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The Griffith Company



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Sunchaser Days, or Too Much Information!

A personal reminiscence of José Cabanillas

I have been asked to record my memories of The Griffith Company and the manufacture of Sunchasers. Working for Griffith was my first real job out of college and a pretty good time. While my time with the company was over 20 years ago, they are pretty vivid memories.

I started with Griffith in August of 1980, working in the Jacksonville, Florida plant as the factory quality control and service representative for the southeastern United States, and transferred a few months later to California. I started either right before or right after the Motor Trend cover article came out. In the Southeast region, we sold a lot of cars in Florida so most of the work I did for my first few months with the company was there.

I got the job by answering an ad in the newspaper, and almost didn't get it. Ron, the production manager for the company, was worried how I'd fit in as I didn't drink any alcohol during the first interview, which took place in the bar and over dinner at a place called the Tree Steakhouse on Atlantic Boulevard in Jacksonville. I remember that they had a way of cooking a steak called a Pittsburgher, where they dipped the steak in cooking oil and set it on fire on the grill, charring the outside and leaving the inside raw. While watching it was pretty spectacular, it was not my idea of the way to cook a good steak. It sure made a vivid memory, though, as I clearly recall it today. That odd evening sort of set the tone for my time with the company. It was a fun and kind of goofy job.

The Company

The Griffith Company had been founded in 1978 or 1979 by some investors working with Jack Griffith, who had made his name with the Griffith TVR of the late 60's. The original idea for the Sunchaser came from a couple of Detroit guys who conceived of getting convertibles into production as, with the exception of the Chevy Corvette, the major manufacturers didn't make them. They engineered a conversion for the Toyota Celica that turned it into a targa convertible, with a lift off hatch over the front seats, a roll cage enclosed in fiberglass, and a fold down top in the rear. The whole concept wasn't new, but the idea of converting a finished production car may have been. Sunchasers went into production, first in Detroit, then in Jacksonville Florida, and finally in Santa Ana, California. Of the three facilities, the Jacksonville one ran the most production. As I recall, the owners of Southeast Toyota were investors, so they made it easy on us. Dealers ordered the cars through the distributor, and we'd get the cars right off the boat from Japan and convert them before delivery. In Detroit and Santa Ana, dealers had to ship the cars to us and we returned them after conversion. We had enough production in Jacksonville to run two parallel lines, and

when a boat came in we would get a bunch of cars. The assembly line would back up for a couple of weeks while we worked through manufacturing and got the cars ready to turn back over to the Toyota distributor. I seem to recall that in our peak week we ran somewhere around 40 to 45 cars through the plant.

The Jacksonville plant was located in pretty interesting place. We had part of a big building on a pier just north of the Matthews bridge that had originally been built as a Ford Model T assembly plant. We had the far end of the pier and shared the building with a company that did van conversions, a custom boat manufacturer named Borum Custom Boats which occasionally would make really big and fast deep V hulls for importers of illicit substances, a little snack bar that cooked pretty good hot food, the importer of BMWs for the southeastern US, and the folks who put decals on the Toyotas that came into the port. It was a great old building, full of windows, and with a planked over rail siding along one wall. You could sit out at the end of the pier and watch the occasional ship come up or down the St Johns River on the way to the docks or the shipyard. The other plants were no where near as interesting, basically being tilt up buildings in industrial areas. However, the Santa Ana plant, where I later transferred, was right across the street from a park where we would see guys jumping low riders if we were in on the weekends.

How to Build a Sunchaser

There were three Toyota models that we built - the Sunchaser, which was built on a Celica coupe, the TX-22, built on a Celica fastback, and the Legato, which was built on a Supra. The Supra at the time was a Celica fastback with a straight six-cylinder engine stuffed under a lengthened hood. The Sunchaser came first, and was followed after some months (maybe a year or so) by the TX-22 and the Legato. There were two trim colors - black vinyl and fiberglass for the Sunchaser and the TX-22, and Beige vinyl and fiberglass for some of the Legatos. The Sunchaser came with a name badge on the side of the targa cap, and the TX-22 and the Legato came with a name badge and a round Griffith logo medallion. The TX-22 name came from "Toyota eXperimental 2.2 (litre engine)". We also had a Legato that we had fitted with a turbocharger as a possible factory offering. It was boosted pretty high so it needed water injection to keep the detonation down, and was so fast that it was scary. Supposedly, the sales manager from one of the Toyota dealers in Miami got caught above 120 on the Palmetto Expressway with the car, and I can believe it. It had so much torque that I almost lost control of it one evening accelerating across the steel grates on the Matthews Bridge.

Building the Sunchaser was pretty simple. The new car was driven onto a ramp and a pair of frame rails was added that tied the front and rear sub-frames together. These rails were formed for us by a subcontractor up north somewhere and were heavy. We jacked the frame rails into place to ensure that they were as tight to the body as possible, clamped on scab plates with welding clamps, and then MIG welded the whole thing in place before any more work was done.

Next, we removed the seats, the rear windows, and the interior, and commenced to do some cutting. It took us five cuts with an industrial sawzall to remove the roof from the car. One cut was made with a template across the front of the car right behind the windshield and leaving a part of the roof. The next two were made at the top of the B pillar, right behind the driver and passenger seats. The final cuts were made at the base of the C pillar even with the bottom of the rear window opening. The top was removed and pretty much thrown away. Much later, I looked at taking one of the sunroofs off one of the special edition cars and fitting it into my Honda Accord, but we could never figure out how to make it work. We tried to keep the rear windows intact as they could be sold as used parts, but occasionally would break one.

Once we had decapitated the car, topside assembly started. A roll bar was welded from one B pillar to the other and triangular plates were welded to the backside of the B pillars for additional strength. The seal for front edge of the fold down top was glued into, and pinch on chrome metal trim was hammered onto, the fiberglass outer targa cap. The outer cap was then fitted onto the body, sealing it under the bow with black RTV. Two screws were installed into the reinforcing plates through holes cast into the cap under the nameplate on each side, and three holes were drilled in the back of the car using holes in the bow of the targa cap as a drilling guide. We then superglued a long piece of windshield washer tubing into the lower front corners of the outer cap.

The inner Targa cap slid under the front of the outer and contained the lip that was used to retain the rear seal for the hatch. It was glued in place with some greenish-gray industrial epoxy that we used to mix in small batches in the tool crib and pass out to the guys when they were installing the targa. Welding clamps with some protective rubber pads were used to clamp the inner and outer targa sections together while the epoxy cured.

After the glue cured and we could work with the targa, we slipped the front fiberglass structural cap into place on the cut roof line at the top of the windshield using the same green epoxy to bond it to the metal on the front of the car. The cars hatch was laid in place and the proper gap was gained by moving the front fiberglass piece around until things fit. We then drilled three holes through the metal roof and the fiberglass cap and pop riveted the assembly together. Then we took the front inner header and glued and clamped it to the lip on the front structural cap, leaving the whole assembly to sit until the epoxy cured.

We would install the clamps for closing and latching the fold down top to the targa cap and install the inner vinyl trim and lights in the targa assembly. We then put some non-hardening black automotive putty strips on the bottom of the bow for the fold down top and insert three T bolts into the holes in the bow at the back of the top. The top was installed by inserting the T bolts through the holes drilled at the front of the trunk and lowering the top onto a pair of studs that were fitted in the targa cap. Nuts were

installed and tightened down, and the tubing super glued in earlier was stretched over the joint between the fold down top and the cap to cover the putty and keep it from oozing onto the owner when he leaned over his car to wash it or something.

The hatch was covered with vinyl using a glue sprayer and contact cement. Then the inner vinyl panels, door window seal rails, and hold down clamps were installed completing the hatch. Once the epoxies had cured, we installed the seals for the hatch onto the front and rear of the opening and reinstall the cut and modified door seals. We would then bondo the rivets on the top of the windshield, prime the area with a chromate primer, and glue down some more vinyl to finish off the car. The car then went to inspection.

That's where I came in. We had standard inspection sheets, and I would crawl all over the car making sure that everything fit and hadn't been damaged. Then I got to drive it outside the building to our water rack and sit inside while the seals and joints were sprayed by high-pressure nozzles. As this was Florida and it could get kind of hot in the cars that didn't have AC, this was normally shorts and T-shirt work. I would turn over the squawk sheet to the car finisher and go on to the next one. Once they worked off the squawks, I signed the car ready to go. I was a pretty tough inspector, but once the guys figured out what I looked for they started betting me that I couldn't find things wrong with the cars. And after a while, they started winning the bets.

TX-22s and Legatos were pretty much the same, except they didn't have the bow back with the fold down top and thus were a little quicker and easier to build. They had the same roll bar, hatch, and forward roof as the Sunchaser, and we added a rear spoiler to make them look, well, sportier. The only difference was in the Legato frame rails, which were longer.

Go West, Young Man

During quiet weeks between Toyota boats, I used to go down to the company office in Fort Lauderdale for a couple of days and post-process warranty claims. I would take the claim forms and organize them by plant, dealer, and type of claim, and then try to track down root cause back in the factory. I would prepare these big sheets and put together bar charts tracking types of claims to help with the sorting process. I got pretty good at mining the data, and it was reassuring to see that the claims that we got dropped way off on the Jacksonville plant once the guys in the shop and I figured out how to build the cars at my quality level. Some of the early cars were so bad that we would put together a kit and go rebuild the car in the field to get it off the books.

My boss was so happy with what I was doing that they offered me a transfer from Jacksonville to Santa Ana, California. They couldn't hire anybody out there at the salary they were willing to pay, which by my standards at the time was a pretty nice raise, and they were going to pay all my moving

expenses. I accepted the offer on the night that the Philadelphia Phillies won the World Series in 1980, and in January 1981 it was off to California.

The Santa Ana plant was different from what I was used to in Jacksonville. First, when Ron introduced me they didn't believe that I was the José that was taking over at the plant, as I am 6 feet 2, blonde haired, and blue eyed. They thought that it was a gag, nobody named José looked like that, and persisted in that belief for several hours, until I finally had to show them my drivers license to get them to shut up. The shop was much smaller as well. We normally had just enough cars to keep slightly less than half the guys we had in Florida busy, and we tended to run at a slower, more sustained pace. The product mix was different, as we did very few TX-22s, and I don't think we did one Legato in the 8 months I was there. We just kept running 10 or 15 Sunchasers a week through the plant.

The Toyota dealers out in LA were pretty busy and much less willing to do even routine servicing on the cars, so I would spend a lot of time hand holding them on warranty claims. The service manager at a San Fernando Valley dealership, a man named George, took to calling and whining so much that the guys in the office would call on the PA in the shop and just say "It's your dad on the phone". I knew whom they were talking about without another word.

Another difference was in the way we processed cars. In Florida we had two mini assembly lines and the workers had incentives that they could make if we hit certain production targets. This was due to the nature of deliveries from the Toyota boats through the shop and out to the dealers. We could get as many as 75 to 100 cars to process at a time.

In Santa Ana, we scheduled drops from the dealers into the flow so that we didn't hold the car too long and didn't have to worry about overfilling the shop with cars. The problem with overfilling was the local gang, named "F Troop". This was back before the crack wars of the 80's and they seemed more interested in their lowriders and in stealing stuff than real bloody gang conflicts. We originally left the cars outside the building at night with a guard dog. One night, they cut a hole in the fence and the guard dog chased one of their guys who took off running. Once the dog was gone they came over the wall and stole all the alloy wheels and tires off the cars. After that, the cars came inside the building at night. Later, probably just to make a point, they cut the lock off the gate and stole the roll away center sections of the frame welding rack. They rolled them three blocks away where we found them the next morning covered with the gangs' "FXT" tag. The X was supposed to represent crossed calvary sabers from the TV show.

Our assembly sub in California also ran a more relaxed shop with respect to the workers. In Jacksonville, it was organized like a factory, and the shop manager ran a pretty tight ship. In Santa Ana, it was very loose. The guy who ran the shop called the guys on the floor trolls, which didn't bother them a bit. On Friday, we would take a beer break at the end of the day after we had closed out production and policed the shop for the weekend. As part of

the Friday ritual we used to get cans of WD40 and cigarette lighters and torch whatever black widow spiders we found. We had a big photo of a Fiat X1/9 in the front office with the words "Sunchaser by Fiat, Accept No Substitutes" lettered on it. We also were the support shop for the cars loaned to Hollywood for film and TV production and for the annual visit by the company to the Las Vegas Auto Show.

The Hollywood cars consisted of a red Sunchaser and a Sundancer (more on the Sundancer later) that we would loan out to production companies. I can't remember all the stuff they were used for, but off the top of my head I do remember two. We had the red Sunchaser in "Flamingo Road", where Stella Stevens, who played the madam at the local brothel, drove it on camera on a regular basis. It also had a part as the car driven by a bad man with red hair on an episode of "Eight is Enough". In that one, the car was shown sliding a 180 and almost hitting a police car when the cops caught up with the bad guy. We later found that in an unused take they had actually hit the police car, and the studio repaired the Sunchaser before they returned it to us without saying a word. We found the repair when we bumped it with a tool and chipped the paint off the bondo while changing the wheels out for a photo shoot.

Some of our customers also used to drop by the shop from time to time. There was one older lady in particular who had a custom plate that said "TOPLISS" and hated it when, with my southern upbringing, I would say "Yes Ma'am" or "No, Ma'am" in response to a question. She used to complain that she got more than her fair share of speeding tickets because the car stood out in a crowd.

Sunchasers On (and Off) the Road

For a conversion, the cars held up pretty well. The early ones had a lot of problems, but we made some changes during production that addressed the issues and made for a better car. The biggest problem was that, as a conversion, they tended to leak if the seals were not cared for pretty carefully. Some of that we addressed by changing the seal material from rubber seals to wider silicone ones. The top also squeaked as the car would wiggle, due to the reduced stiffness caused by removing the roof. And if the owner did not keep the hatch clamps adjusted, or forgot to clamp them tight, a hatch would occasionally fly off a car and have to be replaced.

One of the biggest issues we had to deal with was fiberglass. The early parts we got had to be cleaned up with a rotary grinder to smooth the edges, and were spotty in layup thickness. These parts used to crack in the back by the trunk, sometimes even before we got the car out of the shop. We got pretty good at reinforcing the fiberglass and refinishing the gelcoat on some of those targa caps when we found a bad one. Additionally, the fiberglass hatches used to be of a variable size, which also meant that we couldn't develop standard tools for spacing the A pillar insert relative to the targa cap. About the time I came on board, the hatch was changed to an injection formed composite called Teksil (or something like that) and we started to get

repeatable and much nicer hatches as a result, if somewhat heavier. The Teksil hatches also allowed us to build a tool out of a scrapped part so that the hatches became interchangeable without modification, especially good if someone lost a hatch after they bought the car.

We also changed from regional fiberglass suppliers and standardized on Eckler's in Titusville, Florida, who still make Corvette aftermarket fiberglass. The Eckler parts, with their green resin and good fiberglass layup, were a significant improvement over the earlier pieces of fiberglass.

The final major change was to add two side windows, based on a fold down top a customer modified on his own, that addressed really big blind spots when the top was up.

Eventually we got to inspect one of the cars that had been involved in an accident. It had rolled over, and the insurance agent called the company looking for a valuation on the conversion. For as extensively modified as the Sunchasers were they held up pretty good. The fiberglass on the wrecked car was pretty well destroyed and the hatch shattered when it came off the car, but the top corners of the windshield were only moderately damaged and the roll bar was intact under the remains of the targa cap. Another car ran off a curve at speed, flew through the air, and terminally bent the frame rails when it landed. It turned out that it was owned by an aerospace engineer I worked with a few years later, and his daughter was talking with a friend and speeding. Neither was seriously hurt.

A less serious issue with the cars came up when a man who lived north of Tampa bought one of the cars and parked it next to his horse pen while he went to get his wife to come out and see the new car. When he came back, one of the horses was eating a hole in the fold down vinyl top. He tried to file a warranty claim, but I don't think we ever accepted it.

Comes the Sundancer, and Comes the Sunset

I didn't realize it, but the day I moved out to California pretty much defined the day I was going to part ways with The Griffith Company. We knew there was a body change coming on the Celica at the end of the 1981 model year, and plans were in place to work on a follow on Toyota car. At the same time, the company had embarked on a joint venture with American Motors. The AMC project had been developed by Jack Griffith as a way of expanding the financial base and size of the company. At the time, Jack was VP of Marketing or something like that.

Anyway, the deal was that we would make a modification kit like the Sunchaser that would go on the AMC Concord and Eagle two door sedans, which were nothing more than a 10 year old Hornet (like the 1971 Hornet Sportabout that I had in college) with a new grille, bumpers, and interior. The conversion would be done in a facility that Griffith would operate near the AMC factory in Kenosha, Wisconsin. AMC would handle the delivery and dealer ordering, same as the deal we had Southeast Toyota. The modified

AMC cars were named the Sundancer, and the design used frame rails, a roll bar, hatch, targa cap, and fold down top that were similar to the Sunchaser.

The Concord was much more of an optimally designed unit body than the Celica, and when the development team in Detroit decapitated the prototype Sundancer the windshield pillars needed a LOT of reinforcing to replace the structural loads that the roof carried. They had to insert custom formed steel tubes down the A pillars and across the top of the windshield before it was stiff enough to support the hatch. Even then, it was a much wigglier car than the Celica we used for the Sunchaser.

They shipped the prototype Sundancer out to us in California. Bob, the commission sales agent for the company, started taking it out on the road. He would rotate it with the red Sunchaser when the cars were not up in Hollywood, so occasionally we would have one of the two cars available for me to use when I was out visiting dealer service departments. This was nice, as some of the Toyota dealers got snippish when I would drive up in my silver Honda Accord with parts or tools in the back. The shop trolls would also use the cars to go pick up supplies and other items when they needed them. We developed a dislike of the Sundancer, primarily because it wiggled so much and had a lot of squeaks. It got to the point where the shop manager took to calling it a Nash, and it sat around as much as it got driven.

The AMC project deal went to the management and board of directors and they approved. The company had invested a fair amount of money in the engineering and construction of the prototype and fixing the problems, and set up a factory that had a larger capacity than what we had at the Sunchaser sites. They started booking sales after showing the car to the dealers, and the company awaited the flood of orders. When the dealers got the first Sundancers, the improvements over the prototype helped sales, but not a lot. The project soon became a money sink. The company had taken on all the financial risk and the overhead was badly hurting the bottom line. This difference from Sunchaser manufacturing, where we had subcontractors doing the assembly on a dollars per unit converted basis, started to eat up the remaining investment money and made it harder to begin development of a follow on Toyota.

The original plan was that once we wrapped up production of the Sunchaser, I was going to move back to Detroit and work with the engineering team on the new car, and then come back out to LA when we rolled out production. As the competition was starting to design follow on cars, with some of them sending engineers to Japan, we needed a good follow up to keep going.

One of the competitors turned out to be our subcontractor in Santa Ana, a company call All Terrain Engineering Company, or ATEC for short. Run by a couple of guys we called "The Cow Persons", ATEC engineered and built a large variety of products for off road vehicles. They saw the writing on the wall for the Sunchaser and decided that they could make more money building convertibles for themselves than they would make building cars for Griffith. They hired a slick car guy from one of the custom car builders and

started up a development operation in a building next door. Their car was a full convertible, and I indulged in some industrial espionage with the company Polaroid to keep my boss back in Fort Lauderdale informed as to what was going on. Then ATEC decided they needed more space, namely the Sunchaser shop, so they moved our operation two blocks away and banned me from my old office to keep me away from what they were doing.

As the summer of 1981 went on, we pulled together the inventory of parts in the shop to determine where we had overages or shortages. We then filled out what we were short of to make a finite number of kits, and decided that we would limit the number of cars built in Santa Ana to the number of kits we had on hand. We kept building cars, killing black widows, and generally having a good time until I got a call in August from my boss at Griffith.

It turned out that the cash crunch had gotten so bad due to less than anticipated sales of the Sundancer that they were not going to do the follow on Toyota in house. So the team of engineers planned for the development of that car, namely myself; Ken, the Director of Engineering; and Dave, the company rep in Detroit, were let go. The follow on Toyota engineering was subcontracted out and the conversion packages would be procured as kits, rather than as the individual parts as we had done on the Sunchaser. After I was laid off in early September 1981, the company offered me an opportunity to make money as an independent warranty support rep, but I declined and moved on. What was left of The Griffith Company eventually came up with a follow on car called the Sunrunner based on the 1982 Toyota Corolla coupe, but they only built a limited number and sold them mostly in the Southeast. I went to work on the Space Shuttle, but that is another story.

Epilogue

I can't remember for sure how many Sunchasers we built, but it was a few thousand. They sold all over the place, from California to Colorado, from Las Vegas to Oregon, Michigan, Ohio, and all over the Southeast. It surprises me sometimes to come across one more than 20 years later, but a few are still out there and still running. In spite of the way things ended, I really enjoyed working for Griffith and fondly remember my time there.

The Griffith Company and a couple of other outfits were responsible for the general reintroduction of the convertible to the American driving public after Cadillac built the last Eldorado on the assembly line in the latter half of the 1970's. The Griffith built - Toyota distributed business model we had with Southeast Toyota, and attempted with AMC, was implemented more successfully, first by American Sunroof and Chrysler, and later by others. Eventually convertibles got back on the car builders product list, where today they are built in house on the same line as their hard roofed brethren.

The old Ford Model T factory on the pier at the end of Wambolt Street in Jacksonville is now abandoned. The last time I saw it, in December of 2002, it looked lonely.