

SERENDIPITY

Finding the First 1967 Shelby

– Greg Kolasa

Editor's Note: We've all looked at a 1960s promotional photo of a Shelby, GT40 or Cobra and wondered, "What car is that?" Most of the time that information, trivial to any but the hardest-core Shelby enthusiast, is lost to time. Usually a car was chosen at random — it might have been the right color out of a group of cars, or was simply parked on the end. Nobody ever took the trouble to note its serial number anywhere.

In the absence of written documentation, the identity of a promotional car can sometimes be determined by good, old-fashioned detective work. Cars used for public relations or promotional work are usually early production units or even cosmetic "mock-ups" not intended for retail sale but simply used to show what the finished product will look like. This is the story of the history of the first 1967 Shelby GT500 and how its identity was determined.

Serendipity is a word rarely used in everyday conversation, but most people have a rough idea of its meaning. "Good luck" would not be too wide of the mark, but the dictionary definition is more precise and more fitting to the story that will follow. Webster defines it as, "an apparent aptitude for making fortunate discoveries accidentally." If that definition isn't tailor-made for this car, we don't know what is.

This is the story of an unusual prototype 1967 Mustang, but the story of the car is only half of the tale. There is a little more to, in the words of broadcaster Paul Harvey, "the rest of the story." A lot of the interesting facts here are not just about the car, but are an account of how the details about this car came to light during a series of coincidences and accidental discov-

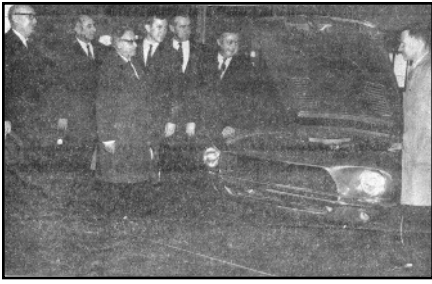
eries that are the very definition of "serendipity." [Note: this little tale of twists, turns and accidental discoveries will give you a glimpse of how, in the absence of factory documents, a good, detailed examination of period photographs can lead to a conclusion with almost the same degree of certainty as if it had been printed in black and white.]

Let's pick up the story on New Year's Eve, 1968. The Ionia, Michigan paper, *The Ionia Sentinel-Standard*, carried an article with the headline "Shelby Cars Are Donated to MTU." The story went on to say that two cars, a "Ford Cobra" and a "Shelby Mustang" (to use the somewhat-confusing nomenclature of the article) had recently been donated to M.T.U.

Formally called the Michigan Training Unit, M.T.U. was one of five state prisons located in the Ionia, MI. area. M.T.U. had a vocational training center for inmates where drafting, welding, auto body and auto mechanics were taught to prisoners as a part of their rehabilitation process. The article stated that Shelby Automotive's Chief Engineer Fred Goodell arranged the donation and a photo of some of the prison's administrators and local Congressmen gathered around the nose of a gold-colored 1968 Shelby Mustang also appeared in the paper. The somewhat unusual date for the presentation (just a day or so before the year ended and in the dead of a Michigan winter) suggests that the donation was made at the end of the year in order to take advantage of the



Just about anyone seeing 1967 Shelby showroom literature, including this postcard, would assume, without thinking about it too much, that the car pictured was just one grabbed off the lot, spiffed up, and used as a prop for the photo shoot. However, once you begin to dig a little deeper a different picture begins to surface. For example, to insure that showroom literature got into the hands of dealers by the time the actual cars showed up, the photos had to be taken BEFORE the first production unit came out of the factory. This just about insured that a pre-production prototype would have to be used as the photo car.



“HOUSE COMMITTEE VIEWS MTU GIFT. A Shelby Cobra, gift to the Michigan Training Unit of Ionia, was among the many areas of vocational training visited by a Michigan house of representatives committee on vocational and rehabilitation on Monday. The car to be used in training inmates in the automotive shop, was one of two presented by the Shelby firm... Daily Sentinel-Standard Photo.”

end of the tax year, which was only a day away.

The next event in the timeline of the M.T.U. Shelby took place about a decade-and-a-half later. SAAC members Bill Van Ess, Jack Redeker, Vanar Mahlebashian, and John Johnson had the opportunity to visit and interview three former Ionia Shelby employees on December 9, 1984. Not a whole lot of information had been available about the Shelby operations in Ionia to that time and the interview, which appeared in *The Shelby American* #49, offered more insight into that brief period of Shelby operations from September of 1967 through December 1969 than had previously been available.

The three employees interviewed were Jim Frank, a development engineer; Pete Shier, a technician in the engineering department; and Cecil

Once a car is donated to an educational institution it usually remains for a long time. Students (or inmates) come and go but the vehicle is viewed as a teaching aid which rarely needs to be replaced. This explains why the Shelby, donated in 1968, was still in the M.T.U.'s auto shop almost twenty years later.



McKinnon, a test driver. Frank's comments included some details about Shelby Automotive vehicles (the production end of Shelby American had been reorganized under that name when it relocated to Michigan at the end of 1967) that had been donated to various institutions, including Montcalm Community College, Western Michigan University and M.T.U. Frank also indicated that one of the Shelybs was still at the M.T.U. He knew this because after Shelby Automotive closed its operations he took a job as an instructor at the prison. The logical question asked of him was, "Would it be possible to see the car?" The disappointing response was that since M.T.U. was a prison facility, it would not be possible for an outsider to see the Cobra. At least for a while.

Two years later, in January 1987, Jim Frank and Bill Van Ess once again got together and the question of a possible visit to the prison was revisited. This time the news was better: Jim would be retiring soon and he could accommodate a tour. So on January 17, 1987 SAAC members Bill Van Ess, Mike Mulcahy and Vanar Mahlebashian met Frank at M.T.U. and were ushered inside. Once inside the prison, the training unit vehicles that proved to be the most interesting were a 1968 Shelby Cobra, a 1967 Gurney Cougar prototype, a completely fiberglass-bodied 1969 sportsroof Mustang (mounted on a 1965 Mustang convertible chassis) and a 1971 Torino.

Although the Cougar and the fiberglass-bodied Mustang

were also examined, Mulcahy and his cohorts focused their videotaping efforts [*pun intended*] on the GT350. At first glance it appeared to be a run-of-the-mill 1968 small-block Shelby Mustang. It had a '68 fiberglass nose, hood and upper side scoops. The characteristic ducktail spoiler was there, as were the complimenting body end caps. But there were other things that set it apart from other '68 Shelybs. The car sat on bias-ply tires and the wheels had plain-Jane Ford hubcaps and trim rings — definitely not anything ever seen on a production Shelby but explained by the fact that there was no need to include optional mag wheels on a car which was going to be donated for use as a shop project and would never be driven on public roads. The paint job was a 1970s-era wild-striped pattern of intermixed color bands that could only come from that decade: turquoise, red, gold and black over orange. The car had obviously been painted while at M.T.U., most likely as a body shop teaching project.

After a few minutes of taping and photographing more oddities soon came to light. First was the complete lack of a Ford V.I.N. or a Shelby ID tag. The '68 front end appeared to use production parts, but the hood lacked the hood locking pins and there was no evidence of them ever having been installed. Moving around to the rear, the car carried an early '67-type lower valence with semi-circular cutouts for



the exhaust tips (which themselves were an unusual straight-cut, with slight trumpeting) and it appeared that the lower scoops had functional air ducting. The oddities continued inside, where the interior seemed to be a hodge-podge of different year Shelby parts. A '67 Shelby gauge pod hung below the radio bezel and the seats were an odd, high-backed bucket type that resembled nothing ever seen in a Ford production car. A '68 Cougar steering wheel (minus the center cap) was used, the chrome shift lever carried a '65-type shift knob. The car had '67 type brushed aluminum door panels and dash trim appliqué surrounding the gauges. The engine bay was occupied by a dirty, small-block Ford powerplant with a vacuum advance distributor. A long, oval "COBRA" air cleaner was laid on the rear deck, and it showed evidence of being crudely converted from a dual-carb application to fit atop a single carburetor. One of the shock absorber beehives had the washers welded to the top, a feature of only the earliest California-built Shelys. It seemed that there was something "So-Cal" about this Ionia Shelby, with another tip-off to a Left Coast history being the 1966-style "Shelby American-Los Angeles California" door sill labels.

When the three SAAC Members left the prison that winter day there was little hope that any of the cars they had seen would ever make it through the prison's gates to the outside world. This was the result of a double-whammy. First, when a manufacturer donates a vehicle to a school or prison, the title is cancelled and the car is transferred with the stipulation that it never be registered or driven on public roads. This protects the manufacturer from liability arising

from a potential accident caused by a vehicle which may not meet recognized (and legally mandated) production specifications. The second part prohibits the recipient institution from transferring ownership to a private party. When donated vehicles' lives have come to an end they are usually cut up or crushed. This prevents a vehicle, which may have been disassembled and reassembled multiple times by student mechanics, from eventually hitting the road where the chances of an improperly-reinstalled nut and bolt might cause a crash (and subsequent lawsuit). This was the sad, but legally-necessary, step in this Shelby's evolutionary cycle. Along with the other cars in the program, it was pretty much forgotten for more than a dozen years.

Fast forward to thirteen years later, in March of 2000. Michigan SAAC member and Mustang enthusiast Lowell Otter learned of a Mustang fastback that might be a good restoration candidate. The car was rumored to have been a "shop class instruction car" somewhere and had a few Shelby fiberglass parts on it. The following week he and the friend who had tipped him off went to a salvage yard to look at the car together. The Mustang fastback was essentially rust-free (that, in itself, was unusual for a 32 year-old Mustang in the Michigan rust belt), with Shelby scoops and T-bird taillights. Careful scrutiny yielded no evidence of a Ford serial number or a Shelby Identification Tag. A few days later, with visions of a missing Shelby dancing in his head (he had already moved beyond mere sug-arplums), Lowell decided to take a chance and purchase the car. In short order the project Mustang was on a trailer heading to a new home.

The car was like a house that a hopeful realtor might describe as "having potential." It was little more than a rolling shell with a custom paint job, but Lowell was excited about the potential of his new project. He told his wife that she had to have vision to see beyond the obvious challenge but she remained dubious. Despite "a few" missing parts (engine, transmission, fenders, doors, hood, and decklid), the car did have T-bird taillights, spoiled fiberglass body end caps, Shelby side scoops, Cobra rear seat belt button inserts, front disc brakes, a nine-inch rear end, dual exhaust, a fiberglass nose panel (laying in the trunk) and a very strange looking high back bucket seat. Although a large portion of the disassembly (read: "stripping") had been done prior to the car's arrival at the junkyard, its proud new owner set out to take what remained down to the bare unibody for a full-up restoration. During that process, things began to get a little odd.

Although there did not appear to be a whole lot of the vehicle left, a tag on the steering column labeled "XD - 532593" was found. "XD" — usually denoting "Experimental Development" — was the kind of nomenclature usually found on hand-built prototype cars. But prototype cars rarely survived the crusher after their tour of duty ended, so there seemed to be something unique about this particular Mustang. Both front kick panels had the numbers "V-738-2" hand written in black marker on the backside. There was also some dried adhesive from a label located on the windshield's top center that read "67ST102." The sill plates contained 1966-style Shelby Los Angeles tags (original embossed ones, not the later

Just about any rust-free 1968 car is an excellent candidate for a total restoration, but when it's a Mustang with Shelby parts it looks even sweeter. The deeper owner Lowell Otter dug, the more anomalies he discovered.





One hard-to-explain feature was the rear brake backing plates which were drilled out for cooling. They are identical to those used on R-Models.

silkscreened reproductions).

The car also had functional rear lower brake scoops, evidence of an early Shelby four- (actually, six) point roll bar attachment, part of a 1967 Shelby gas cap, and 1967 Shelby part numbered shock absorbers (fronts – C7ZD 18045 A; rears – C7ZD 18080 A). Other interesting parts found during disassembly were a prototype heater control unit (marked as such, complete with a pre-printed “Prototype” Ford parts label), a prototype windshield wiper motor, a Pitman arm with the part number “XD531380” and an idler arm with the part number “XD532706”. A Shelby part number “S7MS-5232-A” was also found on the exhaust system (although the chrome trumpets weren’t the usual beveled type — they had straight, slightly flared ends).

The Mustang’s rear brake backing plates had unique cooling holes drilled into them and 2 1/2-inch wide full metallic brake shoes — exactly like those found on the 1965 Shelby R-Models. Even seemingly production parts contained unusual “X” numbers on them, such as the door hinges (they “came clean,” both literally and figuratively after sandblasting). A set of old paper tags wired to the underside of the rear seat cushion proved to be the most significant and unique find. Most tags were difficult to read, but one tag contained the hand written letters ENG PROTO and a vehicle ID line with the numbers “V-738-2” written beside it. This nomenclature was identical to what was written on the kick panels. The window edge trim was unusual; unlike what was found on a production ’67 Mustang, it showed body color paint in the edge of

the window opening. On production cars, this was covered by stainless steel trim and it would not be possible to retrofit production window trim to V-738-2. This “hard” construction detail (one that was integral to the construction of the car and not readily changeable) would later prove to be a key in a future determination of the car’s unusual history. Another oddity concerned the interior “soft” trim: the dash, the headliner and the carpet. All had started out as red pieces and were painted black at some point in the car’s life.

What about a V.I.N. number? There had to be one somewhere and removal of the paint from the inner fenders yielded nothing but bright, clean metal which glistened in the Michigan sun — but no evidence of a V.I.N. number. The same “elbow grease” process was applied to the radiator support and after not too long, the bare metal revealed a set of numbers stamped into the radiator support; the numbers read “X763A-T-V-738-2.” Whatever it was, it was not your usual Ford V.I.N. and was quite different from the “7R02Q” one would expect to find on a ’67 Mustang or Shelby. The numbers and letters (or, more specifically, groups of numbers and letters) seemed to fall into a very logical sequence and an educated guess of this “alphabet soup” of a VIN number using already established Ford VIN codes, is:

X = Experimental
 7 = 1967
 63A = Standard Interior Fastback
 T = 200 cubic-inch six cylinder
 V-738-2 = Prototype Vehicle Number Sequence.

The car was built at Ford’s pilot plant in Allen Park, Michigan. This is where other prototype production cars were constructed in the years-long process of turning a concept vehicle into a standard mass-produced car. The car and its somewhat cumbersome identification of X763A-T-V-738-2, was shortened to “V-738-2”.

The first actual occurrence of serendipity took place as the car’s unibody was stripped, sandblasted and prepared for paint in January of 2005. Mounted on a shop rotisserie, the body shell just happened to end up next to a ’67 Mustang undergoing the same process. A glance at the two naked



Rear brake ducting is the same that was used on 1966 GT350s, indicating that at the time the prototype was built, the intention was to have functional rear brake cooling on 1967 models.

unibodies sitting side-by-side revealed that the junkyard Shelby’s firewall and inner fenders were very different from those of the ’67 Mustang. A flip thru a Mustang parts catalog revealed that they were 1966 parts! This prototype 1967 Mustang had originally been constructed with 1966-type structural parts (the steering gear was also ’66-vintage) and although this was an interesting fact in itself, years later it would prove key to making another discovery about the car.

Otter called West Michigan SAAC member Bill Van Ess the day after his restoration purchase. In researching Shelby Mustangs in general, he had come across the 15 year-old *Shelby American* #49 article written by Bill and the other Western Michigan SAAC Members. Lowell asked Van Ess about the interview and the Shelby located at the Michigan Training Unit. Remembering the tour from years before, Van Ess replied, “You haven’t seen that car have you?”

Otter replied maybe, and that the vehicle could be in his garage! Van Ess asked Otter if his car had a strange looking high back bucket seat in it. After further conversation he informed Otter that both he and Mike Mulcahy had taken pictures of the Michigan Training Unit vehicles, including the Shelby. The following week they got together and confirmed through photos that the newly acquired project was actually the “Shelby” that Van Ess and Mike Mulcahy had viewed at the Training Unit some 13 years earlier.

The second person Otter contacted about his project was SAAC Member Mike Mulcahy. He was also able to

provide Otter with photos he had taken during the prison visit. His photos included shots of a 1967 Shelby under dash prototype gauge package, COBRA air cleaner, Cobra aluminum valve covers, Shelby export brace, Cougar steering wheel, and the unique Shelby American installed front shock absorbers. Mulcahy also shot a BETA format video of all the vehicles at the prison.

Research continued for the next couple of years and it was at the end of that time period that a Mustang enthusiast produced perhaps the most helpful of all Ford documentation, an obscure booklet titled, "Program Description Book." It included a listing of the production numbers and uses for all of the 1967 prototype Mustangs, and it showed that V-738-2's origins (at least on paper) traced back to December 8, 1964, less than a year after the introduction of the first Mustang. The document included a page titled, "Product Engineering – Vehicle Build Schedule" and indicated the designations and uses for all of the 1967 Mustang prototype vehicles. V-738-2 was one of perhaps two dozen Engineering Prototype, Composite Vehicle, Semi-Engineering Prototype, Design Check and Static Test vehicles built in support of the new 1967 Mustang program. Work on V-738-2 was started 1-10-66 and it was completed 1-24-66 with a 200-1V engine coupled to a three-speed automatic transmission. It was finished off in red with a red vinyl interior, tinted glass, an AM/FM radio and something called a "head-rest option."

After a 1500-mile break-in, some of the tests performed on V-738-2 included speedometer calibration, wind tunnel testing, acceleration, interior noise, fuel mileage, engine cold start and carburetor icing.

The Vehicle Build Schedule then indicated that V-738-2 was scheduled to be rebuilt into a "low-cost fastback" configuration on or about 8-12-66. Inexplicably, this "low-cost" rebuild included the installation of a Hi-Po 289 and a four-speed transmission. No additional information was available about the prototype fastback, and no information about its history after 8-12-66 was found in any factory documentation. Detective work would fill in these blanks a little later on. What we had so far was a prototype 1967 six-cylinder Mustang, built in 1966

with some 1966 components, that somehow became an unnumbered 1968 Shelby Mustang. A little strange, but there would turn out to be so much more to the story...

Otter spent time tracking down other former Shelby employees and was able to make contact with Fred Goodell, Shelby's chief engineer. He had some very specific recollections about the Shelby, right down to what it was used for and even where it sat. Its main purpose was as a fit-check vehicle for the various Shelby-unique parts installed at A.O. Smith. After its mission there was complete it was painted metalflake gold by Shelby painter Sonny Fee and donated to M.T.U. Further detective work resulted in finding Sonny Fee, who had also painted the Green Hornet. He confirmed the car as being a fiberglass fit and tolerance test car and that he painted it a custom metal flake gold. It was then donated to the prison. Former Shelby Ionia employee Frank Ferris stated that he also remembered the vehicle to be a 1967 experimental prototype car. Next would be an attempt at contacting some of M.T.U.'s former shop instructors who might have had any dealings with the car. Again, the search paid off: body shop instructor George Ranger recalled that the vehicle was an experimental prototype. When queried as to why he thought that, Ranger replied that he had seen a tag stating that under the seats when they had disassembled the car years before. The instructor, taking his cues from an inmate with some in-depth Shelby knowledge, also remembered the vehicle as being unique because it had a mix of 1966, 1967 and 1968 parts.

An interesting item of note had to do with the car's custom paint job (more serendipity) that was applied in the prison and was on the vehicle at the time the car was located at the salvage yard. A casual perusal through some old car magazines (a task completely unrelated to any V-738-2 research) revealed that a car with an identical paint scheme (a 1973 Mustang) had graced the cover of the May 1984 issue of *Hot Rod* magazine. The paint details were far too unique to be coincidental. More likely, a copy of that issue inspired the paint job on the prison Shelby. Not only did this give a good indication of where the idea for the custom paint came from,

but also the approximate time of application — sometime after May of 1984.

Simultaneous research and reassembly of V-738-2 continued for several years, and the next serendipitous event occurred in the summer of 2007. SAAC's GT40 Registrar Greg Kolasa was scanning some GT40 photographs to put on a CD. Since he was in a scanning mood, he decided it would be a good time to scan some other, unrelated (to GT40s, that is) pictures. He contacted 1968-1969-1970 Registrar Vincent Liska and arranged to borrow a pile of photographs Liska had had printed up years before. They were 1967 Shelby promo pictures featuring a red GT500 and a Lime Gold GT350. Many of them were either taken of the cars at one of the Los Angeles area beaches or in the parking area behind Shelby American's LAX hangers. They had been obtained from a relative of the southern California photographer who had originally taken them. Many of the pictures found their way into Shelby ads and brochures for the 1967 Shelby GT350 and GT500. Liska sent the pictures to Kolasa who began scanning them for posterity. As each image was scanned, he noticed some unusual features, particularly in the interior photos of the red GT500. A '65 shift knob, an AM-FM radio and the lack of the emergency flasher knob stuck out as being a little odd for a '67 car. And unlike any '67 Shelby, the car had a standard interior (but with deluxe door panels), black camera-case finish on the dash bezel, and lacked a tachometer. Perhaps most unusual was something that showed up in one of the interior photographs. Once focus was shifted from the attractive brunette seated behind the wheel, something odd about the car's carpeting showed it was faded (or at least that's the way it appeared in the photo). The promo pictures were taken when the car still smelled new, yet the carpet had the faded, brown-showing-thru appearance of a 20-year old rug, certainly not something one would expect in a brand-spanking-new car.

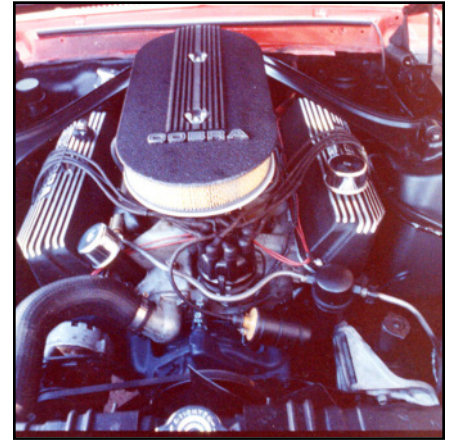
Moving around to the exterior of the promo car, there were subtle features that indicated that this wasn't just any early production GT500. The car did have the red running lights in the upper air scoops (a feature shared with the first 200 or so production

cars), but these lights had chrome and black surrounds to them. These didn't appear on any of the production lights and to date have only been seen on two or three cars. The exhausts were also unique. Instead of the traditional '67 bevel cut chrome tips, these were straight-cut and had slight trumpet flares to them. Again, not production

features.

The car lacked a remote outside mirror and had a tinted windshield (unusual for a non-air conditioned car). These didn't add up, so Kolasa contacted '67 Registrar Dave Mathews. Dave examined some of the pictures and added to the list of oddities: he pointed out that the car had a '66-

type wood steering wheel and that it was indeed perched atop a '66 steering column. At that point, Mathews suggested Kolasa might want to contact Lowell Otter, who had done some research on "a Mustang prototype car" he was restoring. Kolasa and Otter began discussing the photographs, and shared observations about what



During a normal photo shoot dozens of shots are taken for every image that eventually gets used. Once the magnifying glass was put on the photos it became clear this was not a standard production car plucked out of the inventory. It lacks an exterior mirror and other views revealed it had tinted glass — not usually seen on non-air conditioned cars. The '67 production steering wheels had probably not yet been delivered, so a '66 optional wood wheel was used. It was mated to a '66 steering column. When the photo shoot was moved to a ranch, the rear view shows the emblem on the spoiler slightly to the right of what would become the "correct" location on production cars.

appeared to be a 1967 Mustang fast-back that had been mocked up as a prototype 1967 Shelby GT500. These observations were compared to Otter's prototype Mustang that had, in later years, become a '68 Shelby. But the red Mustang done up as a promotional 1967 GT500 itself had a pile of features that were not common to any 1967 Mustang anybody had ever seen. It almost appeared that the Shelby was built on a Mustang that was itself a prototype of some sort. You can see where this was headed...

The promotional pictures were examined at initially a coarse level of detail and then with ever finer scrutiny until almost the sub-atomic (or at least, microscopic) level had been reached. Some amazing coincidences came to light. Both cars, the promotional GT500 and Otter's prototype Mustang, had '66 Mustang firewalls and inner fenders (pictures of the promo car were compared to pictures Otter had taken on disassembly of V-738-2). Both cars had unusual padded dash parts that didn't look like production pieces. Both cars had '66 steering columns and a single-reservoir disc brake master cylinder. Both cars lacked provision for the lower door grilles and courtesy lights as found on production Shelys. Then things got down to the "holes and welds" level. These are what are sometimes known as "hard" construction details in that they aren't readily changed as a car's configuration is altered over the years. They are, in essence, a car's DNA. As for holes, the importance is not so much in that tiny circular area of missing metal, but the TYPE and LOCATION of that area. Randomly-placed holes (ones that appear to have been drilled for a one-time use) are especially important as they aren't likely to be repeated from one car to another. And the type of hole is also telling: punched holes deform the area surrounding it, like a tiny crater, and are generally placed there at the factory. Drilled holes don't crater the metal around the hole, and are usually added after initial assembly. The factory nearly always punches its holes. Both cars had a very unusual conglomeration of drilled and punched holes in the cowl panel, in a pattern that wasn't likely to be "factory." Both cars had the same exact pattern of shock tower spot welds, and this pattern was unique to

V-738-2 and was very different from production Shelys (production '67 Shelby owners Rich Keller, Marty Jackler, John Frey, Dave Mathews and the author all kicked in with detailed photos of the shock tower welds as supporting material). Both cars had unusual small (estimated to be about 1" square) pieces of sheet metal welded to the cowl panel and both cars had the exact same spacing of the spot welds on the front of the shock tower (these were compared to, and differed greatly from, production 1967 Shelys). Both cars had the identical spot weld pattern on the shock towers, and this was very different from those found on production '67 Shelys. The promotional GT500 also showed red body color inside the door window opening.

Talk then shifted to the interior. In the course of discussions, Kolasa mentioned the faded-appearing carpet. Otter countered with an equally interesting observation: his car originally had a red interior but it had been painted black at some point in time. Light bulb! A reexamination of the interior promo pictures at an extremely high magnification revealed the reason for the faded appearance. It was not fading but an incomplete painting to make the red carpet black. Under magnification it was possible to see the underside of the individual carpet loops and there was red showing where the black paint hadn't gotten all the way to their base. It began to look not like two cars with the same unique features, but two photographs of the same car taken years apart.

It was now extremely likely that V-738-2 was used to create the very first 1967 Shelby GT500, the red car featured in numerous 1967 Shelby ads, brochures and on the promotional postcard. This red GT500, well-known by all '67 Shelby enthusiasts, was actually a mock up of a GT500 built on a prototype Mustang chassis.

As exciting as this discovery appeared to be, there was still one major hurdle. The "gold standard" for any statement being made about a particular vehicle is factory paperwork. Without a piece of original paper stating, in black and white, that V-738-2 did in fact become the first GT500, the best that could be said was that the photographic evidence "strongly suggested" that contention. Maybe even "extremely strongly sup-

ported," but it was far from "positive." Everyone understood that.

After burning so much midnight oil, Kolasa realized that he needed a "sanity check" of his conclusions. In effect, he wanted to present the basic information he had gathered to some automotive people with no interest in or knowledge of the conclusions he had just drawn to see what they thought. Did the evidence support the contention that V-738-2 COULD BE the postcard GT500? He set about putting together a PowerPoint presentation to show, in step-by-step fashion, how his conclusion that V-738-2 could be the postcard GT500 had been reached. The package was also designed so that it could be sent to people without the need to explain, in advance, what it was. That would eliminate any preconceived notions about the research.

The package was sent out to a handful of automotive experts, SAAC Registrars mostly, but also to some other knowledgeable Shelby people and automotive historians. When the feedback was reviewed, everyone who received the package agreed, with responses ranging from a simple "yes" all the way to "it's a no-brainer" that the evidence presented supported the contention that it was "extremely likely" that V-738-2 was the first 1967 Shelby GT500, the car used in ads and on the promotional postcard.

While these finds about V-738-2's history were welcome indeed, there was a slight down side: work was well underway returning the car to its semi-1968 Shelby configuration. Otter needed to make the decision whether to continue on course with the planned restoration, or alter course and go to a 1967 GT500 configuration. His response? "Hard-a-starboard!!!" Plans were altered to swing from a '68 to a '67 restoration (not all that much work, really, since none of the car's final assembly had been completed) and what had been done so far was removed in anticipation of the car now being finished as the '67 Shelby promotional car.

With his head spinning from the rash of recent discoveries about his restoration project, Otter began to look forward to relative calm — and for '67 Shelby fiberglass parts. The whirlwind of discoveries were behind him and he now came to grips with what he had... which was actually a



lot more than he ever imagined when he purchased the hulk from that Michigan junkyard. Now he could get some relative calm, and settle down to the actual assembly of his "GT500." This was, however, just the calm before the storm. Because there was one more discovery yet to be made.

One of the experts called upon to review the package was Chuck Cantwell, Shelby American's project engineer on the '65, '66 and '67 Shelys. He reviewed the package and gave full concurrence to the premise that it was "very likely" that the two cars, Otter's V-738-2 and the postcard GT500, were one in the same. He also offered that while he didn't have any specific documentation on 738-2, the '65 and '67-type Shelby features which were fitted to the car, in his words, "proved" that the car was at some time in California. It couldn't get much better than that. Or could it?

In discussing the conclusions that were drawn about V-738-2, Chuck made an offhand reference to a red GT500, "*likely an early production*

car," to use his words, that he had tested at Ford's Arizona Proving Grounds (A.P.G.) in Yucca, Arizona early in the 1967 car's development cycle. He wasn't exactly sure, but pinned the date to before 1967 production began, likely in the August to October 1966 time frame. He knew he had a picture or two, but they were in his photo album which he had recently loaned out, so we would have to wait until he got it back. We waited.

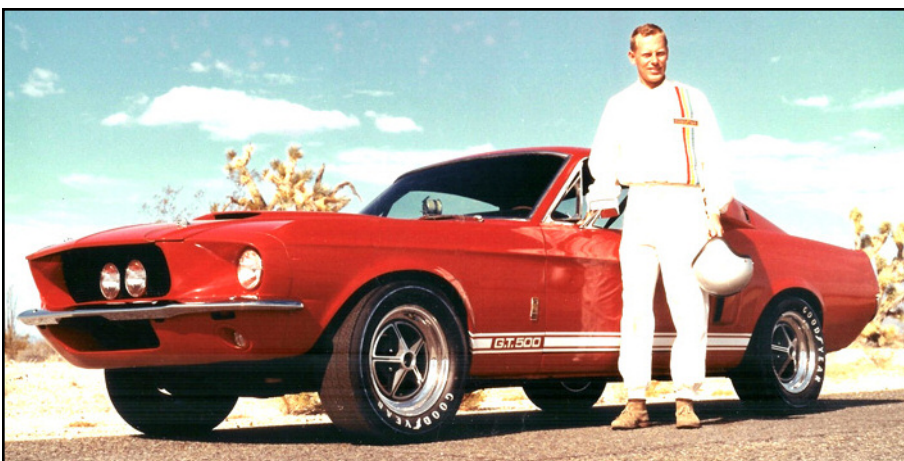
We got a glimpse of what was to come by looking thru an old issue of *The Shelby American* (#44, to be exact) where Chuck had been interviewed. There was a brief mention of the red GT500 he had tested, along with a small black-and-white photograph of Chuck and the car. Then a surprise arrived in the mail. Cantwell sent some photos of that "early production" GT500, photos he had forgotten he had. Aside from general beauty shots of a young Chuck Cantwell and his co-driver Matt Donner (Chuck shared test driving chores with Donner, an ex-WWII P-47 pilot) standing next to a

dusty GT500, there were detailed pictures of the front, rear and sides of the car as well as the area of the wheel wells.

A close look at the pictures showed, among other things, a crudely-mounted tach atop the dash (recall that V-738-2 didn't have an integral tachometer) as well as the same exact door-to-quarter panel mismatch as on the postcard GT500. Other unique construction details (like the body colored window edge molding) began to show themselves. Further evidence took the form of the inside of the dash defroster ducts, which, in one close-up photo, showed red paint inside of them. Even the characters on the car's side stripe, likely applied one-at-a-time, showed the same misalignment and spacing anomalies between the two cars. The black surrounds to the running lights in the scoops were there, as were the unusual trumpeted exhaust tips. All of these led to another startling conclusion: Cantwell's A.P.G ride was, in all likelihood, the postcard GT500... making that, in all likelihood, V-738-2!

The first GT500, the "promotional" V-738-2, wasn't only a beauty car; it was a full-up, meant-to-be-driven working automobile. This in itself was a bit unusual, as generally the two types of cars (test mules and promotional photography cars) were each a species unto themselves, with that twain rarely meeting. Promotional cars were built to look good, while test mules were often kludged-up contraptions used to test components, with very little thought was given to aesthetics. This car had both performance AND beauty!

Chuck Cantwell told of how the car, on arrival at A.P.G., was first tested for straight-line acceleration.



Photos on this page are of Chuck Cantwell at Ford's Arizona Proving Grounds in Yucca. They came from Chuck's personal collection.

Then it was put on the high-speed oval, where lack of a racing-type oiling in the street 428 passenger car powerplant led to a blown engine. Shelby American's Cessna 206 was called into service and a new 428 soon arrived at A.P.G. and was installed by on-site Ford personnel. The car was soon off and running again in acceleration tests, and then on to the oval, where once more the engine blew! Cantwell recalled that the laps run on the oval, between the two engines, didn't amount to more than four or five. The dates recalled by Cantwell also call into question whether, as per the Program Description Book, V-738-2 ever actually received the Hi-Po; this was about the same time frame of the car's being tested at A.P.G.

Cantwell had no recollection of what happened to the car after that but V-738-2's provenance indicates it went to Ionia sometime later in 1967 to become fitted with '68 Shelby fiberglass and was donated to a correctional facility auto shop in late 1968...which, come to think of it, is where this story began. We're back where we started, with the time in between showing a series of discoveries — the very essence of “serendipity” — which along with some keen observations and Shelby knowledge, layed out a highly probable scenario for an unusual car.

Postscript and Follow-Up. V-738-2's restoration was well underway in the summer of 2007. Plans, at that time, were to restore the car to a configuration that was a mix of several snapshots in time. The car would be painted its original Candy Apple Red and would be powered by a Hi-Po 289

(as configured when it was a prototype 1967 Mustang in late 1966). It would carry the 1968 Shelby fiberglass as it had when it was a fiberglass fit-check car at A.O. Smith in late '68. However, the determination that V-738-2 was very likely the first promotional (and test) GT500 drove the restoration to target late 1966, with Los Angeles as the chosen time and place. So the direction was changed. The already-installed '68 taillight panel was removed, the Hi-Po was sold and 428 parts were collected. '67 fiberglass was also ordered, and slowly the car began its metamorphosis from a hybrid 1967 Mustang/1968 Shelby configuration to one more specific in time, that of the very first 1967 Shelby GT500.

Lowell Otter is finding the restoration to be much more challenging than it would be for a standard production GT500. Being a hand-built prototype, things like the factory assembly specifications do not apply. The only references as to what went where and how something was attached are the handful of period photographs. As is nearly always the case, the really nice shot of the engine compartment cuts off the section of the firewall where a question about how something was attached would be answered.

Add to that the fact that the car was altered to a 1968 Shelby in its later life and it really makes trying to restore it accurately a near impossibility (mainly because what is “correct” is just not known). As of this writing, work is well underway to complete the car as a '67 GT500. The car's original test pilot, Chuck Cantwell, is looking forward to someday slipping behind

the wheel and taking V-738-2 for a test hop, just as he did more than 40 years ago. But he promises not to repeat the “two blown 428s” phase of the testing!

Lastly, a word about acknowledging some people who all contributed in tremendous ways, not only to this article, but to the whole deductive process that led to the result. While there is only one name in this article's by-line, this was very much a collaborative effort. The bulk of the first half of the article was originally written by Mike Mulcahy around 2002 (and he very generously allowed its use, almost verbatim). It had been submitted to SAAC for publication but it was put on hold because it seemed, somehow, incomplete. So it never appeared in print.

Now that the “rest of the story” about V-738-2 has been deduced, it is much more complete. Everyone named in this article contributed in some way to the final product, whether it was digging up some rare Mustang documentation or taking some close-up pictures of some obscure construction detail. They all were sources, and their assistance is greatly appreciated. Kevin Marti also deserves a pat on the back. He was very generous in sharing what he had on the car. And last, but by no means least, we want to express our sincere appreciation to V-738-2's owner, Lowell Otter, for not only baring his soul, but his car's as well. The detailed research, documentation and photography he performed while disassembling the car proved invaluable in the research of this piece. To all, we again offer our sincere thanks.



Lowell Otter's Shelby prototype, #X763A-T-V-738-2 as it presently sits. It's been nearly 40 years since the car was fitted with 1967 Shelby fiberglass.