

## SIA Flashback:

# The first high-performance Corvette was virtually unknown in 1955 for a number of reasons

*SIA Flashback*

By [Hemmings contributor](#) from October 2020 issue of [Hemmings Classic Car](#)



Nineteen fifty-five is a bewildering and little-known Chevrolet Corvette year with a mere 700 units produced. Corvette's lowest production year next to 1953. Yet it is a highly significant year, marking the birth of the V-8 and the beginning of Corvette high performance. To understand the year, you have to go back two years earlier to the Corvette's origins.

In the early Fifties, the European sports car invaded U.S. shores. It was led by the MG TD and Jaguar XK120, followed by the Nash-Healey, Austin-Healey, Triumph TR, etc. A sports car market of an estimated 20,000 had grown up overnight, especially in Southern California. Now GM's styling czar, Harley Earl, was keenly aware of this. In fact, he had a son entering college, whose classmates were driving around in new XK Jags and MGs. (See 1954 Corvette driveReport, *Special Interest Autos* #3, January/February 1971.)

Earl began sketching a midsized GM sports car with a V-8 engine. What Earl envisioned was a \$1,000 sports car for collegiates who couldn't afford Jags and MGs. He showed his simple sketches to Bob McLean, a recently hired designer engineer. McLean, in turn, laid out several full-sized views with major components in place. His version had a six-cylinder engine. At this point it was all pretty academic. No one upstairs had ordered a GM sports car. But a number of other events at GM at the time would change things.

Two GM Motorama cars, the LeSabre and XP-300, were meeting with wide public approval. The sports car styling was already there, it just had to be reduced in size. Then came the 1953 Motorama and the need for a Chevrolet entry. Earl's little roadster caught the attention of Ed Cole, who was then general manager of Chevrolet. Engineers assigned to the project included Bob McLean, Vince Kaptur Sr., Ed Cole, and Maurice Olley. But even at this point there was no serious thought of putting the car into production.



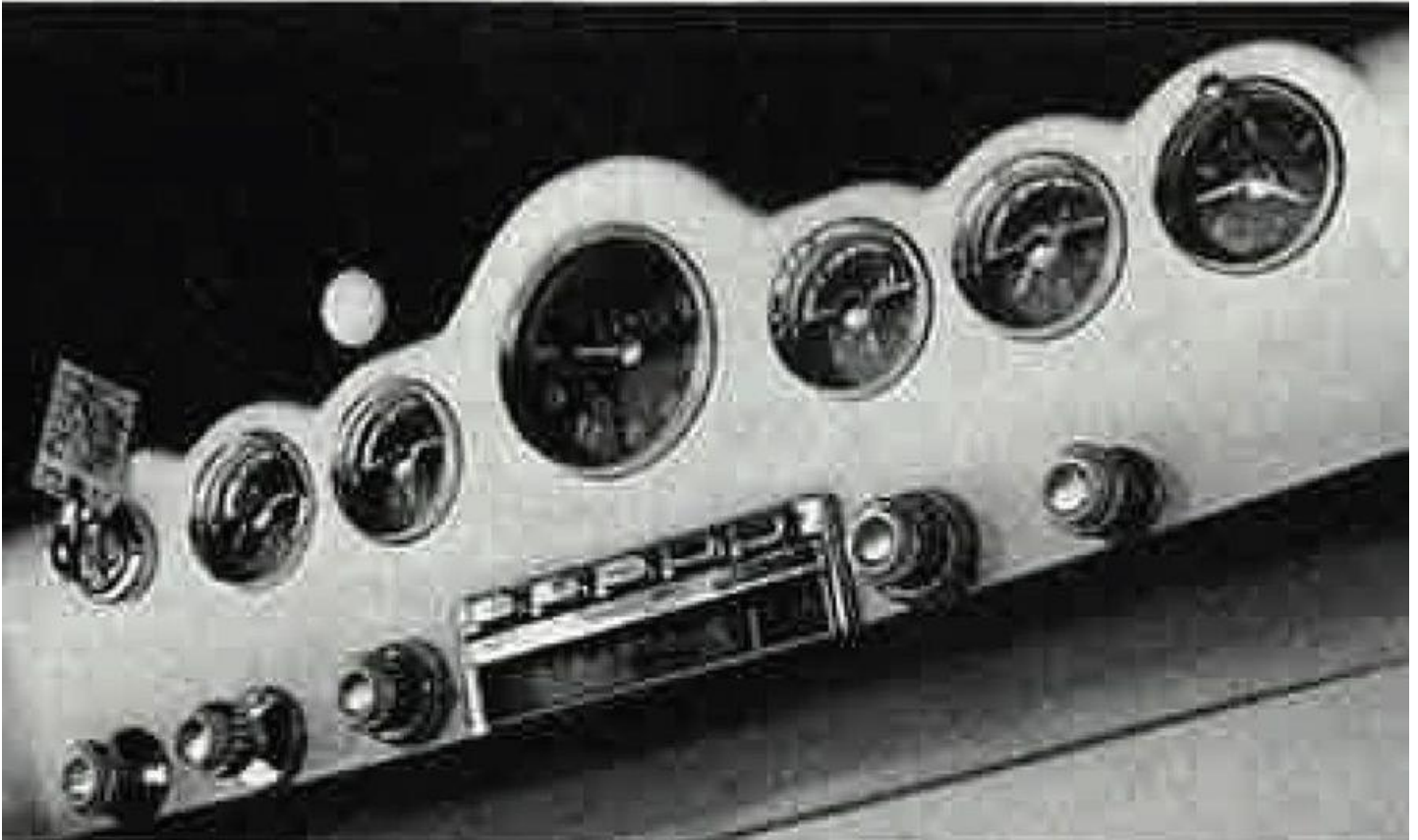
The original idea was to build, for show only, America's answer to the Jaguar. In fact, the wheelbase was set at the same 102 inches. It was a two-seat roadster with simple and very American lines, and for the time a minimum of chrome. The cockpit sat just forward of the rear axle and the engine sat as low as a Chevrolet six could without scraping up pavement. The chassis was a rather conventional X type, but the body was the new miracle material, fiberglass, or as it was called then, Glass Reinforced Plastic or GRP.

The front suspension was taken directly from the 1949-'54 Chevrolet passenger car, only the coil springs were a little heavier. The rear end was Hotchkiss drive, with leaf springs located outboard of the chassis. The stovebolt Chevrolet six was tweaked from 108 horsepower to 150 with a hot cam, higher compression ratio, three Carter YH carburetors mounted on the side to clear the hood, and dual exhausts. There were also solid valve lifters and dual-rate valve springs. Powerglide was the only transmission. A three-speed stick was never offered until very late in 1955. Later in the year, horsepower was raised to 155.

The Corvette was the Chevrolet Division's contribution to the 1953 Motorama. It was the sensation of the show, and the widespread Motorama success was the main reason why the Corvette was immediately put into production. The next year, two other cars accompanied the Corvette to the 1954 Motorama: the Nomad station wagon and Corvair fastback. Both of these cars were based on the same chassis as the Corvette and had similar fiberglass bodies. In the case of the Nomad, the wheelbase was stretched to 115 inches and the overall length to 191 inches. The Nomad was so well received that

it later became offered as a version of the 1955 Chevrolet. The Corvair's fastback styling inspired the Sixties Corvette Sting Ray.

Fiberglass was chosen for the body not only because it was then viewed as somewhat of an exotic, space-age material, but because the car could quickly be put in production in limited numbers. It would have taken much longer to gear up for Kirksite dies to stamp out steel bodies, and far more steel-bodied cars would have to be built just to break even.



*Symmetrical instrument layout makes oil and amp gauges difficult for driver to see.*

The first Corvette rolled out of the factory in Flint, Michigan, the only place it was produced, in late September 1953. A lot has been written that it was not very successful at first. The truth was that Flint could only produce about five a day in the earliest months, and most of these went to important figures in major corporations and important political and military figures. By the end of 1953, only 300 Corvettes had been produced.

All of the original 300 1953 Corvettes were identical, white with red interiors. The base price of \$3,498 including Powerglide hardly reflected Earl's original intent, but it was still a lot less expensive than a Jaguar. The only extras were signal-seeking AM radio, heater, and whitewall tires. All were sold with all these extras except perhaps white-sidewall tires.

The Corvette went into 1954 essentially unchanged. Production was moved to St. Louis, where 1,000 cars a month could be built. Originally Chevrolet thought it could sell 10,000 1954 models. By now it was evident that sales would not meet expectations: 3,640 were built by model year end, but only about 2,500 had been sold. It would be 1956 before the Corvette would begin to sell in any numbers.

Quite a number of reasons have been cited for the poor sales performance of the 1954 Corvette. Originally it was planned to sell a lot of them to celebrities. The celebrities did not buy them in the numbers anticipated. There was, at the time, a widespread misunderstanding as to what constituted a sports car. While it certainly was a true sports car, many purists did not view it as such. As a sports car, the Corvette did not have roll-down side windows or a hardtop that could be attached. Consequently, it leaked to an annoying degree. The six-cylinder engine, lack of a manual transmission, and a degree of handling problems have also been attributed to the 1954 Corvette's limited sales.



*Baffling Powerglide control comes out of side of tunnel-like early Austin-Healy shifters.*

But the overriding reason may have been lack of advertising and publicity. The division at the time simply was not geared to promoting the car. It was sort of a situation of, well now we have it, so what are we going to do with it? No road tests on the Corvette appeared until Christmas 1953, and little if any advertising appeared until almost the end of the 1954 model year. If you wanted a 1954 Corvette you almost had to discover it in a dealer's showroom.

For 1954, steel bodies were planned, which would have provided for much higher production. But fiberglass bodies were continued, which at the time did not permit very high production.

1955 saw the introduction of Chevrolet's new 265-cu.in. OHV V-8. The manual transmission was not available until very late in the year, and even then only an estimated 75 or so were so equipped, none of them sixes.

The V-8 engine offered in 1955 was technically not an option. The engine was a modification of the 265-cu.in. Chevrolet passenger-car engine introduced that same year. With its 195-horsepower rating, as opposed to 162 horsepower for the standard engine, it is similar but not identical to the 1955 Chevrolet with Plus-Power Package. It has a revised cam and solid lifters, but the compression ratio remains at 8.0:1. It is equipped with a four-barrel carburetor, automatic choke, and longer mufflers than previous six-cylinder models. V-8 ignition shielding consists of chrome distributor and coil covers with bails, braided and grounded plug wires, and wire carriers behind the exhaust manifolds. Valve covers of the 1955 V-8 models are chrome plated, with Chevrolet scripts. The 1955 Corvette did not share the 1955 Chevrolet's new ball joint front suspension. The old 1949-'54 Chevrolet front suspension was retained through 1962.



*driveReport car has been personally autographed by its chief creator.*

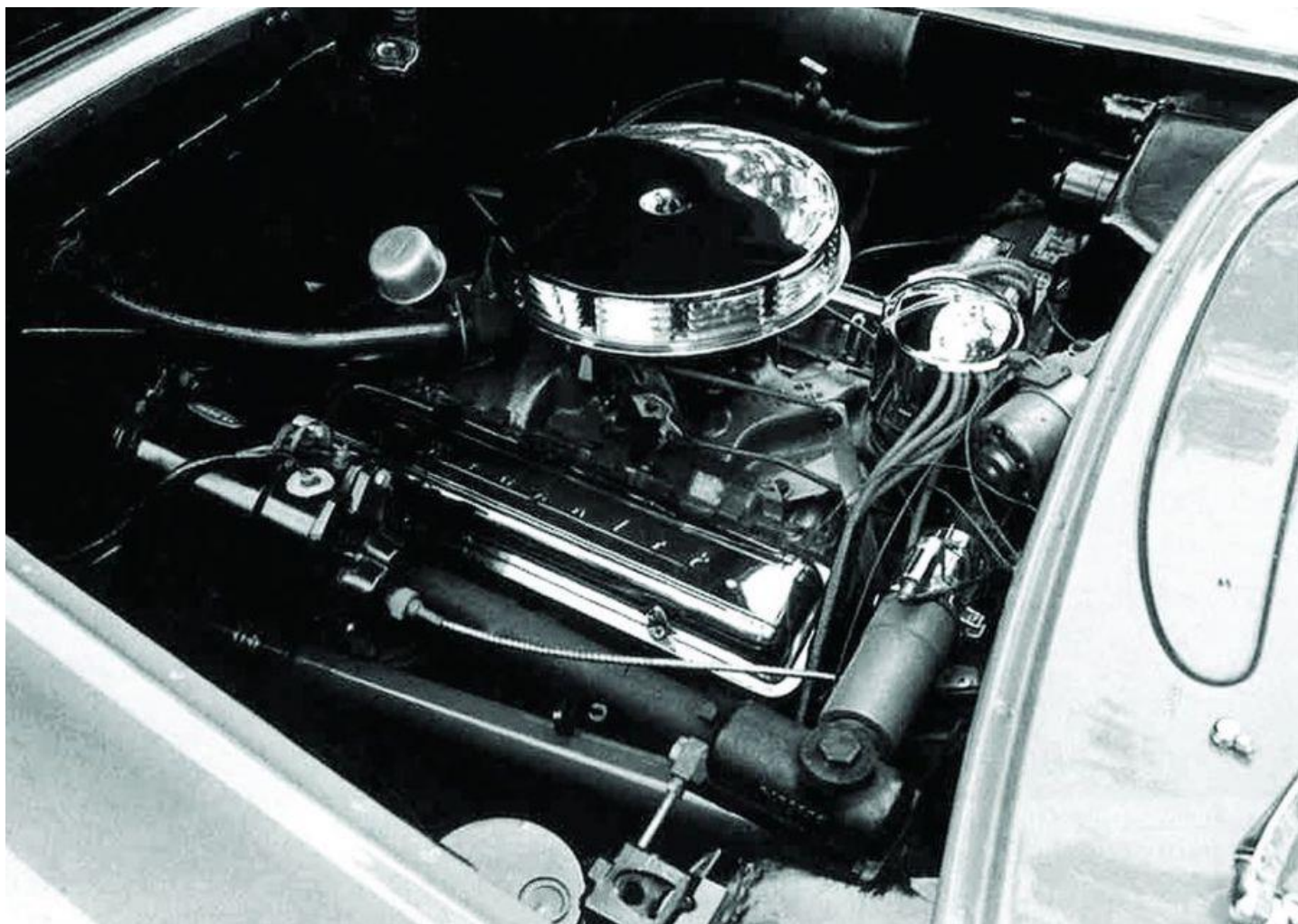
There were some modifications made at the front of the frame to accommodate the V-8 engine. There were some very minor cockpit modifications. For example, the manual choke space is blank on the instrument panel.

The "V" identification, a large gold "V" on the side, separates the eight from the six for identification purposes. Otherwise, the models are identical in styling and detail. Six-cylinder models are virtual duplicates of the 1954 models and still have the six-volt electrical system. It is unclear how many six-cylinder models were produced for 1955, probably no more than a dozen.

For 1955 there was a choice of a Polo White, Harvest Gold, Gypsy Red, Corvette Copper, and Pennant Blue. 1955 is the most confusing of all model years regarding color. Just how many colors were factory applied remains a mystery. Also not clear are soft top colors and materials. Earlier models have a canvas top. Sometime during 1955, vinyl tops appeared.

Corvettes did not have power steering and power brakes until 1963, and the 1955 list of options was as basic as James Dean's wardrobe. The complete list was simply directional lights, \$16.75; heater,

\$91.40; signal-seeking radio, \$145.15; Powerglide, \$178; windshield washer, \$11.85; parking brake alarm, \$5.65; courtesy lights, \$4.05; and whitewall tires, \$26.90. Except for radio, heater, and whitewall tires, the complete list was mandatory.



*Chromed valve covers distinguish Corvette engine from Chevy passenger car V-8s.*

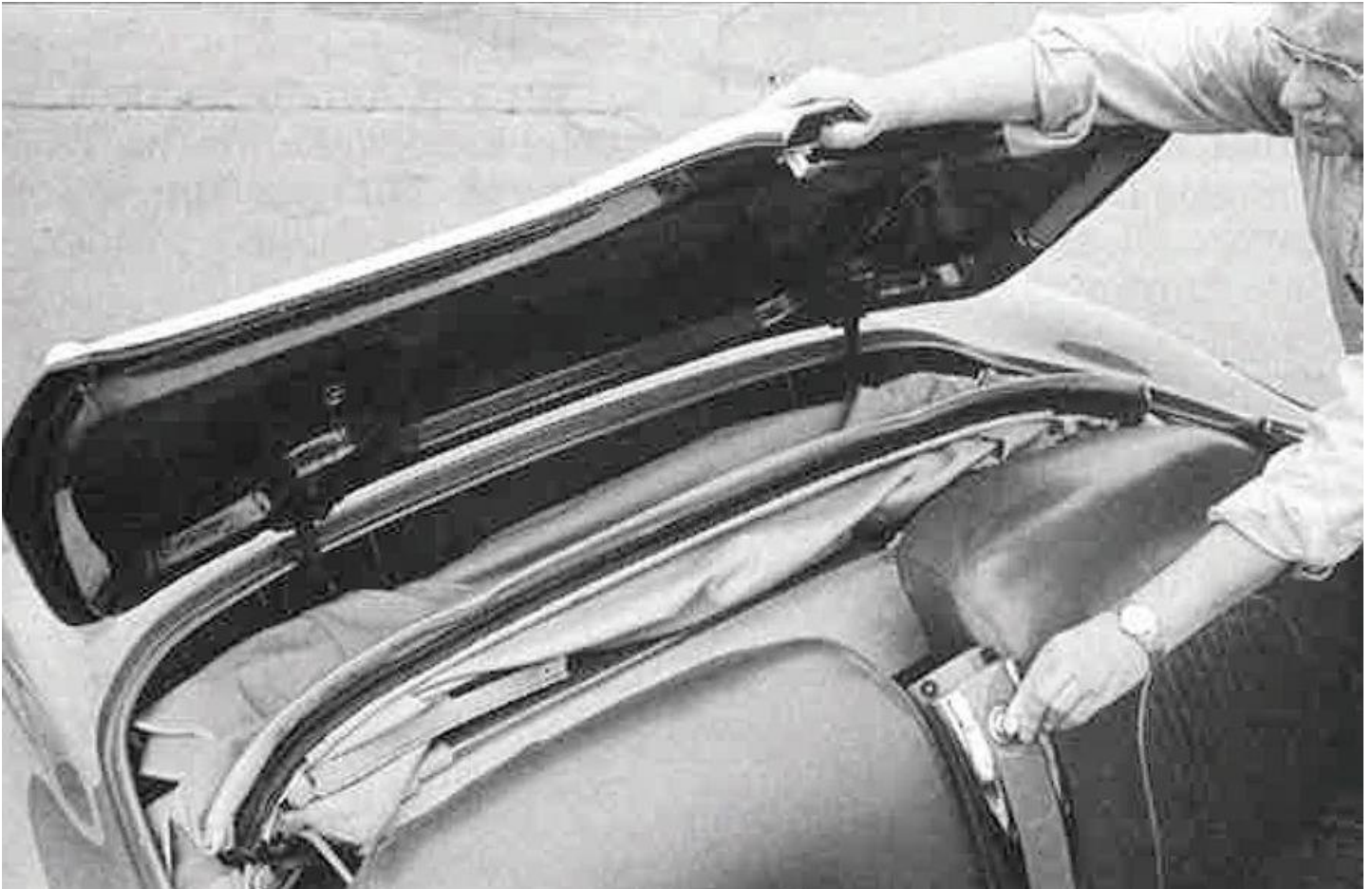
Some were sold new with blackwall tires, but only one has been found without a heater. \$2,774 was the base price for a six, \$2,909 was the base price for the eight. With either engine you paid extra for the Powerglide. If you ordered the six you got a 155-horsepower "tri-carb" engine. With the V-8 you got a 195-horsepower engine with four-barrel carburetor.

Hardtops were not available through 1955, but aftermarket hardtops were marketed by some dealers.

With the smashing success of the 1955 Chevrolet passenger car and the introduction of the V-8 on the Corvette, many will ask why only 700 Corvettes were built for the 1955 model year, making this Corvette's lowest year of production, except 1953. The reasons are many and still do not provide a complete answer.

With over 1,000 unsold 1954 Corvettes on hand at the beginning of the 1955 model year, Chevrolet was slow to produce the 1955 models. In an article on early Chevrolet V-8 performance in *Special Interest Autos* #27, March-April 1975, Karl Ludvigsen wrote, "The art of creating hybrid engine/car combinations was still in its infancy, and anyway Chevy had first to meet the demand for the new engines from its own customers in that boom sales year of 1955. In fact, that's the reason why the

Corvette, such an obvious choice to be given V-8 power, didn't get the new engine as an option until midway through the 1955 model year. Chevy wanted to keep the V-8 for the sedans and use the Corvette to keep attention focused on the old Blue-Flame Six. It was just the opposite approach from what enthusiasts expected."



*Top can be completely concealed under fiberglass boot.*

According to Bert Lukins, a 1955 authority in the National Corvette Restorers Society, Ludvigsen's statement is not completely accurate. The 1955 Chevrolet came as a V-8 from the beginning of its production in January 1955 through January 1956, when the 1956 Corvette began production.

Another factor in the 1955 Corvette's limited production was that Ford introduced its Thunderbird for 1955. While not exactly a sports car, the Thunderbird's all-steel body, roll up windows, optional hardtop, and more conventional styling gave it far wider appeal than the Corvette. Ford produced 16,155 Thunderbirds for the 1955 model year. Chevrolet's feeling, at least for the time being, was why even bother to compete. A further deterrent to 1955 Corvette sales was lack of a standard transmission for the V-8 until the very end of the model year.

However, the underlying reason had to be that the Chevrolet Division simply did not choose to build more than 700 Corvettes.

During this period, Zora Arkus-Duntov rescued the Corvette from certain extinction and made the 1956 model the first true racing Corvette. Still, production that year was only 3,467. 1957 production was up to 6,339. In 1958, a sharp recession year, production was up to 9,168. Still, it would be 1966 before Corvette production would equal and top that of the 1955 Thunderbird.

Our '55 Corvette driveReport car is owned by Jim Haight, founder of Bonanza Corvettes in San Diego. The business sells vintage and used Corvettes, and has about 100 in stock at all times. Corvettes like this one are the personal property of the founder, not for sale at any price. Moreover, this one is an all-original car with 91,000 miles and is signed under the hood by Zora Arkus-Duntov, a key member of the original Corvette team and Corvette chief engineer in 1956.



*Side curtains have a tidy storage pouch in the trunk.*

Jim Haight bought the car 15 years ago from a friend who was going through a divorce. He believes it to be the finest all-original 1955 Corvette in existence. The serial number of this one is E55S001385, meaning it was the 385th of 700 built.

While any '55 Corvette looks as sporty as Rock Hudson, and most have the V-8 engine, underneath all are about as exciting as Mr. Peepers. Within this Motorama dream car lurked Aunt Maude's Chevrolet sedan, shortened, tuned, fitted with an open drive line and Hotchkiss rear suspension, and, horror of horrors, a two-speed Powerglide.



In retrospect, the chassis specifications look pathetic for a high-performance sports car. However, you must judge the model in mid-Fifties perspective, before Duntov got hold of it. While the car appears klutzy in comparison to Corvettes since, it compared quite favorably in performance and handling with other sports cars of its day. A '55 Corvette could sprint from 0-60 in under 9 seconds and easily achieve 100 mph.

Chevrolet made no bones that the Corvette was built to compete with the Jaguar XKs. Unfortunately, this resulted in poor driver-to-wheel position, mediocre handling, and dicey brakes. Had Ferrari, Maserati, Alfa Romeo, Mercedes-Benz or Porsche been the target, the Corvette might have had a happier beginning.



From its inception, the early Corvette was a compromise. Springs were soft front and rear. Suspension and a large-diameter anti-roll bar produced an annoying amount of understeer. Maurice Olley's suspension system placed the rear leaf springs far outboard and angled them inward from their fronts to ensure lots of roll understeer. Front suspension remained stock Chevrolet with only a stabilizer bar added.

We felt that the '55 Corvette gave a firm, smooth ride, and although hardly thrilling in the turns, was quite safe and forgiving. In fact, we were surprised at the rather small amount of lean. Overall, however, we had to rate it as a "boulevard" car as opposed to the XK120 with its stiffer ride and true sports car cornering capabilities. Looking back, we will be first to admit that in the 1955 road races where Corvette did compete, it fared quite nicely.

Among our minor petty peeves, the shifting arrangement left us totally confused. The automatic floor shift is reverse, then low, drive, neutral and park in an odd zig-zag pattern. Windshield washer is actuated by the floor pedal. Opening the doors is even more confusing. The forward knob is to open the door and the backward knob is a release control for the side curtains. Of course, there are no outside door handles. You will never get into the trunk until you finally discover that the unlock button is concealed underneath the trunklid. On the plus side, we liked the simple, straightforward arrangement

of the instruments which are, left to right: fuel, temperature, tachometer, then battery, oil pressure, and, finally, a clock.

In an attempt to keep the car as low priced as possible, and a true sports car, there were side curtains instead of rollup windows, no outside door handles, a fabric top only, and no hardtop offered by the factory. There was a minimum of frills. Of course, all of this turned off the typical Chevrolet buyer, which was reflected in disappointing 1955 sales.

**1955 CHEVROLET CORVETTE SPECIFICATIONS** PRICE BASE PRICE \$2,909 PRICE AS EQUIPPED \$3,389 OPTIONS Carries all the mandatory options, which are directional lights, windshield wipers, parking brake alarm light, courtesy lights, plus the non-mandatory options of signal-seeking radio, heater, and whitewall tires.

**ENGINE** TYPE OHV V-8 BORE X STROKE 3.75 inches x 3 inches DISPLACEMENT 265 cubic inches COMPRESSION RATIO 8.0:1 HORSEPOWER @ RPM 195 @ 5,000 TORQUE @ RPM N/A VALVE LIFTERS Hydraulic MAIN BEARINGS 5 INDUCTION SYSTEM Carter four-barrel FUEL SYSTEM Vacuum pump, camshaft driven EXHAUST SYSTEM Dual

**TRANSMISSION** TYPE Powerglide two-speed automatic with torque converter RATIOS 1st 1.82:1 2nd 1.00:1 Reverse 1.82:1

**DIFFERENTIAL** TYPE Hotchkiss, spiral bevel gears RATIO 3.55:1 DRIVE AXLES Semi-floating

**STEERING** TYPE Semi-irreversible worm and sector TURNS LOCK-TO-LOCK 4.5 RATIO 16:1 TURN CIRCLE 36.75 feet.

**BRAKES** TYPE Four-wheel drums, hydraulic, internal expanding DRUM DIAMETER 11 inches EFFECTIVE AREA 154.4 square inches.

**CHASSIS AND BODY** FRAME Box-girder steel, X-member double dropped BODY Laminated fiberglass-reinforced plastic BODY STYLE Two-door, two-passenger roadster, manual top, side curtains.

**SUSPENSION** FRONT Independent, unequal A-arms, coil springs, stabilizer bar, tubular hydraulic shock absorbers REAR Longitudinal leaf springs, hydraulic shock absorbers TIRES 6.70 x 15 four-ply tube type WHEELS Drop-center rim, pressed steel.

**WEIGHTS AND MEASURES** WHEELBASE 102.0 inches OVERALL LENGTH 167.0 inches OVERALL WIDTH 72.24 inches OVERALL HEIGHT 51.25 inches FRONT TRACK 57.0 inches REAR TRACK 59.0 inches GROUND CLEARANCE 6.0 inches SHIPPING WEIGHT 2,750 pounds

**CAPACITIES** CRANKCASE 5 quarts COOLING SYSTEM 17.75 quarts FUEL TANK 17.25 gallons

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID GOOLEY ADAPTED FROM SPECIAL INTEREST AUTOS—JULY/AUGUST 1997