

CAR COLLECTOR

August 2005

THE PREMIER MAGAZINE FOR COLLECTORS

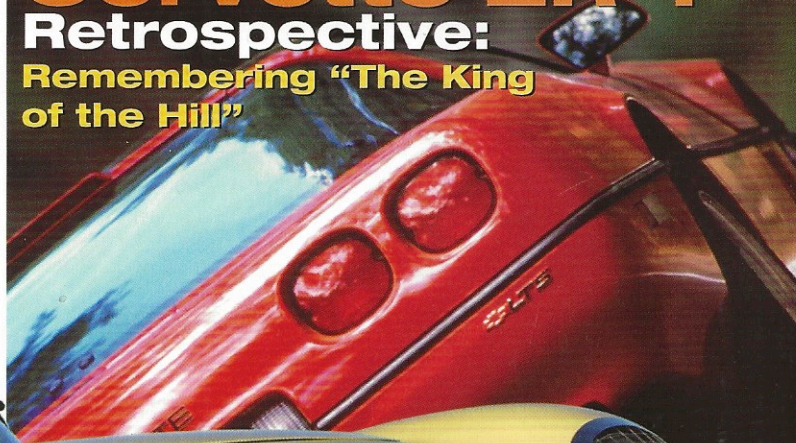
Ready-to-Race

1963 Corvette Z-06



Corvette ZR-1

Retrospective:
Remembering "The King
of the Hill"



Is This The World's
Most Beautiful
1955 Corvette?

How To:

- Dashboard Restoration
- Chrysler 300G
Restoration Part 2

Next Collectible

2005 Corvette Convertible





More

Colorful



and More

Powerful

1955 Chevrolet Corvette

Main: The Corvette was the first production car to incorporate the wraparound windshield. This and other features such as the hide-away top were lifted from GM's experimental 1951 Le Sabre designed by the head of GM Styling, Harley Earl. The '55 Corvette marked the third model year of production of the fiberglass sports car. This award winning example is painted Harvest Gold and is owned by Steve and Francie Newsom of Seabrook, Texas

Right: The '55 Corvettes are almost indistinguishable from the '53 and '54 models. A knowledge of the paint colors offered for the respective years helps to identify them. All '53s were Polo White with a black top and Sportsman Red interior. For '54 other paint colors were offered with a few being carried over to '55 to join new paint color offerings.

Top left: The crossed flags logo continued to appear on the nose as well as the deck of the '55 Vette.



TURNING A DREAM CAR INTO A SPORTS CAR

Text and Photos by David W. Temple

After much fanfare but less than anticipated sales, the Corvette slipped into the 1955 model year with serious doubt about its survival. Chevrolet had rushed the sports car into limited production in mid-1953 in response to the highly favorable comments about its prototype; only 300 were built, though managers expected to boost production to about 1,000 per month for the next model year. Actual production amounted to only 3,640 with some of those left unsold when the '55 season arrived.

The Corvette was the result of GM styling VP Harley Earl's desire to produce an American sports car. Sports cars were becoming increasingly popular, but nearly all of them were of European design. Nash began offering a Healey in 1951 with an aluminum body built by Pininfarina. Briggs Cunningham built some two-seater sports cars as well starting in 1951; his C-4R finished fourth at Le Mans in '52. Other sports car choices included the Kurtis (which later became the Muntz Jet) and Crosley's Hotshot. Even so, there were still few alternatives of American sports cars offered to driving enthusiasts in this country, and none of them approached the popularity of the MG TD or Jaguar's benchmark XK120. However, as popular as these cars were to American enthusiasts, only little more than a quarter of one percent of new car registrations in this country were for sports cars. Small, sporty two-seaters had a number of undesirable characteristics to many Americans. Zora Arkus-Duntov told a group at an SAE meeting in 1953, that statistics showed that the American public did not want a sports car, but went on to question if the statistics gave a true picture. He noted the market for such a car was an unknown quantity and that perhaps a sports car designed to American tastes and roads might have a significant following.

In September of 1951, Harley Earl attended the sports car races at Watkins Glen and watched the MGs, Allards, Ferraris and Cunninghams speed around the track. Briggs Cunningham is said to have good-naturedly ridiculed Harley's experimental Le Sabre which he drove to get to the event. Cunningham is said to have suggested to Earl he should have brought a car he could race. This may have been the trigger that fired Earl's thoughts (or at least to take the idea more seriously) of building a sports car at GM, though seeing all the sports cars on the track and during the race-day parade certainly had much to do with Earl's vision of an American sports car. Earl once said the idea for the Corvette was born while driving the Le Sabre as the pace car for this race. Regardless of the exact moment Earl started thinking of the Corvette, it was a turning point in automotive history.

The project began under the designation of Opel Passenger Car Development Project. Opel, incidentally, was a name borrowed from GM's German division. Amazingly, the time to bring the car from a paper proposal to the mockup stages and then finally a functional prototype was accomplished in about eight months. One of the requirements for the proposed sports car was that it be economical to build in order for it to meet a selling price target of around \$1,850.

(Unfortunately, the price for the production car would become nearly double that of the origi-



Specifications

1955 Chevrolet Corvette V8

Base price: \$2,934	Transmission: Powerglide auto
Engine: 265cid V8	Rear End: 3.55:1
Horsepower: 195@4,600rpm	Production: 700*
Torque: 260@2,800rpm	Wheelbase: 102 inches
Compression: 8.0:1	Performance**
Bore and Stroke: 3.75 x 3.00 inches	0-60mph: 8.7 seconds
Carburetion: Rochester four barrel	0-100mph: 24.7 seconds
Exhaust: dual	Top Speed: 116.9mph

* The feature car is est. to be 1 of about 60 with this color scheme.

** Source: July 1955 *Road & Track* road test report



The '55 Corvettes are almost indistinguishable from the '53 and '54 models. A knowledge of the paint colors offered for the respective years helps to identify them. All '53s were Polo White with a black top and Sportsman Red interior. For '54 other paint colors were offered with a few being carried over to '55 to join new paint color offerings.

nal goal.) This necessity meant that as many already existing components as possible had to be incorporated into the design. One of those was the Chevrolet chassis. Other items already in use by Chevrolet were the straight-six and "Powerglide" two-speed automatic transmission. A V8 was two model-years away and a manual transmission befitting a sports car was further in the future than that, so the

Vette would have to settle for a hopped-up six banger and an automatic.

Road test reports regarding the 1953 Corvette were generally favorable, but the first 300 cars, which were built at Flint, went to VIPs or were retained by GM for further testing. (Incidentally, some references quote 315 as the total production of the '53 Vette. According to Corvette authority, Noland Adams, 15 copies of the 1954 model were completed at the St. Louis plant before the end of the 1953 calendar year which explains the occasional misquote regarding the production run of the original car.) When interested members of the general public discovered that they could not just go to the local dealership to purchase one, they began to lose interest in the car. Moreover, the lack of roll-up windows and other little conveniences made the car somewhat of a disappointment to many potential buyers. Quality control was another problem with the cars. Panel fit was generally poor and stress cracks appeared fairly quickly. The price tag of \$3,490 was certainly on the high side as well. The lack of sales of the '54s would seriously impact Corvette planning for a while.

Those who were able to obtain a Corvette at least got a car with eye appeal and decent performance. The old "Stovebolt" six received a Carter YF sidedraft, aluminum intake, higher lift camshaft with aluminum timing gear, increased compression ratio and dual exhausts. Modifications pushed the output from 108 horsepower to 150. The suspension was composed of as many standard parts as possible, but was given a larger diameter stabilizer bar, special front coil springs, 16:1 steering ratio, and four-leaf springs in back. Weight distribution with driver, passenger, full fuel tank and luggage worked out to about 50/50; empty it was 54/46. The center of gravity was low—just 18 inches above the ground. *Motor Trend* judged the Corvette to be "an exciting car to drive" but noted it would "barely nose out an average [Buick] Century on an unobstructed freeway." The Vette's top speed was found to be about 108mph.

The 1955 model Corvettes received little styling updates though some were proposed. The money for alterations

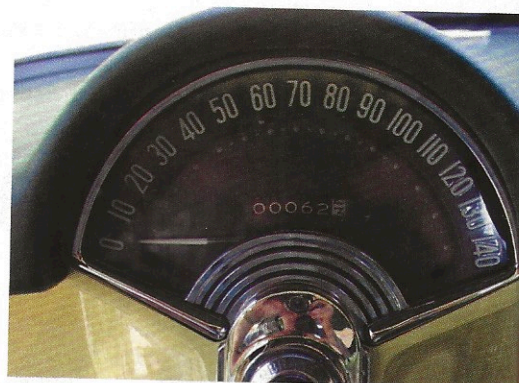


Above: The yellow vinyl upholstery covering the interior of this '55 Corvette is believed to have been the last of the NOS supply in that color. Dark green carpeting, dash pad and upper door panels match the top color.

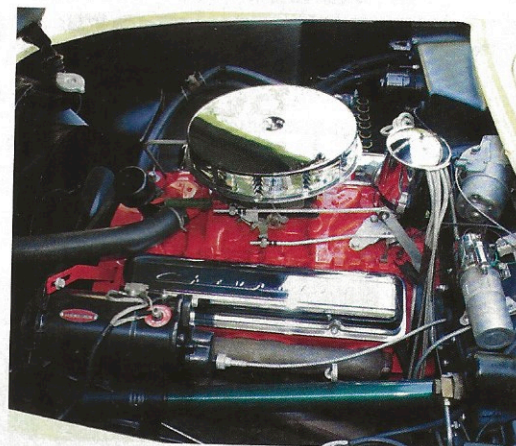
Left: A grille over each headlight continued the curve of the fender as well as added some protection against stone chips for the headlights. Thin bumpers, however, provided minimal protection but looked great.



A large gold "V" replaced the lower case "v" in the Chevrolet script to denote the presence of a V8. Almost all '55s came with the new 265 V8.



The speedometer registers to 140mph. This restored '55 Corvette has not traveled far since its restoration was completed as shown by the odometer reading of just over 62 miles.



The new 265cid V8 provided 195 horsepower for the '55 Corvette. Nearly all of that year's Vettes came with the powerful engine rather than the inline six-cylinder.

"very well" but noted the brakes "show up poorly." Performance of the V8 powered version showed great improvement over the six; the time required for zero-to-60 was trimmed from 11 seconds to 8.7. The quarter-mile result was 16.5 seconds rather than 18. Steering, like the brakes, was judged to be not "fast enough for a sports car." High-speed stability, though, was reported to be "near perfect."

Originally, all Corvettes were Polo White with a Sportsman Red interior. Color choices were expanded for '54 and new colors were offered for '55. One of the new color choices was Harvest Gold—the same color as the 1955 Corvette shown here. Our feature car, which is number 499 of 700 built, is owned by Steve and Francie Newsom of Seabrook, Texas. Before purchasing it, the previous owner asked Steve, who is a technical advisor on the first generation Corvettes and member of the National Corvette Restorers Society (NCRS), to take a look at the car which was then located in Wichita, Kansas. The

was extremely limited so these proposals were rejected for production. However, Chevrolet finally had a V8 ready to drop into the sports car. The new Chevy V8 went from drawing board to tooling within four months, with Chevrolet division's engineering team of about 2,900 personnel all under then chief engineer Ed Cole and an assistant brought in from Cadillac, Harry Barr, who had led the development of that division's 331 V8 first offered in 1949.

The modern V8 weighed 40 pounds less than Chevy's in-line six-cylinder and had a total weight of 488 pounds. The Turbo-Fire featured hollow pushrods, independent stamped-metal rocker arms, fully water-jacketed ports, aluminum pistons, pressed forged-steel crankshaft, and splash lubrication system. The hollow pushrods allowed for oil flow to the fulcrum ball surface and valve stem; as a result, oil passages in the head were no longer needed. The design of the rocker arm assembly permitted lower reciprocating mass, which in turn brought a higher maximum attainable rpm. The fully water-jacketed and aluminum pistons provided improved heat dissipation and new forging techniques resulted in a relatively short crankshaft, and thus less vibration. The splash lubrication system eliminated the need for expensive oil feeder lines. Furthermore, the new block casting technique delivered much higher precision cylinder bores.

The fresh design accomplished its goal of bringing a high performance image in an economical-to-produce way to Chevrolet. The powerful Turbo-Fire was an option offered for the Corvette, though extremely few of the '55s had the standard six-cylinder, which incidentally was given a five horsepower boost in output. The V8 installed in Vettes was rated at 195 horsepower.

The July 1955 issue of *Road & Track* reported the upgraded Corvette handled



The stylists proposed various updates for the '55 Corvette; they were rejected due to cost considerations for the poorly selling sports car. One of the proposed alterations was a new grille, but the bladed grille from the original '53 model continued to be used.



Fins were extremely modest on the Corvette. Thin bumpers mimicking those in front were mounted in back.

Clubs:

National Corvette Restorers Society (NCRS)
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Phone (513)385-8526
Fax (513)385-8554
www.ncrs.org

car was judged to be a good restoration candidate. Steve was given the task of performing some of the restoration and locating the needed parts. The prior owner specified that only NOS parts be used to restore his latest acquisition; even the upholstery had to be NOS. The last known supply of NOS yellow vinyl for '55 Corvettes was used to renew the interior of "499." John Kennedy of House of Customs, who is well known to Corvette enthusiasts, supplied the material and performed the interior and convertible top work. Coulter Automotive (also well known to Vette fans) handled the paint and body labor. Steve's '55 Corvette (number 96) was used as a guide to bring the subject car to award-winning condition. About one-and-a-half years ago, the owner decided the time to sell the

car had arrived and Steve and his wife Francie became the next title-holders.

This Harvest Gold Vette won "T Flight" honors at NCRS competition this past April, and is expected to compete for the coveted Duntov and Performance Verification awards later this year. It was also judged as "Best Corvette" at the 2005 Keels and Wheels Concours d'Elegance in Seabrook.

The total production of Harvest Gold 1955 Corvettes is uncertain, but has been estimated to be around just 60. All '55 Vettes painted this color came with the dark green top as shown here. As workers at Chevrolet became more experienced with fiberglass, the body work on Corvettes became better. As a result, colors other than Polo White were offered (White hides relatively poor body work, which is why all of the '53s were offered only in that color.) Polo White continued to be offered along with Corvette Copper and Gypsy Red, as well as Harvest Gold. New selections of paint and the V8 made Corvettes more colorful and more powerful; the trend would continue in later years leaving enthusiasts with a half century of great sports cars from Chevrolet.



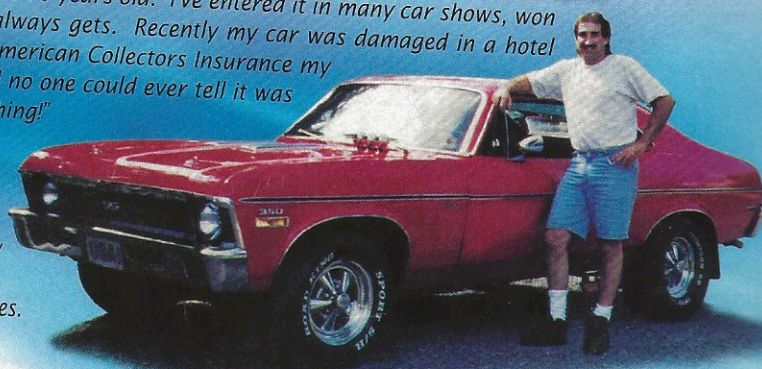
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