

Corvairisation

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Tucson Corvair Association
Volume 27, Number 3

Tucson, Arizona
March 2001



Pontiac Polara



THIS WEEKEND

Saturday, March, 17, 11 AM

Potluck Picnic at AQUA CALIENTE PARK

Tucson Corvair Association
Established 1975

Corvairsation is a monthly publication of the Tucson Corvair Association, which is dedicated to the preservation of the Corvair model of the Chevrolet Motor Division of General Motors. The Tucson Corvair Association is a chartered member of the Corvair Society of American (COSA), Chapter 857.

Monthly Meetings are held on the fourth Wednesday of each month, except December. One technical/social event is planned for each month except August.

Membership Dues are \$15 per year for singles and \$18 per year for families. Initial dues are \$15 for singles and \$22 for families (includes name tags). Make checks payable to Tucson Corvair Association.

Change of Address: Report any change of address or phone number to the Membership Chairperson. Do not report such changes to the Corvairsation Editor.

COSA Membership Dues are \$30 per year (\$70 for 26 months) and include a subscription to the COSA Communique, a monthly publication. COSA membership is not required for membership in the TCA, but is highly recommended. See any TCA officer for more information.

Classified Ads are free to members and \$2.50 per 4-line ad to all others.

Deadline for all materials submitted for publication in the Corvairsation is the 10th for that month's issue. Mail or deliver all materials to the Corvairsation Editor.

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Prez Sez

Spring is right around the corner and that means outdoor family activities. Come on out and bring the whole family. We're going to kick off the season with a potluck picnic at the picturesque Agua Caliente Park this Saturday. Be there: look for the Corvairs.

Then in April it's our annual picnic with the Cactus Corvair Club at Picacho Peak. Don't miss the fun in the sun, wild flowers, free food and all the comradery!!

Congratulation to the newly-elected TCA Board. They are:

Barry Cunningham, President;
Chris Cunningham, Vice President;
Tim Green, Secretary;
Allen Elvick, Treasurer;
Dave Baker, Member-at-Large.

It's going to be a great year, so come on out with your Corvair and participate!

Thanks, Barry

in memoriam

BEVERLY BAKER

from the editor.....

Beverly Baker passed away on February 14, 2001, when her heart failed. We can celebrate her life by remembering her kindness and giving soul. She was TCA's Membership Chairman, a dedicated and very supportive member.

This weekend is TCA's potluck picnic at Aqua Caliente Park on Saturday, March 17, at 11 AM. BRING A DISH TO PASS AND YOUR EATING UTENSILS. The club will provide sodas. You'll love this park. It's all green for St. Patty's Day. Directions: Go east on Tanque Verde Rd. to the 11900 block, then north on Soldiers Trail to Roger Rd. and turn right to the park entrance.

We had a big turn-out for the tune-up clinic at Dave's garage last month, ten cars and fourteen people. It was great to see so many people and Corvairs there. Thanks, Dave, and thank you to your daughter, Terry Valentino, for preparing all the eats and beverages. We had a great time! Also, we had about half of the club at the February meeting. It was gratifying to see so many there.

Did you ever think you may have a long-lost cousin? Well your Corvair does, almost, over in our Pontiac family. Enjoy!!

POLARA - THE PONTIAC'D CORVAIR

Article written by Thomas H. Bonsall and provided courtesy of Ride & Drive.

When Semon E. "Bunkie" Knudsen left the Detroit Diesel Engine Division of GM on the first day of July, 1956, to become manager of Pontiac Motor Division, it may have seemed to some like an easy job. Pontiac was entrenched in the number six spot in national sales, and enjoyed a seemingly solid third place ranking among medium-priced nameplates. Industry observers knew better. Pontiac had lost much of its individuality throughout the 1940s, ending up as a sort of super Chevrolet. Pontiac was among the last makes in its class (or in the entire industry, for that matter) to offer a modern, high-compression V8, its styling was uninspired and, most worrisome of all, there were unmistakable signs that its customer base was beginning to erode.

Knudsen himself had privately characterized Pontiac as "the worst division at General Motors" and how much work he had cut out for him was quickly revealed from an unexpected — and unimpeachable — source.

Recalled Knudsen: "The first day I was there, I thought I might take my family out to dinner that night. I brought home a Pontiac car and my four children, my wife and I started out to go to dinner. My son, who was about 15 years old at the time said, 'Dad, you got a lot of work to do here!'"

The work involved re-engineering the car to turn it into the hottest driving machine on the American road at the time — one with exciting styling, too, that featured Pontiac's now-famous split grille and Wide Track stance. It also involved keeping pace with the compact car boom that hit unexpectedly shortly after Knudsen's arrival.

GM, Ford and Chrysler had been engaged off and on with small car programs since the 1930s. None of the programs ever came to anything, though. What tipped the balance was the explosion in buyer demand for smaller cars. About the time Knudsen transferred to Pontiac, Volkswagen was starting to gain prominence with the original Beetle and, then, the American Motors Rambler suddenly took off in 1958. In 1959, Studebaker joined the fray with its Lark, and it was assumed that the Big Three could not be far behind. The first GM compact, the Chevrolet Corvair, appeared in the latter months of 1959 for the 1960 model year, along with the Ford Falcon and the Plymouth Valiant. The Falcon-based Mercury Comet followed a few months later. For 1961, Buick, Olds and Pontiac all fielded compacts of their own, as did Dodge.

Actually, the Tempest was Pontiac's third small car program. Beginning in 1958, the division had sold the Vauxhall Victor, a compact built by GM's British subsidiary. It wasn't a very good car, nor did it sell very well. The similar Opel Kadett, imported by Buick dealers at the same time, was better and established a long-term presence in the American market. The two car lines were imported partly to test the waters for a small car sold through GM dealers, partly to ease problems of excess capacity in GM's European plants. At one point, Knudsen recalls, he became so frustrated with sluggish Victor sales that he threatened Frank Bridge, Pontiac's sales manager, that if Bridge didn't find a way to move the cars bulging in inventory he would put them on a barge, make Bridge captain, and send them out into the middle of Lake Erie — and he wouldn't much care if he saw barge, Vauxhalls or Bridge ever again! Then, there had been a major effort at the corporate level in the 1957-58 period to sell Pontiac on a piece of the Corvair program. Harlow Curtice, the president of GM, personally intervened in an attempt to persuade Knudsen. Knudsen, who enthusiastically disliked the car and distrusted its handling even then, explained:

"Mr. Curtice called and asked me if I wanted the Corvair. I said, 'Mr. Curtice, no I don't. It's a rear-engined car. It hasn't any grille, so what do I do with the front end? How do you change the back end? You've got to have the engine in there, you've got to have the louvers the way the Corvair is now. The engine [is] bored right to the nth degree.'

"You couldn't bore it out any more. You couldn't change the stroke any more. So, you couldn't get any more power out of it. (Thank God!) So, what was I going to sell? I was going to sell a Corvair with a Pontiac name for 'x' number of dollars more.

"So, I said, 'No, I don't think we want it.' He said, 'That's fine. You don't have to have it.'

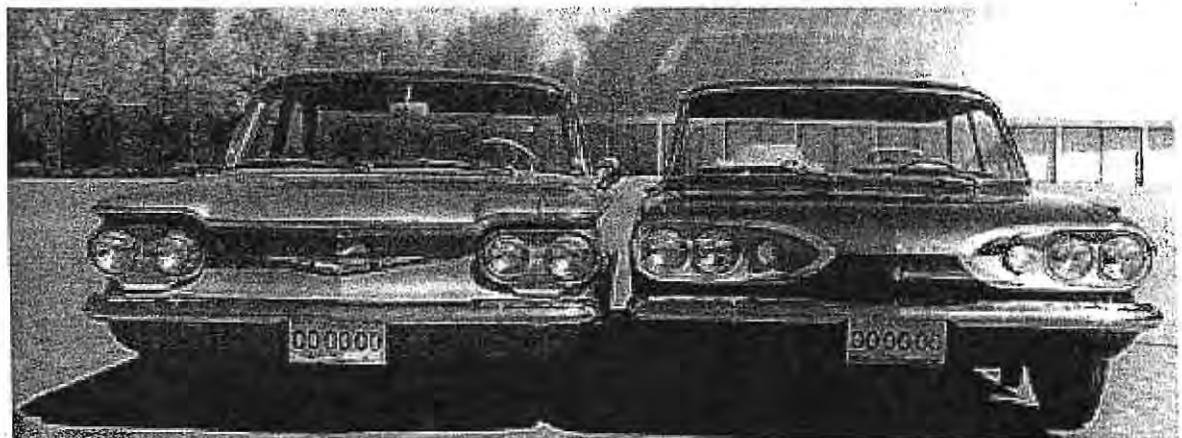
When I interviewed Knudsen in 1991 (several years before his death), he insisted that was all there had been to it. Corporate made a proposal, he turned it down, and that was that. He did recall a special showing at the GM Design Center in Warren, Michigan, where the Corvair was shown to top executives (probably in 1958). And, he recalled Alfred Sloan, GM's legendary chairman, making a personal pitch to him regarding the Corvair. If Sloan, who was nearing retirement but still a major force in the corporation, took the trouble to try to persuade Knudsen, it suggested to me that there was more to the scheme than Knudsen would admit. One did not casually turn down Alfred Sloan, especially not if one was an ambitious man on the fast track at GM.

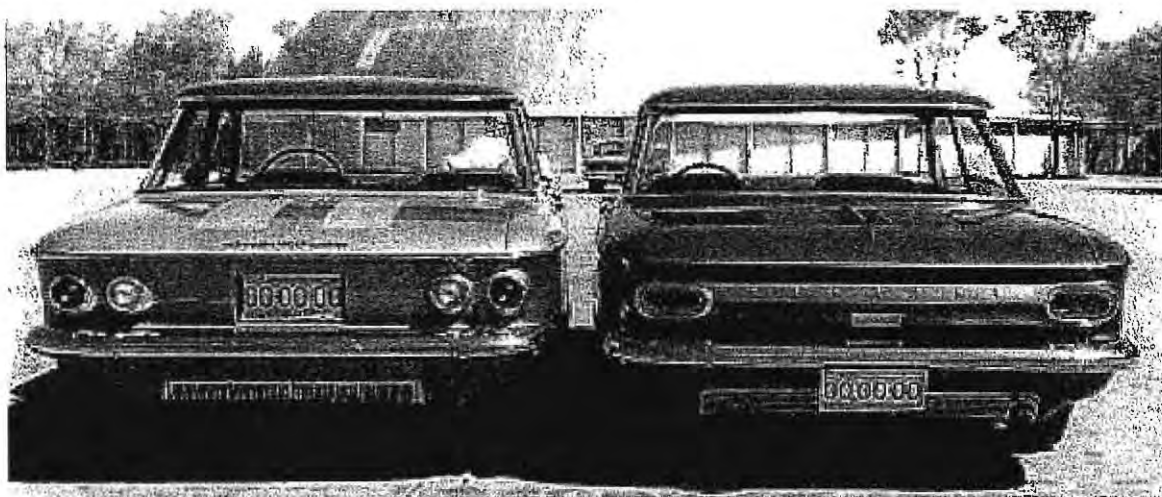
It was only long after my book on Pontiac was published in 1992 ("Pontiac: They Built Excitement") that I came across the photos included here. They were taken in 1958 and 1959 and show fiberglass mock-ups of the Corvair clone that the corporation tried to sell Knudsen: the Pontiac Polaris. So, why wasn't Knudsen buying? His brief statement to me outlined the main reasons, but John DeLorean, then head of experimental engineering at Pontiac, shed more light on the matter in his book, "On a Clear Day You Can See General Motors":

"Frank Winchell, now VP of Engineering, but then an engineer at Chevy, flipped over one of the first prototypes on the GM test track in Milford, Michigan. Others followed. The questionable safety of the car caused a massive internal fight among GM's engineers over whether the car should be built with another form of suspension."

Ed Cole, the Corvair's chief engineer, flatly refused to abandon the controversial swing axle and Knudsen, who was also an engineer by training, would have nothing to do with the car unless it were radically changed. This stalemate resulted in Knudsen's last-minute switch to Plan B: the Tempest program. Buick and Olds, which had also been pitched for the Corvair (although not as stridently as had Pontiac), had already developed their own Y-Body small car program. This resulted in the Olds F-85 and the Buick Skylark. Now, Knudsen wanted a piece of that program and was determined to muscle his way into it. That, however, is another story for another time.

Ironically, Knudsen was promoted to Chevrolet Division in 1961, so, in the end, he got stuck with the Corvair, anyway. He did, however, accept that job on the condition that he be allowed to completely re-engineer the Corvair's chassis and this was done in time for the 1965 models. These cars were universally regarded as first-class driving machines and it is doubly ironic that Ralph Nader's book, "Unsafe at Any Speed," should have killed the Corvair AFTER Knudsen had spent untold millions fixing all the problems of which Nader complained. C'est la vie. In its short life, the Corvair probably caused as much contention and angst at the upper levels of GM as any vehicle program in the corporation's history and, like it or not, Knudsen was in the thick of most of it.





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