



ASK CHIEF PONTIAC

BY TIM DYE

At the 1933-34 World's Fair in Chicago, Pontiac Motor Division touted a seeing, hearing, talking Chief Pontiac as a mechanical marvel. He was no mind reader, nor could he help you with your finances, but he could answer questions about Pontiacs.

For the World's Fair Pontiac published a special brochure measuring 11" x 15 3/4", folding out in three panels, and printed in one color, dark brown. It is titled at the top "Pontiac Chieftain" dated 1907 - 1934, and subtitled "27 years of progress." The time span is interesting as it goes back to the beginning of Oakland, even before GM's acquisition.

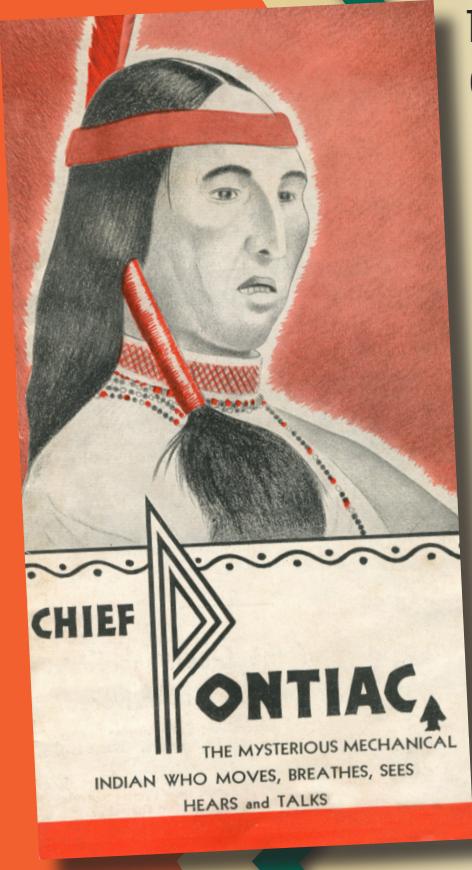
On the left side of the cover is a description of the various displays related to Pontiac that you will find at the General Motors exhibit. The remainder of the cover is an illustration of the talking Chief Pontiac with the label "Ask Chief Pontiac" and under that "Sees, Hears, Talks, Answers Questions - Don't miss the mysterious entertainer." The text goes on to explain that this Chief Pontiac breaks tradition with the typical cigar store Indian by speaking. It further explains that you can't ask him personal questions; however, you can ask him anything about Pontiacs, and he will answer.

Inside, the brochure highlights all of the Pontiac models for 1934. It also emphasizes the safety of the Pontiac, and features like Knee-action front springs, Bendix brakes and the smoothest power plant in the low-priced field. It even has a full page just for the ladies. Over all this is a wonderful piece of literature of interest to both Pontiac enthusiasts and World's Fair collectors.

Another piece related to the talking Chief Pontiac is a much smaller brochure. This

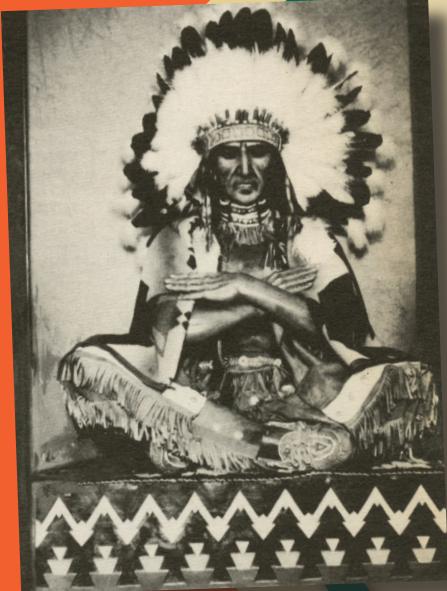


This is the illustration from the cover of the 1934 Pontiac - World's Fair brochure.



Above: This is the cover of the post World's Fair brochure featuring the talking Chief Pontiac.

Below: Photo of mechanical Chief Pontiac from Messmore & Damon brochure.



one only measures 3 1/4" x 6 1/4" and like the other, it also folds out to three panels. The cover of this pamphlet has a completely different illustration of Chief Pontiac and calls him "The mysterious mechanical Indian who moves, breathes, sees, hears and talks." It is interesting to note that his description has been expanded to include "Moves" and "Breathes." It is also interesting to note that in both of these illustrations the Chief has one feather. We will revisit that point further on in the story.

Inside, on the left panel is the caption "Famous World's Fair Chieftain Tells All." The text here lets us know that the Chief went on tour after the World's Fair, making appearances all over the country. This led me to wonder what happened to the Chief? I asked this question of the late Pontiac historian, John Sawruk and he did not know. I am always hopeful that the Chief is still around in the attic of some building and will surface one day.

Taking up almost the entire remaining two panels is a picture of a 1934 Pontiac, which leads us to believe this brochure was published right after the World's Fair. The rest of the brochure consists of questions that were asked of the Chief during his appearance at the World's Fair, and his responses. Example: Q. "I hear you have changed the Pontiac frame. In what way? A. Pontiac now uses a K-Y frame, which is far more rigid than conventional X-type frames. This new frame gets its name from its unusual bracing - a K-shaped girder being combined with a Y-shaped girder to reinforce the side members of heavy channel steel. There are also five cross members". As I read over the questions and answers, they appeared to be straight from the advertising department.

The final brochure was published by Messmore & Damon, the company that built the talking Chief Pontiac. Messmore & Damon were designers and display builders, specializing in high end exhibits like those used at a world's fair. This brochure was designed to promote their services for the 1939-40 World's Fair in New York. It features some of their creations displayed at the 1933-34 World's Fair, and the Chief was one of them.

This is the only piece I have found with an actual picture of the Chief, not an illustration. We can see here that he has a full headdress, but the illustrations show him with a single feather. History tells us that the illustrations were probably closer to reality as Chief Pontiac was not known to use excessive adornments. However, the picture represents how Americans envisioned an Indian Chief.

Nowhere are there any details of how the Chief operated. One can only surmise that the mechanics were similar to the Wizard of Oz and his curtain, with a man working levers to operate the Chief and a microphone with a speaker at the other end for answering the questions.

This talking Chief has been a wonderful piece of Pontiac history to highlight, and has also been the inspiration for our "Ask Chief Pontiac" feature on the museum's website. 