



# Safari

Pontiac's high class hauler







**"G**ee, I didn't know Pontiac made a Nomad."

They didn't. They made a Safari. More specifically, the Star Chief two-door Custom Safari. At the time that the Chevrolet Division of General Motors was cranking limited numbers of Nomads off the assembly line, the boys over at Pontiac Motor Division were performing the same feat, though in even more limited numbers. These sporty wagons were not exactly traffic stoppers in the showrooms during

their three-year run (1955-57), and the Pontiac Safari sold less than half the number that Chevy did. One of the reasons for this was marketing strategy: The Chevy wagon came as a more or

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By Ron Panzer

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less plain jane car with the six-cylinder engine and austere interior standard equipment. The Safari, on the other hand, had a V-8 engine and custom interior appointments in the basic car.

Both vehicles offered gobs of options, but the Pontiac had by far the longest list and was the classier car. When you have a choice between two cars that kind of look the same but are priced \$500 apart, you can be sure the Nomad looked a lot more appealing to the buyer. Let's take a look at what made 9,094 people choose a Pontiac Safari over the Chevy. Remember, back in the mid-Fifties these were not cheap cars. They were the most expensive models for each division.







The Safari used the same basic body shell for all three years of production, though Pontiac made some extensive sheet metal changes for '57 in an effort to give an aging design a whole new look. Based on the successful showcar known as the Waldorf Nomad, shown at the 1954 Motorama, the car was hurriedly put into production and brought to the showrooms rather late in the new car year; February 2, 1955.

It boasted a suggested sticker price of \$3047, making it the most expensive Pontiac ever.

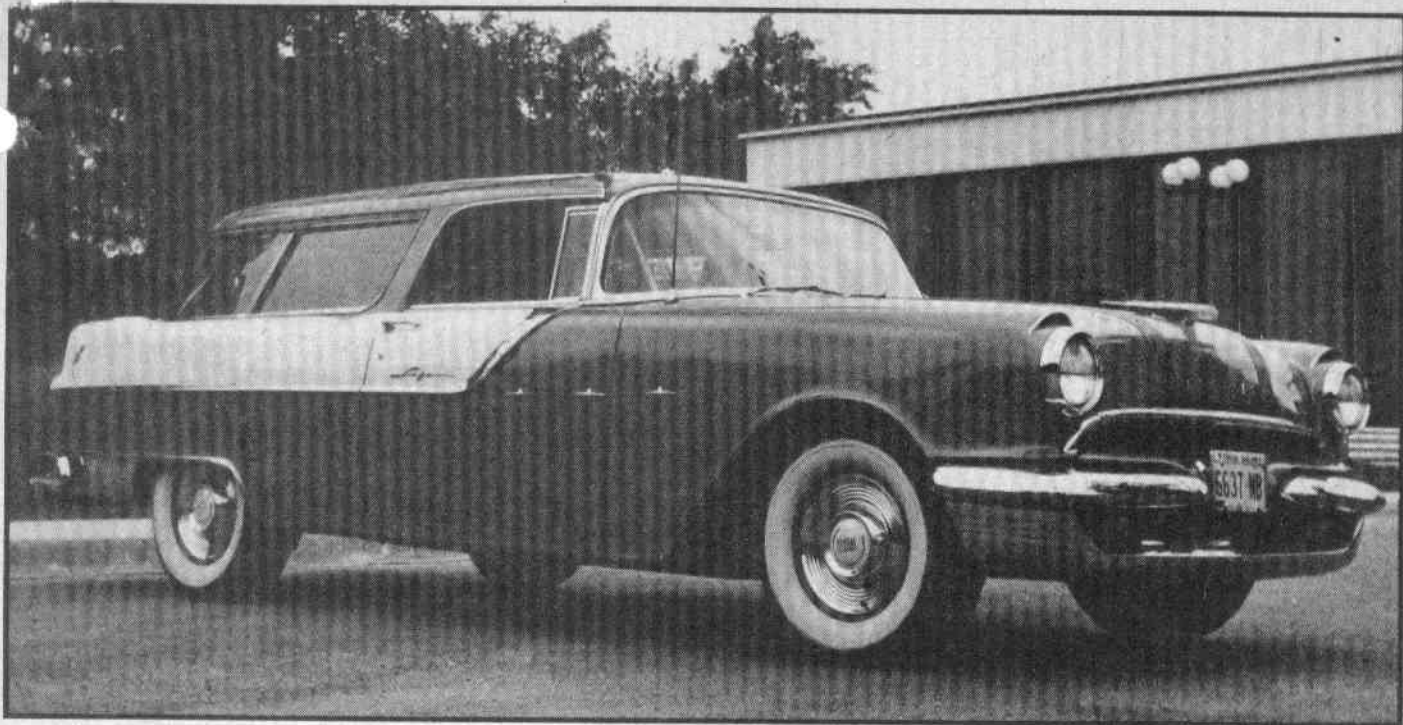
The first thing you notice about the Safari is the sporty roofline which gives the wagon an elegant forward leaning look; plus it only has two doors. Right there you can guess the car was aimed at a very limited segment of the market. The average station wagon buyer was looking for four

doors and lots of cargo space. The forward canted tailgate and rear window chopped 16-cubic feet off the capacity of the car. This car was special and more than likely appealed to the fellow who was successful in business and needed a wagon for his hunting trips or business excursions, but at the same time wanted a car that would be right at home at an exclusive nightspot.

Those things the Safari could do. It







The Safari has all the dash of its Chevrolet cousin, the Nomad, but it hasn't received near the attention (yet) of its milestone relative. (John Lee photo.)

was plush inside with a capital P. Carpeting was used throughout the interior; floors, lower door panels, even the cargo area. The seats were leather, though they could be ordered with cloth if one so desired. Bright chrome work was everywhere inside; skid strips on the cargo floor, around the windows and dash, and there are even chrome roof bows on the headliner. That much interior chrome made driving a Safari on a sunny day a dazzling experience. While we're inside the car, I should mention the unique folding feature of the second seat, used only in the '55 models. The seat bottom folded forward against the back of the front seat, then the seat back folded down flat to give the owner a total of 71 cubic feet of cargo space. This unusual folding feature made for one of the most comfortable rear seats ever and, naturally, being only a two-door, the front seat backs folded forward to allow easy entry to the rear. For ventilation, the rear seat passengers could slide the side windows back on tracks. Also standard inside the Safaris were crank operated vent windows, automatic interior lighting, ash trays and armrests, deluxe steering wheel and clock.

All this was packaged neatly on the shorter Chieftain 122-inch chassis as is traditional with Pontiac wagons, then and now. Standard engine was the 180

hp, two-barrel V-8 of 287 CID. For '56 and '57 the engine was enlarged and the four-barrel carb made standard. The four-barrel was optional in '55 for an extra 40 bucks. By now you'll notice that the \$500 difference between the six-cylinder equipped Nomad with its unadorned interior and the plush Safari begins to look very small. And in reality, the Safari was the better buy (don't try telling that to a Nomad owner though). While the base price of the car included all of the above plus manual trans, 7.60x15 blackwall tires and deluxe wheel discs, there was nary a Safari that wasn't loaded with the options Pontiac was famous for offering, and that brought most of the sticker prices into the \$5,000 range.

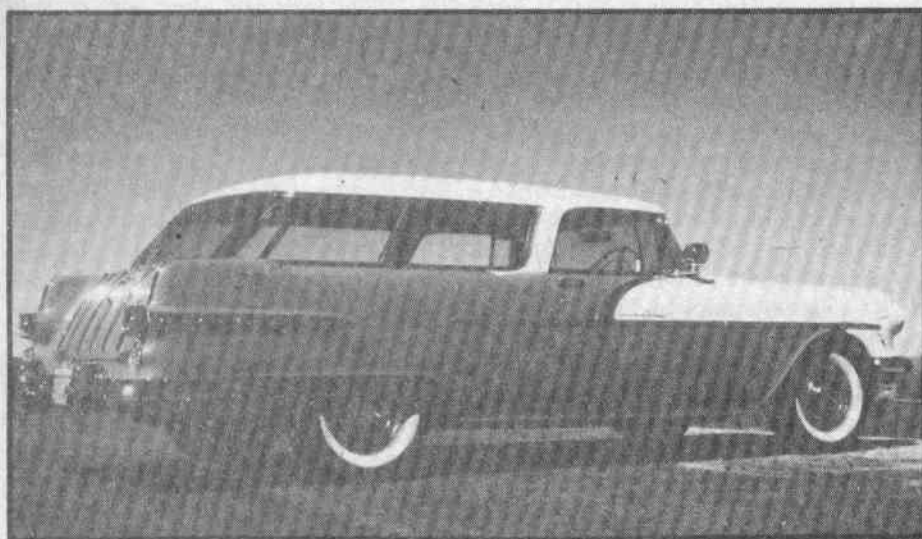
Let's look at each year of the Safari individually. Officially, the car is known as the Star Chief Custom two-door Safari, but nowhere on the outside of the '55 can you find the words Star Chief. On either door, just above the swept back molding, is the word Safari. All other wagons in the Pontiac lineup were known as 860 or 870 station wagons and were quite box like in appearance when compared with the smooth flowing lines of the Safari. Whereas the 860 and 870 wagons, which share the same body shell with Chevy, use a taillight treatment totally different from any other Pontiac

model, the Safari uses identical appearing taillights to all Star Chiefs. While we're at the back end of the car, you can't help noticing that familiar ribbed tail gate with its knucklebuster handle (later changed to the better '56 design) that cants rakishly forward to further enhance the styling of the car. Stepping around to the front of the car, everything appears quite the same as any other Pontiac rolling off the assembly line in 1955; same massive integral bumper and grill, twin Silver Streaks running the length of the hood and large chrome, winged hood ornament. If you parked a Safari next to a standard Pontiac wagon, you would immediately notice that the cars are not the same height. The Safari sits a full inch lower and, being a Star Chief, gets three stars on either side of the body just forward of where the molding sweeps up to the windshield pillar. That was enough for the 3,760 people who took the car home that year.

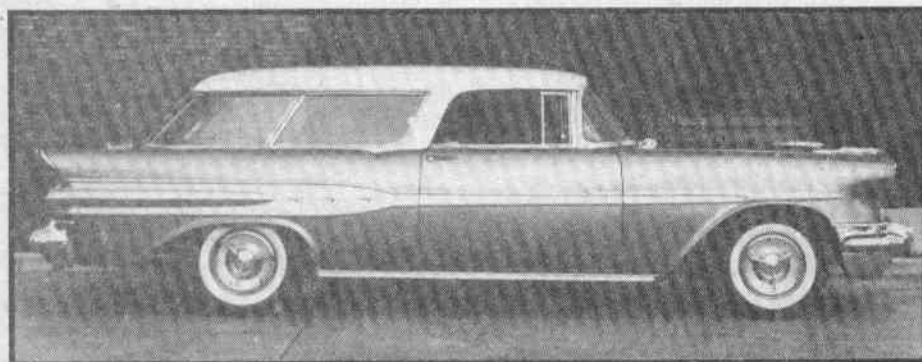
Colors were very limited for Safaris. Only four were offered; Turquoise Blue, Firegold, Driftwood Beige and White Mist. These were available in solids or two-tone combinations. Interiors were two-tones of Turquoise and Ivory or Firegold and Ivory with either leather or cloth seats. But who would want cloth when you could have leather for the same money? Incident-



Like the '55 Nomad, the '55 Safari is the cleanest of the three-year run, but that doesn't mean it was completely free of goo-gahs and doo-dads. (John Lee photo.)



In 1956, the shape of the Safari remained basically the same as the previous year, but trim and paint scheme were changed completely. (John Lee photo.)



Safari was all new for 1957. New shape, new chrome, new paint scheme and some marvelous new things under the hood. (John Lee photo.)

ly, on two-toned painted Safaris, the upper color was sprayed over the initial lower color causing the first color to bleed through. So watch this when restoring your Safari or you won't get the factory correct shade.

At first glance (assuming one is not that familiar with mid-Fifties Pontiacs) the '56 Safari looks very similar to the '55, until you look hard that is. Both years have the same basic sheet metal, but in '56 the front bumper and grill were redesigned and the taillights received a chrome eyebrow. The side molding was reversed and run forward to the headlights; a short, heavy molding was added to the side of the rear quarters and run to the taillights. Gone were the three stars, and the V-8 emblem was moved from the rear fin to the lower front portion of the front fender. The results of this minimal change gave the '56 Safari a bit more flair (though many feel the plainness of '55 styling was an added feature) and reversed the manner in which the two-tone paint was used. Whereas the second color on the '55 was used on the rear portion of the wagon, the '56's second color was used on the front half. Interiors for the '56 remained about the same as '55.

Production was up slightly for '56 (4042), as was the list price (3213). Most of the big changes were done not to the styling, but to the mechanics of the car. Under the hood, the engine was punched to 317 cubes, compression raised from 8:1 to 8.9:1 and the four-barrel carb made standard. The diameter of the single exhaust system was enlarged and, for the first time, dual exhaust was made available. The steering was redesigned for improved handling. A new Strato-Flight transmission, with a PARK position on the quadrant, was now standard (the old Dual-Range Hydramatic used REVERSE position to lock the trans when the engine was off). This new trans did have some early problems that were corrected for the '57 models. Behind the trans was a new driveshaft with larger universals, and rear axle ratios remained as in '55; 3.23:1 with automatic and 3.64:1 with stick.

If you didn't think 227 horses could get your 3700-pound Safari away from the lights quick enough, a new 285 hp dual quad Strato-Streak engine was available with 10:1 compression. One had to give up any thoughts of air conditioning with this option, however. With that much power, who needed air



to be cool. Some new options were added to the already long list from PMD: six-way power seat, signal seeking radio and, for the first time, electric wipers. All other option packages were carried over from '55. Initially, only four paint colors were available, but this list was enlarged in the spring of '56. While on the subject of paint, one of the big controversies among Safari owners is how to paint the body dip on the two-tone models. This dip is molded in the rear quarter at the beltline just to the rear of the doors, and the actual V part of it is painted with the bottom color; the top color follows the beltline straight across the dip and not down into it. In spite of all the improvements, added chrome and new paint colors, people didn't beat a path to the showrooms (Nomad shared the same problem), and sales accounted for less than 1% of new car sales that year.

With just a month to go before production was to begin on the '57 models, Pontiac's new General Manager, Semon E. Knudsen, had the styling department remove the twin Silver Streaks from the hood and end a 22 year tradition of Silver Streaks gracing the body of all Pontiacs. Faced with having to get one more year out of an aging body design, the stylists at PMD brought out what was known as their Star Flight Body Design that, when viewed from the side, gave the appearance of a rocket ship. The old rear quarter fin was flattened and the fender extended rearward to form a large V shape, enhanced by a body length side spear, outlined by chrome moldings and painted a contrasting color. More massive bumpers, larger tail-lights, a new grill and smaller 14-inch tires made the '57s seem like all new cars. Weight was now around the 3900-pound mark with automatic trans. Suggested retail price was \$3572.

Again the standard interior was top grain, hand buffed leather, but this year, no nylon cloth interior was available and colors were keyed to the 19 exterior colors. The option list grew a little longer: Power antenna that extended and retracted automatically when the radio was used; radio used transistors for the first time and came with three speakers; and a new eight-way power seat was added. There were some changes under the hood, too. The engine grew to 347 CID with the addition of a new crankshaft and put out

270 hp with the four-barrel carb and 10:1 compression. With Elliott Estes as new Chief Engineer, this was only the beginning. Pontiacs were getting a name for themselves in the racing world, and the new Tri-Power equipped 290 hp engine was one of the reasons why. Also available was a 317 hp Daytona engine and, after the first of the year, Fuel Injection appeared. The fuelie was rated conservatively at 310 horses.

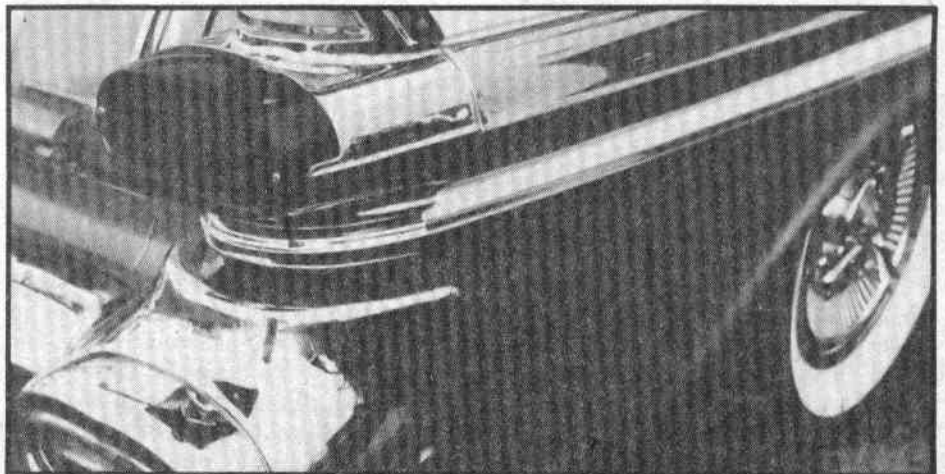
The words Star Chief and Safari shared equal billing on the body now, and all of Pontiac's wagons were called Safaris. The smaller wheels gave owners some problems with brake fade, as they restricted air flow.

It appears the public was tiring of the Safari/Nomad design. Both divisions lost sales, and the '57 run of Safaris plunged to 1,292 units. While Chevy threw in the towel, so to speak, and gave up on the Nomad, at the end of the '57 models (Pontiac did the same with the two-door), PMD introduced the Star Chief Custom four-door Safari on December 8, 1956 in an effort to bolster sagging sales. This car became known as the Transcontinental and had a production run of 1,894 units for '57. While the two-door Safari was ended in '57, the four-door continued in '58 with 2,905 being produced. The '58 was also the first to have the words Custom Safari on the car itself.

Until recently, little has been written on these cars over the years. From the few road tests that were done, plus talking to Safari owners, you'll find that the cars offered superb handling with a smooth, firm ride. They had good acceleration and cornering com-

bined with excellent brakes. Lack of breakdowns or unexpected trouble is often mentioned. They are, however, renowned for their leaky tailgates, though a cure is now readily available. Most car testers felt the Safari offered everything the dashing hunter/sportsman type could ever want, but the car was too impractical to be used as a daily grocery getter. They were roomy, comfortable and quiet, with an average appetite for gasoline; 10 to 17 mpg. Luxury was standard and most were loaded to the rafters with options, but where are they now?

Nomads found early favor among the Chevy enthusiasts and have survived remarkably well over the years. Safaris, on the other hand, have not done as well, due mainly to the fact that many were stripped of all interchangeable parts to complete a Nomad restoration; i.e. window glass, doors, tailgates and inner body panels. Safari owners are adamant in their love for the cars. In recent years a number of Safari owners have joined together and formed an international chapter of the Pontiac-Oakland Club International with the intent of finding and preserving these fine and unusual automobiles. Though they have located less than 200 of the wagons, they feel as many as a thousand may still survive. The chapters' monthly newsletter *The Safari News* contains tips and information about the cars along with ads for cars and parts. For more information on the Custom Safari Chapter of the Pontiac-Oakland Club International, contact: Bob Johnson, 4983 Redrock Ave., Riverside, CA 92503; or POCI, P.O. Box 5108, Salem, OR 97304 CC



1957: A little chrome here, a little chrome there. Let's get lots of shiny chrome and put it everywhere. (John Lee photo.)