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Chevrolet Corvair

By Bill Vance

The Chevrolet Division of General Motors was the only one to market air-cooled cars, and both would turn out to be star-crossed, although for quite different reasons.

The first air-cooled Chevrolet, which GM chose to call "Copper Cooled" because of the vertical copper cylinder cooling fins, came in 1923. It was designed by GM's brilliant research head Charles Kettering, but this time his genius had failed him. Once the cars got into the hands of dealers and customers they were found to detonate badly and lose power when hot. An embarrassed Chevrolet had to recall every one of the 759 built. All but two were destroyed. But the memory of the Copper Cooled Chevrolet had faded by the 1950s. When the Big Three (GM, Ford and Chrysler) decided to counter the rising tide of imports, particularly the popular Volkswagen, with smaller "compact" cars, Chevrolet's general manager Edward Cole decided to build an "American Volkswagen."

1960 Chevrolet Corvair

While the domestic industry staple was a large, front-engine, rear-drive, sedan, usually V-8 powered, Cole took a daringly innovative approach for an American manufacturer.

The Corvair's engine was an aluminum, horizontally opposed (flat), air-cooled, six-cylinder located in the rear. The Corvair had unit construction, and four-wheel independent coil spring suspension. These features were amazingly similar to the Volkswagen, except for the VW's torsion bars.

Chevrolet's Cole was convinced that he could build a bigger and better VW. Thus, although the Corvair had the same general layout as the VW, it wheelbase was 343 mm (13.5 in.) longer, and it was 363 kg (800 lb) heavier. And the Corvair's 2.3 litre (140 cu in.) six developed 80 horsepower, versus just 36 from the VW's 1.2 litre (72.7) four.

Ford and Chrysler took different approaches with their compacts. While Chevrolet unabashedly copied the Volkswagen's layout, the others chose a conventional route. The Ford Falcon and Chrysler (soon to be Plymouth) Valiant had water-cooled, front-mounted six-cylinder engines driving the rear wheels. Neither had independent rear suspension.

In spite of its technical novelty, or perhaps because of it, the Corvair didn't sell as well as its main rival, the Ford Falcon. The Corvair did, however, appeal to sporty car buyers, and when the dressed up Monza version appeared in mid-1960, Corvair found a new market direction.

The Monza was just a Corvair Deluxe 700 coupe fitted with items like bucket seats, special wheel covers, chrome rocker mouldings and vinyl upholstery. But these seemingly minor styling changes altered the Corvair's personality. Monza sales took off.

Chevrolet knew it was on to something, and set out to really appeal to sporty buyers. For 1961 it added a four-speed manual transmission, and then for 1962 it introduced the Corvair Monza Spyder, as either coupe or convertible, fitted with an exhaust-driven supercharger, known as a turbocharger.

Chevrolet, therefore, along with Oldsmobile, which had introduced its turbocharged F-85 "Jetfire" model a month earlier, made General Motors the world's first manufacturer to offer turbocharging on production cars.

Along with the Monza for 1961, Chevrolet introduced a Corvair station wagon, and an attractive Greenbrier minivan and pickup truck based on the Corvair's rear engine layout.

In 1965 the Corvair got a beautiful restyled body and new rear suspension in which the swing axles were replaced by a fully articulated system much like the Corvette's. This corrected a major design criticism of the Corvair.

But along with the new styling and suspension came a nasty surprise in the form of a book entitled Unsafe At Any Speed by Ralph Nader, a Washington, D.C., consumer advocate lawyer. In Unsafe Nader excoriated the auto industry with the allegation that it was building unsafe cars.

He singled out the Corvair for a particularly scathing attack, charging, among other things, that its swing-axle suspension (used on '60 to '64 models) caused the rear wheels to "tuck under." Nader alleged that this made the Corvair flip over during even relatively low-speed cornering.

Nader's book brought a rash of lawsuits from Corvair owners injured in accidents. General Motors compounded the problem by getting caught investigating Nader in an unsuccessful attempt to find something derogatory in his background. When this reached the media GM had to make a humiliating public apology to Nader.

Unsafe intensified government interest in automobile safety, resulting in far-reaching safety legislation. The industry would never be the same. Nader's book, plus stiff competition from Ford's sporty new Mustang introduced in 1964, sent Corvair production into rapid decline. From 235,000 sales in 1965, it slid to only 15,400 in 1968.

When sales fell to only 6,000 in 1969, General Motors discontinued the Corvair. The Corvair's handling would later be exonerated by the U.S. Department of Transportation, but the damage had been done. Although one of America's boldest technical experiments slid quietly into history, it left behind a legislative legacy.

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