

Corvette



CORVETTE



David Newhardt



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This book was a labor of love. I got my start as an automotive journalist many years ago, writing and shooting for *Vette Vues Magazine*. Over the years, I've had my work in many other periodicals, and I'm currently on the masthead of *Corvette Magazine*. So when editor Jeffrey Zuehlke asked if I'd like to create a book introducing people to the wonderful world of the Corvette, I couldn't sign the contract fast enough.

I speak about Corvettes from experience: my daily driver for eight years was a 1966 coupe. Both my newborn sons came home from the hospital under its huge rear window. It was with a heavy heart that I sold it to buy a more family-friendly vehicle. But over the years, I've been fortunate to slip behind the wheel of many Corvettes, and their magic continues to fascinate me.

It's impossible to create a book without help, especially a tome about automobiles. Without the assistance of many people, I'd still be staring at a blank computer screen and my cameras would stay in their bags. Here, in no particular order, are the people and organizations that have helped me celebrate America's original sports car: Chevrolet Motor Division, Bernie DeMarkey, Dana Mecum, Sam Murtaugh, Dan McMichael, the Corvette Owners Club of San Diego, Jim Parkinson, Harry Rieger, Kenn Funk, Michael Smyth, Brad Kleinman, Page One Automotive, Randy Leffingwell, Jim Mangione, Eric Gustafson, Jay Leno, Helga Pollock, Reeves Callaway, Ron Austin, Michael McCafferty, Fred and Deni Fossek, Randy Standke, Sharon Sceper, "Corvette Mike" Vietro, Joel Rosen, Martyn L. Schorr, Bernard Juchli, Bob Sales, Darwin Holmstrom, and Zack Miller.

Thank you.

David Newhardt,
Pasadena, California

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INTRODUCTION



Thank the British for the Corvette. Really. Without the spindly, low-slung, wire-wheeled affairs that American servicemen took a shine to while stationed in England in the late 1940s, the Corvette never would have happened. After World War II, the American automobile industry took up where it had left off in December 1941, making full-size, heavy vehicles that were ideal for taking the family on a cross-country journey but lacked anything resembling fun. On the other side of the Pond, the Brits were used to making smaller, more nimble cars,

such as MGs and Jaguars, in part because the roads were narrower but also because a smaller car requires less material. Upon the cessation of hostilities in 1945, raw materials were in very short supply in the UK. People wanted their own transportation, but with a finite amount of metal, British carmakers built what they knew best, vehicles of diminutive stature.

American servicemen in the British Isles drove the local cars and loved the way they hugged the road and created fun wherever they went. Many servicemen brought their

English cars home to America with them, and soon they were buzzing around from Mulholland Drive to Wall Street. It didn't take long for American racetracks to be filled with the sound of angry English sports cars, and in Detroit people took notice. Granted, the quantity of imported sports cars in America was tiny, but they had an influence beyond their numbers.

Harley Earl, the head of General Motors' Art and Colour Section, the in-house design department, loved the idea of a small, sporty vehicle in the GM lineup; it would represent the youth and optimism that he wanted GM products to exude. But with America embroiled in the Korean War, valuable materials such as steel were in short supply. So he had his studios create a visually exciting two-seat concept car, built out of fiberglass, a material new to the automobile industry. Fiberglass made it easy to create compound curves, and it was rustproof and lightweight as well. The intention was to make a concept car out of fiberglass, then switch to steel for the body of the production vehicles.

Using a modified production Chevrolet frame and a 150-horsepower straight-six engine called the Blue Flame Special to save costs, Earl unveiled his creation at the 1953 Motorama show, a traveling event that gave the public in six cities a chance to see possible future designs. The response to the Polo

White-painted car was enthusiastic, and the decision to put the vehicle into production was soon made. General Motors wanted to strike fast, getting the new car on the street as soon as possible. But a steel body would take too long to develop, so GM decided to stick with fiberglass. And in a discreet nod to the roots of the vehicle, a photographer named Myron Scott, who worked for the Campbell Ewald advertising agency, came up with the name of a small, nimble British warship: *Corvette*. So overwhelming was the public's response to the Chevrolet Corvette that Ford rushed the 1955 Thunderbird, its own two-seater, to market.

Since its introduction, the Corvette has been an aspirational vehicle and, in the hands of Zora Arkus-Duntov and his engineers, an effective race car. It's been a star on road courses, drag strips, and movie screens. It has been owner modified for decades, and it has created one of the finest single-marque automotive organizations, the National Corvette Restorers Society. A thriving aftermarket industry has grown around the needs of Corvette owners, and the Chevrolet two-seater continues to attract more fans every year. It has been the Chevrolet flagship since 1953, and with the imminent release of the sixth-generation Corvette, it's clear that this American icon isn't going anywhere except down the road, quickly.

CHAPTER 1

FIRST GENERATION, 1953-1962





With the overwhelming demand for the new Corvette following the GM Motorama show at New York City's Waldorf Astoria Hotel in January 1953, Chevrolet had to get some cars into the public's hands, and pronto. A temporary facility was pressed into duty in Flint, Michigan, to build 300 1953 Corvettes. Due to the scarcity of the car, General Motors felt that getting the car into the hands of high-profile individuals, such as movie stars and professional athletes, would increase the exposure of the new sports car.

Production for model year 1954 moved to St. Louis, Missouri, where the Corvettes would be built until 1981. Still available with just a six-cylinder engine, the Corvette, while well received, didn't sell in the expected numbers. The introduction of a V-8 engine for 1955 didn't exactly spark a stampede into dealerships, and General Motors thought about pulling the plug on the car.

But a GM engineer, Zora Arkus-Duntov, saw the potential within the Corvette. He pushed for changes that transformed the Corvette from boulevard cruiser to genuine sports car. A new body for 1956 gave the car a sleeker, more purposeful look, and a score of Duntov-driven changes under the skin created a true sports car.

The introduction of mechanical fuel injection for 1957 raised the performance level of the Corvette to a point where it could genuinely compete with European sports cars. As the 1950s came to a close, American automobile designers' fascination with the "bigger is better" philosophy even extended to the Corvette. The body gained heft, the option list grew longer, and the engines became more powerful. While this wasn't everyone's cup of tea, no one could deny that the Corvette was truly America's sports car.



FIRST GENERATION, 1953-1962



FIRST GENERATION, 1953-1962



1953 CORVETTE ROADSTER

Under its voluptuous fiberglass body, the new Corvette borrowed much from the staid Chevrolet sedans of 1953. With a beefy chassis incorporating an X-brace and a straight-six engine bolted to a two-speed Powerglide automatic transmission, the Corvette was anything but fragile. Actually, it was a bit slow compared with its intended competition, the Jaguar XK-120. And the Corvette cost \$268 more than the Jaguar. Each 1953 Corvette was essentially a

1953 CORVETTE ROADSTER

Price: \$3,498

Engine: 150-horsepower, 235-cubic-inch, inline six

0-60: 11.0 seconds

Top speed: 105 miles per hour

hand-built automobile, as the alignment of each fiberglass panel had to be adjusted on the assembly line. Plastic slide-in side windows didn't do much to convey a



1953 CORVETTE ROADSTER

high-end aura, and neither did a leaking convertible top. Yet the press was impressed and gave the Corvette a hearty welcome. Every 1953 Corvette was finished in Polo White paint, with a Sportsman Red interior.

The first Corvette rolled off the assembly line on Van Slyke Road in Flint, Michigan, on June 30, 1953. Two were built that day, and it's suspected that they were test-driven to destruction. Corvette serial number E53F001003 has survived and is in the

hands of a collector. Production at the Flint facility ended on December 24, 1953, and on December 28, 1953, the assembly line for the 1954 Corvettes started. But the '53 Corvette was the first series production automobile with a fiberglass body.

Did You Know?

When the first production Corvette, serial number E53F001001, rolled off the assembly line, worker Tony Klieber was behind the wheel.



1953 CORVETTE ROADSTER



1953 CORVETTE ROADSTER



1955 CORVETTE ROADSTER

By the third year of production, the initial demand for the car had been satisfied, and sales had taken a precipitous drop. When the 1955 Corvette went on sale, more than 1,100 1954 models were still sitting on dealer lots. Something had to be done, so Chevrolet slipped its new 265-cubic-inch V-8 engine into most of the 700 cars built for 1955; a handful rolled off the assembly line with the Blue Flame straight-six. Color choices

expanded, and for the first time, a three-speed manual transmission was available. A modest list of options wasn't really optional; virtually every 1955 Corvette had all the options installed.

But Chevy had serious egg on its face with the release of the new Ford Thunderbird the same year. A two-seat personal car, it was well built, powered by a 292-cubic-inch V-8, and dramatically



styled. Ford sold 16,000 for 1955.

Chevrolet realized that it had better do something radical with the Corvette or the Thunderbird would turn the fiberglass vehicle into a mere footnote. Fortunately, the Corvette had powerful friends within General Motors. They decided to pull the car away from the personal car mold and take it into uncharted territory: creating a true sports car.

1955 CORVETTE ROADSTER

Price: \$2,909 (V-8)

Engine: 195-horsepower, 265-cubic-inch V-8

0-60: 8.7 seconds

Top speed: 119 miles per hour

Did You Know?

Six-cylinder Corvettes used a 6-volt electrical system, while V-8s utilized a 12-volt system.



1955 CORVETTE ROADSTER

1955 CORVETTE ROADSTER



1955 CORVETTE ROADSTER



1957 CORVETTE ROADSTER, FUEL INJECTED

In the handful of years since the Corvette had debuted, its purpose, thanks to Zora Arkus-Duntov, had settled firmly on competition. Duntov, a former racer and now the Corvette's chief engineer, was a forward-thinking force of nature who lived by the creed, "If power is good, more power is better." When General Motors moved to put a mechanical fuel-injection system onto production vehicles, Duntov was at the front of the line, insisting that the flagship of Chevrolet be offered with it.

1957 CORVETTE ROADSTER, FUEL INJECTED

Price: \$3,902

Engine: 283-horsepower, 283-cubic-inch V-8

0-60: 5.7 seconds

Top speed: 134 miles per hour

Four levels of "Ramjet" fuel-injected fun were available, ranging from 250 to 283 horsepower. Tipping the scales at just 2,849 pounds, the Corvette responded as few street cars ever had. It wasn't an accident

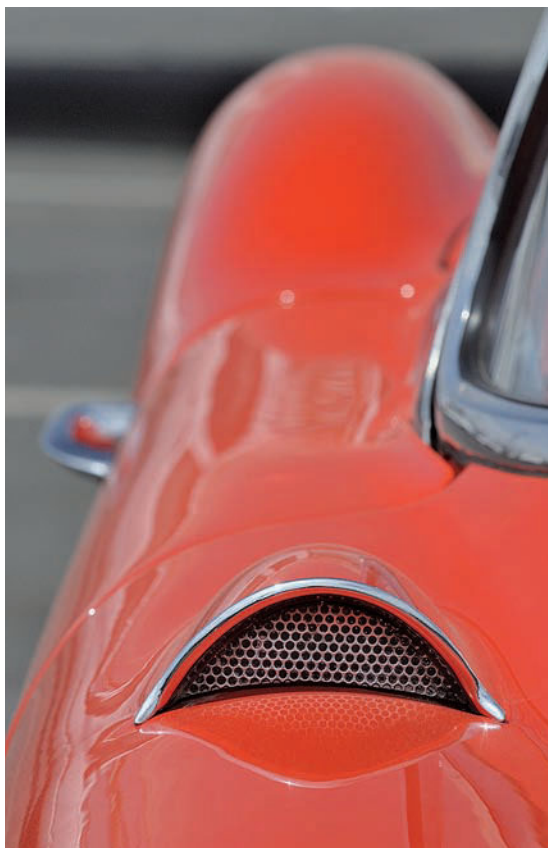


that racing grids were soon full of Corvettes, trouncing virtually everything else on the track. Only 1,040 Corvettes were equipped with fuel injection in 1957. This was also the first year that a four-speed manual transmission was available in the Corvette. Who says racing doesn't improve the breed?

With its dual headlights and clean lines, the 1957 Corvette sold well, almost doubling in sales from the year before. A total of 6,339 Corvettes went to good homes for 1957.

Did You Know?

Equipment that's standard on today's Corvette was optional in 1957. This included windshield washers, a heater, power windows, and an AM radio.



1957 CORVETTE ROADSTER, FUEL INJECTED

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