

In Detroit, the street racing capitol of the world,  
Tom Hoover's '66 Hemi Coronet was truly:

# KING OF THE ROAD

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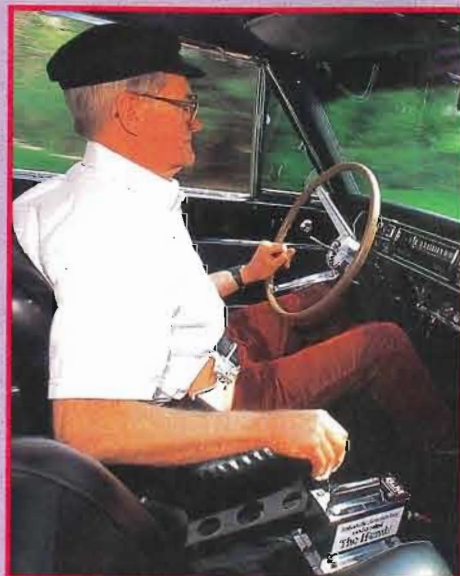


"I bought it new in 1966. The price — \$3285," Tom explained. "It was a regular A102 Hemi car. The car, when I got it, had one problem: the camshaft was installed off one tooth. The A102 engines were built in Marysville (Michigan) at M&I, and the quality control was not what it should have been. Once I got the cam in straight it would run 103.5 (in the quarter mile) like it was supposed to. I ran it 9000 miles with the original engine. In the meantime, I was building the good engine at the Ramchargers shop. The original engine became the first supercharged Hemi for the Ramchargers Funny Car."

That "good" engine was loaded with the best Mopar had to offer: A Street Hemi bored .040, with A990 aluminum heads. It used a standard intake manifold, bored to 1-11/16-inches and fitted with 1-11/16 x 1-11/16-inch Carter AVS carbs. Hooker 30x2-inch headers fed a custom, full-length, three-inch exhaust system. Prototype aluminum roller-tip rockers and stands were installed, with a Racer Brown SSH-25 cam. Remember, Tom had to build a race car that could (and would) be driven daily on the street. The cam had to have the tractability to do that. Tom explains: "The Racer Brown SSH-25, which we recommended for street applications at the time, (I feel) contributed a lot to the thinking among Chrysler engineering in terms of valve gear design. The big thing that Racer did on those hydraulic cams, that we were never brave enough to do before, was eliminate the 'ramps.' In other words, positive acceleration starts

**T**he "Motor City." During the 1960s, it was truly the street racing capitol of the world: Woodward Avenue; Telegraph Road; Interstate-696. These were the scenes of some of the fastest, most competitive racing anywhere in the world — legal or otherwise. Having the fastest car in Detroit during this era was a distinction valuable as any racing championship.

In the late Sixties the car to beat was a dark green Hemi-powered '66 Coronet 440. The owner and usual driver: Tom Hoover. That's right, the man who was the guiding light of the incredible Ramchargers Racing Club, the Chrysler engineer who is rightfully called "The Father of the Hemi," also owned the fastest car on I-696.



Hoover began working for Chrysler Engineering in the mid-1950s. He soon found other engineers at Chrysler shared his interest in racing. Thus, the Ramchargers were born. So, too, evolved the many successful factory race cars and street muscle machines that Dodge and Plymouth built throughout the Glory Years. The A/FX cars, Altered Wheelbase racers, Max Wedge and Street Hemi, were just a few of the projects that Hoover's brilliant engineering mind helped conceive.

Building a special car for the street was not a Chrysler-sanctioned project, just a personal engineering exercise.

*After 23 years Tom Hoover takes to the street again in the "King of I-696."*



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right off the base circle. The SSH-25 was the first to do that." Though quite docile on the street, Tom estimates his Hemi produced 560 horsepower.

Getting that big Hemi to breathe was a consideration Hoover applied his engineering savvy to. "We took Tygon tubing and mounted it on various places across the front of the car. I had a manometer on the passenger seat, and I drove around trying to find the area of highest pressure, which we learned, was at the inside headlights. But this was a street car and I didn't want to remove them. The next best place was at the outside of the grill. We got eight water column inches of pressure there; it would drop off to four inches in other places." He cut out that area behind the grill, fashioned sheet metal scoops, and ran four-inch rubber flex tubing to the air cleaner — a factory-looking ram air system. To reduce weight, he removed the rear seat and rear window regulators, installed seats from a Dodge A100 van (like the factory racers used) and moved the battery to the trunk for better weight distribution. The final touch was the 1957 Plymouth hubcaps, a Tom Hoover trademark. "I won the 1960 NHRA Nationals in a '57 Plymouth; those hubcaps became my good luck symbol."

He really didn't need it. As Tom explains: "By then the street races in Detroit had graduated from North Woodward. The cars had become so fast, it simply wasn't safe anymore. We would congregate at 10 Mile Road and Northwestern, then go out on I-696. It was the car to beat on I-696 in 1968. By then it would run 116,

even 117 in the quarter mile—just the way I drove it to work. I never made a pass in the car with the headers uncapped. We went out to Milan (Raceway) a couple Sunday afternoons. It sure wasn't stock, so we ran it in 'hot rod' class. Usually, I ran the car developmentally, strictly at Chrysler Test."

Street racing in Detroit was very serious business, with high speeds and corporate and personal reputations on the line. The greatest consideration was the fear of getting caught. Hoover remembers: "The chal-



lenge was that we were starting to get some adverse publicity; there were a couple of articles I remember, specifically in the Detroit Free Press, that were badmouthing us: 'Why are these engineers out street racing when they should be doing something more responsible.' There was one occasion where references were made to AMC, of all people, and Chrysler being out on I-696. I kind of regret it now, but I never took any pictures of the car in an environment where it would be incriminating. That's why I don't have any pictures of the green car on the track, or at Howard Johnson's or whatever. I just didn't want to have any evidence. Anytime we did any serious racing I always had Ted Spehar drive. I'd be elsewhere. It simply wasn't worth the risk. It could jeopardize the whole (racing) program if we were caught. Ted was under contract to Chrysler, but he wasn't an employee. It gave us a little breathing room. If something like that had happened heads would have rolled. I like to think we had the common sense not to do anything to jeopardize the program."

"It was good generally for our image as an engineering organization, how successful our program was, to have the car to beat on I-696. Before the green car I had a '65 Coronet, a 426 eight-barrel Wedge car. It would run about 105. It was a four-speed manual. That was the car we tried the "slick shift" in for the first time. We took the synchronizers out and ground every other tooth off each gear. It was great if you got the gear, but if you missed it just a little, you could hear it for blocks!

Having the King of the Road in Detroit was a Mopar tradition. "It wasn't always my car," Tom recalled. "We had a dyno operator who had a '64 Plymouth Wedge. He was a four-speed driver, and he'd carry the front wheels with it! Then I built the '66. The best at that time was a dark green Firebird — an NHRA car. I beat that car."

All kingdoms must pass, and the reign of Tom Hoover's '66 came to an end around 1970. He explains: "What moved it to the next level was that by 1970, Chevy brought out the 'long' crank from the Cam Am big block, which made it a 496 or something like that. One of the guys was a Ford engineer; he had a lightweight Camaro with a 500-plus cubic inch big block. He could get by my green Coronet.

By then it was getting difficult to compete. Then "The Silver Bullet" came along. We managed to get the '67 GTX 440 four-barrel engineering test car into Jimmy Addison's hands. He worked for Ted Spehar. It was already a situation where we couldn't repaint those cars and put them

SPECIFICATIONS	
<b>Engine:</b>	
Type	Chrysler A102 Street Hemi
Displacement	436 (.040-inch overbore)
Heads	A990 Aluminum
Cams/shaft	Racer Brown SSH-25
Valve Springs	Standard Street Hemi (.88-inch)
Valve Spring Retainers	Titanium
Valve Gear	Experimental Alum Rockers/Stands
Horsepower	560 est.
Compression Ratio	11.0:1
Valve Lifters	Hydraulic (.060-inch dry lash)
Intake Manifold	A102 bored to 1 1/16 x 1 1/16-inch
Carburetion	Two 1 1/16 x 1 1/16-inch Carter AVS (w/staged linkage)
Exhaust Manifolds	Hooker 2 x 30-inch headers
Exhaust	Three-inch w/Walker Turbo mufflers
Water Pump	Aluminum Housing
Oil Pan	Deep Sunip w/Windage Tray
Fuel Pump	Booster Pump near Tank
Recreated by	Bill McKnight, Dana Tech Center, Toledo, Ohio
<b>Drivetrain:</b>	
Transmission	TorqueFlite Three-speed Automatic
Shifter	B&M modified to "Slap Shift"
Final Drive Ratio	3.91:1
Front Springs	Six-Cylinder torsion bars
Rear Springs	Mopar Performance Super Stock leafs
Brakes: Front	Manual, Drum
Brakes: Rear	Manual, Drum
Weight	3400 pounds (with 1/4 tank of fuel)
<b>Modifications:</b>	
A100 Van Seats	
Rear Window Regulators Removed	
Rear Seat Removed	
Battery Moved to Trunk	
Ram Air System	
1957 Plymouth Hub Caps	
<b>Restored by:</b>	
Joey Cole	
Cole's Restorations Plus	
1148 Cribb Street	
Toledo, Ohio 43612	
419-478-2020	

back on the street because the wheelhouses had been opened up, that sort of stuff. We managed to funnel the right parts to Jimmy, and we called that '67 GTX "The Silver Bullet." My green car would run 117 mph, but the Bullet would go 130. No nitrous, no funny stuff. It was a four-hundred-eighty-some cubic inch Hemi. It had the first tunnel ram, and it was painted silver. The Silver Bullet became the car to beat on I-696. It would run about 10.30 at 132. He ran it on slicks all the time; if it rained Jimmy stayed home."

With the passing of the "crown" Tom Hoover sold his Coronet. "Once we built the Silver Bullet, it became rather redundant," Tom said. The Coronet was purchased by a Detroit man, but soon became the pawn in a divorce battle. The wife won! The engine was sold to a man in Scotland and the car sat neglected for years. It was later sold to a relative, and the neglect continued. Two years ago, Tom Devers, a Sylva, Ohio, Dodge dealer, heard about the

car. Identifying it was easy as most of Hoover's modifications remained. In the glove box was all the documentation possible—build sheet, Certi-Card, original owner's manual, even Hoover's personal logbook on the car filled with sketches, ideas, comments and notes written throughout his ownership.

Devers hired Joey Cole of Toledo to restore the Coronet, but the task was daunting. Not only was every nut and bolt removed, but the unibody had to be cut into pieces, with new sheet metal welded in to replace the extensive rust. "Had it been any other car," Cole said, "it would not have been worth the effort." But this is not any other car, and the results are flawless.

The restoration was completed this spring, with Tom Hoover supervising the work. He joined *Mopar Muscle* to drive his Coronet for the first time since he sold it in 1970. After 23 years the "Father Of The Hemi" and the "King of I-696" were united once again.

