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TUCSON CORVAIR ASSOCIATION

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. The Tucson Corvair Association is a chartered member of the CORVAIR SOCIETY OF AMERICA (CORSA).

MONTHLY MEETINGS are held on the fourth Wednesday of each month except December. One technical/social event is planned for every month except July and August.

MEMBERSHIP DUES are \$10 per year and are payable to the TUCSON CORVAIR ASSOCIATION through the Membership Chairman.

CHANGE OF ADDRESS: Send any change of address or phone number to the Membership Chairman. Don not send changes to the Editor.

CORSA MEMBERSHIP DUES are \$25 per year and include a subscription to the *CORSA Communique*, a monthly publication. See a TCA Officer for a membership application.

CLASSIFIED ADS are FREE to a TCA Members and \$1.00 per line to all others. The dealine for materials submitted for publication is the 10th of the month for that month's issue. Mail or deliver all materials to the Corvairsation Editor. Articles are welcome for publication.

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editor's notes:

In last month's issue we reported all of the good things that were going on with Ester Alex. We reported that several club members gave blood for her cause including Don Robinson. We lied! Don apparently Don does have the right kind, so he sent his lovely wife instead. She's the one that deserves the credit; not Don.

We are growing closer to election time. The New TCA officers are chosen by an Election Committee that is appointed by the President the October before the election. The officers are recommended by the committee and presented to the general membership of the club for approval at the February meeting of every year. The officers then assume their duties on March 1st. This year, Ed Sanford is the chairman of the committee with Gordon Cauble and Van Pershing assisting.

Each year it seems like we come right down to the wire in the selection of officers. It's very difficult to get people to help out. Some clubs actually have several people running for each office. We are very lucky to find one person for each one. Some people in the club even do two jobs!

We would encourage you to think about the offices that are to be filled. If you would like to help out, give one of the committee members a call. There's plenty of work to do and we all need to pull together to keep TCA alive and well.

The <u>Corvairsation</u> goes on. Alan Atwood and I try to do the best we can at getting the newsletter together and out to you every month. We hope you enjoy the articles we find and the material that you read. We are always looking for ideas, articles and tech tips that you might have in the back of your mind. Please feel free to communicate any of these at any time. If you have a tech tip you'd like to share, give us a call and we'll do the writing, if you're not in the mood. Anything out of old (or new) magazines would be greatly appreciated as well. Your suggestions are always welcome.

Van

1966 PHOENIX BY FITCH



THE ULTIMATE CORVAIR

HEY say that nice guys finish last. John Fitch is as nice a guy as you'll ever meet, but during his 11-year rally and road racing career he never finished last, and was often first. His automotive plèce de résistance, though, the stunning Phoenix, finished long before its time, and therein lies one of the most polgnant vignettes of automotive history.

When John Fitch retired, if you could call it that, from racing in the late fifties. he movied with his family to Lime Rock, In northwestern Connecticut, More of an attraction than Lime Rock's rural character was the road racing circuit then being developed by enthusiastentrepreneur Jim Vaill. John became intimately involved in the design and construction of the track. Lime Rock Park, and soon became a partner and general manager. Lime Rock quickly became known as the "Road Racing Conter of the East," a subtitle still embraced on the track's advertising, and in addition to the usual SCCA sports car races featured a few touches of Fitch's own. One of the more notable of these was the "Little LeMans" series, in which stock imported sedans lreally stock, even down to tires, brake linings, and precise

by Kit Foster photos by the author

stage of engine tuning) vied for the checkered flag in six-hour heats. The precursor of SCCA's slightly misnomered "Showroom Stock" formula, the "Little LeMans" featured two-stroke Saabs and Volvo 544s, particularly, and often a team of Renault Dauphines managed by fellow-retired-racer, former Bugatt: ace Rene Dreyfus.

Fitch had a iceling that, just as garden-variety import sedans could be subjected to hours of grueling torture on the track, even American economy cars could be made a good deal more, well, sophisticated.

Of particular attraction was Chevrolet's Corvair, introduced in October 1959, which owed much in concept to the German Porsche (see SIA # 22). John evolved a number of modifications to the Corv-ir, far surpassing GM's own Monza version, which turned it into a fine performer in its own right. Significantly, Fitch's changes involved mainly chassis tuning rather than addition of raw power, though engine mods were also part of the package. Fitch reworked the Corvair's rear suspension with uprated springs and shocks, resulting in a two-degree negative camber, and replaced factory-supplied tires with Michelin radials. The steering arms were shortened to provide a faster ratio, a steering damper was added, and upgraded brake linings were installed. For more power, two additional carbs were added to the Corvair's pair. "We developed the four-carb kit before GM did." Fitch recalls. "for a very simple reason. It balanced the carburetor-to-cyl-Inder distance on each manifold. We cut a hole in each manifold and attached a carb flange with Devcon adhesive. They never leaked, and improved fuel economy as well as power." A freer breathing exhaust, together with the four carbs, added up to 145 bhp (in the earlier cars, 155 later), as opposed to 102 for the standard twin-carb Monza engine. The resulting car, with some thoroughbred dress-up items like headlamp screens and fender stripes, was christened the "Sprint," A number of Sprint features were years ahead of their time. Stalkmounted switches at the driver's fingertips activated a "one sweep" windshield



Top: Phoenix's lithe, low styling provided inspiration for later Corvettes, particularly in the front end. Above left: Wheels look like knock-offs, but they're bolt-ons. Above right: Body sides are crisply sculptured. Below: With limited luggage space. Trunk rock is a necessity for touring.



1966 PHOENIX

wiper and flashed the headlamps, the latter having Lucas "Flame Thrower" high beams. A tachometer, a full set of engine-monitoring gauges, luggage deck carpeting, a sound-deadening package, and a handsome wood-rimmed steering wheel rounded out the list of refinements. Fitch worked out an arrangement for Sprint kits to be sold and installed by a number of key Chevrolet dealers. John Fitch & Co. was formed to fabricate and distribute the kits. and since there was call for "in-house" conversion of some customer cars, the firm set up headquarters in the premises of a defunct Chrysler-Plymouth dealership in nearby Falls Village, Connecticut.

Road & Track loved the Sprint, waxing enthusiastically: "The Sprint shows its breeding and, given its head on a winding road, brings one a feeling that no Corvair ever handled so well."

Buoyed by the success of the (relativelyllow budget "Little LeMans," Fitch had another idea. Noting the popularity of one-design sailboat racing, he envisioned a similar formula for automobiles, where driver acumen and car tuning would truly determine the winner. He reasoned that since the cars should be inexpensive, and since he had demonstrated the viability of turning a common Corvair into the startling Sprint. the same might be done for Falcons and Valiants as well, generating a NASCARstyle competition among the major manufacturers. For track use, a more radical form was called for, though the car should be easily converted for road use. Thus was conceived the Super Sprint.

With so much Corvair background, Fitch naturally devoted his efforts to that model: let others modify Falcons and Valiants. Fitch called in his longtime friend and neighbor, illustrator Coby Whitmore, known for his covers for Saturday Evening Post, McCall's, Sports Illustrated, and other magazines. Whitmore, who had been hooked on cars for years and who had collaborated with Fitch years before on the Fitch-Whitmore Special, a Jaguar-based car which has had a long and venerable sporting career (see sidebar, page 35). came up with a striking design for a "modular" auto. In racing trim it was nearly an open-wheel competition car. but !: ad fenders and a windshield which couisi be latched in place for road use. For reasons of economy, the body was to be fiberglass, mounted on a special chassis designed by Gerald Mong which bore Sprint-quality Corvair running gear. Total weight was projected at 1.000 pounds.

Mong built one such chassis, and work was all but complete on a prototype Super Sprint. The project was announced in Car and Driver in May 1964, which gave the project a thumbsup. As would repeatedly prove to be the case. John Fitch had had a great idea. but one for which there was more than one answer. Others saw the need for an affordable racing formula, and at this precise time SCCA adopted their Formula Vee rules for a new class using Volkswagen running gear. Formula Vee was an instant hit, neatly satisfying the demand for a one-design concept. so much so that continuing with the Super Sprint seemed futile. While SCCA racing clearly needed an entry-level class, it didn't need two.

John Fitch's fascination for automotive design had been apparent during his college years, when he made his first attempt at a Fitch-built car. Other creations followed (see sidebar, page 35). He had long had aspirations of producing his own gran turtsmo machine, a car

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of beauty and impeccable road manners, but based on domestic mechanical components. "One should not have to walt days or weeks for delivery of essential parts for an exotic car," Fitch said. "It should be possible to build a car which could be serviced by dealers of American cars nationwide." The brief for the Phoenix rapidly came together: It was not to be a competition car, and it could be significantly upmarket from the Sprint or the Super Sprint. The technology and know-how to make a sophisticated car from Corvair components was already at hand; what was needed was a design and a means of production. The facility at Falls Village was adequate for development work and a certain number of Sprint conversions; It was not sufficient for building bodies from scratch.

The design was straightforward enough. Fitch and Whitmore set to work together as they had numerous times in the past. Coby's drawings provided a starting point, and work progressed very quickly to a full-scale mockup, laid up over the redundant Super Sprint chassis. For coachwork, Fitch looked to Frank Reisner's Costruzione Automobill Intermeccanica, of Turin, Italy, which had developed a reputation for high quality, low volume work. Intermeccanica would build steel bodies to the Fitch-Whitmore design, then ship them, minus drivetrains, to Falls Village where final assembly would take place. When the mockup was to their liking, drawings were made for use by the coachbuilders. Designer Bob Cumberford, working for Intermeccanica, came to Falls Village and transferred the mockup's dimensions onto paper taped to sheets of plywood. These full-scale drawings were sent to Italy, and Reisner's craftsmen set to work on a 1965 Corvair purchased in Europe, shortening the platform and building the steel body.

Aside from its shortened wheelbase, 95 inches versus the Corvair's stock 108, the chassis was basically state-ofthe-art Sprint, The 140-cubic-Inch, 160horsepower Corvair engine was used as a starting point, and four Weber 36DCLD carburetors substituted for the original Rochester units, would result in 170 horsepower. Girling disc brakes were specified for the front, and the Sprint steering, spring, and shock absorber modifications were made, recalibrated for the shorter wheelbase and lighter weight. The design weight was just 2.000 pounds: the prototype barely missed the mark at 2.150. In the process of sorting out the handling, two different sizes of

radial tires were specified, 14 x 175 at the front, and 14 x 185 for the rear. The reason for the prominent tire covers was twofold: to maximize the use of space and to create a styling cue to the classics of the twenties and thirties. Storage underneath them was provided for two tires, one of each size: no illhandling "donut" spares for John Fitch's car!

In addition to designing a stunningly beautiful targa-top two seater. Fitch and Whitmore worked in an uncommon number of creature comforts. Two sculptured bucket seats were upholstered in leather, the driver's to be fitted for height and adjustment to order. Fitch had always hated sticky seats in summer, so provision was made to ventilate the cushion and seatback and locate a blower under each one. The rear window retracted electrically, the high beam and directional tell-tale lights on the dash were individually adjustable for brightness, and a red warning light was located at the trailing edge of each door to warn oncoming drivers when they were open.

One wonders about the Phoenix name. "I had a P51 during the war," says Fitch, "one 1 particularly liked. I always liked the eagle shape, so 1 put a profile of that on the plane, and called it the 'Phoenix.' I wasn't thinking of rising from the ashes then. When we put the name on the car. It was considered kind of daring, with its association with destruction by fire."

Marketing the Phoenix took a novel tack. While sales through selected Chevrolet dealers were to continue, additional exposure to potential upscale buyers was called for. An arrangement was reached with Abercrombie and Flich (no relation), the New York sporting goods retailer, to display the Phoenix at their main store in Manhattan, and take orders there and at branch locations in Florida and California. The Phoenix project moved ahead smartly; from the time the first line was put on paper to debut of the car took just twelve months. The marketing plan called for the car to be in A&F's window by July 4, 1966. The last minute rush to meet the deadline caused some omissions - the carburetors and brakes remained standard Corvair equipment, and the seat blowers and John's favored thre cover trim (which Coby, by the way, disliked) were left off. John added the latter item himself a few years ago, but the seat blowers. Weber carbs, and disc brakes have never been installed. There was no shortcut on quality, however, and the car appeared before the New York public on July 7, following a hasty airlift on Alitalia.

The public and the press loved it. Car and Driver's David E. Davis, Jr., drow the Phoenix and found it "absolut above reproach. It does all the right things," he wrote. "The brakes are first class, and the acceleration and handling are right up there with the best European GT cars." The usually Pollyannic Motor Trend was not so effusive. MT's Donald MacDonald didn't drive the car, and found the styling to be a personal matter ("either you like it or you don't," he wrote, implying that he didn't) but had nothing but good words for its engineering. Automobile Quarterly was elegantly succinct: "There has never been anything like it before."

Potential Phoenix buyers could specify an automatic transmission at no extra cost (one wonders if any did), choose from ten body colors, delete the side mounted spares for a single front mounted spare and bulge-less side covers, and omit the luggage rack on the rear engine cover. For the less adventurous Fitch planned a downmarket Phoenix II, with the basic Sprint engine and all-drum brakes, to sell for 8400 less; in fact, in the haste to make the plane the prototype was left in this configuration.

A&F wanted a window display to show the evolution of the Phoenix devement, so the original full-scale buck. Super Sprint chassis and all, was cut up in several sections for various displays. When the displays came down, the pieces were not useful for anything, so were thrown away.

This notoriety did not escape the notice of GM styling director William Mitchell. "Bill Mitchell saw the press photos," says John Fitch. "Great lines," he said. 'Bring it out to the Tech Center and we'll do something with you.' I trailered it out, and Chuck Jordan and Zora Arkus-Duntov drove off in it and they didn't come back for two hours. We'll be



in touch,' they said, but nothing more came of it. When the '68 Corvette was inroduced, I had a call from Gerry Allen of Don Allen Chevrolet in New York, one of our dealers. 'Good God,' he said, 'they've got your car.' Considering the longevity of that Corvette design. I'm tempted to say that Chuck Jordan owes me one." The second generation Sting Ray (see SIA #112) was an evolution of Mako Shark II, but when one examines how the bulbous fenders of the show car were tamed (reportedly at Duntov's insistence) a kinship to the Phoenix can easily be seen. The timing, too, supports Fitch's suspicions, for the final restyling of the Vette was coming together in late 1966.

Some 100 orders, accompanied by deposits, rolled in for the \$8,700 car (this in a time when Ferraris sold for \$14,000 to \$16,000, depending on model, and \$5,384 would buy an E-Type Jag roadster). "We were going to build 500." says Fitch, "and see how the wind blew at the time." If demand continued, there would have been more Phoenixes, if not there might have been another venture. But it was not to be.

On September 9, 1966, President Johnson signed into law the National Traific and Motor Vehicle Safety Act. At that time it was apparent that the US Government would have a profound impact on the design, engineering, and manufacture of automobiles, but it was not clear then, nor for some time afterward, just how the saga would unfold. The act called for the establishment of a government agency to enfect federal safety standards applicable to all new motor vehicles.

"First an administrator had to be appointed." Fitch recalls, "and englneers hired and standards promulgated. Then they had to cajole the established manufacturers into accepting them. Next there were the regulations to be applied to importers. Way at the bottom of their list were the small independent manufacturers, once they discovered there were small manufacturers. We didn't enter into the Phoenix project naively. We designed in the safety provisions we felt were important. We had a . crush zone: the Phoenix complies with bumper height requirements (in fact the rear has two bumpers, the license plate frame is also a full-strength bumper), and has an integral roll bar in the targa roof. But we didn't know what regulations we would have to meet, what our timetable would be, and no one could tell us. We learned that two cars would have to be crash tested, and two would be required for EPA testing. one new one and one with 50,000 miles on it. This out of a total production of 500."

Z. Taylor Vinson, senior attorney with the National Traffic and Highway Salety Administration, who was there at the time, recalls: "The original 1966 act contained no exemption provisions. Senator Birch Bayh (D. Indiana), spurred no doubt by Avanti and Duesenberg (small manufacturers already building cars in his constituency), introduced legislation in 1967, which we supported, which became effective in April 1968 (the original safety standards were effective January first that year) allowing petitions by manufacturers producing 500 vehicles or less per year, who could show that compliance with one or more of the standards would cause substantial economic hardship." Had John Fitch had a formidable lobbyist, unlimited financing, and a crystal ball he might have forged ahead, achieving his 500 unit production goal with the help of an NHTSA exemption. But in the autumn of 1966 he concluded he could not win against Washington and reluctantly called a halt, returning all 100 deposits.

John Fitch & Co. continued to furnish Sprint equipment until the early seventies ("there was always a loval enthuslast following," reminds John, "even when Corvairs fell into general disrepute"), and in the later years took on a Peugeot-Citroen franchise. There were other development projects for sundry GM divisions, the "Phantom" Toronado (see sidebar, page 35), a race-winning 442, an Opel for GM overseas, and the Fitch Firebird precursor to the Trans Am (SIA #95), but it remained for the Fitch Inertial Barrier, the yellow sandfilled barrels invented by John and now common on highways nationwide, to erase the debt left by the Phoenix.

It has become axiomatic that one must be driven and tyrannical to build a great ear, an Enzo Ferrari or an Ettore Bugatti if you will. John Fitch belies that stereotype, demonstrating not only that nice guys can linish first, as he did at Buenos Aires and Sebring, they can also build great cars.

Acknowledgements and Bibliography John Fitch with William Nolan, Adventure on Wheels, G.P. Putnam and Sons. 1959; Sports Illustrated. October 15. 1959: Road & Track. July 1964: Car and Driver. May 1964, December 1966; New York Times, July 8, 1966; Motor Trend. December 1966: The Island Packet. June 29. 1978; US Patent 4.141,336; John Evans and J. Thomas Light, "Expanding the Limits on Engines and Vehicles imposed by Circulating Liguid Engine Cooling Systems." paper delivered at the SAE Passenger Car Meeting and Exhibition, Dearborn, Michigan. September 22-25, 1986: John Fitch & Co. and FIBCO literature and catalogs. Thanks to Jim Shane. manager, Lime Rock Park, Lime Rock, Connecticut: David Brownell, North Bennington, Vermont: Philip and Gertrude Foster, Falls Village, Connecticut: Z. Taylor Vinson. Alexandria. Virginia, and National Technologies Inc., Sharon, Connecticut, Special thanks to John Fitch, Lime Rock, Connecticut.



1966 Phoenix by Fitch

FROM VALVE CLAMER' JUNE 89

How is Eli Lilly & Co. like a small, rear-engine Chevrolet?

S TRANGE though it may seem, Indianapolis-based Eli Lilly & Co., the huge (1988 sales: \$4.1 billion) and civicminded drug company, and the Chevrolet Corvair are, in a sense, two peas in a pod.

Both share a common enemy: Ralph Nader, the Washington, D.C.-based gadfly who is to some a consumer advocate but to others a meddlesome outsider.

Nader last month urged Indiana legislators to just say no to a bill that would exempt Lilly and other pharmaceutical companies from punitive damage claims.



Corvair/Eli Lilly irritant Nader

In a letter to House Speakers Paul S, Mannweiler (R-Indpls.) and Michael Phillips (D-Boonville), Nader criticized the "strong-arm lobbying of Eli Lilly," which is seeking passage of Senate Bill 504.

The bill later died on the House floor, by a 40-59 vote. Under its terms, drug companies still could be sued for damages caused by illnesses. But they would not be liable for punitive damages, which are damages that go beyond medical costs and are meant as punishment for the offending company.

"The bill would weaken drug companies' incentives to ensure safety," wrote Nader.



Lilly: "Hoosiers won't be persuaded by outsiders."

In his letter, Nader also took the opportunity to dredge up old news, news that Lilly would sooner forget: the Oraflex episode of 1985, in which a number of Britons took the Lilly-made arthritis-combatting drug and suffered serious side effects, among them death. Lilly pleaded guilty to criminal charges for failing to notify the U.S. government of the incidents.

A Lilly spokesman, in a touching display of home-state pride, said of Nader's most-recent anti-Lilly efforts: "We believe that Hoosiers will not be persuaded by the point of view of a special interest group outside of Indiana."

This is not the first time Nader and Lilly have tangled. Last year Nader called for a boycott of Lilly products, after labeling "miserly" Lilly's financial settlement with the unfortunate Oraflex customers.

Nader first rose to fame two decades ago by hounding other companies in much the same fashion he's now hounding Lilly. An early Nader target was the Corvair, the small, technologically advanced (for its time), rear-engine Chevrolet that Nader insisted had a nasty habit of rolling over.

Nader's efforts-coupled with Ford's introduction of the Mustang and the Corvair's subsequent slumping sales led Chevrolet to cease production of the Corvair in 1969. In an unusual twist a number of Corvair owners continue to cling to their beleaguered automobiles. Throughout the nation, loyalists formed Corvair Clubs, which meet regularly to discuss the virtues of the diminutive aircooled alleged death traps. The Indianapolis chapter, the Circle City Corvairs, is among the nation's larger such organizations, boasting 75 members, according to Harry Jensen, the executive secretary of the 6,000-member Corvair Society of America.

Conversely, our research uncovered not a single Oraflex Club. •



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FOR SALE: '64 GREENBRIER, automatic, not running, \$500; '61 RAMPSIDE, runs, \$1000. Call Robert Segi, Casa Grande, 1-836-6390. 6/90

FOR SALE: '60 700, 4-DOOR, straight body, all original parts, some parts rechromed, needs interior and paint. \$650 OBO. Don Schmitt 745-5581, 6/90

FOR SALE: '65 CORVAIR COUPE, 110 engine, 2nd owner, 50K orginal miles, needs small amount of body work Engine needs minor rebuilding. Interior needs replaced. New brakes. Asking best offer. Must sell. T.K. Estes, wk:795-8242, hm:885-1339. 3/90

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FOR THE DO-IT-YOURELFERS: Mag ignition wires & long rotors, plus all regular ignition items Wrapped fan belts, air & oil filters plus viton o-rings and oil cooler seals. Call Gordon Cauble 299-1122

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3637 N. 1ST AVE., TUCSON, ARIZONA 85719 (JUST NORTH OF PRINCE RD.) TUCSON CORVAIR ASSOCIATION REGULAR MONTHLY MEETING FOURTH WEDNESDAY of each month (except December) Piccadilly Cafeteria, 6767 E. Broadway, Tucson

6:30 pm: Parking Lot Bull Session 7:00 pm: Dinner (Optional) 7:40 pm: Meeting Starts

COMING EVENTS

Wednesday, Jan 23: Regular Monthly TCA Meeting Wednesday, Jan 30: TCA Board Meeting 7:30 at JBs, Swan & Speedway