

It's hard to believe the Corvette is about to turn the big 'five-oh'.

But the fact is the car that faced cancellation just two years after its introduction because of slow sales is now an aging baby boomer... and a cultural icon that is revered like no other.

Mark Hamill drove one in Corvette Summer. Dirk Diggler had a Sting Ray in Boogie Nights. And Prince couldn't resist singing about his Little Red Corvette.

It is passion and romance rolled up in a four-wheeled plastic body. It's a V8-powered drug that turns otherwise sensible humans into Corvette-aholics. They collect Corvette models, they belong to Corvette clubs, they enter their cars in Corvette shows, wear Corvette clothes (including underwear) and take Corvette vacations.

Doug MacDonald, a 64-year-old car dealer, turned the entire basement of his new home into a 3,600-square-foot showroom for his convoy of 16 'Vettes of all stripes.

"I think the car is so unique. Ford keeps coming back with the Thunderbird and Chrysler has (the) Viper... But nothing seems to have the pizzazz and excitement of a Corvette."

MacDonald thinks the 'Vette phenomenon is partly based on its split personality.

"With a Corvette," he says, you can drive it downtown. It's like a pussycat. Until you hit that accelerator and it comes alive. I think that's the attraction."

Nostalgia also has something to do with

it, at least in present-day terms. Collectors are in their '50s and '60s and grew up watching Tod Stiles and Buzz Murdock in the classic television series Route 66, carefree and foot-loose, seeing the country in their Chevrolet.

"It's amazing the number of people who'll call me and say: 'You know, a neigh-

bor of mine... had a Corvette 35 years ago and I always said when the kids are educated and I've got a little money for a toy, I want a Corvette and I want you to find me one."

"I'll bet that happens to me 15 times a year."

How this cult, the Corvette Nation, came about, considering the car's rocky beginnings can be attributed to one thing: boys and their toys.

When U.S. servicemen stationed in Europe returned home following the end of the Second World War, they brought with them small two seater sports cars. Most were MGs and Jaguars, which were basic and fun to drive.

What's more, there was nothing like them on this side of the pond.

Harley Earl, the chief designer at General Motors noticed the trend in the late '40s and wanted to get in on the action, so he set out to sell the bean counters on the idea that the time was right for America — GM, actually — to have its own sports car.

In addition to being a capable designer, Earl was also a smooth salesman.

He convinced GM brass to let him build a prototype to show at the 1953 Motorama (which was GM's traveling car show at the time) in New York City.

The head honchos indulged Earl, with one exception.

Under the slick body, he had to use stan-

dard running gear already lounging in GM parts bins. That nearly doomed the project from the start.

Certainly, Earl cobbled together a great piece of eye candy that became an instant hit with the general public.

However, the production window didn't allow enough time to make steel body panels, so the fibreglass show-car molds were used. Fit, finish and durability of the 300 hand-built 1953 cars, all pearl white with red interiors, was suspect. And all were powered by a lacklustre 150-horsepower 235-cubic-inch six-cylinder engine mated to a two-speed Powerglide automatic, a combination despised by sports-car enthusiasts.

Sales went nowhere fast and GM considered cancelling the whole project. However, it just so happened that Ford, which had hit a home run with its new two-seater Thunderbird, would help show Chevrolet that Earl's dream could, in fact, become reality. It just took a guy like Zora Arkus-Duntov to ensure the Corvette would never look back.

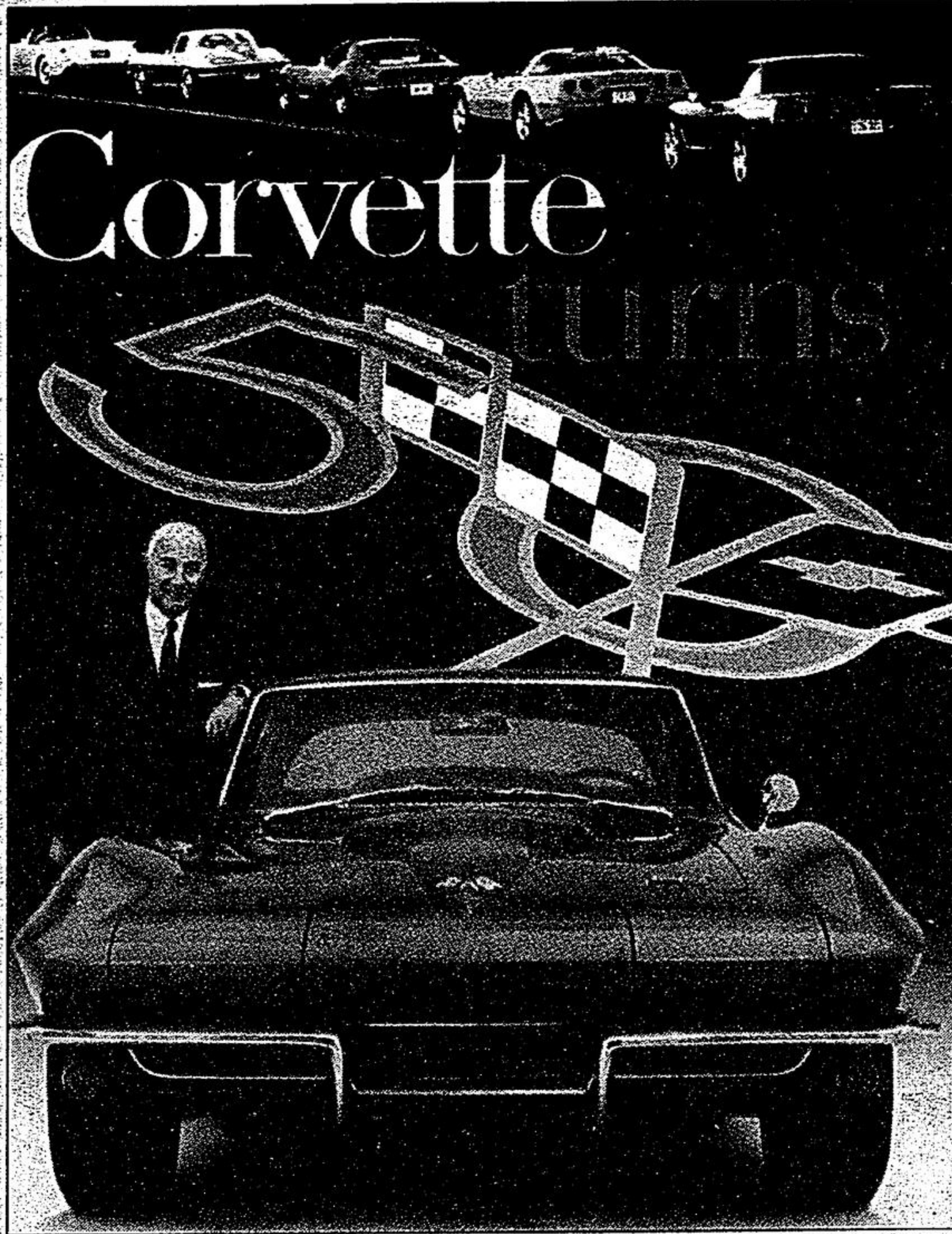
The legendary European race-car driver and motorhead was already working at Chevrolet when the Corvette arrived. Lobbying to turn the car into a true performance piece, he would eventually become Corvette's chief engineer.

Using Earl's styling, a 195-horsepower V8 and a three-speed manual transmission, the Corvette became a hot little number for 1955. It was a pivotal move that would put Chevrolet at the top of the North American performance pole for the next five decades.

Even at 50, the Corvette and the performance promise it makes shows no signs of aging. Collector, enthusiast and 'Vette-aholic Doug MacDonald and millions of others see to that.

"The Corvette seems to have magic."

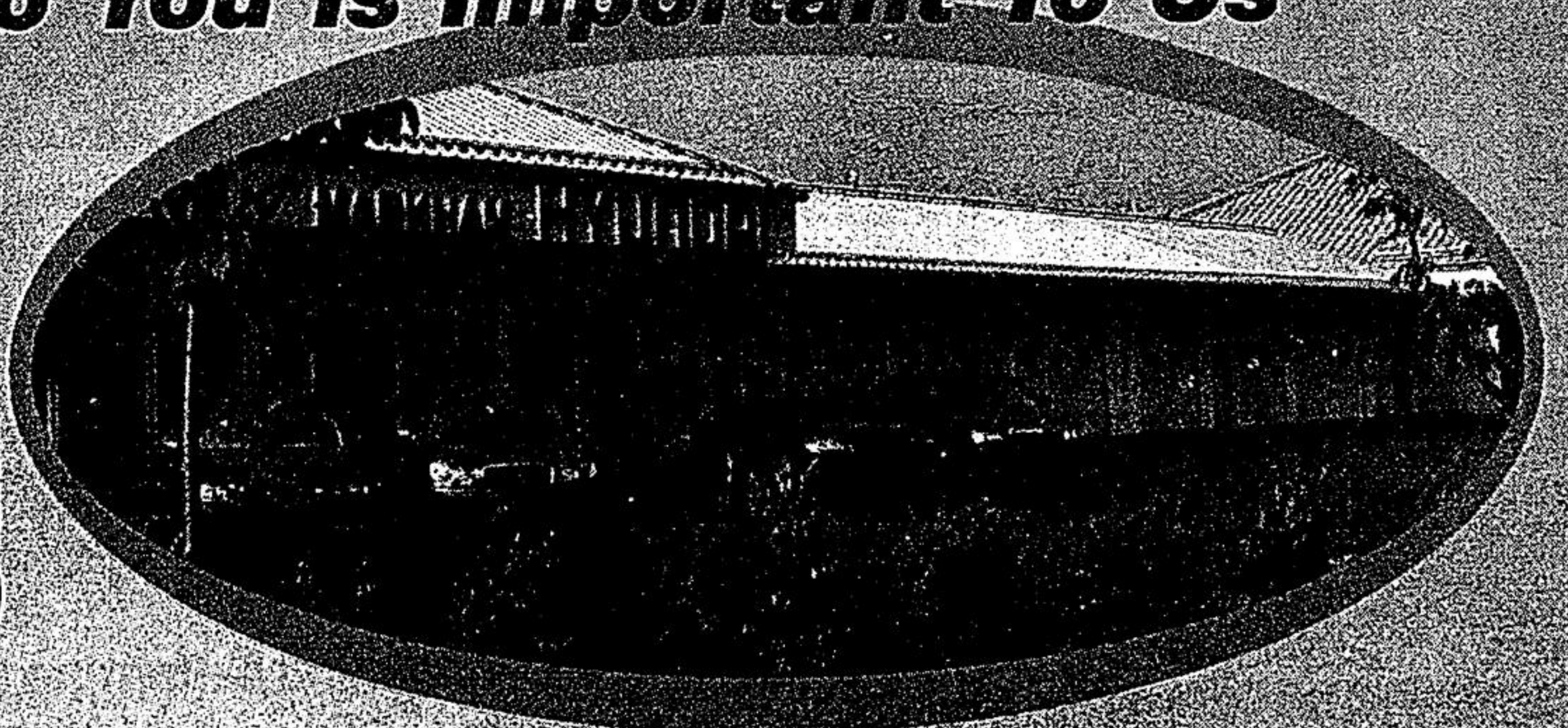
■ *Otto Stein specializes in classic cars as a writer with Wheelbase Communications, a world-wide supplier of automobile news, reviews and features.*



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