

50 Years - Still Rockin' and Rollin'

By Ken Rabello
Public Relations Director

CASTRO VALLEY, CA -- The fact that a group of people are about to celebrate being involved with an organization that is in its 50th year of existence may not seem interesting to the casual observer. Many fraternal organizations are a lot older than that --The Loyal Order of the Moose is more than 110 years old.

But, the members of the **Northern California Corvette Association** really do feel a sense of pride and amazement when they realize that their club has made it to its golden anniversary, even though some of the early members had serious doubts that the Chevrolet Corvette, the car they loved, would even survive into the next year.

Why did they have their early doubts about the survival of the Corvette? Why do they now so enjoy being members of "The Oldest Corvette Club in America"?

Well, it all started in 1953 when Chevrolet introduced the Corvette at the GM Motorama held at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City. Chevrolet thought its "dream car" would capture serious attention in a market dominated by the successful European sports car manufacturers of the British MG and the Jaguar.

While it may have gotten some attention at the Motorama, it didn't exactly get the attention of the market's pocketbook. When only 300 Corvettes were sold that first year, Chevrolet knew they had a real challenge on their hands.

Production grew to only 3,640 in 1954 and 1,100 of those remained unsold by year-end. In fact, most automobile historians believe that if it weren't for Ford's introduction of the new 1955 Thunderbird, Chevrolet most probably would have killed the Corvette at the end of the 1954 model year.

GM somehow hung on to their "dream" and production grew. Now about 35,000 Corvettes are assembled at the Bowling Green, KY plant each year.

But how is it that Chevrolet has sold more than 1.4 million Corvettes since such a seriously shaky beginning?

Some say it's because of the genius of Zora Arkus-Duntov, a racing-engineer who was hired by Chevrolet in early 1955 to "improve the drivability" of the coming 1956 Corvette and to

design wind-up windows to replace the removable Plexiglas windows.

The result was a better suspension, better handling, roll-up and optional power windows, and more headroom. Duntov's tremendous influence on improvements and design of the Corvette continued as he was named Chief Corvette Engineer in 1968.

However, most automobile historians agree that the success of the Corvette would not have been possible without the intense and loyal support of serious, some say, "obsessed", Corvette enthusiasts worldwide. Some have owned as many as 15 Corvettes, some more. Enthusiasts like the members of the Northern California Corvette Association.

Way back in July of 1956, it's hard to imagine that Johnny Zeh and Jerry Wright had anything else on their minds than just trying to get some people together who shared their enthusiasm for the new Chevrolet Corvette -- and to have some fun.

In fact, when they first met to talk about it, they commented that it seemed like weeks would go by before they'd spot another Corvette. Yet, both of them knew that there was a number of Corvette owners in Northern California, and several in the East Bay. But where were they and would they be interested in getting together in some sort of "mutual admiration society" wrapped around their Corvettes?

Well, Johnny and Jerry started contacting the Chevrolet dealers in the area and found that they weren't the only ones that were in love with their Corvettes. They found other Corvette owners all over the East Bay that really did like the idea of getting together with other owners. The group decided to call themselves the **Northern California Corvette Association**. For nearly a year, less than a dozen of these "enthusiasts", as they liked to be called, met monthly at a local Chevrolet dealership to talk about their cars, and ways they could have more fun with them.

The group initially focused their activities around the growing sport of autocross. The S.F. Bay Area had several foreign car clubs active in autocross at the time and some of the group's members had owned foreign sports cars and participated in autocrosses before buying their Corvettes. This seemed to be the logical

common bond to begin their activities, so the group began entering their Corvettes in autocross competitions around Northern California.

Some of the members began to do well on the autocross “circuit” and additional members joined the group. Early in 1957, they heard of other Corvette owners wanting to start up clubs in California so they decided to make their club “official”. So, on May 9, 1957, the Northern California Corvette Association was incorporated.

The club’s participation in autocross grew and the members continued to be successful bringing home trophies and ribbons. However, while the members enjoyed how autocross demonstrated the agility of the Corvette, they wanted to get involved in events that would also demonstrate the car’s acceleration and speed. They searched around but couldn’t find what they wanted, so the members decided to organize and run an event themselves. They thought what better way to show who had the consistently fastest car than to have an old fashioned drag race.

So, in 1974 they began to work on the club’s first all-Corvette drag race event. It would take a year to plan and organize and would be open to members and all other Corvette owners that wanted to see how fast their cars could run the ¼ mile. They searched the area for a suitable location and signed a contract with the famed Fremont Drag Strip. They named the event Vette Magic and the first one was held in 1975. Vette Magic was so successful that it became, and has been for the last 31 straight years, the keystone event for the club.

The success of Vette Magic has since turned into a weekend event with a car show on Saturday and races on Sunday. It draws participants from all over California. The proceeds from the races help the club with its yearly expenses and also help support the N.C.C.A. Foundation, a non-profit organization that donates thousands of dollars each year to local charities.

The club also sponsors “A Legend On Display”, the Western States Corvette Council sanctioned car show that focuses on the beauty of the Corvette and how well its beauty can be displayed. The “Legend” show was presented for the 26th consecutive year in 2006 and continues to draw participants and attendees from all over the Bay Area.

While it is “The Oldest Corvette Club in America”, the club’s activity calendar shows that it is anything but stodgy. Members have a wide variety of events and “happenings” they can work on or attend during the year.

Members can participate in Corvette autocross events, help run the Vette Magic car show and drags, help with the “Legend On Display” car show, and still have the opportunity to participate in the 25 – 30 social “happenings” sponsored by the club. During the summer months, every weekend on the calendar is filled with some social “happening” – all involving the members and their Corvettes.

During this, its 50th anniversary year, the club is still putting on the normal array of events – Vette Magic, Legends, and the 25 – 30 social happenings that seem to be attracting more new members each month. However, it is also making room on the calendar to put on a major banquet bash – a formal black tie affair – to put the topping on the yearlong celebration.

So, what was started by a couple of guys 50 years ago in Castro Valley, CA as a way to talk Corvettes and have some fun, has evolved into... a whole lot of men and women who meet monthly and on weekends to talk Corvettes and have a whole lot of fun.

What a concept... what a car!!!