



FROM PLASTIC DREAMS TO THE REAL DEAL

From a plastic model on a dresser to the real deal

FIRST offered in 1953, the Chevrolet Corvette was based on the 1952 EX-122 Motorama dream car. It was one of the vehicles from the show circuit that actually saw production with minimal, if any, styling changes.



LARRY D'ARGIS

Originally planned as an economical sports car for young adults, power came from a 150-horsepower, inline, overhead valve, six-cylinder engine, mated to a Powerglide two-speed automatic transmission. While its performance didn't set the earth on fire, the platform would also lend itself to modifications for competition use and a performance-image builder for Chevrolet.

While steel bodies were planned for later production, the fibreglass body was novel and a cost-saving measure, allowing the limited-production car to get into the marketplace quickly. Sales were slow with 300 units the first year, 3,640 in 1954 and then sinking to only 700 units in 1955. But, 1955 saw the availability of a new 195-horsepower, 265-cubic-inch V-8 engine, and sales began to rise year after year.

For Wayne Penner of Winnipeg, acquiring his 1958 Corvette is a boyhood dream come true. The plastic model he built of a '58 Corvette sat proudly on his dresser for many years, and from that time he always had the bug to own a real one. After searching for many years, he found one for sale in 2001 rural Quebec, just a few kilometres north of Montreal. Penner recalls, "I knew I wanted this year because of its distinctive deck lid spears, washboard hood, and it featured another first for any car — dual headlamps and a 160-m.p.h. speedometer."

Finished in Panama Yellow with white coves, the colour in '58 was a slow seller, yet today this is a sought-after colour for the early Corvettes. Described by Penner as a barn find, because it was housed in a barn when he went to see the car, it was actually what many would call a survivor car. It's had work done on it through the years and been well-maintained, so it's really a great driver car. After purchasing the car, Penner had it shipped to Winnipeg and safely tucked in its new home.

The '58 Corvette is really a looker with its quad headlamps, ornate chrome trim, faux hood louvers and side scoops. Inside, the car is contrasting factory black, vinyl bucket-seat upholstery, floor shift, signal-seeking AM radio, rear antenna, and white convertible top. Keeping with the '50s vibe, the Corvette rolls on period-correct Coker wide whitewall bias ply tires, with the Corvette trademark knock-off style hub caps.

Originally, the car came equipped with the optional 290 horsepower, 283-cubic-inch fuel-injected V-8 engine. This engine found its way into 11 per cent of the 9,168 Corvettes produced in 1958. The Rochester fuel-injection package was only in its second year of production, and the mechanical system occasionally proved temperamental.

Many owners opted to revert back to carburetion. Over time, that engine had been replaced with a more reliable 350-cubic-inch V-8. Backed by a four-speed manual transmission leading to a 3.70:1 ratio, posi-traction rear axle, it's still a capable performer. Penner says, "It's a very interesting car; it always starts, runs great and seems to attract lots of attention."

Penner, a 10-year member of the Corvette Club of Manitoba, made an interesting discovery. A fellow club member, who only lives about 2½ kilometres away, has a silver blue '58 Corvette with a serial number separated by only six digits. A safe bet would be these two cars came down the assembly line on the very same day.

Only driven on nice summer days, Penner and his wife, Ruthe, like to take the Corvette on the occasional trip to Lockport and take in a few car shows, averaging about 160 km a year.

For 1958, the sharp 50 per cent increase in sales helped America's only production sports car achieve a record. It was the first time Corvette actually earned a profit for General Motors that year. Today, after a 60-plus-year run, the Corvette remains America's favourite sports car. With modern engineering, it features performance not even dreamed of in the 1950s, and continues to be the vehicle most youngsters dream about owning.

57ford@mymts.net

PHOTOS BY DAVID LIPNOWSKI / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS