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Your CORVETTE

OPERATIONS MANUAL

CHEVROLET

CORVETTE NEWS

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THE DAY OF THE CONDER
(JOHN CONDER-THAT IS)

Story by Becky Bodnar, Photos by John Conder and Don Bailey

Editor's Note: John Conder is something of a newcomer to the Corvette scene. His gleaming 1954 is the first Corvette he has owned, and he did most of the restoration himself.

The day was October 1, 1977, and the big event was the Rockford, Illinois Corvette Concours and Swap Meet — one of the more prestigious happenings of its kind.

Fourteen cars — 1953, 1954 and 1955 models — were entered that day in the Classic Car competition, and John Conder took a blue ribbon by scoring a total of 91-1/2 points out of a possible 100. Not too shabby for a first showing. And John admits that he was forced to borrow some of the chromed parts to be ready in time for the show. (He has since found the parts and returned all the borrowed items.)

The car was first brought to **CN's** attention by one of John's neighbors in the Detroit area — Ransom Hall, Sales Manager of Passenger Car Products for Kelsey - Hayes. (Kelsey - Hayes, incidentally, makes the optional aluminum wheels for the 'Vette.) Although Mr. Hall is car oriented, he's not what you would classify a dyed-in-the wool Corvette buff. So the car must have made a tremendous impression. We thanked him for tipping us off and tucked away the idea of contacting John about the car at a future date.

Several months later I got a call from Don Bailey, owner of the 'Vette Shop in Southfield, Mich. He was so excited about a '54 model they had just painted that he could hardly contain himself. I just had to come out to the shop, meet the owner and do a story on the car.

I set up an appointment for the following week, and I met John Conder, who is a Regional Manager for Maytag Company, in Don's office. He showed me many pictures of the car, but no car.

"The weather was so bad this morning," said Conder, "that I opted to keep my prize at home in the garage. However, if you'd like to run out to the house with me to see it, you can take the car for a spin yourself."

It wasn't until John and I were wheeling back to his home in Northville, Mich. that I realized this was the same car Ran Hall had told me about a few months earlier. He really did know a sharp Corvette when he saw one!

We parked the Conder's family "bus" on the street, walked up the drive and opened the garage door to reveal a very familiar silhouette under a white cover. It was a pristine 1954 red-on-red Corvette. It was beautiful.

Then something else caught my eye. Suspended from hooks in the ceiling of the garage was a Ford Model A "pie" truck — a rare breed indeed. At last count, there were only about seven in existence.

"I was in the process of restoring it," said John, "until I got hooked on the idea of picking up an old Corvette

"I took it all the way down to the frame," said John, "and as I went about the task of dismantling, I packaged and labeled every part I took off the car."

instead. I'll get around to the Ford later."

John tossed me the keys to the car.

"Go on, get in and we'll take it for a spin around Northville," he said.

(By this time, the rain had stopped, and the sun was shining. After all, no one in his right mind takes a '54 model out for a ride on a rainy day.)

I tossed the keys back to John. I told him that I'd rather be a passenger this time around. (My husband always felt that I won my license in a Cracker Jack box. The thought of smashing up a car that had taken two years to restore just wasn't my idea of a fun afternoon.)

Our trip around Northville was an experience I'll never forget.

"How do you like this?" asked John. "Here we are tooling around in a brand new old '54 that's a super performer, but rides like a bucket of bolts."

How well I knew. My husband and I first got hooked on 'Vettes when we purchased a 1958 model. It was pretty but noisy. The only time you could carry on a conversation or listen to the radio was when you stopped for a traffic light! Nevertheless, it was a CORVETTE, and that's all we really cared about.

The joyride over, we returned to the Conder's home and, over coffee with John and his wife, Connie, I heard the story of their Corvette.

"Actually," said John, "I ran into the car by accident. No pun intended. I was thumbing through an issue of **Hemmings Motor News** and ran across several ads for Corvettes. Bob Donohoe, who belongs to the National Corvette Restorer's Society, had several 'Vettes for sale. One was already restored and the asking price was $7,800. That was just too much for me. But when I called Donohoe, he told me he had another one — a '54 — that could easily be restored, and he was asking $3,900 for it.

"There was no question about it," continued John, "it was a used car, registering 80,000 miles on the odometer. But about 95% of the original car was still there. There were a few chrome pieces missing, and the seats were the wrong color. The car was definitely restorable."

However, it wasn't in running condition, so John dickered a while and told Donohoe that, if he would deliver the car to his home, he had himself a deal.

"I did feel $3,900 was too much to pay for the car," said Conder. "After all, this was three years ago and a lot has happened to the older Corvette market in the past few years. But I filled it up with gas, put in a new battery and it started."

John decided that if he started driving the car in the condition it was in, he would never get around to restoring it. So in July of '75 he began dismantling it — a task that took about 30 Saturdays, Sundays and evenings.

"I took it all the way down to the frame," said John, "and as I went about the task of dismantling, I packaged and labeled every part I took off the car. Once it's all apart, you can't possibly remember what goes here and what goes there."

But before that came the job of taking the body off of the chassis. Although the body doesn't weigh more than 500 pounds, care must be taken because it is held together by only the rocker panels. You have to make sure that the body remains on a level plain and that it is lifted high enough to clear the engine to get it off the chassis. Then the steering column is removed but not until you get the body off.

"What you do," said John, "is get about eight high school kids to help you. Place four of them on each side of the car, lift carefully and place the body on substantial supports. I used wooden milk crates."

The next step was sandblasting.

"Not just the frame," stated John, "but the chassis, the running gear, the springs, plus every usable nut and bolt removed from the car. About the only thing I left intact was the ring-and-pinion gear. Everything else was taken down to the bare essentials."

Then the job of rebuilding the car began.

After careful examination, all worn parts were replaced. Those that could be rebuilt were rebuilt.

"Surprisingly," laughed John, "I found a good number of the mechanical parts at Lou LaRiche Chevrolet in Plymouth, Mich. because some parts — and I stress the word **some** — are interchangeable with standard Chevrolet passenger car parts."

(One of the original reasons the production of the Corvette was financially feasible was the fact that the car incorporated many passenger car components.)

At this point, John began rebuilding the running gear, priming and getting as much as possible assembled before he began the undercoating.

In the meantime, the engine was totally disassembled and most parts were placed in a "witch's brew" where they boiled for ten to twelve hours. It's a great way to clean up a bad act.

The car's 235 six-cylinder short block was completely rebuilt with new cam bearings, cam, crankshaft and pistons. Also, all machinery was rebuilt — the three carburetors, the fuel pump even the windshield wiper motor.

"I wanted to paint the car myself," said John, "but certain things you have to the experts. The body was old, and fiberglass has a tendency to shrink. Because of this, many of the edges had to be ground out and refilled. Also, one of the fenders and the trunk had bad fractures."

But John had done a great deal of the work before the car was ready for paint.

Everything had been rebuilt, assembled and bolted in place. He assembled the head, and it was torqued down. The components of the three Holley carburetors were put together. The chassis was in running condition, but there was a very bad leak. John had forgotten to replace a gasket on the water pump. So, off came the pump. The gasket was replaced, and the car was in running condition.

This accomplished, the body was dropped back onto the frame and bolted down. Sans doors, trunk and hood, the car was trailered to the 'Vette Shop where it would receive a custom paint job.

Although the 'Vette Shop did the painting, John took it upon himself to strip down the car to the original fiberglass — a very messy job.

"The paint comes off like taffy," said John. "It's a miserable job, and you have to be very careful that you don't disturb the jelcoat. If you don't use gloves, you take the chance of losing the first layer of skin. I wouldn't do it again if someone paid me a $1,000.

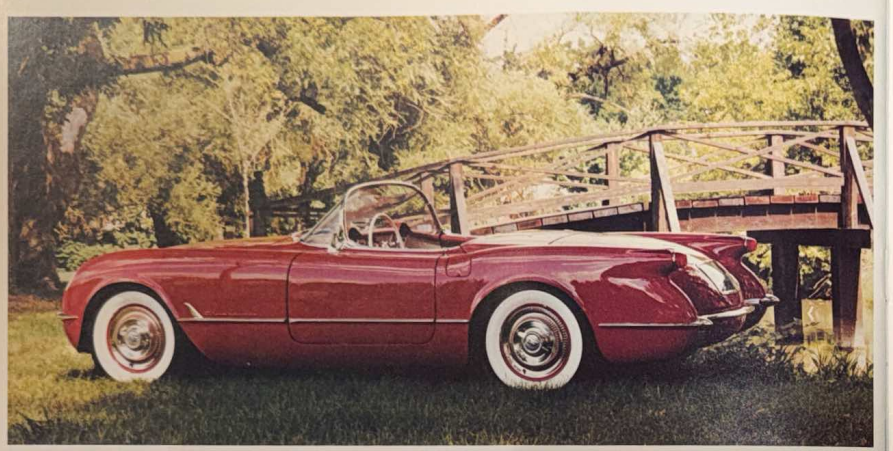
"The 'Vette Shop had the car for nine weeks. They rehung the doors, aligned the hood and trunk and did a super paint job. It cost me $1,700, but it was worth it. All I told them was to do it right, and they did.

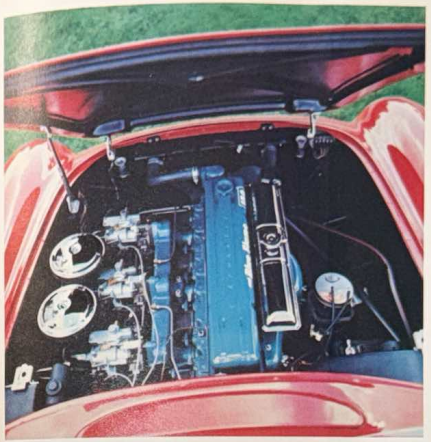
"You know, though," continued Conder, "when you are showing your car, people always ask who did the paint job. When you tell them you didn't do it, they wonder what you did do to the car. Actually, I probably did 90% of the work myself. But as I said earlier, you leave some of the work to the experts — things that you just aren't capable of tackling. Novi Auto, Novi, Mich. did part of the engine. Dave's Mechanical in Walled Lake, Mich. finished up the basics. After all, the average home garage just doesn't have the facilities for doing some of the things that must be done.

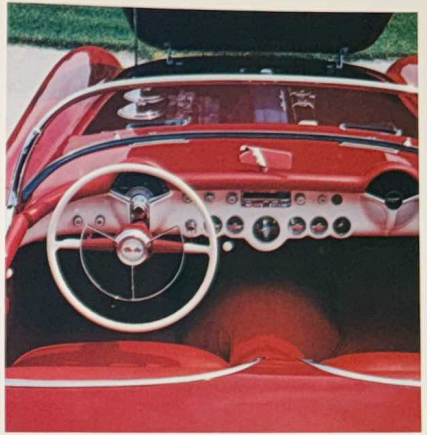
"For example, do you know of anyone who has a bake oven to dry the paint?"

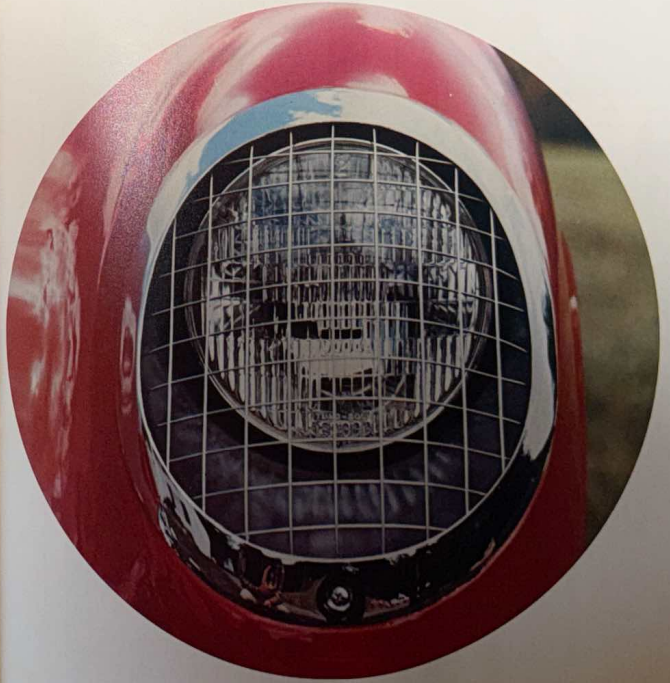
While the car was in the tender, loving care of the 'Vette Shop, John had many other irons in the fire.

The seats, carpeting and chrome still had to be attended to. In fact,









"Although I would have liked to paint the car myself," said John, "there are certain things that you leave to the experts."

everything not on the car needed careful attention.

"The upholstery was completely shot," said John. "It wasn't even the right color. I had Ferndale Auto Trim, Ferndale, Mich., do the seats during the winter. They could use the seat frames and the springs, but that was about it. I purchased the seat covers through a local supplier. They were authentic, and the price was right. You buy the covers, and they are fitted to the seats. I also purchased replacement door panels and the soft convertible top."

Although the top is pre-cut, says John, each car presents a different fit problem. The top must be fitted to the individual characteristics of the roof bows. It's a tough job to stretch the material over the bows to make sure you get the right fit.

Also, John says that some of the most difficult parts to find are the rear bow latches. It took him more than a year and a half. He finally found one at the Bloomington Meet and the other one at the Rockford Meet — to the tune of $75 each. He says that the rear vertical bumper bars are also very tough to find.

While the car was being repainted at the 'Vette Shop, John found an original windshield, had the chrome rebuffed or rechromed, and rewired the lights from a schematic in the Owner's Manual (something you won't find today).

Tires were particularly important to John. A friend who works for Uniroyal selected a set of tires for him and had them X-rayed to make sure they were true to round. Two of them didn't meet specifications and were sent back for replacement. John now has five perfectly matched Denman 670 x 15s, which, incidentally, were made from Firestone molds that were owned by Denman at the time.

Once the tires were mounted, the original wheel covers were put in place. Spinners on the wheel covers are reproductions because the originals were too badly pitted to be redone.

Finishing touches included all new weatherstripping for the windshield, doors and trunk. The instrument panel had been completely dismantled and reassembled. All instruments including the tach, speedometer and the Wonderbar radio were completely rebuilt.The radio sounds great, by the way.

All parts needing cadmium plating were replated.

"Funny thing," said John, "when most people had their '54 Corvettes tuned, they would toss out the ignition shielding rather than replace it. Another item that was often discarded was the steering wheel. It was such a monster size that many people replaced the wheel with a later, smaller version. Happily," continued Conder, "the car had both the original shielding and the steering wheel, as well as the original wheel covers. Today, these wheel covers sell for $600 to $700 a set."

Last came the carpeting, which was glued to the floor. Door panels and kick panels were installed and the seats were replaced.

How long did it take to put the car together?

"About two million hours," laughed John. "Seriously, it took just about two full years working only Saturdays, Sundays and evenings. It probably would have taken me longer except for the fact that about 95% of the car was intact. But some of the screws used in the car were unbelievable and hard to locate.

"For example," continued John, "they used sheet metal type screws in the fiberglass. They were a real heavy thread, oval head, and had to be cadmium plated. And, of all things, they used clutch head screws in the trunk. I don't know if you're familiar with a clutch head screw, but it has an odd-looking figure eight in the center of the head. I can't think of any logical explanation for using those particular screws, but there are nine of them in the trunk area and they were a bear to find."

Would John do it all over again?

"That's a difficult question to answer," mused John. "I'm happy with the results. I doubt if I would ever sell the car, but I don't know. Maybe now I'll get around to restoring that 'pie' truck. . . ."

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Litho in U.S.A.