

History of the Legendary First Gen Chevrolet Camaro

Contributed by Mording42
Friday, 08 February 2008

When Ford introduced the Mustang in 1964 there was no immediate reaction from General Motors. By August 1964, just four months after the Mustang's introduction, GM realized the appeal of a four seat sports car. Ironically, the Mustang was created in response to the Chevrolet Corvair Monza.

Clay Model of the XP-836 - Later...Camaro Clay Model of Project XP-836 which became the Camaro.

Drawing of the XP-836 - Later...Camaro Rendering of Project XP-836, which became the Camaro.

GM had actually begun preliminary work on such a car as early as 1958, according to Pontiac Designer Bob Porter. "I remember a four-passenger, sporty type car of the general size and weight class of the Mustang being worked on in an advanced studio. In the early '60s, similar cars were developed from time to time. Everyone wanted to do one, but at the time there was really no corporate interest."

When the Mustang sold 100,000 units in the first six months, and almost half a million the first year, GM took an interest. The responsibility for GM's Mustang fighter was given to the GM Design Center's Chevrolet Studio under the direction of Henry C. Haga. Interior design was directed by George Angersbach, who had been heavily involved in the design of the Corvette, Corvair, and the Chevy II, which became the Nova in 1968. It has long been a misconception that the '67 Camaro was designed from Chevy II components when actually it was the other way around. The Chevy II was to be all new for '68 and it shared many parts with the '67 Camaro, but this did lead to compromises in the design, most notably the cowl height and hood length.

One unique feature was the decision to use a front subframe isolated with rubber "biscuits" in combination with the unit body construction of the rest of the car, a technique that had been used on several European cars, including many Mercedes-Benz models. This combined the best of both worlds. A larger interior and more luggage space than was possible with a traditional frame and at the same time a quieter, smoother ride than a full uni-body car delivered.

The designers did mock-ups of many different models, including a two-seat roadster, a fastback, and a station wagon. GM was trying to keep the cost as low as possible, however, to compete with the Mustang, they decided to stick with just two models, a coupe and a convertible. The Camaro was to be offered with a wide variety of powerplants, ranging from a 230 cubic inch six cylinder to a 327 V8. In addition, a new engine displacement was created just for the Camaro, a 350 cubic inch V8 rated at 295 horsepower. As the launch date neared, the car still had no name. It had been called various names by GM and the press, including Nova, Panther, Chaparral, and Wildcat (later used by Buick.). It is rumored that Chevy also considered using the letters "GM" in the name, and came up with G-Mini, which evolved into GeMini, and finally Gemini. General Motors Headquarters supposedly killed that name, because they didn't want the letters "GM" used in case the car was a failure.

Chevrolet ChaparralChaparral Badge

This pre-release car bears the "Chaparral" name.

Finally, the car was introduced to the press as the Camaro, considered to be a good name because nobody knew what it meant. Chevrolet claimed it was taken from an old French dictionary showing that the word meant "friend" or "companion", but Ford found an alternate meaning in an old Spanish dictionary - "a small, shrimp-like creature". The automotive press had a good laugh over that, and an even bigger one when one journalist found yet another meaning - "loose bowels". It didn't take long for the laughter to stop after the introduction of the stunning 1967 Camaro. THE HISTORY OF THE CAMARO (DAY BY DAY)

Mid-Year 1963

Immediately upon introduction of the Mustang, rumors began developing (mostly within the industry) that Chevrolet was working on an answer. The rumor was true but the car was kept under wraps for another 2 years under Code Name XP-836. Nothing was done to stop the rumors. July 14, 1964

The first design was the XP 196X --The Super Shark-- for display on renderings/scale model purpose (mystery competition). July 16, 1964

The XP-386 project began in Design Staff. July-August 1965

Public Relations begins to shoot photos of everything from drawing board through clay models up to various features of the finished car, as it developed. One important project was an effort toward a LIFE Magazine story on the Birth of the Camaro. The car had not yet been named. Nor did the story ever materialize. It was replaced by the Frey-Mustang vs

Estes-Camaro featurette that did appear in September 1966. Many of the photos have been used in different magazine stories. Fortune Magazine may still run the picture story originally planned for Life. November 1965

The internal code name became "F" car. November saw the first showing of cars to Chevrolet sales executives and creative people and to Public Relations. By now the car had become "The Panther." There was much speculation that this would be its name, and the public accepted it as such. Public Relations began planning for a July Press Conference. Proposals were made for various ways to publicize the car; specified cars were required for early showing and for photographic work. Creative work began at Campbell-Ewald immediately. This included catalogs, direct mail, sale promotion, and of course print-outdoor and TV/radio. January/February 1966

Public Relations began photography of test prototypes and styling models; early testing. March 1966

Public Relations decides to have 20 top-optioned Camaros for a press drive-away scheduled for early September. A selection of cities and editors to participate would be made. Creative explorations. April 1966

At the New York Auto Show Press Conference, it is admitted that the new 1967 will be in the Corvair-Chevy II range. No name has been chosen as of yet. Creative work is refined. May 1966

The first creative presentation takes place. The project is still known as the "F" car. June 29, 1966

A 14-city closed circuit press conference is held to bury the name "Panther" and to announce the new name, CAMARO. General information is revealed on the new car. Estes' gag story about how he came up with the name was that he locked himself in a closet and came out with CAMARO. Bootlegged, over the fence telephoto lens photos hit on UPI Wire Service. July-September 1966

Public Relations has all major magazines in to the Proving Grounds for briefing, driving, and interviews on all aspects of the total line, with the emphasis on the Camaro. Photos and specifications were distributed. Wide photo coverage is done by the publications for September release. Radio/TV kits are distributed. August 22-23, 1966

At the Chevrolet Sales Convention in Detroit, the Camaro is the big hit of the show. September 5, 1966

LIFE Magazine teaser ad appears. September 25, 1966

First Camaro ad appears in newspapers. September 28-29, 1966

Camaro ad consist of newspapers, magazines, radio, television, outdoor, and a six-minute TV spectacular. Public Relations released a press package including photos, specifications, and line stories. The press package is mailed nationally. A General Press Conference is held using 25 Camaros, with 100 members of the press present. Another press conference is held featuring questions and answers, driving on the proving grounds, and a gymkhana where press guests competed in handling of the Camaro. The same type of conference was held a week later in Los Angeles for West Coast press. Top-optioned Camaros were driven from Detroit to home cities by 15 editors. They were used over the announcement weekend for a large public display at the U.S. Grand Prix by journalists and celebrities Cars circulated among the other prominent press in major city locations for additional "I drove it personally" features. September 29, 1966

The Chevrolet Camaro is released to the public for the first time. The legend arises!