldn't buy it, but I swore to myself I'd get one just like it someday."

Many of the cars otherwise sold through the dealership became part of the local cruising scene, Paul recalled. "We had the 'Pontiac group' and the 'Chrysler group,' and we went out on the street and raced." With other car dealers selling Chevy, Buick and Ford in Saukville and nearby Port Washington, there was never a lack of action in their small town.

A building expansion in 1970 included 18 stalls for Albingers Pontiac's body shop and service department, but the showroom — with room for just three cars — remained small. "Dad was under pressure from Pontiac Motor Division to increase new-car inventory, but his approach was to instead let the customers order the exact car they wanted."

Firebird sales did very well for the dealership through the mid-1970s, but soon exploded with the release of *Smokey and the Bandit* in 1977. "After that, all we sold were Trans Ams," said Paul. That included a sale to three brothers who together walked into the dealership to buy identical Bandit-edition Trans Ams — all 400/4-speed cars. "I saw the brothers recently, and they each still have their cars... and they're all in great shape!"

Paul says that his dad encouraged each of his sons to buy and sell cars themselves. "We would buy 'em cheap, fix 'em up, and then offer them for sale. At one point, I had up to five cars of my own for sale."

Paul went on to own about 15 various Pontiacs over the years. He'll never forget the 1973 LeMans Sport which he special-ordered but later sold for a red 1973 GTO with a black

interior and a four-speed transmission. The car had been sitting on the lot and wasn't moving, so he was inspired to buy it after selling the LeMans for a tidy profit.

A '74 LeMans and a more-economical Astre followed. "That car ran like crazy at 30 miles per gallon!"

Later, a couple of front-wheel-drive Phoenix models came along as Paul began raising a family of his own.

While his two brothers stayed on with the dealership, Paul eventually joined the local fire department in 1975 and made that his life-long career. Even so, he never really left the family business; being in such a small town with so many years invested meant that Pontiacs were "in his blood."

When a brand-new 10th Anniversary edition Trans Am — of which only 7,500 were produced — appeared in his dad's showroom in 1979, Paul developed an inevitable connection to it. His dad agreed to sell him the car at cost — but only if the car remained parked inside the showroom for an extended time as a lure for potential Firebird buyers. "Dad would only permit me take it out to car shows and short drives every once in a while — but never in the rain — so the car remained right there until 1996 when the dealership was sold."

More recently, as a resident of Arizona, Paul began to reminisce about some of the other Pontiacs that left an impression on him decades ago. So, true to his word, he located and purchased an orange 1969 Firebird convertible — quite similar to the one which originally caught his eye on the showroom floor some 50 years earlier — to accompany his 10th Anniversary T/A as part of his long-term collection.

That Firebird recently participated in the 2019 Bandit Run, joining a slew of other F-bodies and muscle cars in a romp from Fort Worth, Texas to Kansas City, Missouri, June 22-29. The convertible ran the 1,600-plus mile trip without a hitch and is now resting for the summer in Wisconsin for when Paul and wife Barbara spend time at their family home there.

Ultimately, their two Pontiacs, together with a sampling of memorabilia (pictured below), serve as the cornerstone for their indelible dealership memories.

"There is a tremendous pride from those many years with the dealership. We had many long-term employees; they were like an extended part of my 'Pontiac family.' My dad really believed in Pontiac and what he was selling. He was asked to take on another line, but he was a tried-and-true Pontiac guy."

After 55 years in the business and with his health failing, Paul's dad sold the business in 1996, allowing it to continue on as a Pontiac dealership for some time afterwards. Paul's two brothers moved on to operate a repair business and sell used cars elsewhere until retiring in 2008. And yes, the original Albingers Pontiac dealership building still stands today, operating as yet another auto repair business. 🍀

**OPPOSITE:** Paul and Barbara Albinger enjoy sharing the history of their Tenth Anniversary Trans Am at local car shows. The 20,000-mile Pontiac features its original 6.6 Liter (403cid) V8. **THIS PAGE:** Treasured memorabilia from Albingers Pontiac of Saukville, Wisconsin is typically kept inside a protective glass showcase which the couple will proudly display alongside their '79 T/A. The dealership also sold Vauxhall cars in the early '60s along with GMC Trucks, and operated a towing operation which kept the family quite busy through the years.

