

Tiger had tame start in life

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

In the collector car world, sometimes a clone is better than the real thing.

A clone is a replica of a highly regarded collectible car — usually a high-performance car — constructed from an automobile that started life in a more modest configuration.

Jim Foster's car, for example, looks like a V-8-powered '65 Sunbeam Tiger, but it started life as a rather less exciting Sunbeam Alpine.

"I couldn't afford a real Tiger, so I found a very nice Alpine body," he says. Sunbeam was a very old English car marque that was part of the Rootes combine in the early '60s.

The company produced a sporty two-seater called the Alpine after the company's competition successes in the Alpine rallies of the 1950s. An executive in the company's American branch believed Sunbeam could cash in on the buzz surrounding the AC Cobra — a British sports car with a Ford V-8 — by dropping the Ford 4.2-litre (260 cubic inch) engine into the Alpine.

In 1964, the Sunbeam Tiger appeared. A total of 7,085 cars were built before production on the Tiger was stopped in 1967.

In 1985, Foster purchased a nearly rust-free Alpine shell with no power train for \$400. He disassembled it and sandblasted the parts.

"Then, like most projects," he says, "It kind of got filed away."

In 1994, Barb Foster stepped in. "After eight or nine years of dragging the thing around, I said, 'Either build it or get rid of it,'" recalls Jim's wife.

Once begun, it was another four years before the clone was complete.

Foster gives California Tiger maven Dale Akuszewski, one of the best-known Tiger campaigners in vintage

racing, much of the credit for how well it turned out. All of the Californian's Tigers, Foster points out, are built from Alpine shells.

Despite the Rootes precedent, building a Tiger isn't just a matter of dropping a Ford small-block into an Alpine.

"Actually, the Tiger wasn't a very good car," Foster explains. "They didn't change the brakes or suspension parts."

To make his car handle properly, Foster had to reinforce the front cross member, reinforce the lower A-arms (which tend to collapse, he says) relocate the upper A-arms and replace the spindles and hubs.

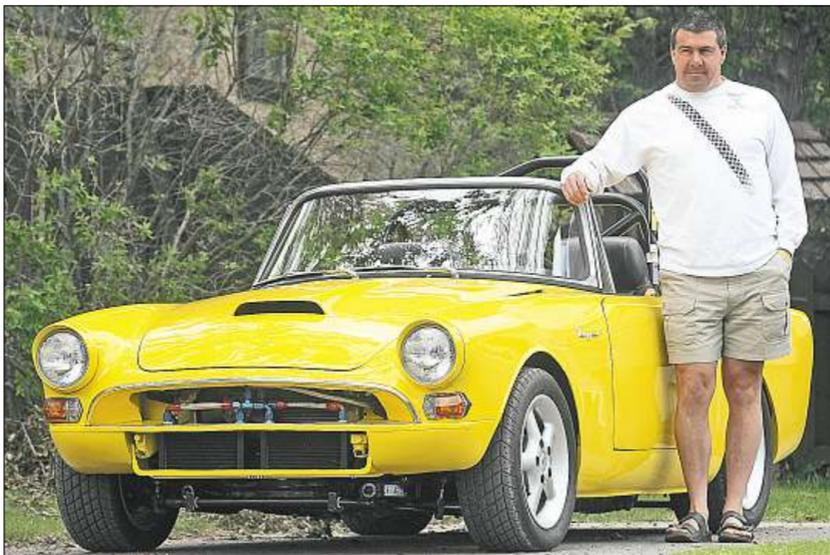
The 1,134-kilogram car has a Ford 302 (4.9 L) engine stroked to 337 cu. in. (5.5 L). Foster has run the car down the drag strip in 11.8 seconds at 190 km/h, which he says indicates the engine is making well over 400 horsepower.

"They're definitely a fun car to drive," he says. "The short wheelbase can be a real handful. The wheelbase is only 15 centimetres longer than an Austin Mini. There's a lot of overhang at the back and that's where the battery and fuel tank are. Once it starts to oversteer, it's hard to catch. And because it's short, it tends to oversteer quite quickly."

"You think it's going to handle well because it's a little British car, but they don't," Foster continues. "They go good in a straight line, so you sort of feather them around a corner and pull the trigger."

Foster says he built the Sunbeam to be a street driver, but also to do some vintage racing. Ironically, the latter provides fewer nervous moments than the former.

"I don't drive it a whole lot," he says. "I'm kind of paranoid to drive it around the streets because it's such a small car. I'm sort of fearful of Calgary drivers."



Photos, Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald
Jim Foster and the 1965 Sunbeam Tiger he built from a Sunbeam Alpine body he bought in 1985.



The rich leather interior of Jim Foster's 1965 Sunbeam Tiger.

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