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Is This the Best Surviving Hemi Charger?

Story and photos
by Geoff Stunkard

The year 1966 was something of a watershed moment for performance cars. GM had Tri-power on GTOs and 4-4-2s, the Corvette's feared L88 powerplant quietly debuted, Ford created a run of drag-only 427 Comets and Fairlanes, and Chrysler unleashed its race-bred 426 Hemi motor in street trim to the few and the brave. So, while Professor Leary dropped out, Nancy Sinatra's boots went walking, and the Monkees hit the charts, members of the automotive "in-crowd" were piling into their favorite new-car dealerships to see a rapidly expanding group of possibilities.

In hindsight, that 430-horse L88 Vette was the year's real monster. But not many were sold, and the people who got them needed to have guts to wring them out. The new Hemi, on the other hand, was detuned just enough to be streetable and was available in almost any Chrysler B-platform body. This 425-(plus) horse mill was also a handful, but not as touchy as the sports car, and certainly more practical if you had more than just a girlfriend to take around. Unlike the handful of Corvettes that got away from GM (mostly to serious racers for SCCA competition), Mopar sent more than 1,000 Hemi engines onto America's byways that year.

Rebellion was growing. Antiwar protestors, inner-city riots, and offhanded statements about who was bigger than Jesus Christ were the backdrop when Dodge announced it too had a rebellion, and the new Dodge Rebellion was led by a model named Charger. Reportedly conceived as a potential platform for the stillborn turbine engine Chrysler had been developing, the new model was a direct shot at the growing

interest in performance styling.

Indeed, the '66 Chrysler B-Body lineup was entirely restyled from '65, featuring harder, crisper body lines. For Plymouth, the Satellite and Belvedere were the models, differing primarily in trim and options. Dodge had its Coronet as a competitor for those two, and the new Charger was a stand-alone vehicle for that division.

And the Charger was different. Notable styling cues included its sloped fastback roof line, hideaway headlights, and a red insert across the rear edge spelling out "Charger." Once inside, it was unlike anything Chrysler had released in the past, with four turbine-styled pods full of gauges glowing in the dashboard, bucket seats fore and aft, and a large expanse for the trunk under the rear window. Beneath the hood was one of several engines—the longtime standard 318-inch



polyspherical engine, the 383 Wedge, or the new-for-'66 Hemi. That year, 468 examples came off the assembly line with the latter between the wheelwells, including this one.

Keith Arteman of Bloomington, Illinois, is this car's co-owner and caretaker, and it caused quite a stir in the magazine world when it first turned up in public more than a decade ago. What you're seeing here is basically an untouched example of the breed. Indeed, Mopar-guru



The long red lens across the entire rear states "Charger," and it's fragile; many Chargers from '66-'67 that turn up have this item either damaged or missing.



Galen Govier spent two weeks crawling all over it and stated it was the most original Hemi car he had ever seen to that time. Noted-restorer Roger Gibson was shaking his head as he spent hours looking at little details.

How this car made it through time from new to the present in this condition is as interesting as the car itself. The story began in late 1965, when a single, middle-aged woman named Cora Case made up her mind to buy the new model and new

engine when it was announced. Cora worked at Courtesy Dodge in Bloomington, and though the dealership owner tried hard to dissuade her from the \$877.55 motor—recommending a 383 instead—Cora put her foot down and stated unequivocally that the Hemi was the only choice for her. Soon after, an order for a gold example went into the system, and then she waited and waited—and waited. She would get a telegram saying that her car would be built on such-and-



This is basically the only thing that ever changed on this car. When Cora Case couldn't find anyone to give her a top-end run on Route 66, the dealership swapped out her Hemi emblems for 383 Magnum tags. The originals are now back in place.



One of the things that surprised Roger Gibson was the way overspray was mated on the undercarriage, which remains amazingly clean. Note the different shades of paint, the location of the undercoating, the mark on the eyelet end of the rear spring, probably to help make sure that they were installed properly on the differential during assembly.



The tie-down tabs used to secure a car to the transporter during its trip from the factory were normally removed by the dealership during new-car prep. As you can see, they were left on in this case, and were on the chassis before the undercoating was applied to the car. Keith Arteman's other '66 Charger also has the tabs in place, but it's not a common occurrence to find them.

such date, followed by another that it had been postponed. She finally asked the boss if there was another new Charger in the state that she could have in its place.

As chance would have it, he found one, painted Mauve no less, down south in Springfield, though the dealer there made him take a 273-inch Dart GT convertible as part of the deal. Cora finally had her car. She drove it sparingly that summer, making an occasional blast down Route 66 with regular street racers until those 426 badges made her a highway pariah. The dealership swapped the fender Hemi badges for a set of 383 versions, and she was back at it. That fall, the dealership agreed to keep the car in its upstairs storage area, and she drove only occasionally again in 1967.

That summer, things changed. Cora got a new job that came with a company-provided car, and she decided to basically mothball the Dodge, allowing a local friend to store it away. She didn't see



Never say never. This is the OEM air-cleaner top that was delivered with the car, but it has no centered orange 426 Hemi decal on it like most do.

it again for the next 20 or so years.

Her legend lived on, though. People in Bloomington's small Mopar world knew that there was a gorgeous '66 Hemi Charger around someplace; it was never seen, but Cora was the owner. So, when Cora happened to come into Keith's shop one day in the late '80s to buy some parts for an outdated Zenith record player (he had formerly owned a Zenith Electronics store and still had repair pieces), he asked almost in passing as she was walking toward the door, "So, Cora, how is that old Charger of yours doing?"

Taken aback, she stopped for a moment. "Oh, I guess I don't own it any longer."

"What? Did you sell it?"

"Oh, no, I would never sell that Charger. It's very complicated."

She proceeded to explain that there had been some sort of problem with getting it out of its second storage site, and

that she had not seen it for decades and had sort of given up on getting back her special car. Keith told her he would help in any way he could if she wanted. It would be six months before she came back to ask for that help, and he began to do the groundwork. Then there was a year full of lawyers and statements and court dockets and all sorts of nasty stuff like that, until the day came that there was no question of who owned the car, and a wrecker was sent to the location to pick it up for its rightful owner.

"Well, Cora, where should I take it?" the wrecker operator asked.

Taken aback yet again, she replied, "I never thought about that..." She looked at Keith, then at the car. "Why don't we take it over to your place?"

To this point, Keith had only wanted to see justice served; he had not intended to try to talk Cora out of the car. But their friendship was now strong enough that



The pair of Carter AFBs the factory selected worked pretty well on the new dual-plane street intake, which was heated with an exhaust-tube system routed up from the passenger-side headpipe. Since Cora never needed to get the engine reworked for racing, these are basically untouched, other than by Keith's very careful cleaning. Details abound.

she wanted him to be her partner in it, and so that is how Keith Arteman became half-owner and the caretaker of the Charger. Now in her late seventies, Cora remains active with her houseful of pets and still has no intention of selling her Dodge, while Keith gets to take the car to shows, where it remains a star attraction whenever it appears.

As built, it was one of just two '66 Hemi Chargers painted in broadcast-code 661BB Mauve, a color that likely suited Cora more than gold anyhow. It had the A727 TorqueFlite behind the Hemi and 3.54 gears in an 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch differential. Goodyear Blue Streak tires mounted on 15-inch factory rims with simulated mag wheel covers rounded out the package. The car received the Hemi and power steering, though it has standard drum brakes on all four corners. The only major interior option beyond the Charger standard equipment was an AM radio.

Keith has been honored on numerous occasions with this car. He is proudest of a 2006 Chrysler Employee Motorsport Association Best of Show, awarded to him by Chrysler employees at the Walter P. Chrysler Museum in Auburn Hills, Michigan, at an event that featured almost 500 machines. The car also received a special invite to be displayed at the '05 Daytona 500 for the debut of the new-generation Charger, and it has also garnered three Big Daddy's Favorite honors, presented to just one vehicle at the Mopar show hosted by the Garlits Museum in Ocala, Florida, each year, and handed out by Don Garlits himself.

Few cars are as unique as the one owned by Cora Case and Keith Arteman—a time capsule from the era of the Dodge Rebellion, the first year of the Hemi, and the car that launched the legendary Charger name. **MCR**

AT A GLANCE

'66 DODGE CHARGER

Owned By: Cora Case and Keith Arteman, Bloomington, Illinois

Restored By: Unrestored original survivor

Engine: '66 426ci Hemi, rated at 425 hp

Transmission: A727 TorqueFlite

Rearend: 8 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch with 3.54 gears

Interior: Standard Charger equipment, AM radio

Wheels: 15-inch simulated mags

Tires: Goodyear Blue Streaks

Special Parts: All-original survivor



Keith is co-owner of the survivor Charger. Cora, who bought the car new, owns the other half.



This shows paint dabs on the choke, which may have been used to help initially set the tune-up before the engine left the Industrial & Marine engine plant, where the Hemi engines were assembled. Also note the very-hard-to-get original Hemi fuel filters and fuel-line routing and clamps.



Here's the very air filter that came on the car right from the factory; replacements normally differ in terms of their pleating and support structure.



The Hemi plug wires that were installed on the engine are dated 3-65, as this image shows. Cora took delivery on April 16, 1966, more than a year later.



The styling for the Charger's interior was a radical departure from anything Chrysler had offered in the past, with inset round gauges, full-length console, and quad bucket seats.



Automatics equipped with the floor shifter had this layout, complete with porthole-style courtesy lights on each side of the console.



One of the gnarliest wheel covers to leave Detroit was this 15-inch version with simulated mag lug nuts. Good ones are pricey if you need a set these days.