

MUSCLECARS



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carbs, a \$150 option. A distinctive fiberglass hood with twin functional scoops was a \$125 item.

Whatever the options, a Dana 427 Camaro was loaded for bear. Or pony. "No matter how many 'hot' cars you've driven, the first time you really uncork a Dana Camaro you're bound to be awe-stricken if not outright panicked at the sheer magnitude of the force unleashed," explained *Motor Trend's* John Etheridge. "At about T plus 1/2-second you begin to wonder if maybe you hadn't ought to have done it, a feeling which persists until you either chicken out and get off it or shift into 3rd gear." With slicks and open headers, Etheridge's test subject posted a 12.75/110-mile-per-hour e.t.

Just like its rivals from Chicago and Pennsylvania, the Dana Camaro was built in various forms in the '60s, all meant to meet each customer's individual whims. An L88 "Phase I" cam, the M22 "Rock Crusher" four-speed, power front discs, a Hurst Competition Plus shifter—it was all in there and more, as were many optional dress-up pieces. Often overshadowed by its Yenko, Nickey, and Baldwin-Motion counterparts, the Dana 427 Camaro was still one super car.

Berger Chevrolet's approach to the Chevy-powered fast lane differed greatly from the others. Pronounced "bur-jur," this long-running dealership in Grand Rapids, Michigan, was founded in 1925 by William Berger. Forty-one years later, Nickey's hot parts guru, Jim O'Connor, came over from Chicago and joined Berger Chevrolet, selling Dale Berger, Jr., on the idea of marketing Chevy performance in a big way. But unlike Nickey and the rest, Berger Chevrolet didn't jump head-first into the conversion kit game.

"We were not like Yenko," sales manager Mike Wawee later told author and Camaro enthusiast John Hooper. "We never had an assembly line to build the cars." "We were never too keen on conversions," added performance parts manager Jim Luikens in a 1987 *Musclecar Review* interview. "We'd do it to accommodate our customers."

As Luikens said, some specially requested big-block swaps were performed at Berger, and the company did market its image-conscious "Super Nova" in 1970. But the vast majority of the hot Camaros, Corvettes, and Chevilles rolling off the Berger lot in the '60s were stock Chevy machinery, not that that was bad. In 1969, Berger Chevrolet took delivery of as many as 50 COPO Camaros and another six COPO Chevilles. By then, performance cars were making up about 20 percent of the dealership's yearly sales. Whether it rolled right off the truck or was dealership tweaked or tuned, both the "by Berger" screw-on badge in back and "Prescribed Power" decal under the

hood meant your hot Chevy had come from one of America's top sources for Bow-Tie power.

Hot parts sales were Berger Chevrolet's main priority. To this end, Bob Delamar moved in after O'Connor left to head the dealership's High Performance Department. In 1968, Delamar hired Luikens, then working in a local grocery store's produce department, as his assistant. And when Bob went into business for himself in 1970, his right-hand man replaced him as manager. Under Luikens' direction, muscle parts sales soared; even as late as 1973, Berger was bringing in more than \$1 million a year from hot hardware, making the Grand Rapids firm Chevrolet's number one performance distributor.

As Berger ads claimed, "Jim probably knows more about high performance parts than almost anyone inside or outside the factory. He can pull more specs out of his head than you can find in Motors, Chilton's and the factory manuals put together." And not only Chevy specs. Being a General Motors dealer, Berger Chevrolet was also the hot spot for anyone hungry for, say, a pair of Pontiac Ram Air IV heads or an Olds W-30 big-block in a crate. Berger's business concentrated on parts, genuine GM parts. According to Dale Berger, 80 percent of these sales consisted of factory pieces. Aftermarket items made up the other 20 percent.

While Berger Chevrolet's performance heyday ran longer than anyone else's, the power did finally wane after Luikens left Grand Rapids in January 1975 to join Joe Hrudka's Mr. Gasket company. As he told *Musclecar Review*, his replacement at Berger, Doug Koechnef, was "a really good guy" who later went on to a successful business career. "But in 1975 he just wasn't ready," continued Luikens. "From being the number one dealer in the U.S. in January 1975, by January 1977 it was gone, they had given up on it."

Dale Berger explained it a little differently in 1996, claiming Luikens "did do a great job while he was here," but his leaving, nor his replacement's actions, wasn't the reasons behind Berger's decline. "At its height, the performance business was like shooting fish in a barrel," said Berger, "all the kids were buying that stuff." Changing times, however, meant a change of direction. "The parts sales didn't drop because of Jim leaving," he continued, "they went to hell because the government started putting emissions controls on everything in 1974. Plus Chevrolet started raising prices on all the parts; the kids couldn't afford them anymore. A lot of young guys just started finding different things to do."

Like everyone else, Berger was out of the performance market by the late '70s. The dealership, however, continued on in healthy fashion. Family owned and operated through four generations now, Berger Chevrolet is

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