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1961-1962 AMERICAN MOTORS RAMBLER CLASSIC CUSTOM SIX

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Although American Motors technically dissolved in mid-1987, the love affair with AMC's automobiles is stronger than ever. They designed and built some of the most fuel-efficient, best-styled and well-made cars of the 1950s and 1960s. If you're a baby boomer, you remember well all those cute little Ramblers running around town, or maybe your parents had one of those station wagons with the fold-down seat. Long admired for their simplicity, utilitarian design approach and servicing ease, Ramblers of the early 1960s are an inexpensive way to get into the collector-car hobby, and there are numerous parts outlets and support to keep your car on the road.

Although the 1961 Rambler was based on the 1956 Rambler body, it was renamed the Rambler Classic and received a new front end featuring a one-piece, rectangular extruded-aluminum grille with the letters RAMBLER underneath. There were several series of the Rambler Classic Six, including the Deluxe Line, the Super Line and the Custom Line, which featured bucket seats in a four-door sedan. Pricing started at \$2,098 for the four-door six-passenger sedan. A station wagon cost just \$339 more.

In 1962, the Rambler had no major changes. The Super models were dropped and replaced by a "400" that had an overhead-valve engine. A new assembly plant was built in Brampton, Ontario, Canada, for the production of Americans and Classics. AMC took a leadership role with their safer brake systems when they fitted all their cars with dual-circuit master cylinders, something GM didn't do for another five years. And according to Brian Yacino, national president of the American Motors Corporation Rambler Club, Rambler received an award from the Florida Chiropractic Association for "pioneering in the development of postural seat design."

Engines

There were several engines available. The base engine was the 195.6-cu.in. straight-six with 127 horsepower. With its aluminum block, it was quite ahead of its time.

The aluminum engine came standard in the 1961 Super and 1962 400 models and the cast-iron engine was standard on the Custom and Deluxe both years, with aluminum optional. The 250-cu.in. V-8 was available only in the 1961 Classic Eight, model 6120 only. Despite the company's claims, Ramblers, with six years of design experience and more than two million test miles on proving grounds, highway and track, were not infallible, and there were some problems with the aluminum construction. The die-cast block weighed only 60 pounds, an 80-pound savings over a cast-iron block. AMC said a precision, high-pressure die-casting process assured uniformity and high quality with centrifugally cast-iron cylinder liners that were mechanically and chemically bonded permanently to the aluminum block. The cylinder head was cast iron, and the connecting rod bearings were steel-backed copper-lead alloy for long life. The crankshaft, a drop-forged steel design, rode in four main bearings. With its 8.7:1 compression ratio, it produced 180-lbs.ft. of torque at 1,600 rpm. A 138hp version was also available.

Another optional engine was the 250-cu.in. V-8, which was available in two horsepower versions: 200hp and 215hp, available only in the 1961 Classic Eight. The standard 200hp version featured a Holley two-barrel carburetor, while the 215hp V-8 had a four-barrel Holley and dual exhausts. Both V-8s used solid lifters, five main bearings, a throw-away full-flow oil

filter and heavy-duty cellulose-fiber air filter. They also had an 8.7:1 compression ratio, so regular leaded gasoline could be used. Speaking of gasoline, Ramblers were stingy with a gallon of gas in the late 1950s and early 1960s when it really didn't matter; a Rambler got more than 33 miles per gallon on a trip from Canada to Mexico during the NASCAR Economy Run in the late 1950s. Cars destined for California had a special crankcase ventilation system to comply with air pollution requirements.

Except for reliability problems with the aluminum blocks, the cast-iron engines are durable and were as strong as anything Chevrolet, Ford or Chrysler was building. Longtime AMC mechanic Warren Patterson of Harrisville, Rhode Island, said the problem with the aluminum-block engines generally surfaced when the owner drove only short distances. "They had a tendency to get severe carbon buildup," said Patterson, who worked as a dealer mechanic from 1958 through 1966. "We had a customer who commuted daily to New York City and was driving 40,000 miles a year with an aluminum block in his car. He told me it was the best car he ever owned." Patterson said the V-8s were virtually bulletproof. "If the customer brought them in for regular service, we had no trouble at all with those V-8s. A great, great engine."

Transmissions

The standard transmission was a three-speed manual that was full synchromesh and proved durable and quiet. The three-speed came with mechanical shift linkage, and AMC had oil holes added to the main drive gear on the Classic Six transmission to improve lubrication. Parts are readily available to rebuild these units. The manual transmission came with a dry-disc single clutch, and heavy-duty clutches could be ordered. For better fuel economy, buyers could order an overdrive, which reduced engine speed by 30 percent. The optional automatic, the Borg-Warner "Flash-O-Matic," had three forward speeds and featured a free-wheeling sprag-clutch for smoother shifting, less slippage and reduced noise. The mechanical shift linkage consisted of two heavy-duty cables; one cable operated Park and the other worked the push-button gear selector. Like many automatics, the Borg-Warner featured a magnetic element to pick up metal shavings in the transmission oil.

Rear Axle

The Rambler had a hypoid differential unit with semi-floating axles. It also featured a torque tube that housed the driveshaft, which functioned to resist rear-axle torque reaction. Several final-drive gear ratios could be ordered, up to 4.10:1. Also optional on all models was Twin-Grip, which was AMC's version of a limited-slip differential.

Suspension

AMC labeled its front suspension "Deep Coil Ride," which had direct-acting coil springs mounted on insulating rubber pads mounted above the front wheels, thus leading to a quieter ride. The "sea-leg" (inverted V) mounted hydraulic Monroe shock absorbers were designed for a smooth ride; Gabriel shocks were fitted on V-8-equipped models. Heavy-duty shocks and springs could be ordered. In the rear, there were coil springs mounted on rubber pads, top and bottom, as were the shocks.

For the 1962 models, AMC redesigned their front suspension, replacing the lower trunnion with a longer lasting ball joint. Patterson said the biggest problems on these cars were the trunnions, which work just like ball joints. "Back in those days, cars needed to be greased, especially the trunnions. I remember, if they weren't greased, they'd come apart at, say, 40,000 miles. The customers who came in for regular oil changes and kept them greased could get about 80,000 miles from a set of trunnions. The problem was they would not accept as much grease as a ball joint, and needed lubrication every 1,000 miles."

Standard tires were either blackwall Super-Cushion Goodyears or B.F. Goodrich tubeless 6.50 x 15 four-ply tires. Wider 6.70 x 15 tires were optional, while all V-8 models were equipped with 7.50 x 14 four-plys; whitewalls were optional. Standard on the three-seat station wagons, but optional on all others, were Goodyear Captive-Air Safety tires, which had an extra layer of inner lining material designed to protect against punctures, thus allowing the driver to continue at up to 50 mph for more than 100 miles. The wheels were heavy-gauge steel, and full-wheel covers were stainless steel.

Brakes

The standard drum braking system featured nine-inch bonded Wagner brake linings on the Classic Six models that totaled 153.8 inches of lining area; the 10-inch brake linings on V-8 models resulted in 167.5 inches of lining area, and also featured a cooling flange on their Bendix drums. Self-adjusting and power brakes were optional. An optional red parking brake lamp stayed lit, warning the driver if the parking brake remained on.

Body and Frame

The Rambler was engineered with unitized body construction. In fact, Rambler advertising

proclaimed "the strong, silent type," referring to the body. AMC claimed to be the first American manufacturer to "successfully" apply the unibody concept to passenger cars, when pioneered by Nash in 1940. The Rambler featured an all-steel welded body that included a welded-on structural angular brace that joined the forward section of the rear wheelhouse to the underbody floor for increased torsional rigidity. The windshield pillar had a double-box inner section for greater strength to support a wrap-around windshield.

Even 45 years ago, AMC tried to prevent rust in the rear quarters by installing a steel covering plate, which helped prevent dirt, mud, water and snow from getting trapped up inside. Full undercoating was a low-cost option.

Buyers could choose from 15 exterior colors and 26 two-tone color combinations. AMC called their paint "super enamel," and said it "retains high luster, and resists dulling, chalking, chipping and marring." Before painting, each body was treated to a "Deep Dip" primer process, in which the entire body structure was submerged into a tank of chromate primer. The non-metallic chromate primer provided an effective and lasting anchor for the bodies. AMC became the first U.S. carmaker to adopt this process in 1958. All told, the paint process included four steps: the Deep Dip phosphate rustproof paint bond, rustproofing, a baked primer and surface coat, and two color coats of baked enamel.

Despite these precautions, unless you buy a California or Western State car, look for rust around the sub-frame and underneath the front door, where the sub-frame meets the floor, says Brian Yacino, president of both the American Motors Corporation Rambler Club and 4 Seasons Rambler Club. "If the rust gets into the sub-frame, then you have some trouble. There are no reproduction parts available to repair this that I know of," he said. The exhaust system, for many years a high-wear item on many cars, featured a "Ceramic-Armored" muffler. The muffler and tailpipe were dipped at the factory in a liquid ceramic material and then fired at a higher temperature. After that, the muffler was wrapped in what today would be illegal-asbestos--followed by a galvanized steel shield. So sure was AMC that the muffler and tailpipe were ironclad, they were guaranteed against rusting through as long as the original owner had the car.

Interior

Although they could not be called luxurious, Rambler interiors were well-made using a combination of porous vinyl for added ventilation. Underneath that vinyl was full coil spring construction with inner springs, rather than the cheaper zig-zag springs found in many other cars at the time. The front and rear seat cushion and rear-seat-back spring assemblies were coated with rubber known as the "Acoustacoil" process, which soundproofed and stabilized

the coils. The front seats were supported by a rigid tubular frame, adjustable fore and aft six inches on curved tracks.

A unique optional feature was the "Airliner Reclining Seat and Twin Travel Beds." The right front seat could be put all the way back into a chaise lounge or full-length bed. It was quite novel at the time and is used on almost every new car today. Also available were accessory air mattresses and insect window screens. New for 1961, the headliners were cushioned acoustical molded fiberglass, replacing the conventional fabric type. The fiberglass was effective in deadening road noise and insulated against summer heat and winter cold. One-piece panels covered the roof of sedans, and two pieces were used for station wagons; they were available in eight colors.

Instruments were placed in an elliptical cluster, centered and raised in front of the driver. The steering wheel measured 17 inches in diameter and featured a deep recessed hub for better safety in the event of a crash. A two-tone hand grip was used on the Custom models' steering wheel. Each Rambler featured twin ashtrays in front, two in the rear, except on the Deluxe model. A cigarette lighter was standard on all models. And unlike other carmakers of the day, AMC stressed safety when safety didn't sell. For example, the rear of the front seat backs were designed with extended crash-padding around the edges, sun visors were built for greater sun glare protection, and the full length of the dash was padded, including the lower edges. To further emphasize safety, the door latch striker plate was built with a spring-loaded device designed to keep doors from accidentally opening if not closed securely. Seatbelts were made of long-wearing nylon webbing and a vacuum-powered four-door locking system called "Lock-O-Matic" was optional; it operated via a switch below the dash. With the switch on, all doors automatically locked once the engine started.

The clock was high quality and electrically wound, and featured jeweled pin-lever movement. This feature proved less sensitive to voltage fluctuations than a regular electric clock, which resulted in greater accuracy, and also eliminated ticking noise into the radio. For comfort in hot weather, AMC offered air conditioning that featured an aluminum compressor that weighed just 15.5 pounds, half of a comparable cast-iron unit. When ordering AC, the buyer also received heavy-duty cooling and a heavy-duty electrical system.

Restoration Parts

New parts are somewhat plentiful and, unlike other collector cars, not priced out of reach of the common man. Original interiors can be found at SMS Fabrics in Portland, Oregon, and Galvin's AMC Rambler Parts in Lodi, California, has an extensive parts supply. Other suppliers are American Parts Depot in Manchester, Ohio, and Blaser Auto Nash, Rambler,

AMC in Moline, Illinois.

Specialists

Galvin's AMC Rambler Parts

Lodi, California
209-365-6315

South Texas AMC

Bulverde, Texas
830-980-3165
www.southtexasamc.tripod.com

Blaser Auto Nash, Rambler, AMC

Moline, Illinois
309-764-3571
www.blaserauto.com

Parts Prices

Carpet set - \$110
Flexplate - \$46
Fuel tank sending unit - \$98
Heater core, rebuilt- - \$160
Oil pump - \$118
Piston set, 6-cyl. - \$228
Rod bearing set - \$69
Shock absorbers, gas - \$87/pair
Transmission mount - \$9
Trunnion repair kit, lower - \$238
Turn signal lens, repro. - \$24

Club Scene

American Motors Corp. Rambler Club

www.amcrc.com

860-658-0027

Dues: \$24/year; Membership: 1,000

Production

Classic Six Four-Door Sedans

1961

Deluxe 40,398

Super 62,563

Custom 29,398

Total 132,359

1962

Deluxe 38,082

Custom 68,699

400 Line 31,255

Total 138,036

Owner's View

Neil A. Rodrigues, 46, an engineer from Campbell, California, is the second owner of this 50,000-mile Rambler, which was bought new in San Bruno, California. Neil paid \$2,700 for it in 1998, with just 26,800 actual miles, and it was still fitted with the original tires. "I drove this car more than 2,000 miles in four days to a national meet in Kenosha," Neil told us. "The only problem I had was that the battery went dead in Sacramento. After fitting a new battery, I made the rest of the trip with no trouble. I averaged between 55 and 65 mph, and cars were passing me along the way. I got many thumbs-up and people yelling, 'Hey a Rambler; now that is nostalgia.' That is my favorite part of owning this car--seeing and hearing people's reactions. I also love the fins and the fact that it's so original and well-made compared to other 1961 cars. We had a '61 Chevy, but my Rambler is put together much better."

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