

CHEVROLET'S • By Richard Greene SINGULAR SENSATION

A priority in our monthly classic car series is always the story. While the vehicles are forever stunning in appearance, it's the story that goes with them that makes it something worth writing about.

In all the history of American car production, the Chevrolet Corvair remains the only mass-produced passenger car with an air-cooled engine in the rear – where you usually find the trunk.

Chevrolet was so committed to the transformation in compact cars during the 1960 decade that they marketed the Corvair as a 4-door sedan, 2-door coupe, convertible, 4-door station wagon, passenger van, commercial van, and even a pickup truck.

This 1966 Corvair Monza owned by Jack and Judi Sheedy was one of the approximately 1.8 million produced from 1960-1969 in seven of GM's domestic plants and six of the company's foreign locations.

There was even a concept Corvair in 1966 – same year as the Sheedy's – labeled

as the Electrovair II and as the name implies, it was an experiment for replacing the gasoline engine with an electric motor. Problem then was the high cost of the batteries and offering a driving range of only something like 40-60 miles. It was so well ahead of its time, we wouldn't see much of any such cars until about now – some 50 years later.

So, with all that history of this one-of-a-kind rear engine automobile, why have many of you who are reading this never seen one or, if you have, likely long forgotten about it?

The answer comes with the rest of the story, following a bit of research.

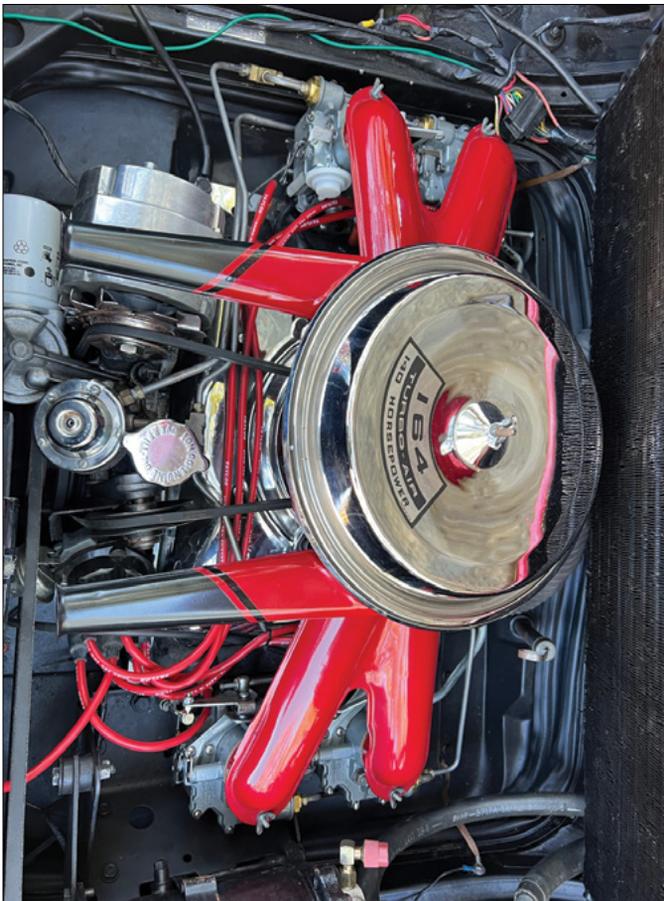
Heralded when first introduced in 1960 the

Corvair won accolades from, among others, Motor Trend Magazine declaring it as the Car of the Year, Time Magazine featured it on their cover proclaiming it as the forerunner of a new age of innovation, and *Car and Driver* magazine said the 1965 model was the most important new car and the most beautiful since before World War II. >>>



Jack Sheedy stands with his 1966 Chevrolet Corvair, the only mass-produced American car with an air-cooled engine in the rear.

Photos: Richard Greene



While the 1966 Corvair has a number of attractive and practical features, what sets it apart from other cars of its era is the 164 Turbo-Air, 140-horsepower engine that sort of resembles a giant, six-legged red spider (far left).



Then trouble came when the Corvair's reputation (and GM's altogether) was damaged with accusations about its handling ability in consumer protection activist Ralph Nader's 1965 book, "Unsafe at Any Speed," which influenced the adoption of the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act in 1966.

The company, having been hit with more than 100 lawsuits, saw sales cut from 220,000 units in 1965 to less than half that number in 1966. By 1968 production had fallen to less than 15,000 vehicles, and, a year later, the last Corvair rolled off the assembly line.

Never mind that by 1972 Texas A&M University had issued a safety commission report that concluded the Corvair presented no greater potential for loss of control than its competitors.

That same year, an independent advisory panel of engineers reported the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's findings that the Corvair compared favorably with contemporary vehicles.

Now Jack and Judi have a nearly perfect example of the



Corvair's role in American automotive history. And their connection with it traces its origin to the time when she had one in the late '60s when they were dating. "We wanted to see if we could find one like her's," Jack says, "and eventually discovered what we have now."

When he spends time going over all the features, Jack likes to share with those admiring his car that his favorite moment seems to be when he opens what most believe is the trunk and proudly shows off the 164 Turbo-Air, 140-horsepower engine that sort of resembles a giant, six-legged red spider.

The Sheedys share their memories and current experiences with about 100 fellow members of the North Texas Corvair Association, itself a chapter of the Corvair Society of America. It seems the once-celebrated "forerunner of a new age of innovation" is not to be forgotten.

The *Chicago Tribune* summed up the reason 25 years after Corvair's demise in an article reporting the Standard Catalog of American Cars, describing it "perhaps the most significant automobile of the postwar era."   