

Dale Smiley and his Corvair Story

It was October of 1959 and I had just turned 15. My father, mother and I made our "annual trip" to Johnson Brothers Chevrolet, located at Meridian Street and 10th Street in Indianapolis, Indiana. The 1960 Models had just been released and we were anxious to see the new cars.

Probably the largest crowd that night was around this new "compact car" a cute little thing with 4 Doors and A REAR MONUNTED AIR COOLED ENGINE! It was called the "CORVAIR" and was keeping the salesmen busy answering questions. My dad and I were interested in the "how it worked" part. It was very different that any car we had seen and we spent a lot time checking it out. Dad didn't like the Gas Heater option.

Dad and I talked about the Corvair many times after that night and he said he wanted to see what the 1961 Corvair might be. He worked for Allison building Aircraft Engines and was never happy with the 'first' of anything! Besides, we had a good 1956 Chevy Bel-Air that I was being taught to drive in and he was not ready to buy a new car!

In the fall of 1961 Dad was ready to replace the Bel-Air so once again we were off to Johnson Chevy. Dad ordered a 1962 Corvair (Monza, White, with Red interior). I fell in love with that car as soon as it was delivered!

In the next few years I drove the '62 a lot. I could drive almost anywhere, even in snow! That surprised several of my college buddies who's new 409's went NOWHERE in snow! By the time I was in my senior year at Valparaiso Technical Institute Dad had bought a 1964 model and let me have it as 'my car' for that year. I graduated in the spring of 1965 and went to work for Motorola Portable Products in Chicago. I still lived in Valparaiso, Indiana so drove to work and home every day in that Corvair.

Of course, I 'modified' these Corvairs. I usually put in a Tach (just because I could). Dad didn't like it much but didn't say I had to take it out. All of his Corvairs were Powerglides so he figured out the Tach wouldn't hurt anything.

I had lots of fun(?) driving those Corvairs. I managed to lose a fan bearing driving from Chicago back to Valpo. I took "everything" off the top of the engine, took off the Top Cover and took it to the local Chevy dealer. They put in a new bearing, showed me a GM message about reduced bearing life do to belts being too tight. I put it back on and used their recommendation on tightening the fan belt.

I had one other problem doing that drive. I was going about 65mph us the Dan Ryan Expressway when the Powerglide suddenly downshifted to LOW, the Tach went to over 4500rpm and I was in a mess! If you don't know the morning traffic on that Expressway it is kind of like a multi-lane Indy 500 headed to downtown Chicago! Naturally, I was NOT in the low speed lane!

I managed to slow down and get off at the next exit. I think I aged about a dozen years doing that! At this exit there was a Transmission Shop. Thinking I was very lucky, I took the Corvair to them. They said they "did not know anything about Corvairs, I would have to find a Chevy dealer!" Driving at 30 mph on side roads I was able to get to work. This was a Friday, so I figured if I could get it to the Chevy dealer in Portage, Indiana (I knew they did car service on Saturdays) I might be able to get it fixed before the next work week.

I got it there, again driving no faster than 40. It took about 4 hours (normally a 1 ½ hour trip). When I explained it to the Service Manager he laughed, said he knew what the problem was and said he could fix it in about an hour. He put it on a lift, reached up and pulled the Governor the rest of the way out of the Powerglide and showed me where the retaining strap had rusted thru (driving in snow didn't help). He bolted in a new one and we were back in business!

Things were going well until the end of 1965. It seems Uncle Sam decided that he wanted my services so off to the draft I went. Long story short: I was drafted in January, 1966, made a 'small change' and served 3 years active duty with the Army's STRATCOM unit, then had 3 years Inactive duty (no active reserve duty required)! I got out of the Army in December of 1968, got married in January of 1969, and borrowed Dad's 1969 Corvair to get a job and drove it to work until June of '69.

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By then, both Dad and I were upset at the poorly constructed Corvair and the lack of interest in repairing it at the local Chevy dealer. By this time I had purchased a Triumph GT-6+ so he sold the Corvair cheap and got a Chevelle.

As the saying goes, "Life happens while you are making plans!" My wife Julia and I were working full time and enjoying our free time in my 'sports car' or her fancy Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme! We managed to build our first home and start raising our family. While all this was going on I kept noticing Corvairs still on the road. I was interested in driving another one. As soon as Julia announced she was pregnant I sold the Triumph!! It was barely big enough for the two of us, it sure would not hold a baby!!

Again, 'life happened' as time moved on. When our son was 5 years old (he was the youngest of our three kids) I saw an ad for a "used 1964 Monza" that 'ran well' and they only wanted \$900!

We went and looked at it. It had a nice new paint job (Black) and the engine did start right up. I bought it on the spot and we went to Dairy Queen to celebrate my 'collector car'! I soon found out 'why' he had it parked in a side yard with high grass - it leaked oil everywhere!

That night I spent hours trying to fix the leaks. I was able to do a few, but the poor thing had leaking push rod o-rings and the clutch didn't reel right. I drove it to work for a few weeks while trying to figure out if I should fix it or sell it!? One night on the way to work one of the bolts on the "Leaf Spring" (suspension mod on the 'new' '64s) broke! The 'spring' hit the ground at 40 mph, flipped over and was stuck. This made a terrible noise so I stopped as soon as I could. I found the spring firmly stuck between the road and the other suspension bolt. I had no way to jack up the car so I drove it the one mile to work!

At the end of my shift I got the big hydraulic jack from our warehouse and jacked it up so I could get the Leaf Spring removed. It had worn pretty thin on the end that had been dragging! I started calling around and found a guy in Indy who was servicing Corvairs. I went to see him, thinking he would have parts to reinstall the spring. Nope, he said he didn't like working on Early Models (first time I had heard that phrase) but he did show me a catalog from "some place called Clark's" that might have what I needed.

Long story short - I called Clark's, told them what my problem was and the nice lady told me they had a special kit for the 1964 Leaf Spring. I ordered it and asked to have a catalog as well. I got the kit, reinstalled the Spring, studied the Catalog and determined that I did NOT have the right Differential (no support for the Spring)!

It turns out that one of our friends had just bought a 1965 Corvair and was working on it. He was an Aircraft mechanic so he knew the Corvair type engine well. We talked over our cars and he convinced me that it would be 'easy' to overhaul my engine. We did that, buying parts from Clark's along the way. I learned so much about Corvair engines, transmissions and differentials I knew I was a Corvair Nut!

This began a 'hobby' of buying, driving, fixing, selling and buying more Corvairs for many years. What might have been my last Corvair was a 1966 Corsa with the 180 Turbo. It was in pretty good shape and I drove it for several years before the hidden rust made itself apparent (it had an "Earl Shibe" paint job over a really rusty body). I parked the car, thinking I would find a 'good' body and move the Turbo drive train to it.

At that point I developed some medical issues that almost kept me from driving again! Not wanting to leave Julia with the problem of getting rid of that "silly Corvair stuff" I sold it off to other Corvair Nuts. By the Grace of God and the excellent help of my doctors those problems were resolved and I have been able to work, drive, and once again collect Corvairs! Getting ready to retire (I was 72, figured it was time to 'get outta Dodge') so I was looking for my "last Corvair"! I thought I wanted a 1966 4-Door Monza, but when a Red 1967 4-Door Monza became available at a "1966 price" I grabbed it! It has taken a lot of work, but I am having a lot of fun. "The Red Baron" is my ongoing experiment! It will be my version of what a 2019 Corvair would have been if GM had not had their head where the sun don't shine!

My two youngest grandsons can't wait to drive the Corvair! They are 5 (will turn 6 this summer) and 4 (turns 5 a couple of months after his brother turns 6) so it may be a "little" time, although they are large boys and the oldest can drive a Gator around his dad's farm! More Corvair Nuts on the way!!!