

MY NEW SAFARI STORY

by Rich and Pam Gabrielson

I found my first 55 Safari in a wrecking yard back in the early 80's. It had sat beside the San Francisco Bay for over 12 years with the windows rolled up and as a result suffers from some heavy rust issues in the roof and elsewhere throughout the body. My quick fix has been rolls of duct tape in the winter months (my Custom Safari winterizing kits) and that has actually landed its photo in the Pontiac Oakland Club International magazine Smoke Signals after the Western Regional's a few years ago.

Since I got this car I started collecting parts to eventually restore it one or two pieces at a time. Then EBAY came along and the parts became more available and my spare parts collection started growing. I answered an ad in Smoke Signals about a rust free Arizona body and was told it was sold. Then a year later the same ad came on for the same body. I called the guy and asked about it and he was a little rude and said "how many times are you going to call".

I told him this was the second time and I was told it was sold the last time. He apologized and said he thought I was someone else. I was in San Diego for a car show with my Orange 1955 Chieftain and told him I would be there the next day. He said fine and off I went.

It was dark the next day when I found his place and he took me to see the car with a flashlight. It looked pretty decent but I told him I wanted to see it in the daytime. He said you're looking at it now and someone else also wanted it and they were on their way from back east. I told him I would think about it and let him know. The next day he was at work and I hopped the fence and it did look pretty good but the frame was bent from a head on collision. I met him after he got home and bought it then. He said he could deliver it to me in a few weeks. A few weeks went by and I called him about the delivery, he said he wasn't going to deliver it and if I wanted it I better come get it and "don't dawdle". I made a call to a friend in the Desert Renegades club and found out he had sold that body several times and after 30 days would reclaim it as abandoned. I had 5 days left before my 30 were up.

I called My California Highway Patrol buddy and told him I needed him to go with me to get the car home and when we got there the guy was a little surprised. He asked me how we were going to load it onto the trailer since it had no front or rear suspension. I said how about that forklift of yours and he said it would cost \$80.00 for him to load it. I gave him the money and home we came. This fellow has since passed away so his little scam might have lined his pockets at the time but didn't lengthen his life.

Since my doors and tailgate also had rust issues I bought some extra's from Ed Vassar (1955 - 57 Pontiac specialist) along with a 6 way seat and some factory A/C pieces. Then another fellow added to my A/C collection with parts from an abandoned car he found in the Nevada desert. I had some front fenders from a parts car I bought when we restored the Chieftain. My friend Norm White had an extra hood that I traded for and my collection of parts kept growing.

I was at Ed Vassar's one day and mentioned the bent frame on the Arizona body and he said go look at the frame on that wagon he was parting out. I did and now I realized I had enough parts to build a second Safari from scratch.



I still had my Auto repair business at that time and with 2 two post racks it was not too difficult to swap the two frames from the Safari and the station wagon. My landlord owned a body shop and he wanted me to complete the restoration of his 46 Ford convertible. I thought we could work out a trade for the Safari body work and maybe even a paint job. I scheduled the body to be bead blasted inside and out but he came 2 days before that and said they needed the car right then I asked about the bead blasting and he said don't worry that the Arizona body wasn't that bad and they could take care of it. He has already worked on the fenders and doors and tailgate so I took his word for it.

So I completed his Ford for him, turned a body shell on a frame into a running, driving car fixing everything from the convertible top to the radio, installed the engine and tranny you name it and it was done, anticipating my Safari body coming together. After I was done, my Safari is in bare metal at his shop he asked me should he keep going or what? I said where are we as far as the trade went. He tells me the trade was used up on the doors and fenders. Seems he was running a time card on every minute they worked on my car and I had just thrown a ball park time on his car because I thought we had a trade going. Turned out that I owed him an additional \$5000 and my car was still in bare metal on the outside with some body work done on it here and there. He was a little miffed at me because he wanted me to sign a 5 year lease and I was 65 years old and didn't want that long of a commitment at my age. We settled for a 3 year but he raised my rent \$200 for not signing the 5 year lease.

I stopped the job right there and brought the car back to my shop and covered it with a car cover for the next year. Now I'm staring at the end of my lease and if I want to ever see this Safari done I better get going. So I pulled the body back off the frame, stripped the frame and sent it out for powder coating along with the rear end, backing plates and a bunch of other parts. I finally got to put to use the parts that I had purchased over the previous 20 years and finished the frame. Installed the rebuilt engine and transmission and trying to figure out what to do about the body.

Then another body shop owner needed A/C put into his 64 Impala and would do the Safari as a partial trade. I told him I would be on a time card for his and I expected the same from them. Once burned twice cautious.

I had the body on a rotisserie and we pushed it over to his shop with my landlord watching. My landlord told me that all the body work his shop did would probably need to be redone because

I had waited a year while I did the chassis. Well all of that work did have to be redone but only because they bondo'd over metal work that should have been repaired. The floor around the gas pedal looked like swiss cheese once the bondo was removed when I finally had the car bead blasted like I wanted in the first place. I figure I paid them at least \$3000 to hand strip the car when I could have had it blasted for \$700.

Then every time the new body shop tried to fit one of the parts they had to remove the excessive bondo the first shop had used. The doors were built up to a curve when the $\frac{1}{4}$ panels were flat. I was told you never finish the doors or fenders off the car because you can't tell if they will match when installed. Nothing matched on this car when it was pre assembled. It took 600 hours before everything lined up, was straight, had correct gaps and parts fit like they were supposed to. Needless to say my A/C installation wasn't going to go too far on this deal. It took \$21,000 to complete the body and paint from the second shop plus the over \$8000 in cash and trade to the first shop and I still have to complete the assembly of the car yet to do.

I closed my business January 31,2011 and have brought the car home. It still needs glass, upholstery, tires and some chrome work done. In this economy I could not find a qualified buyer for the business and after 30 years just closed the doors and sold off my equipment. I hope to find the extra money from selling stuff on EBAY and Craigslist to complete the car. I did drive it down the street with a smile on my face but with no glass and a blanket thrown over the front seat I did not venture any further. At last count, over 20 1955 Pontiacs have contributed their parts to put this car together.

