



ROCK OF THE '80s: TOP C4 PICKS

M A G A Z I N E Corvette

Eight Ball THE CORVETTE THAT SAVED THE DAY.



REVEALED: SUN-WORSHIP C6



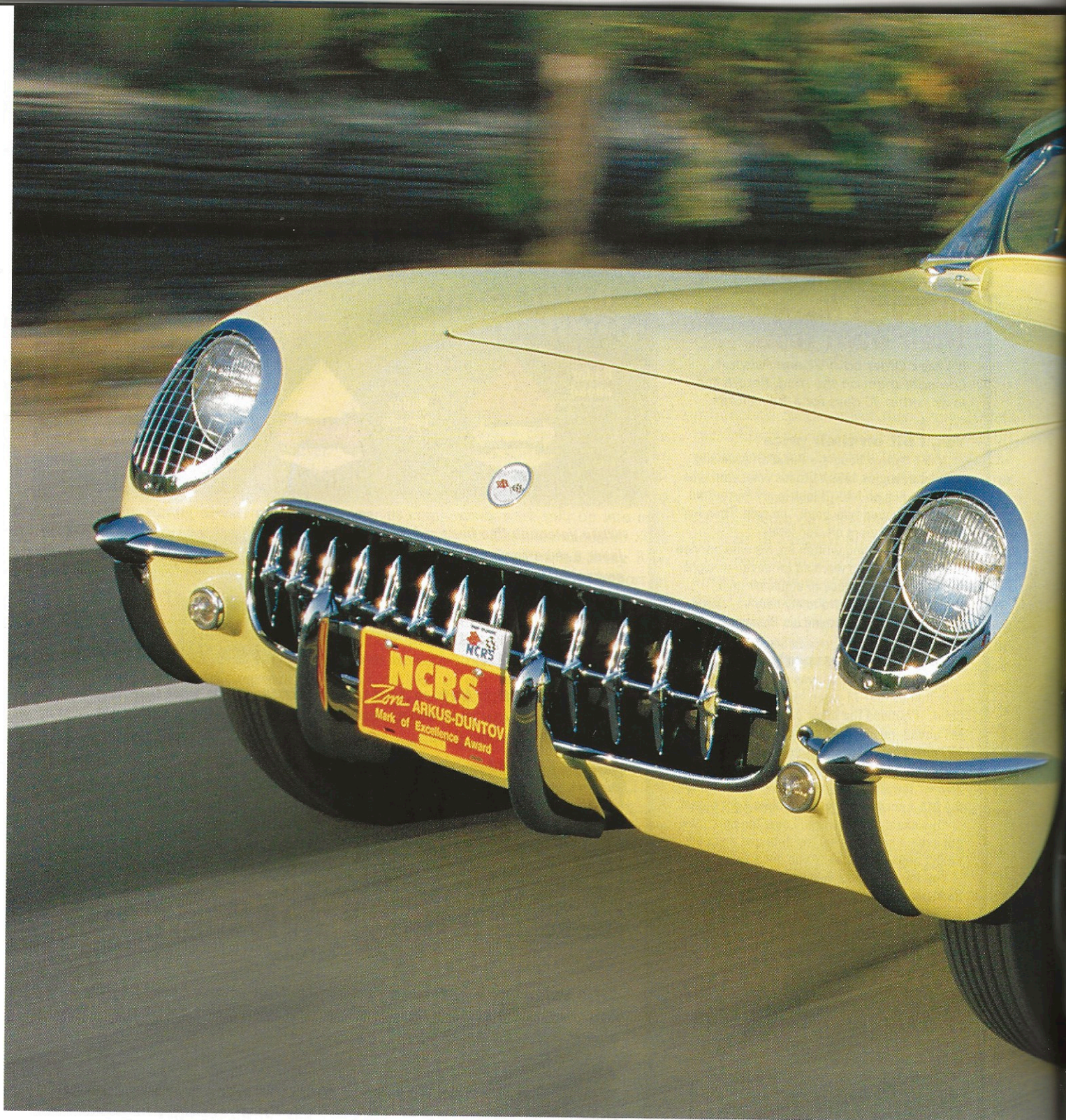
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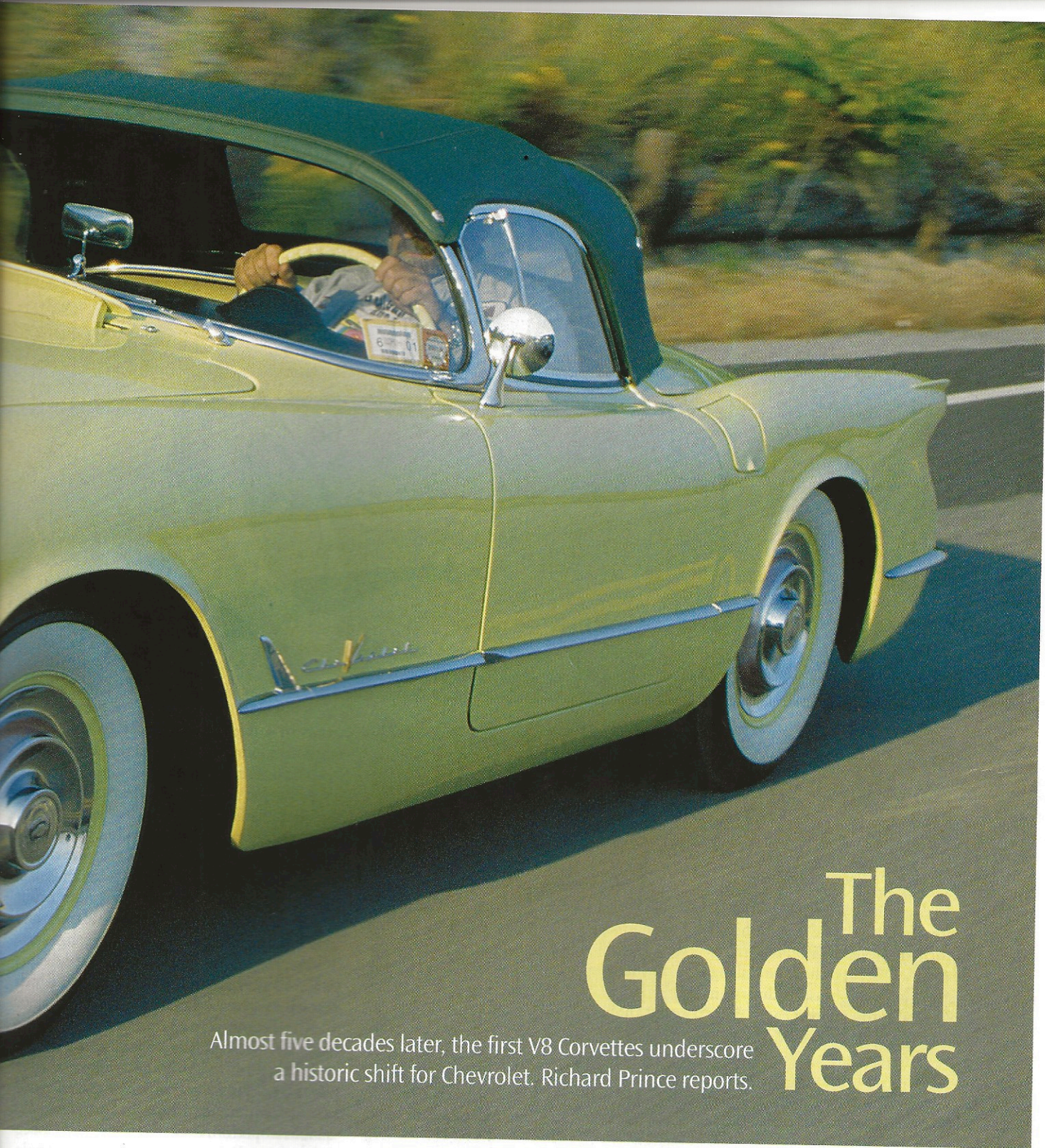
These days, only history buffs and old folks know that there used to be some logic to the organization of General Motors. Basically, the entire industrial enterprise was built around the automotive version of cradle-to-grave attention. Newly minted drivers were expected to start out with a low-priced Chevrolet and then work their way up through the other divisions as they gained money and families. Finally, if their American Dream held out, they'd find themselves old and rich enough for a Cadillac.

By all accounts this system worked—after all, by the end of the second World War, GM was the biggest industrial manufacturer on Earth. But despite the inherent beauty and self-perpetuation of GM's stair-step division structure, profound changes were afoot by the early '50s that would soon throw such pleasing simplicity to the winds.

Oddly enough, these changes rose from the bottom up, starting with the corporation's low-cost, high-volume entry brand: Chevrolet. Up until this point, Chevy's self-image had

been one of reliable, economical transportation. America's self-proclaimed "Value Leader" did that so well that it perennially topped the nation's sales charts. Under the new vision that was just then taking shape, however, the various divisions would begin spreading out their reach to encompass a broader range of buyers...all while retaining, GM somehow assumed, the core market placement and values that defined them.

Chevrolet management was—in large part because of its new general manager, Edward



The Golden Years

Almost five decades later, the first V8 Corvettes underscore a historic shift for Chevrolet. Richard Prince reports.

N. Cole—eager to exercise just that kind of freedom. Personally, Cole was interested in such un-Chevy traditions as youthful appearance and speed. Professionally, he saw that his division had started to cross the line between pleasantly sensible and downright dowdy. What it needed was some added flair, and in 1953 that got handed to Cole on a platter.

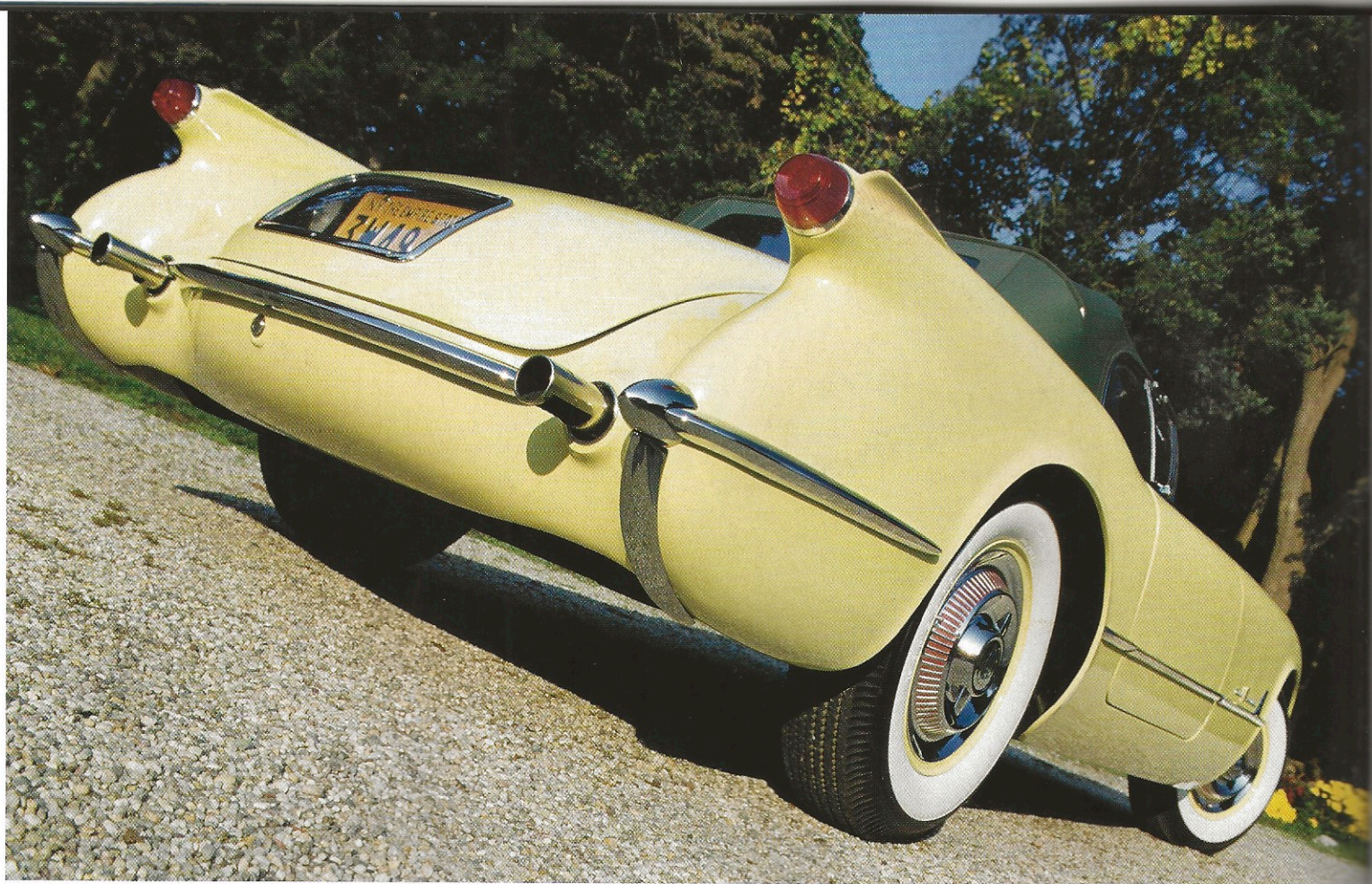
The new Chevy Corvette was more than just GM's first sports car: It was also the first time in history that a core GM division was given a distinct sub-model to sell alongside its

main platform while still wearing the same badge. Thus, today's wasteful over-proliferation of GM models and the shamefaced cancellation of its most venerable marque, Oldsmobile, can arguably be traced straight back to the first Corvette. While the car itself was more an accident than part of a master plan, it did mark the official end of GM's one-brand, one-car philosophy.

Harley Earl's initial goal for the car that became the Corvette was a bare-bones, low-priced roadster aimed at youngsters. Such a

rudimentary and inexpensive machine clearly belonged within Chevy's portfolio, so that's where the corporation dropped it.

Earl was a much better stylist than product planner, however. By the time his Spartan sports car reached reality its pricetag had nearly doubled, meaning that not only was the car different from the "big" Chevy mechanically, it was wildly different in market placement and utterly unrelated in manufacturing style. Probably before anyone really understood it, the world's leading producer of high-volume, low-



cost, production-line transportation was in the business of making a low-volume, high-priced, largely handbuilt piece of eye candy.

This unintended step into uncharted waters was disruptive for the division, but it served as a useful shakeup in preparation of the even more profound changes to come. The Corvette experiment also proved that Chevy—or for that matter any division—could build vehicles outside its normal purview without coming apart at the seams. Indeed, rather than killing off the division's core business, its diversion into the high-end specialty market cast a positive glow on everything else the brand made.

Chevrolet's big transformation all came together for model-year '55, the year that extensive restyling and reengineering radically shifted not just the brand's products but also its very nature. In a single model cycle this long-awaited transformation—a change the Corvette pre-saged but did not predate—took the biggest GM division from "America's Value Leader" to "The Hot One."

Ironically, Chevrolet's two-seater did not benefit from the same total transformation that its Chevy brethren enjoyed that year, but it did get one spinoff that most enthusiasts now credit with saving the car from extinction: A magic pill called the V8 smallblock. A further development of the late-'40s thinwall V8 that Cole had developed for Cadillac, this light, powerful, easy-to-build engine gave the

Corvette the one thing it really needed to break from the dealership doldrums: speed.

As an early-'53 concept car, the Corvette generated nearly unbounded enthusiasm. In Chevrolet showrooms, however, that fascination turned to boredom once the public came to realize that GM's showpiece wasn't nearly as fast as it looked. While those earliest Corvettes had other shortcomings, it was this less-than-sparkling performance that buyers were unwilling to overlook.

With no prior experience to draw on, Chevrolet's executives and ad guys didn't really know yet what would make their sports car sell, but they all understood that more power certainly wouldn't hurt. With a pricetag well past the ease of the average Joe, something a lot more compelling than slinky looks alone was still required. Only after finding that would this model come into its own.

Besides the giant leap in performance, Chevy's new 265-inch V8 Corvettes were improved in a number of other ways. The change from six- to 12-volt electrics greatly aided reliability. Fit and finish continued to make strides as the car's panel-production method progressed from hand-laid fiberglass to vacuum-bag molding and finally to matched-metal dies. And while it was only installed in about 75 cars during the latter part of '55, the new availability of a three-speed manual gearbox opened the model up to thou-

sands of drivers who deemed an automatic transmission to be the surest sign of a poser.

In addition to Polo White (the only available color for '53 and by far the most common in '54), 1955 Corvettes additionally boasted a nice palette of easy-to-order colors. Pennant Blue (only available in the early part of the year), Corvette Copper, Gypsy Red, and Harvest Gold were now just a tick on an order form away. Tellingly, matching roof colors had also been keyed to each paint hue this year: White cars got beige or white tops; blue cars came with beige; copper got white; gold was teamed to green; red came with beige.

The various permutations of interior colors were only slightly less complicated, and all of it just went to show that Chevrolet was starting to understand how the model's success would require a broad combination of qualities—performance, the *perception* of performance, relative value compared to rivals, and sexy, sophisticated visuals.

Of all the colors that flowered in '55, Harvest Gold probably best symbolized the period. In addition to its classic '50s look, the tone's brilliant radiance also makes it one of the most highly desired colors amongst collectors today. Indeed, the color of the 1955 shown here is what convinced Rene and Rob Tringali to buy the car to begin with. The first time the couple saw a Harvest Gold '55 was all the way back in '84, and they only missed

getting that one by the tiniest margin. Over the intervening years they stayed on the lookout for another example, figuring that eventually the right car would present itself.

Years later, hoping to find a suitable example in time to give to Rene as a birthday present, Rob stepped up his search in secret. In 1997 that hunt came to an end with a disassembled but highly original example in Massachusetts. The car had been apart and in storage for 30+ years by that time, but on closer inspection Tringali determined it was a genuine Harvest Gold V8 with all its original parts, including such hard-to-find, one-year-only items as the braided-metal sparkplug wires, chrome ignition shielding, and hose-mounted coolant-shutoff valve.

By day, Rob Tringali runs a late-model auto-body shop. He doesn't do any old-car restoration work for others but is no stranger to the art himself, having built a number of award-winning Corvettes for his family's personal collection over the years. With the exception of shooting the exterior paint (that was done by his son, Rob Jr.), Tringali did all of the work on this car: Massaging the body, rebuilding the mechanicals, restoring the chassis, refurbishing the interior, and everything else necessary to transform his wife's present into a thing of beauty.

One of the most challenging tasks of all was replacing the dark-green ragtop. Exact records are nonexistent, and '55 Corvettes predate the inclusion of color data on the trim tag; still, estimates for the total number of Harvest Gold '55s range from only a couple of dozen (almost certainly too low) to more than 150 (likely a good bit high). What is certain is that these cars came with their own unique dark-green soft-tops in a vinyl-coated canvas known as Cotan.

There are some fairly close facsimiles of mid-'50s Cotan still being made, but nothing exactly original. Through lots of solid detective work and a few strokes of fine luck, Tringali was able to track a roll of NOS green Cotan to the attic of a '50s-era upholstery shop. When he located the building decades later, there it still was, and the new top that graces his car was re-created from that fabric.

In testimony to the quality of its restoration, the Tringalis' Harvest Gold Corvette has earned its stripes on the usual show circuit, earning an NCRS Duntov Mark of Excellence Award, a Bloomington Gold Certificate, the Triple Crown Award, and uncounted Best in Show trophies. Unlike most Corvette-show entrants, though, the Tringalis believe in using their cars as they were intended. As a result, Rene's present is still taken out regularly and continues to give the family a fair bit of driving pleasure. It also serves as a tangible reminder that growing older still has its rewards. ○



Red, not orange, is the correct color for this very early smallblock (below). Enlarged golden V in CORVETTE script (bottom right) denotes the first batch of V8s to reach the Corvette. Complex yellow, gold, and green-tone interior (bottom left) is stock except for seatbelts, an addition Tringali made to fit the car's planned use.

