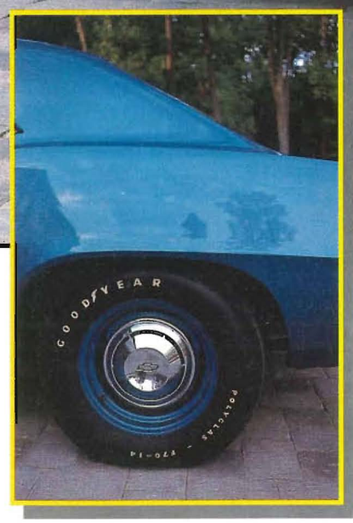
Aluminum Legend

69 very special Camaros for '69

SuperCar PROFILE

text and photography by ***Thomas Glatch***



It starts and idles with all the dignity of a Brahma bull ready to charge. Actually, this is the automotive equivalent of a Brahma bull, a creature born and bred to attack with incredible fury. Ed Cunneen's "plain Jane" is actually a legend, a ZL-1 Camaro.

Of all the musclecars to roll off a Big 3 assembly line, this is the most exotic. Yes, Ford had the Boss 429 Mustang, but that was built by Kar Kraft. Chrysler, too, had their wicked 1968 Hemi Barracuda and Hemi Dart racers, but Hurst Industries did that conversion. Yet off the Norwood, Ohio, assembly line, mixed in with the six-cylinders, the 327s, and all the rest, came the aluminum engine wonder, Central Office Production Order 9560, better known as the ZL-1.

Of course, Detroit was in the midst of a horsepower war, and Chevrolet was listening to the racers suggestions for keeping them competitive. Fred Gibb and his driver Dick Harrell knew how to win in the NHRA Stock and Super Stock classes. Gibb also knew how to use the Central Office Production Order loophole to get Chevrolet to build the cars he needed to win; he already had 50 COPO 396-powered Novas built for him in 1968, the famed "Mystery Novas." Now he wanted the ultimate Super Stock weapon.

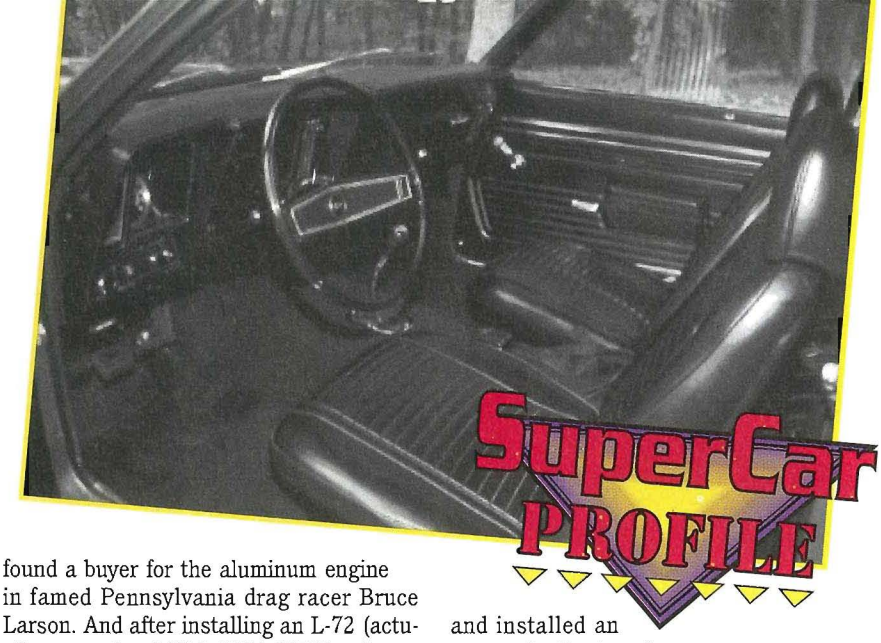
Vince Piggins had it for him. Piggins was director of Chevrolet's Product Promotion Department—the department that promoted Chevrolet products by making them go faster—and he already had a prototype Corvette running around with an all-aluminum big block under the hood, the ZL-1 427. Fred Gibb decided to combine the sleek Camaro with the incredible ZL-1 powerplant, and placed the Central Office Production Order for the 50 ZL-1 cars he needed to qualify for Super Stock racing.

Building the ZL-1 Camaro was simple—they began as standard SS 396 Sport Coupes. But as they moved down the assembly line, some of those standard parts were replaced with other items. Skip the stock SS 396 springs and rear axle, and install the special F62 and G32 heavy-duty suspension and a special "severe usage" 'BE'-code 12-bolt rear. Delete the SS 396 hood and trim, and install the ZL-2 cowl-induction hood and plain base-model 'bowtie' emblems. Forget the standard radiator, and install one from an air-conditioned SS 396. Finally, leave the L-78 396 on the pallet.

Then came the magic, the all-aluminum ZL-1 427. It came right out of the Can Am sports car series, packed with all the features of a true racing engine. Internally it shared much with the famed L-88, the iron-block 427 that powered many victorious Corvette racers. Same Tuftrided forged crank, forged 12.5:1 pistons, and forged rods with 7/16-inch bolts. The open chamber aluminum heads were the same, too, as on L-88s built after June 1969. But the ZL-1 had an even hotter cam, and, of course, an aluminum block with cast iron liners. Providing the spark was the Corvette's K66 electronic ignition. The ZL-1 was supposed to be the first production engine equipped with Holley's new 850-cfm "Double Pumper" carb, but manufacturing delays forced the installation of Holley 780s on at least the first 52 cars. Fred Gibb's own ZL-1 racer failed to pass inspection at the first AHRA race of 1969 because of the Holley 780 under the air filter. A shipment of 850 "Double Pumpers" arrived at Gibb's dealership shortly after the event, and his mechanics replaced the carburetors on all of the ZL-1s shipped to him. Each engine was created at the same Tonawanda, New York, plant as the other Chevy big blocks, but the ZL-1 was assembled in a special area under surgical-clean room conditions.

When complete, the ZL-1 was as light as the famed Z-28 small block, but with close to double the horsepower. In papers filed with the Automobile Manufacturers Association, the ZL-1 was rated at 430 horsepower @ 5200 rpm (SAE Test-20) while torque was listed at 450 lbs.-ft. @ 4400 rpm. The AMA may have believed it, but any racer who lost to a ZL-1 knew otherwise. Fran Preve, Tonawanda plant historian, has supplied us with data from a factory dyno test that showed peak horsepower to be 585 @ 6400 rpm and torque to be 510 lbs-ft @ 4800 rpm with headers and open exhaust!

Despite the ultra-exotic powerplant under the hood, some components of the ZL-1 package were standard fare. The cast iron exhaust manifolds were stock, although they did not match the aluminum head's larger oval ports. The rest of the system was either the standard N10 dual-, or the optional NC8 "chambered"-exhaust. All but one of the ZL-1s had the standard vinyl interior; automatic equipped cars had a column shift, while many of the four-speed cars came without consoles. Only the Canadian "Zed L-1" had a white houndstooth interior and console shift. Many were equipped with painted steel wheels with "bottle cap" hubcaps, and were generally devoid of even the simplest of options. Although Vince Piggins wanted to



give the cars a special graphic treatment like the Z-28, these special-order machines were indeed very plain, as Fred Gibb intended these cars for racing only, and he knew racers would remove anything superfluous and install headers, slicks, shifters and whatever else the rules would allow to make them faster.

From December 1968 through May 1969, a total of 69 ZL-1s were built at Norwood. Fred Gibb ordered the first 50, while other dealers ordered the remaining 19 cars. The first two ZL-1s arrived at Fred Gibb Chevrolet in rural La Harpe, Illinois, on New Year's Eve, 1968. Both were Dusk Blue, with black vinyl interior, M40 automatic, and Raised White Letter tires, but Fred Gibb was in for a surprise. He had never seriously discussed the price of the ZL-1 option with Chevrolet, and was dumbfounded to find the package alone cost $4,160—the price of a well-optioned SS 396. Talk about sticker shock, even the most stripped ZL-1 would cost over $7,200!

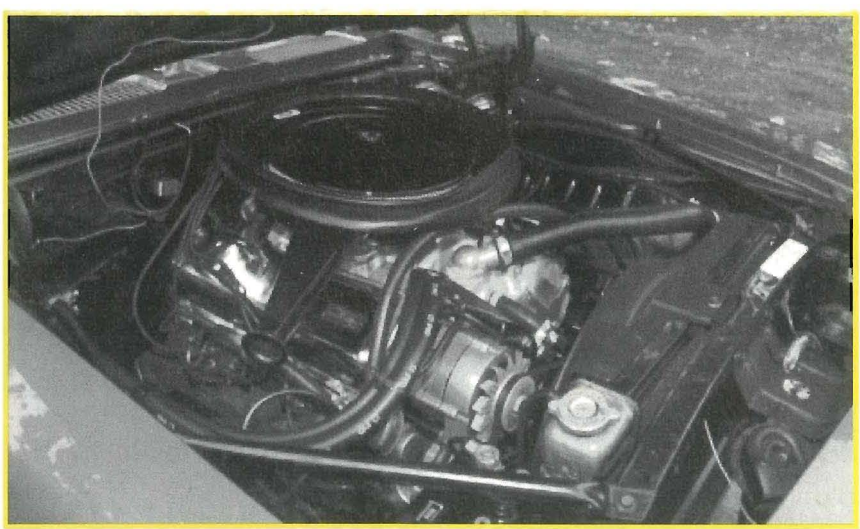
Eventually Gibb was able to convince Chevrolet that no dealer could sell 50 $7,200+ Camaros, and he was allowed to return 37 of them. In May of 1969 they were parked on a back lot at the Norwood plant, where the window stickers were removed so that Fred Gibb Chevrolet would not incur finance charges. When another dealer bought one of these cars (they initially had to take at least two) a new typewritten window sticker was prepared. Not surprisingly, other dealers found it equally difficult to sell their ZL-1s. But they did local racers a ready market for the ZL-1 engine. Then, by substituting an iron-block for the ZL-1, a dealer could bring the car's price down to within reason (and few people outside the racing community knew what a ZL-1 was anyway).

That is just what happened to Ed Cunneen's ZL-1. Suttliff Chevrolet in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, purchased the car (number 46) from the Norwood plant. They found a buyer for the aluminum engine in famed Pennsylvania drag racer Bruce Larson. And after installing an L-72 (actually a genuine COPO 9561 "MN" code engine), they found a buyer for the LeMans blue beauty in Lee Patton of Harrisburg. The new owner had the dealer install a Z-28 rear spoiler, along with an AM/FM radio and power antenna. He then changed his mind, and had the radio and antenna removed and the radio delete plate replaced before delivery (although the antenna bezel remains). He then showered the Camaro with tender loving care, to the point where in later years he had a State Trooper come to the house to perform the car's annual state inspection. But early in its life, the Camaro was involved in a number of "stoplight Grand Prixs," including one memorable race—against Bruce Larson. And yes, the L-72 powered Camaro became the talk of the town by beating the racing hero.

Ed Cunneen purchased the Camaro from Lee Patton in 1988. It had just 16,000 miles of use over those years, and is in as-delivered condition—paint, interior, tires, battery, everything, are all original. He also has the window sticker, invoice, protect-o-plate, and dealer paperwork. Ed has made only one change to this otherwise original automobile: He removed the L-72 engine and installed an exact duplicate of the correct ZL-1 powerplant (the original engine is owned by a collector and is currently not for sale).

Ed Cunneen's ZL-1 Camaro looks like a six-cylinder creampuff, but acts like a provoked Brahma bull. The ultimate "sleeper"? Maybe. The ultimate muscle car? Quite possibly. The ultimate Camaro? Undoubtedly!

MCR



COPO 9560

1969 Camaro Base Price	$2,727
ZL-1 Option	$4,160
Total production	69
Four-speed	47 (M21 33, M22 14)
Automatic	22

Standard Package Included:

ZL1 427-cid aluminum engine
ZL2 Cowl Induction hood
V01 Heavy-Duty radiator
F41 Heavy-Duty suspension
K66 Electronic ignition
N10 Dual exhaust

Mandatory Options:

J52 Power front disc brakes
M21 Four-speed or M22 Four-speed or M40 Turbo Hydra-matic

Engine	Aluminum block and heads
Bore x Stroke	4.251 x 3.760
Compression Ratio	12.5:1
Carburetion	singel four-barrel (780cfm or 850cfm)
Horsepower	430 @ 5200 rpm (advertised)
Torque	450-lbs.ft. @ 4400 rpm
Axle	12-bolt
Axle ratio	4.10 standard, 4.56 optional
Wheels	14x7
Tires	F70x14