

RILEY MANNING: 'Judge' nearly lands grandfather in hot water

Nov 10, 2019



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If you know my dad, you know he's a car guy. His father, Eric Manning, owned a dealership in Aberdeen through my father's childhood. After college, my dad sold cars, too, and to this day he retains what seems to me an encyclopedic knowledge of vehicles.

For instance, he knows off-hand that Jeep didn't start putting automatic transmissions in Wranglers until 1994. He knows that GM used to test future Cadillac features by implementing them into Buicks and Oldsmobiles first.

Growing up, I remember road trips where he would point to a car and say something like, "That's an AMC Javelin, which they only made between 1967 and 1974."



Car facts sometimes segued into tales from his own childhood, what sounds like a wild, burning-rubber time compared to today's standards.

One of my favorite stories involves the debut of a special edition 1969 Pontiac GTO known as the Judge.

The original GTO hit the streets in 1964 as part of the instant classic, working man's muscle car generation. "The Judge" nickname came from a skit involving the car on Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In. Pontiac leaned into the shtick, advertising the '69 GTO with slogans like "All rise for the Judge" or "The Judge can be bought."

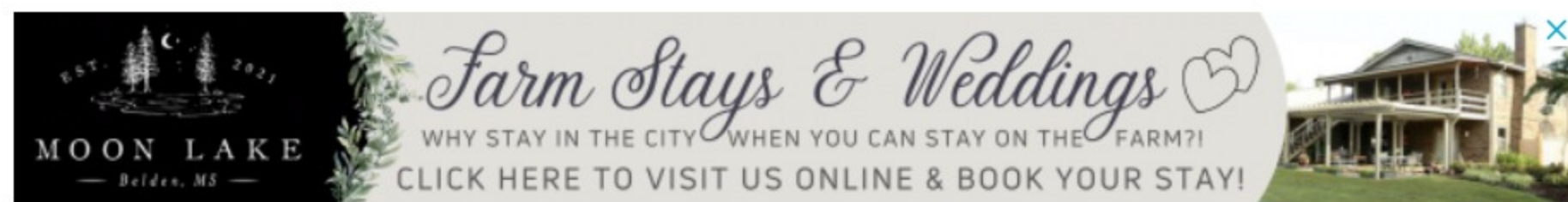
Back in the day, he unveiling of a new car occasioned a whole event. Dealers kept new models under wraps until "show day," which enticed folks to come check it out with door prizes and refreshments. At an early age, my dad was tasked with detailing cars, so he got to see them early.

Dad was 10 when the first Judge was delivered to Eric Manning Pontiac-Buick. I can only imagine what it must have been like to feast his eyes on such a vehicle.

After he'd gone to bed that night, my grandfather took the Judge for a spin to stretch the legs on all 366 horses under the hood. He probably had the window down, the early fall air whipping in, the rushing tires like a pulse against the road and nothing ahead but darkness.

Wouldn't you know it? He gets blue lighted by local law enforcement, but instead of pulling over, he puts the pedal to the floor. The GTO's Ram Air V8 engine leaves the cop in the dust. The poor officer never stood a chance.

When he gets back home, he nudges my dad awake and whispers, "Mike, we've got to get that Judge cleaned and spotless and on the showroom floor by the time we open tomorrow."



They get it ready by 8 a.m., and at 8:30, the officer from the night before walks into the dealership.

"Mr. Eric, I was chasing someone in a Judge just like this last night. Have you sold one to anybody lately?" he asks.

My grandfather shakes his head.

"Nope, just got these in new."

The officer leaves, and that's the end of that.

Dad always shrugs at this conclusion and says, "That's how I was raised in the muscle car era."

I never knew my grandfather, so I'm not quite sure what to take from that story. Perhaps what first comes to mind is my dad's capacity to keep cool when making decisions under pressure, to quickly discern the most straightforward, matter-of-fact path to a resolution.

As any good dad, he always seems to know what to do, but even when he doesn't, he has the guts to make the call and take responsibility for its outcome.

I'm a man now, providing for my own family, who depend on me to make decisions, to handle things. Maybe if I keep working at it, I'll have all the answers, too, one of these days.

