

A New Interior for the Jolly Green Giant

For 1966 Cadillac only produced 2,250 Fleetwood Eldorados - the last of the rear-drive convertibles.

Only Eldorados shipped standard in metal-flaked Firemist colors, and all received additional brightwork, Fleetwood crests and wreaths, leather and genuine American



walnut trim on doors and quarter panels. *One of the earliest examples of the “personal performance-luxury car...”* This one, body #02015, was among the last 10% built, on May 1, before Cadillac re-tooled in July/August for the '67 front-drive Eldorados. Only about 225 were built as optional, no-additional-cost, bucket seat versions like this one! *The shot above is at San Marcos TX Grand National June 2018.*

The original owner, Colonel Harold J. “Pete” Birkhofer, ordered this Tropic Firemist Green (96-4) Eldorado with Antique Gold (484) perforated leather interior in June 1966 at Beacon Motor Company on Summer Street in Bangor, Maine. List was \$6,631, but a few options brought the total to \$7,956.73. That’s \$62,276 in today’s dollars, adjusted for inflation. The car came to Georgia and stayed all its life. Col. Birkhofer was assigned to the 465th Bomb Wing, and the Birkhofers lived at Robins AFB near Macon. He was a decorated flyer, earning the Distinguished Flying Cross for his helicopter work under fire in Vietnam.¹ When I learned of its history the car demanded to have the name given by US troops to the Sikorsky



¹ Lt. Colonel “Pete” Birkhofer was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for extraordinary achievement while participating in aerial flight as Aircraft Commander of an OH-3E helicopter in Southeast Asia on 15 August 1971. On that date Colonel Birkhofer led a formation of three choppers to place friendly recon teams deep inside hostile territory. Despite severe weather conditions, the constant threat of hostile fire, and limited aircraft capabilities, Col. Birkhofer accomplished his mission ensuring the successful completion of the mission. Birkhofer, an Air Force veteran, died in 1979. His car has been named “Jolly Green Giant” to honor the name given the Sikorsky OH-3E.

chopper flown by its owner: the *Jolly Green Giant*. It sports a small “tatoo” of the Sikorsky OH-3E on its driver’s side fender as a tip of the cap.

I am the fifth owner, and as you might expect at least one of the previous owners had allowed the car’s upkeep to drift. I bought it with proceeds from my ’66 Sedan DeVille, a Past Presidents’ Preservation award winner that now spends its days in air-conditioned comfort in Abu Dhabi. I traded a pristine ’66 sedan for a really rough Eldorado, knowing it needed work.

The PROBLEM: Foam crumbs on me arse! Although there is body and paint work to be done in this rolling restoration, I had grown tired of brushing the foam rubber crumbs off my backside every time I exited the car. I believe someone in the past had done a quick-n-dirty flip job on the Eldo’s original leather interior – spraying lackadaisically over every surface (leather, vinyl, stainless steel) to spiff it up a bit (right). That dye job had dried out the leather and caused it to crack and peel (below).



But I’ve been happy driving the car in its condition for four years while bringing back the drive train and suspension. The Giant made the 2,000-mile round trip to sunbaked San Marcos in June 2018 without a hitch, and I was beginning to feel bulletproof. That sense of satisfaction lasted until Christmas 2018, when – coming home with an auction find from our region’s big holiday bash – I chipped off a half-dollar-sized piece of the dash cap. Now there was an ugly, jagged patch of black foam showing through the tan cover directly in front of the passenger’s seat. All I can say is the dash pad was 50+ years old. It was brittle, and it was already showing three hairline cracks. I knew it was going to need replacement eventually.



Exploring alternatives: One of the reasons the Peach State region keeps me around is I like finding replacement parts for myself and others. Makes me feel needed! So I got started looking for dash pad alternatives. Among the variables I had to sift through:

1. Ralph Messina told me that they all – coupes, sedans, convertibles, ’65s, ’66s - share the same steel dash cap subframe. All ’65s are designed for mono speakers. Thus, a ’65 dash CAN easily be used for a ’66 *mono* radio car. But it must be modified for use in a ’66 *stereo* car. To modify a ’65 dash you’d have to position the holes for stereo speakers, then cut them out. The ’66 cars were the first to have the dash frame stamped for the stereo option.

Cadillac merely spot-welded plates in the holes if you ordered a mono radio; one can open up a '66 mono dash for stereo speakers by cutting those spot welds. But if you're modifying a vintage dash you still must cut through steel AND brittle, 50-year-old plastic.

2. Ralph also wondered whether the grain pattern was different between years, so I eyeballed my friend Larry Wilson's '65 Deville convertible. It looked like a dead-on match for the grain in my '66.
3. Lots of guys prefer to just fill and wrap the old cracked dash, but this seems to depend on how much you trust your upholsterer, as results are mixed. I've been told the repairs don't last long, and you also have the challenge of matching the grain pattern with a modern sheet of vinyl.
4. Placing speakers in the kick panels or into the center space of the dash was out of the question for me, because I was determined to put this car back to a factory build - eventually.
5. Options for those of us who have a '66 stereo car appear to be:
 - a. Pay *Just Dashes* or another outfit to do a custom restoration for upwards of \$1200 (plus shipping) using your old dash;
 - b. *OPGI* in CA sells a licensed re-pop for about \$715 for a generic '65-'66 dash that's a mono-setup. Jeff Shively was happy with that approach. But for stereo speakers you have to modify it. Some say the grain on the dash doesn't match the original, which makes the end pieces attached to the doors look "off." And it comes only in black or red or blue – requiring a dye job. *Caddy Daddy* has the same part for \$771, but why?
 - c. Buy an original '66 stereo dash from a vendor (eBay, etc.) for \$300-\$500 and paint or dye it, but be prepared for it to be a hard-to-find item, while taking the risk that it is as brittle as your old one;
 - d. Buy an old '66 mono dash for \$300-\$400 and cut out the spot welds that hold the round plates in place where the stereo speakers go, then carefully cut the plastic pad (and take the same risk as item c above);
 - e. Buy a '65 mono dash for \$300, scribe the metal where you think the stereo speakers go, then cut out the holes in the steel and plastic (and take the same risk as item c above).
 - f. Pay your upholsterer to fill the cracks and wrap the original dash with new vinyl or leather – who knows what this would cost.

I began by shopping eBay for a nice old one to re-spray in my color. I was willing to risk that it would be brittle and maybe hiding some little cracks. But I didn't trust myself to modify a mono dash to fit the stereo speakers. I was able to find...NOTHING. Not a mono dash out of a closed car, as Ralph suggested, and certainly not a stereo dash for a '66.

Then I got a reply from Vince Taliano of Potomac region:

Hi Doug, I may have what you are looking for. I have a 1966 stereo dash that appears to never have been installed in a car. It is the same color as my 1965 DVC dash -- the caramel like color. I can take pictures and send to you after I return home from my work trip if you are interested. I have been holding on to it with the thoughts of maybe installing in my '65 but I know it is not correct for my car because of the stereo set-up. Talk with you later, Vince

Eureka! Was I *ever* interested! When I saw the photos Vince sent I realized it was my color, and yes, rigged for a stereo car. It's a longer story than you want to hear, so let's just say this: I bought Vince's '66 stereo dash pad. Vince was so very careful about picking a reliable shipper, because the worst that could happen would be damaging the 50+ year-old pad in shipment. Turns out the shipper had a lot to learn about shipping vintage auto parts! He placed the UP arrow on the down end, thus ensuring that UPS would drop the box on its less cushioned top. *When it arrived, it was cracked...* (right)



Vince and I worked together to get the shipper to honor the insurance we had purchased. When he saw my photos of the shipping boxes and the dash pad, he did honor the insurance agreement without much hesitation, and noted that he would be more careful the next time. The trouble with that is I am still out a good dash. I now have TWO cracked dashes, although it's true that one cost me nothing except my time when all was said and done.

The Solution: A New Interior! This DASHING adventure was all I needed to push me over the edge on the question of a new interior. Anticipating a drive to Louisville for the Grand National meet in June, the time was NOW! I could get the upholsterers to take a shot at fixing *one* of my cracked dashes while they fixed my problem with crumbling foam rubber. I had been exploring good upholstery shops around Atlanta for years; we have the contact information for the best half-dozen in our region's list of suppliers and mechanics. But I found a number of reasons to hesitate with all of these. Too expensive! Takes too long! Not the best workmanship! At a Peach State fund-raiser in 2017 I ran into PSCLC member Frank Patton, who showed me the perfect restoration of his '50 Fleetwood's interior. Frank's friend, Larry Bixler, was there with his '66 Continental convertible, posing in a new red leather interior. I was SOLD! Now, two years later, I was connecting with Ron Gangster, the owner of Ron's Heme Head in Nashville GA, four hours south of Atlanta – Frank's highly recommended upholsterer. Frank met me in Nashville in mid-March and we explored Heme Head for hours, getting to know the guys and discussing how I wanted to approach the project. We agreed on the following, so I left the car:



- A new interior as close as we could get to the original materials and design. This meant perforated leather seating, chrome edging, and

matching carpets. We found scraps of original materials so that we could recreate the original “Antique Gold” color.

- I had a budget that would be real. Asked if I wanted them to refinish the wood panels, I said “Only if you can do it under the budget.” I had done these myself a year ago.
- The deadline was the end of May or first week of June, to give me time to shake it down before driving 420 miles (6.5 hours) to Louisville for the 2019 Grand National.



- I had samples from SMS Interiors in Oregon, the go-to guys for authentic fabrics and kits. But SMS wanted until mid-June to stitch together the kit – and to charge roughly \$3500. Not quick enough! So, Ron’s upholstery guy, Jeff, said he would find the hides and stitch the pieces together from scratch in less time and for less money. Done!



- New custom-made carpeting with padding, door and quarter panels, new belts using the original buckles, sun visors, getting the power seats to work, fixing window regulators and motors as needed – all in the budget. Later, we added new vent window gears that I bought

from USA Parts Supply because missing teeth were making the vent windows iffy. Also, I had installed a Jenkins trunk kit a couple years before, but wasn’t very happy with the details (e.g., I couldn’t get the hinge covers on right). Jeff would straighten that out as well.

- I apparently caught them at a good time, because Jeff was able to devote nearly full time on the Eldorado. He completely disassembled the interior, including the dash, and worked from the floor up. He cleaned the floors, seat frames and springs. He found only surface rust. He painted it all black, then installed insulation. He got the seats working beautifully. (I learned that the passenger seat only goes front and back, not up and down like the driver’s seat.) It does NOT tilt back as I have heard some say theirs does. It’s a two-way switch, not a four-way, like the driver’s seat.



- Jeff found the chrome trim that surrounds the seat bases, but it took two weeks to get them in. Meanwhile, he took the original covers apart and used them as templates, and with SIX cow hides, he created the seat covers, front and back. It started out FIVE hides, but as it turns out, doing the perforation wastes a lot of hide, so we needed a sixth one at \$550. Good news: I have enough leather left over, perforated and smooth, to make Barb a matching purse and myself a dangd nice wallet!
- Jeff and Ron kept me posted about every two weeks, sending photos of the progress. Important, since they are four hours away from me. But I could tell things were moving fast, and my Frank looked in on them every time he was at his cabin in the area.
- *About that dash:* They figured out that the original dash pad was so broken up that they couldn't fix it. So, they took the one I'd bought from Vince and attempted to get it to work. Ron used a Dremel tool to open up the crack, then inserted a bunch of PVC pipe adhesive to hold the sides together. Then they filled the remaining valley and painted, sanded, and painted again. They tell me it looked great for a while, but the first thing I saw when I approached the car was the hairline crack right in front of the steering wheel. It opened up more as I drove up the road, probably flexing with the highway. *Hemee Head did NOT charge me for the failed attempt to fix the dash.* It still looks decent, so I will drive it like this until I can afford to send the ORIGINAL dash pad to *Just Dashes* and get it rebuilt. When that happens, Vince and I are going to be looking for buyers for the '66 stereo dash core the shipper bought for us...



Pick-up Day! Larry Wilson put aside his work on the red '65 Deville convertible for a day and drove me down in my '96 Brougham to pick up the Green Giant. We left at 7:00 to beat the commuter traffic, and made it in under four hours.

- Naturally, I made a beeline for the Eldorado, sitting pretty in the courtyard, waiting for me to get it back home. Couldn't help myself, I checked the dash first, and immediately saw the hairline crack to the left of the temp sensor. (right) Disappointed, but not so much that it distracted me from putting my hands all over that new leather. Heaven! I knew right away it was terrific workmanship.
- We toured the grounds at Hemee Head. Steve showed Larry their work – this is a total restoration shop, and there are well over 100 cars there in a warehouse. They're storing several nice restorations, like a Thirties Chrysler Airstream, a Fifties Mercury, a few Chrysler letter cars. Their projects are in stages



of restoration (e.g., THE Hot Rod Lincoln from the song by Charlie Ryan released in 1955²). A few there were for sale (e.g., a triplet of '50s and '60s MGs, which are near and dear to Larry's heart, since he's restoring one alongside his Deville).



They have a few parts cars too (e.g., '58 and '59 Chevy panel deliveries, a stack of '56 Packard body parts). We took Steve to lunch because Ron was at the Hershey meet buying cars. Quite a celebration.



My total invoice was \$6,088.00. Labor was \$2670 at \$65/hour. In addition to the list of tasks I gave you earlier, Jeff took off the old interior cardboard panels and fabricated new panels to



² https://video.search.yahoo.com/yhs/search?hsimp=yhs-att_001&hspart=att&p=Song%3A+Hot+rod+Lincoln#id=2&vid=87982af18200994bf4288a18d524e57e&action=click Please note: This video shows a red modified Ford, not the Hot Rod Lincoln... And the photo above of the 45 RPM record is original, but it's Commander Cody's version of the song. Cool anyway!

hold the new vinyl. It took six hides: three perforated, three regular, plus three sheets of vinyl. Materials: \$3418.00 (leather hides were \$3010), and the remainder, \$2670, was labor.



You know as well as I do that it ain't an old car project without a surprise. Despite our best intentions on our way home, Larry and I hit the downtown Atlanta connector at 5:15 PM. We sat in standing traffic for an hour, idling in the heat. I shouldn't have worried, this is a seasoned parade car, having weathered the 2018 July Fourth parade in nearly 100-degree heat. But when I crawled around the Grady Curve the accelerator pedal came off and got hung up under the brake pedal. I made things worse kicking the danged thing around until I curled the rubber mat up beneath it AND the danged brake pedal. I thought I was going to die going 2 mph on the ATL freeway! Oh, and this was the trip the brake lights decided to stop working. Larry had to tailgate me all the way home, until I could get the brake light switch replaced.

But if you ask me, all the hassles were worth every minute. I am riding in splendor now, comfortable and looking cool. Maybe the best outcome has been unintended: When I open the garage door every morning, I get a strong whiff of new leather. My whole garage smells like a new baseball glove! Every day it's springtime for this little kid...

