

# *Chalk Dust from the Schoolhouse Floor*

## **Short and Disappointing: The Pacer Saga**

*We exhibit a 1977 AMC Pacer in the Towe Auto Museum, and I've heard several of our folks wonder out loud why we'd be caught dead with such a thing. What's so all-fired museum-quality special about this little egg-shaped orphan? Well, I think it represents an interesting story of the American auto industry. Read on, and perhaps you'll think so, too.*

### ***The Sticky Situation***

In the Air Force we used to describe deep trouble as “running out of altitude, airspeed and ideas.”

During the mid-1970s American Motors Corporation was decidedly shy of the first two, but still had no shortage of the third. It's just that execution's a lot tougher when the ground's filling the windshield. AMC's Pacer project is a perfect example of that.

### ***The Idea***

The notion behind the Pacer's concept perfectly fit the '70s fuel crisis age; the other American manufacturers hadn't gotten it yet, but would soon be educated by our Japanese friends. AMC's new baby was to be an “urban” car: tallish, wide (77 inches), short (100-inch wheelbase) and economical, with generous room for four in a small (and, as originally conceived, light) envelope. It was also to be an eye-catcher, and in that they definitely succeeded.

The writers of the day made little of it, but designer Dick Teague's initial concept (sketched, legend has it, on an airliner's barf bag) apparently assumed a front engine/front drive power package. For Americans this was way ahead of the parade in a day when

about the only FE/FD vehicles were, as I recall, the decidedly un-American Honda and Subaru, British Leyland Mini, Panhard (recently deceased), Citroën, Wartburg and Trabant. (Just to be sure, AMC also drew up a conventionally-powered rear-drive variant.)

### ***The Bad Bet***

And where, with no development money, had they thought they'd get a compact FE/FD power package? Well, General Motors, actually, at least for the engine. In the early '70s GM set out to develop the Wankel rotary. (My sources are vague on whether the GM project also included a transaxle, but it's reasonable to guess that.) The AMC guys thought this was a natural so they designed their car around it. Only thing, when the GM brass tumbled to the fact that somebody down there'd had an original idea they promptly killed it. (Some say they saw problems with weak apex seals, emissions and fuel economy; Mazda has since dealt with those.) Whatever the reason, little AMC was left twisting slowly in the breeze, a position they could ill afford.

### ***The Product***

There was nothing for it but Plan B: Throw in the old iron in-line six ahead of a conventional rear drive. This thoroughly loused up the design: Interior room shriveled and weight went out of sight along with the rear couple of spark plugs.

Oh, the Pacer still wasn't without innovation: When introduced in 1975 it was second in America (behind Ford's Pinto) with rack-and-pinion steering (acquired

from GM before even they had it in a car). For easy passenger access the Pacer's right door was 3½ inches wider than its left, with both cut into the roof for better headroom. The car had acres of glass, offering about the best visibility in the industry; it also offered about the best air conditioning in the industry because of all that glass. Its unit body was tight, with a hatchback offering easy access to could-have-been-more cargo space. A rubber-isolated front crossmember carried the engine and front suspension, minimizing noise and vibration inside.

### *The Outcome*

So despite AMC's advanced thinking the Pacer was generally perceived as an ordinary car with very quirky styling. It drove well for its day and was smooth and quiet for being so short, but that hardly made it stand out. You either loved or hated its looks, and unfortunately most people fell into the latter column. I've never been that put off myself, but I do remember driving by dealer-ships when their lots looked like a bunch of giant insects had just hatched out.

Soon the Pacer disappeared from the automotive scene (in 1980, after 280,858 cars and wagons), and AMC followed in 1987. Chrysler Corporation bought them out, mainly to get the Jeep.

### *The Sequel*

But wait! I'm not through! AMC's *people* didn't just disappear: Many of their best, among them quite a few engineers, went to Chrysler with the remains of the company. Some are still there.

Their reception by the Chrysler hierarchy wasn't what you could call warm. Putting it plainly, it was guilt by association: They were considered a gang of losers. But they

soon showed the Chrysler guys that they were smart, resourceful scrappers who'd learned to do a whole lot with very little, and quickly. This soon put them at the pointy end, and today you can find their fingerprints all over DaimlerChrysler's best: The Ram and Dakota pickups, the Viper, the PT Cruiser, the vans, the sedans (and, of course, the Jeep). They all benefit from AMC's transplanted talent. I've had the pleasure of meeting a number of those folks.

I expect we'll keep our little Pacer, at least if I have anything to say about it. Perhaps it didn't revolutionize the automotive world, but that wasn't for lack of good ideas and intense effort from talented folks.

– *The Ol' Schoolmaster*