

## Curbside Classic: The Best European Car Ever Made In America: 1965 Corvair Monza

By Paul Niedermeyer: April 22, 2010



You wake despite the hope that you would never awake, in fear that the wildest night of your life with Corvair was all just a dream...oops; never mind. But if a car ever inspired one to emote and wax poetically, it was the Corvair, especially the 1965. So I'll try hard to restrain myself: the 1965 Corvair was the best European car ever made in America. And if that alone doesn't explain the Corvair's inevitable failure, lets just say that in 1965 Americans were eating a lot more Wonder Bread than baguettes.

I've been sitting on this gem of a Monza coupe Stephanie found parked in front of a small wood products mill in the industrial part of Eugene. Shooting it sure brightened a rainy day. It's a brilliantly clean and timeless gem. I hadn't planned on using it today, but then I realized how critical it was in telling not only the story of the Camaro's existence, but also so much about why Detroit lost the war against the imports and eventually crashed.

I can't do the Corvair's birth and development full justice here, but it started out to be something quite different from how it ended up. Or did it? What arrived in the fall of 1959 was a terribly stripped little car, with a drab monotone gray taxi-cab interior, rubber floor, and totally devoid of chrome trim. Born in the depths of the 1957-1958 recession, the original 1960 Corvair lost its \$4 sway bar and any pizzazz to GM's bean counters who wanted a cheap car to fight the VW Beetle and the Ford Falcon, and still make a profit. Given the Corvair's complex alloy engine, that was already seeming unlikely.

But a rear-engined small car intrinsically offered great enthusiast potential, as

Porsche had shown so convincingly. In fact a Porsche 356 was used as a test mule for the Corvair engine. The Corvair had great potential, but its intended mission in life was as confused as its buyers. The Falcon made a much better compact for most Americans' needs in schlepping the kids and the groceries, and GM realized it instantly. The highly pragmatic Chevy II was rushed into production, and the Corvair was quickly dressed up with bucket seats, a higher output engine, and an available four speed: the Monza. Out of desperation and necessity, GM invented a new genre: the small sporty car; for American cars, that is. The Europeans had been chasing that for quite some time.

The fact that GM bean counters didn't give the early Monzas that sway bar and other suspension upgrades that the Corvair's father Ed Cole bitterly wanted every Corvair to have from day one is very telling, and perhaps the most significant aspect of the Corvair story and its failure to compete against the imports: GM perpetually elevated style and flash over substance. With just a few more bucks and a costless change to a faster steering ratio, the early Corvairs could have been as brilliant as they inevitably had to make the 1965.

Instead, the Corvair Monza's real role in life was to inspire the Mustang, which elevated style over substance to a whole other level, resulting in a colossal commercial success. America's brief fling with chasing the sporty imports ended before it even properly started. By the time Chevrolet sorted out the Corvair's suspension and added some zest to its engine via turbocharging, the game was already essentially over, although Chevy didn't quite realize it yet.

It assumed (hoped?) that Americans were much more in love with the Corvair's inner beauty than its bucket seats and cute looks. Not so, as the Mustang made so perfectly clear. Who cared if the Mustang had a flaccid Falcon suspension, dull steering, mediocre brakes and a large percentage of them came with a feeble little six? Never underestimate the power of a long hood to

create a fad, especially in America. A cheap V8 didn't hurt either.

The Corvair, and the idea of what the Corvair could be, died on March 9, 1964. Within a few months of the Mustang's introduction, Chevrolet rushed the Camaro into production, and halted any further development and marketing of the Corvair. And so the brilliantly styled and refined 1965 appeared that fall as an unloved orphan, or even worse, as an abortion.

I've always been torn about my feelings for the gen1 and gen2 Corvair. Let's just say that my first car was a white '63 Monza with the optional higher output engine and with a four speed stick. And I've always regretted not finding a barn to keep it for my old age. So I've got a bit of a built in bias, to Corvairs in general, and the gen1 in particular. It's hard to be objective about the first real car love of your life

Of course the '65 and up was the better car, with its new Corvette-sourced non-swing axle IRS and faster steering ratio. Styling wise is where it gets hard. The '65 is certainly a brilliant design, so light and airy and almost timeless. But for reasons that go beyond having one, I'm also deeply emotionally involved with the original 1960 design. It was the more radical of the two, for its time anyway; the 1960 Corvair was a an utter bombshell when it was shown in Europe, and created a styling revolution there whose influence was all too obvious well into the nineties.

Ironically, the gen1 Corvair's styling is not as highly praised in its home country as the 1965, which in turn had very little effect on Europe. Among other things, that may well be because four doors are much more common in Europe than coupes, and the 1960 four door was so superb and worked even better than the coupe, whereas with the 1965 was the opposite: the four door didn't work well at all. To each their own: they're both some of the best to ever come from the Bill Mitchell era at GM, and

## Tucson Corvair Association



Established 1975

The 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 America (CORSA) as Chapter 357.

Membership dues are \$15 per year for individuals and \$18 for families. Initial dues are \$19 for individuals and \$22 for families (includes name tags). Make checks payable to the 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.

CORSA membership dues are \$38 per year (\$76 for 26 months) and include a subscription to the CORSA Communique, a monthly publication. CORSA memberships is not required for membership in the Tucson Corvair Association, but is highly recommended. See any TCA officer for more information.

Classified ads are free to members and \$3 per 4-line ad for non-members. Deadline for materials submitted for publication is the 10th of the month.

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# TCA 2010 Events at a Glance

Sat, May 15

**Run to Tombstone.** Meet at Omar's at the TTT Truck Stop on I-10 east of town at 10:00am for a fun day in the town too tough to die. We have lunch at a local restaurant.

Wed, May 26

**Regular Monthly Meeting.** Parking Lot Bull Session at 6:30 pm. Meeting starts at 7:00pm. Golden Corral, 4380 E 22nd (just east of Columbus)

Thu, Jun 3

**Board Meeting.** 6:45 pm at Bill Maynard's, 3605 N Vine. Everybody welcome.

Sat, Jun 19

**Picnic at Aqua Caliente Park** on Roger Road just east of Soldier's Trail. Meet



at the McDonald's on Tanque Verde and Catalina Hwy at 10:00 am. The club will provide The burgers and sodas. Bring a side dish to share.

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## April Meeting Minutes

Minutes from the TCA regular monthly meeting held April 28, 2010 at 4380 E 22nd Street, Tucson Arizona.

**In Attendance:** Barry Cunningham, Bob Moulton, Van Pershing, Lynn Marrs, Bill Maynard, Ken Farr, Heidi Farr and her sister Cevia, Ed Segerstrom, Mike Strong, Allen Elvick, Ron Bloom, and Don Robinson.

**The Meeting:** The meeting was called to order at 7:40 pm by President Farr. Thanks was given to Jim and Terri Mills for the great BBQ after the Chevy Showdown car show. The show was a success with 5 of the 7 Corvairs entered receiving recognition and awards. A reminder was given that the mid-month activity for May will be a drive to Tombstone and everyone will meet at 10:00 am on May 15 at the Triple T Truck Stop on I-10 east of Tucson. The minutes from the April meeting were approved. New member Bob Moulton was introduced. Ken mentioned that he has entry forms for a car show/fund raiser to be held May 8. See him for information. After seeing the nice T-shirts that were received at the Chevy Showdown, it was mentioned that the club

# DON CHASTAIN

1921 - 2010



Long-time club member Don Chastain passed away on April 12, 2010 of congestive heart failure.

Don was a founding member of the Tucson Corvair

Association and active member as long as his health permitted. He and Betty rarely missed a meeting or an activity. He was always helping other Corvair owners with their car issues and was always willing to help in fellow Corvair owners with whatever he could.

Don was born in Livonia, Indiana and was a 55-year resident of Tucson. He served his country in the Air Force during World War II as a crew chief and flight aerial engine on B-17 bombers.

We will miss Don and wish Betty and his entire family the very best.

Godspeed, Don.

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## MINUTES (continued)

should have something of similar style for a new TCA shirt. Barry mentioned that we still have plenty of T-shirts left. Ken encouraged all to participate in the upcoming Nam Jam car show.

**Treasurer's Report:** With no expenses in for the passed month, the current balance in the club treasury is \$2,770.43.

**The Raffle:** Tickets netted \$20 and prize winners were Cevia, Ed, Barry, Allen, Bob and Mike. Next month prizes will be donated by Allen Elvick, Ken Farr and Bill Maynard.

**Tech Talk:** Don changed out a fuel pump, cleaned his fuel system and overhauled his engine only to find out that when his van's gas gauge registers 1/4 of a tank it really mean EMPTY! He also reported that his '64 dies at idle when the lights are turned on. It was suggested that he NOT turn his lights on. Barry discovered that a spitting oil filter was caused by a faulty pressure regulator valve in the oil filter housing. A brief but all too meaningful discussion was held on clutch installation.

The meeting adjourned at 8:25.

Submitted by: Van Pershing

## CURBSIDE (continued)

will go down in history as classics.

The 1965 Corvair handled unlike anything ever made in the US up to that time. I had the pleasure to whip a friend's 1965 Monza coupe just like this one through the back roads of northern Baltimore County on more than one occasion, and I'll relive them, curve by curve, forever. And his had the wretched two-speed automatic. Whatever; Corvairs, except the higher output Spydors and Corsas, were pretty much a stand-on it proposition anyway. Ok, I'm rationalizing; the Powerglide sucked big time. But even it couldn't diminish the pure joy of setting up the Monza in each curve, harder and deeper each time. In those days of flabby power steering, there was nothing finer than the unassisted steering on a rear-engined car, especially with the '65's faster ratio.

I had flung my old '63 through several hundred miles and several thousand curves of a deserted Skyline Drive and the Blue Ridge Parkway in the late fall of 1973, and it never once tried to bite me. Having the right tire pressure was the key, as well as understanding how a swing-axle rear engine car will react if you hit the brakes in a curve. While the '63 would dance if you knew how to lead properly, the '65 was a trained pro. It made anyone with a half-way decent touch feel like they were Dancing With The Stars. And unlike the earlier ones, it was never going to give you a push for stepping on its toes.

It's easy to forget one of the Corvair's finest but most overlooked virtues: braking. In that era of pathetic little drum brakes on front-heavy conventional cars, the overworked fronts always overheated and faded, and the rears locked, as what little weight was on them shifted forward. The Corvair, like any rear engined car, almost perfectly weighted its brakes evenly, as its rear weight shifted forwards. That alone was worthy of an Eureka! moment the first time one fully experienced and appreciated it.

So what happened to the Corvair faithful, the true lovers of the fine art of Dancing With a Car? They discovered the BMW 1600/2002. Or maybe the Datsun 510, if they couldn't afford the baby Bimmer. Or something else; but whatever it was, it wasn't very likely to come from Detroit in any case. The 1965 Corvair might have been the last chance for GM to keep a criti-

cal and influential segment of the market. I say might, because it probably wasn't in the wind anyway. The breezes blowing from Europe and Japan were becoming stiff gales, and it would have taken a hell of an effort to head them off. The Corvair was left to wither on the vine, and the Vega sure as hell wasn't it; pissing into the wind never was a particularly smart thing to do.

The Corvair was just the innocent canary in the mine, and it's croaking was inevitable. Americans wanted a Camaro, even if it was the antithesis of the Corvair: lousy brakes, heavy or over-assisted steering, terminal understeer, rear axle hop under acceleration and braking, etc.. But it had that long hood and big, cheap V8s. The Big Gulp trumps a Perrier. Good times too, once you do some work on that mono-leaf rear end, put on some proper brakes, and some shocks, and...well the Camaro eventually got there, more or less. But certainly not to start with.

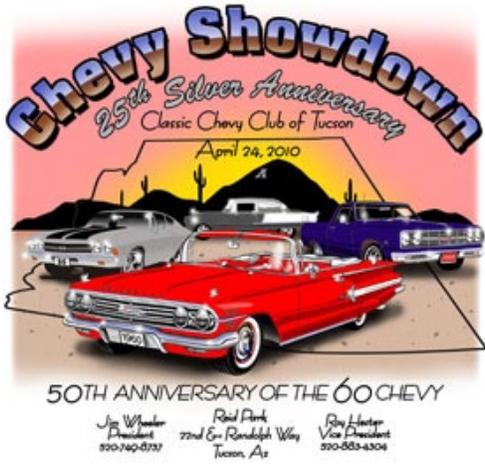
Its an irrelevant issue now; old history. The Corvair lived in an era when cars were still all imperfect, unlike today. And it had its shares of imperfections too. But the few things it did well made it stand out head and shoulders from the (American) pack. And those very qualities that it excelled in are ones we take for granted now. The Corvair was way ahead of its times, calling out from the wasteland; but then prophets are rarely appreciated in their time.

from [www.thetruthaboutcars.com](http://www.thetruthaboutcars.com)



Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress





# CHEVY SHOWDOWN 2010

The 25th annual Chevy Showdown was held at Reid Park on April 24, 2010. As a mid-month activity the Tucson Corvair Association participated in the event for the first time. A total of 7 Corvairs were in attendance six of which were from TCA. The seventh was Charlie Evans with his blue '65 Monza with a small block Chevy in the back seat. His car placed second in its class.

The TCA members in attendance were Allen Elvick with his convertible, Ron Bloom with his Greenbrier, Ed Segerstrom with his red convertible, Ken and Heidi Farr with their '65 blue coupe, Bill Maynard and the Lakewood and Van Pershing with his Stinger. Vice President Lynn Marrs was there lending her full support. Of the 7 Corvairs in attendance, 5 of them received recognition awards. Ron's Greenbrier did not receive any recognition from the judges but it received plenty of recognition from the crowd and it took a 2nd place the the Nam Jam

car show the next weekend. Bill's Lakewood did not receive any recognition either. Somebody put a generous coating of Amor-All all over his tires and completely ruined his chances for any recognition whatsoever. This could quite possibly be the first time the Lakewood has ever been shown that it didn't win some kind of award.

The Classic Chevy of Tucson who sponsored the event will add Corvair classifications to the event next year, probably because they hated to see the Corvairs run away with all the prizes!!



All the Corvairs were able to park together which made a nice display that attracted a lot of attention. The Chevy folks weren't used to seeing so many Corvairs together in one place.



This picture would be considered "art" in some circles. Notice how the stripes on the car line up with the stripes on the banner - an accident to be sure!



1. Allen Elvick's convertible
2. Ed Segerstrom's convertible
3. Ron Bloom's Greenbrier
4. Van Pershing's Stinger
5. Bill Maynard's Lakewood
6. Ken and Heidi Farr's coupe
7. Charlie Evans' V8 Monza



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**Regular Monthly Meetings** are held on the Fourth Wednesday of every month with a bull session starting at 6:30pm with the meeting starting at 7:00pm.

The November meeting is held on the third Wednesday. The December meeting is our annual Christmas party with the time and place to be announced.

## **NEW MEETING PLACE:**

Golden Corral, 4380 E 22nd St (just east of Columbus), Tucson, Arizona.



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