

## Do Not Feed After Midnight: The AMC Gremlin

Written by Aaron Severson

Saturday, 13 October 2007 14:56

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By the late 1960s, the demand for small, compact imports, temporarily sated by Detroit compacts like the [Falcon](#), was on the rise again, and Detroit was getting scared. Each American automaker fielded its own response, but American Motors, which had built its market position with economy cars, came up with two. The first was a clever improvisation, the second was a brave attempt to do something genuinely new. Some people call them the ugliest cars of the 1970s -- a title for which there are many contenders -- but nobody would ever mistake them for anything else. We're referring of course, to the AMC Gremlin and the infamous [AMC Pacer](#).

We begin with the Gremlin.

{readmorelink}Click here to read more about the AMC Gremlin



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### THE THREAT

For the longest time, nobody in Detroit took Volkswagen seriously, and who could blame them? The Beetle was an anachronism, no matter how much steady but glacier-like evolution it underwent, no matter how conscientious its assembly or clever its ads. By the end of the 1960s, however, it was selling more than half a million copies a year in the U.S. In the February 1969 issue of **Motor Trend**, editor Eric Dahlquist laid it out, explaining that the Volkswagen was frequently the best-selling car in Los Angeles, one of the nation's (and the world's) largest automotive markets.

This was bad news for all of the U.S. automakers, but it was particularly threatening for American Motors Corporation. AMC had made its mark in the late 1950s and early 1960s as [a purveyor of economy cars](#), alternatives to what George Romney called "Detroit dinosaurs," but by the late sixties, its compact [Rambler American](#) was moribund, stigmatized as a car for little old ladies. AMC's total sales for 1968 were

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272,696, climbing a bit to 281,297 for 1969; Volkswagen's sales for the same model years were 582,009 and 548,904, respectively. The Volkswagen was certainly problematic for Chevy and Ford, but for AMC, it was a deadly threat. Beyond that, Toyota and [Datsun](#) were beginning to emerge as real contenders. Something had to be done.

AMC was already preparing a new compact, the Hornet, to replace the aging [Rambler American](#) for 1970. American management realized, however, that, like the contemporary Ford Maverick, the Hornet was basically a new bottle for the same wine. Despite new styling, a longer wheelbase, and the revival of the storied Hornet name (which had been dropped when AMC abandoned the [Hudson](#) nameplate in 1957), the new car was not that different from the Rambler American underneath. To compete with the imports, AMC needed something different, something smaller: a genuine subcompact to take on the Beetle and its foreign brethren.



Even the shape of the rear sheet metal suggests that the Gremlin is a hatchback, but it's not -- only the rear window lifts up for loading cargo. (On some early base cars, even that was fixed in place.)

### THE CUT-DOWN HORNET

The ever-resourceful Dick Teague, AMC styling VP, was already working on it. Back in 1966, Teague and stylist Bob Nixon had discussed the possibility of a shortened version of the Hornet, which was then in development. Its engineering would also be reminiscent of the production

[AMX](#)

: just as the AMX was a cut-down

[Javelin](#)

, the new subcompact would be a cut-down version of the Hornet. Nixon created a series of sketches along those lines, which Teague liked.

On an airline flight that fall, Teague presented the idea to Gerry Meyers, AMC's VP of product development. Lacking any of Nixon's design studies, Teague sketched the design on the only thing he had at hand -- the back of an air-sickness bag. Meyers liked the idea, in large part because its tooling costs would be very low.

AMC showed a concept version of the new design at the New York auto show in April 1968 under the name AMX-GT. The AMX-GT was a trial balloon, and AMC did not suggest any plans to build it. Nonetheless, public response was generally favorable, and plans for the production model went forward. Perhaps mindful of Chrysler's success with the [Plymouth Road Runner](#), AMC settled on a cute name for its subcompact, with a cute, cartoon mascot to go with it: Gremlin.

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springs let the axle hop around in hard braking. The Gremlin was not well suited to enthusiastic cornering or panic stops.



The 1975 Gremlin was 170.3 inches (4,326 mm) long, 9.0 inches (229 mm) longer than the 1970½ model, thanks to its bigger bumpers. Charlie's '75 Gremlin X has non-stock alloy wheels, although the side stripe was part of the original X package. ( [Photo](#) © 2006 [Gremmie](#) ; used by permission)

The Gremlin's fuel economy was also disappointing, at least compared to its import competitors. Conservative highway driving could reach 25 mpg (9.4 L/100 km), but in harder use, the heavy body and big six would drop mileage below 20 mpg (11.8 L/100 km), not exactly in keeping with its economy-car mission. **EVOLUTION**

Despite its late introduction, the Gremlin managed a modest 28,560 sales in the 1970 model year. Better yet, total AMC sales were up sharply, by more than 100,000 units for 1970, so the Gremlin was adding business, rather than cannibalizing existing AMC sales. Sales for 1971, its first full model year, were 76,908.

In 1971 the small six was dropped and a bigger, 258 cu. in. (4.2L) version became optional. The switch to net horsepower ratings for 1972 dropped the 232 and 258 engines to 100 and 110 net horsepower (75 kW and 82 kW), respectively, although they were mechanically unchanged from 1971. More helpful was a new automatic transmission; AMC called it Torque Command, but it was actually Chrysler's TorqueFlite 904, which AMC quietly arranged to buy from its rival. It was a vast improvement over the archaic Borg-Warner "Shift Command" transmission it replaced. You could also now order front disc brakes for an extra \$47.25, providing notably better stopping power.

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### E PUT-ON

The Gremlin's looks and bargain-basement engineering have often been derided, but we think its real problem was simply that it came to market two or three years too late. If it had appeared in '67 or '68, it would've been an interesting counterpart to the Javelin and AMX, more firmly establishing a new, younger image for AMC. If it had had immediate V8 availability, perhaps with the Javelin/AMX's new 280 hp (209 kW) 343 cu. in. (5.6 L) engine, it would also have been a formidable competitor for the Plymouth Road Runner in the budget muscle sweepstakes. By the standards of 1967, its fuel economy was respectable enough, and buyers would have appreciated its performance. By 1970, though, the performance market was dying on the vine, and buyers were starting to demand greater fuel economy and utility from their small cars.

What the Gremlin never would have done in any case was seriously compete with the Beetle. For all the domestic industry's fear of the Volkswagen, none of the U.S. automakers really understood why people were buying them. It wasn't that the Beetle was a particularly good car -- for all of VW's continual evolution, it was hopelessly obsolete, and its performance was abysmal. The excellent assembly quality and strong dealer service certainly helped, but the main reason people bought Volkswagens was not what they were, but what they were *not*. VWs were not *real cars*

by Detroit standards. The Beetle was impossible to really take seriously; in the parlance of the day, it was a put-on. Buying a VW was a minor act of protest, a thumbing of the nose at the whole Alfred P. Sloan automotive class system. It was about being *different*

In that respect, the Gremlin was a smarter response to the Beetle than most people usually give it credit for. It wasn't sexy, but it was certainly unique, with an impish character far removed from the dowdy Pinto. Furthermore, for all the derision the Gremlin received for its parts-bin engineering, it cost far less to develop than either the Ford Pinto or [Chevrolet Vega](#), it had very few of those cars' well-publicized faults. The Gremlin's own deficiencies were not unlivable, or, compared to other cars of the time, particularly egregious. Compared to its domestic contemporaries, the worst that can be said of it is that it was a little weird-looking. Dick Teague's cut-down compact emerges as an honorable effort and a decent success -- no small feat for a car engineered on a shoestring and sketched on an air-sickness bag.

Special note: The blue Gremlin seen here (and the matching Pacer we'll see in part two) is owned by Charlie and Debbie from the northeast ([Gremmie](#) on Flickr), who've been kind enough to let us use their photos. We'll talk more about these specific cars in our [next installment](#)

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## **NOTES ON SOURCES**

Our initial sources included: Alfred Koos, "A Brief History of the Gremlin" (no date, **GremlinX.com**

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We subsequently revised this article incorporating new information from Todd Ruel's 29 July 2006 interview with Bob Nixon (6 October 2007, **Torq-o.com**,

<http://www.torq-o.com/Podcasts/podcasts.html>, accessed 7 December 2009) -- which was the source of Bob Nixon's description of the Gremlin as a "short-sheeted" Javelin -- and Patrick Foster, "Bob Nixon: AMC's Master of Design

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, April 2009, pp. 48-51.

This article's title, inevitably, was suggested by the film **Gremlins** (produced by Mike Fennell and Steven Spielberg, directed by Joe Dante, written by Chris Columbus, United States, Warner Bros., 1985).

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