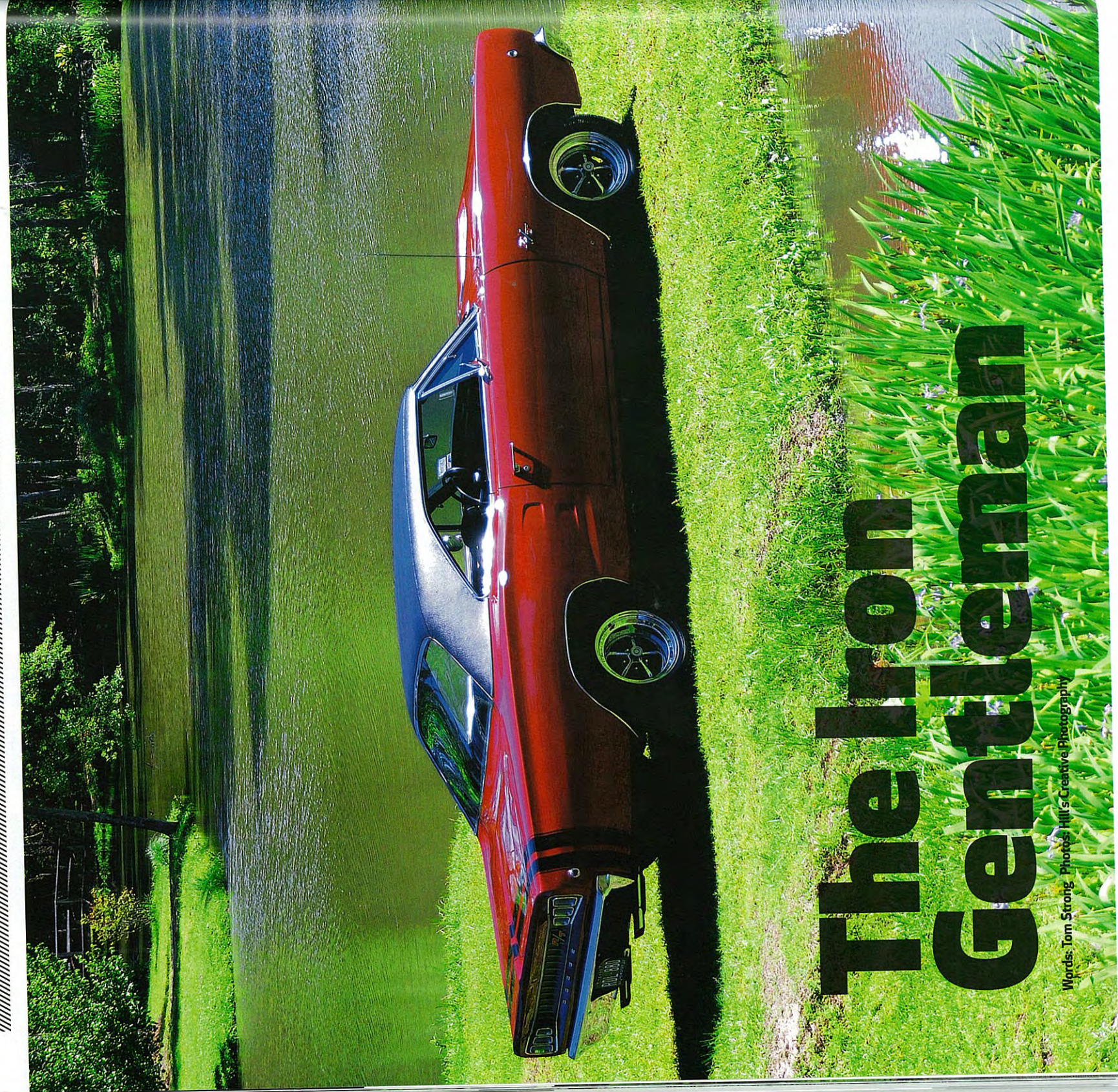


C! Classics



The Gentleman

Words: Tom Strong Photos: Hill's Creative Photography

Mitchell & Mitchell 1968 Dodge Coronet R/T



The year was 1968. Jimi Hendrix wanted to know if we were "experienced". The Doors were giving us an open invitation to light their fire, and the Beatles were evolving with the times, having released the "White Album". The assassinations of Presidential hopeful Bobby Kennedy and civil rights leader Martin Luther King had taken its toll on the collective American psyche that was concerned with years of US involvement in Vietnam. On television, the United States got their chuckles with the popular show "Laugh In" and at the box office Stanley Kubrick made the nation think well into the future with the Sci-Fi classic, 2001: A Space Odyssey.

The average price for a gallon of gasoline was 27 cents in USD, insurance payments were as slim as the popular mini skirts and talk of "Smog" and "Pollution Control" had only just started. As the Baby Boomer generation was working its way through their 20's and early 30's, the automotive industry created the perfect storm of price, performance and styling to meet their demands. Names like Charger, GTX, 442, RoadRunner, Chevelle and Torino owned the streets of North America. 1968 represented a crossroads in the industry as the next few short years would produce some of the greatest automobiles in history. Welcome to the "Muscle Car Era" and the story of one

Baby Boomer named Bob Mitchell and his 1968 Dodge Coronet R/T.

The term "Muscle Car" is used to describe 60's era American automobiles designed and manufactured to out perform the models from which they were derived. They almost certainly contained 300 plus cubic inches of American V-8 power in either short or long block form. The engines swallowed a gallon of premium gasoline every 8-10 miles and breathed by a carburetor setup most often found in 2, 4, 6 or 8 barrel configurations. They usually had sleek creased styling, minimal interiors, and had shed the fins and chrome of years past. On the outside, a muscle car could be adorned with a myriad of overtly bright or conservative colors, hood scoops, decals and badges that would have others take a second look. In Ford terms, they were the GTs or GTAs, Buick sold the GS version of their cars, Chevy had SS and RS models and the Dodge boys let you know when they were serious with R/T, standing for Road & Track. By installing as standard equipment combinations of high performance engines, transmissions and suspension parts, American automobile manufacturers tapped into the publics desire to own factory designed hot rods. A desire not lost on Bob Mitchell.

Having had his first taste of speed and power in his father's 1953 Oldsmobile Super 88, all things fast would pique his

interest for decades to come. No stranger to American power, in his late teens and twenties he bought and sold several cars: a 1954 Chevrolet, 1957 Chevrolet BelAir Station Wagon, 1961 Chevrolet Impala with a 283 cu. in. engine, a 327 powered 1963 Chevrolet Impala, a 396 cu in. 1965 Chevrolet Impala SS Convertible and a 1966 Ford Fairlane GTA with a 390 V-8.

Feeling the need for a newer and faster ride, Bob stepped into a Dodge dealership on July 24, 1968 in Sioux City, Iowa to see Dodge's new offerings, referred to as the "Scat Pack" cars. It was an effective marketing campaign that Dodge used in the late 60s and early 70s to promote their line-up of performance-optioned automobiles. The line included the Super Bee, Charger R/T, Coronet R/T, and the Dart GTS or Swinger. These cars were readily identifiable by the "bumblebee" stripe wrapped around the back end of the car. A proud standing Coronet R/T model would catch Bob's eye on that day, and 38 years later the love is not lost.

The 1968 models sported what has become known as Coke-bottle styled bodies. Other major options for the Coronet R/T in 1968 would have included ordering the 426 cu. in. HEMI engine or to opt for a two-door hardtop or convertible model. The two engines available on that model year respectively produced a stump pulling 480 lb-ft of torque (440) at 3200 RPM and the HEMI generated

1. FATHER & SON

▶ 2 generations of Mitchells proudly display their restored ride in various car shows.

2. HUSBAND & WIFE

▶ Bob and Barbara alongside their original Dodge Coronet R/T hardtop.

3. FLYER

▶ Bob kept all sorts of memorabilia, including this 1968-vintage ad for the Coronet.

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Four on the floor as any muscle car should have.



490 lb-ft @ 4000. The name "muscle car" was derived from the level of power available and priced for the average consumer.

Bob achieved horsepower nirvana during the brief but captivating test ride of a dark blue R/T with white bumblebee stripes.

That car had an automatic transmission, air conditioning, power brakes, radio, center console, bucket seats and wide tread tires with narrow red sidewalls and hub caps. This high performance vehicle was equipped with a 440 CID (7.2 liter), 375 HP engine, dual exhaust, heavy duty suspension and brakes and a no-slip rear (Sure Grip) differential as standard equipment. The speedometer registered 150 mph but the car could do more when equipped with a smaller geared rear axle. For Bob, it was love at first ride and without wasting any time, he bought the car.

Within 2 months, Bob was transferred to Arizona. He placed every thing he owned into his new R/T and headed cross country. The added weight didn't significantly hamper the Coronet's performance. In Colorado Springs the R/T beat a Pontiac GTO three times between consecutive traffic lights. After the third defeat, the GTO made a right turn and disappeared down a side street. Bob is fond

of saying he thinks the driver turned-off to look for the nearest Dodge dealer.

In 1969, he met and married a lovely girl named Barbara. Within a few months of getting married the military sent Bob abroad. The Coronet R/T remained with Barbara who drove it while she attended college. Bob returned a year later to his lovely wife and they drove the car until 1971 at which time Bob was again transferred by the military. The car was sold in Georgia before their departure to Germany but never forgotten.

In 1974, while in Germany the Mitchell family grew. This new member of the family (also named Robert) heard countless stories about the then long gone family muscle car while growing up. With a lifetime of "muscle car" stories duly noted and his father Bob's 60's birthday only weeks away, son Robert presented his father with the opportunity to own and restore what would become Bob's second 68 Coronet R/T. Thirty-two years after saying good bye to the first Coronet, on Bob's birthday, Robert reunited his father with the muscle car. Time did nothing but amplify the relationship between Bob and 68 Coronet's. He viewed the new project car as if he had just found a long lost friend.

Being nearly impossible to locate the actual car Bob purchased in 1968, son Robert spent 2 years to locate and finally purchase another 2 door hardtop Dodge Coronet. These cars were very rare even in 1968, so trying to find one 32 years later in the right area of the country was very difficult. Although not a true R/T from the factory, the Mitchells would give this car all the goodies available and customize this Coronet to their wishes while staying true to stock specifications. The previous owner had replaced the original 318 CID engine with a rebuilt 1970 Chrysler 440 CID engine producing over 400 HP. The remainder of the vehicle was in serious need of attention. It would take two years to return the vehicle to original condition.

Between 2004 and 2007, sourcing parts for this car was (and still is) fairly difficult for three reasons, making their restoration a challenge. The first challenging factor was the overall supply of old parts. When a NOS (New Old Stock) part was needed, The Mitchells' found it nearly impossible to locate them due to the fact that there were not many like vehicles made in the first place. Remanufactured restoration parts for 60s vintage Fords and Chevys were readily

4. SCAT PACK

The three famous Scat Pack cars: the Dodge Charger, Coronet, and Dart

5. ONLY 8

Pre-oil crisis, the only true American motors were gurgling V8s with plenty of horsepower.

Mitchell & Mitchell 1968 Dodge Coronet R/T



SPECIFICATIONS

1968 Dodge Coronet R/T

Engine:

440 CID (7.2 liter) OHV V8 Magnum (standard),
442.6 CID (7.0 liter) OHV V8 HEMI (optional)

Bore & Stroke: 4.32" X 3.75" (Magnum)
4.25" X 3.75" (HEMI)

Compression ratio: 10:1:1 (Magnum), 10.25:1 (HEMI)

Max Power: 375 hp @ 4600 rpm (Magnum),
425 hp @ 5000 rpm (HEMI)

Max Torque: 480 lb-ft @ 3200 rpm (Magnum),
490 lb-ft @ 4000 rpm (HEMI)

Transmission: A727 Torqueflite automatic,
A904 Torqueflite 4 speed manual

Axle Ratio: 3.23 or 3.54

Weight: 3,565 lbs (Hardtop)

Exhaust: Dual (2.5 inches)

Price: \$3,565 (1968 Hardtop),
\$3,640 (1968 Convertible)

» Red, the color of power and strength, complete with matching bumblebee stripes denoting Scat Pack membership.

available but the Dodge aftermarket supply from remanufacturers had yet to kick in. In the duration of 3 years, the rarity of these cars propelled demand for parts to higher levels which spurred a parts replication onslaught as 60s MOPAR muscle became big business. However, as the resurgence of 60's era Dodge parts happened, they were being produced for automobiles that enjoyed top tier sales success in terms of volume from the factory. The main reason for this is that cars with greater production numbers get restored in greater numbers, which allows suppliers to sell more parts if produced for the high volume cars. The 68 Coronet R/T was a low production vehicle with only 10,000 + units sold that year and hence, parts were scarce. Toward mid 2007, the remanufactures have woken up and parts availability was quickly becoming a non-issue, but the Mitchells' built this beauty when the times were tough, having assembled much of this car from parts found in most of the 50 states.

During the vehicle's restoration, extensive changes were made to its exterior, interior and drive train to accurately match those of the Coronet R/T model. The case could be

made that their vehicle is better equipped today than it was when manufactured. When new, the R/T model had large drum brakes; the Mitchell's restored Coronet has front disc brakes, enhancing the cars stopping ability. In addition, it wasn't uncommon for a car from the 60s to be released by the factory wearing only exposed acrylic paint. For their new Coronet, The Mitchells' decided to leverage a modern base coat/clear coat technique in paint application. They deviated slightly from factory specifications by applying a modern color, Dodge Paint Code PEL (Inferno Red) found on recent creations by the same maker. Inferno Red, which has a metallic pearl composition unlike paints of old, gives unmatched depth and luster to their almost 40-year old highway king.

Many people confuse the Coronet with its brother: the legendary Dodge Charger, made popular and is much more of a "star" than the Coronet thanks to appearances in movies like "Bullitt" and more recently, the Blade Trilogy. The Charger was also a hit on TV, in that the Dukes drove their General Lee around Hazzard. The Charger is an icon of the era, but the Coronet retains a

more distinguished presence, often being referred to as the "Iron Gentleman". The Coronet was marketed as an upscale ride while the Charger was targeted at a younger demographic. Being true enthusiasts however, the Mitchells' will educate all interested by comparison as they have recently purchased a 1968 Dodge Charger which is currently undergoing restoration. One day someone will once again ask Bob, "Hey is that a Charger?" at which point Bob's response will be "No that's my Coronet, my Charger is over there."

The Mitchells are members of a local car club in Texas and enjoy cruising in and displaying the Coronet at local car shows. Unique everywhere it goes, the car has won numerous awards and draws lots of praise. Happy with the reunion and restoration of his old friend, Bob plans on driving and showing his unique American muscle car for many years to come.

The Mitchell's established a web site where they documented restoration of the Coronet with text and pictures. Those interested in restoration techniques or just wishing to see the transformation of the vehicle should find the site worth visiting. 