

Un-Realized History

By Bob Schmeichel

Most people would walk right on by a Chevrolet Corvair not realizing when they were introduced in December of 1959 that they were the most technologically laid out American car since World War II. GM wanted to create a car to be competitive with the Volkswagen market and did so from its beginning. From the body styling to the rear-mounted air-cooled engine and transmission, many European car manufactures mimicked the Corvair look in their own ways right up until 2002. While GM played around with upping the horsepower of the Corvair six cylinder by adding a turbocharger to maybe step into the European Porsche market, another idea of a single same chassis for both the Corvair and the Corvette came about. The same frame idea for the rear mounted Corvair engine and flipping the engine to the front of the rear end making it a mid-engine mounted Corvette kind of floundered in the design department and never happened. It makes you wonder if some of those GM designers went on to Europe to pursue the mid-engine concept there with Ferrari and other supercars. Over the years the Chevrolet Corvairs by themselves evolved into many different models to meet the public demands of gas mileage and smaller cars starting with a 2-door hardtop, 2-door sedan, 4-door hardtop, 4-door sedan, a convertible, a station wagon, a passenger van, a commercial van, and a pickup. GM did very well with mass produced sales the first six years with all these different models available. They could be had with a 3-speed or 4-speed manual trans as well as a 2-speed Powerglide automatic transmission. The flat six-cylinder engines came with 80 horsepower and ranged up to 150 horsepower depending on how they were ordered from the factory. All Corvairs had an independent rear suspension much like the mid-60s Corvette and were unfairly scrutinized by Ralph Nader as being unsafe at any speed. That scare came about because people were making the air pressure in the tires the same all around, which made them handle squirrely. But later that was proven debunked because of how people drove. Because the engines were air cooled, the heater borrowed from Volkswagen ran off gasoline, which cut the gas mileage by about 5 miles per gallon when using it in the winter time. In 1960 when the Corsair came out it was called the "Car of the Year" by Motor Trend Magazine. After years of small styling changes and technological improvements, the Corvair in 1965 had reached a status and considered to be the most handsome car in the world. And along with that same year many other auto manufactures were starting to create their own stylized car designs along with more horsepower and beginning to create what we call muscle cars today. Horse power was in demand and coming on strong over gas mileage. By May of 1969, Chevrolet had produced 1,786,243 Corvairs in its nine-year existence and decided to drop the Corvair line in general due to declining sales. To date, it has been called the most successful rear-engine car ever built in America.

In 2003 a coworker of Kris Tank told her in passing that she was thinking about selling her 1963 Corvair convertible that her parents had bought new and she had driven daily through all four college years. It had been parked back in her parent's garage after college for 10 years then moved to a family farm where it sat for 17 more years, and now was the time to sell it. Kris knew that her husband, Dave, had a vested interest in Corvairs because of his father having a Chevrolet dealership in North Dakota the 60s, and Dave driving one in high school. It didn't take long, and Dave and Kris had the Corvair at their home with Dave diving right in to restore the entire car. Touching a Corvair again reminded Dave of how simple these cars are to work on. This car had the optional 102 horsepower engine with a power glide automatic transmission option. Dave said he had never seen one with a power glide transmission at his dad's dealership because the cost was about 10 percent of the car cost then, so they are kind of rare to see. By the time Dave had the entire car all apart, he had removed and replaced the floor in the car as well as rebuilding the engine himself. He updated the electrical system generator to an alternator along with a newer

lightweight magnesium engine fan. This was a technical engine improvement in 1965 that allowed the car to accelerate and slow down quicker because of the lighter weight. Dave said he did all the body work and had a work-related customer paint the car for him, but kicks himself over the five-year rebuild for not taking enough pictures when he took it apart as a reference for later reassembly. With the original seat used in the back, Dave also installed new seat covers on the front bucket seats besides adding a new white colored convertible top. With the car done since 2008 and having driven it 14,000 miles, Dave and Kris thoroughly have enjoyed belonging to the National Corvair Club, and hitting other Corvair events around the country while competing and comparing notes. Moving to this area of the country and being new members of the GPSR, hopefully their fun continues!



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