

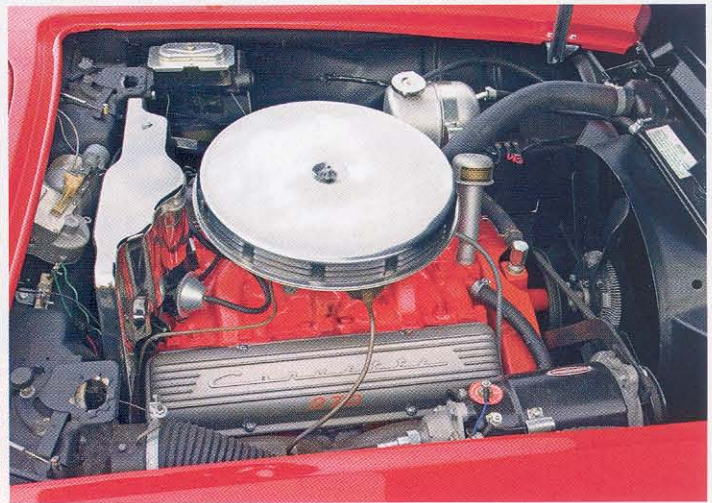
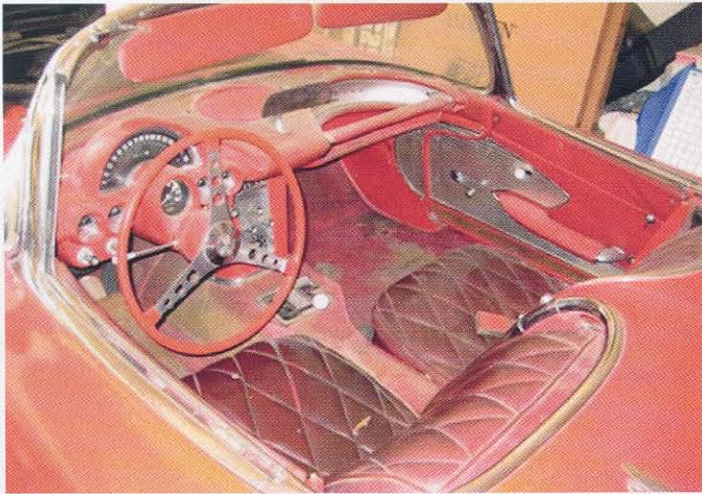
M A G A Z I N E Corvette



Longtime AFFAIR

The story of
how one '61 got
a new lease on life.

BY HAROLD PACE
PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR



Tom Lainson waited a long time for his first Corvette—14 years, to be exact. He initially fell in love with a copper-colored '56 in 1958, but he was fresh out of high school and his dad refused to co-sign the loan, so he had to pass on it. Fast forward to 1972, when Lainson, now living in California, spied a red '61 for sale at a Texaco station. It was Roman Red and the 230-hp 283/Powerglide combo was original. Though this time around Lainson had a wife and three kids, he also had a job and a little bit of money to spare—not to mention the same burning desire to own a Corvette. He bought the car for the princely sum of \$1,000.

The '61 Corvette was desirable for a number of reasons. It was the first year for the Sting Ray tail and the last year for the famed 283 engine. It was also the last time the contrasting-color-cove option would be offered, as the '62 models didn't have metal trim around the coves to break up the two colors. Lainson's '61 also had an all-red interior; the red/red combo was rare, and is now highly desirable.

Mechanically, the '61 was pretty much the same as the '58 to '62 C1s. The base model listed for \$3,934 and there were a number of

options. Engine choices ranged from the standard 230-bhp single-carb 283 up to a 315-bhp fuel-injected solid-lifter-cam version. In between were two dual-carb mills (245 hp and 270 hp) and a weaker 275-bhp "fuelie" with a hydraulic cam. Also new in '61 was the exhaust system, which now exited below the body instead of through the rear bumpers.

The Powerglide automatic was supplemented with 3- and 4-speed manual transmissions. Today, most Corvettes are ordered with automatic transmissions, but in 1961 only 1,458 of 10,939 Corvettes built went the clutchless route. The signal-seeking AM radio in the dash of Lainson's car was optional, as was, believe it or not, the heater! However, only 268 buyers (presumably racers or those from warm climes) opted out of the heater. The two-tone paint option retailed for \$16.

Surprise!

Lainson surprised his wife, Sandy, with the new purchase, but she was less than thrilled at first. "That \$1,000 was a big part of the \$16,000 a year I was making back then," recalls Lainson with a grin. But the Corvette quickly became part of the family, and was soon Sandy's daily driver. She drove the kids

to football and cheerleading practice, where it was the envy of both young and old. The couple took the car on long cruises down Pacific Coast Highway to San Diego on the weekends. They had a lot of fun with it.

Lainson's job led them to Houston and then to Dallas, where the Corvette began to experience mechanical woes. "It was in great shape appearance-wise," says Lainson, "but it started burning oil and we weren't in a position to have a valve job done then." The car went into storage in 1974, but they always had the intention of getting it fixed and back on the road. The storage time eventually extended to 33 years. "Lots of people tried to buy it, but it wasn't for sale," Lainson says. Even with all the offers, he didn't realize what a prize his car had become. "It was just a nice 11-year-old Corvette at the time," he recalls. "It wasn't until later that I realized how rare matching-numbers cars were, and just how original mine was."

Time to Restore

During the car's time in storage, the paint cracked and faded, the interior dried out and the running gear got stuck. Finally, in 2007, Lainson decided it was time to get the '61 back

on the road. He took it to Carr's Corvettes and Customs in Plano, Texas for a complete restoration, with the goal of turning it into a daily driver. Although its matching-numbers status meant the car was kept mostly original, there were some minor concessions made to safety, performance and appearance.

The body was in pretty good shape, the body shims were excellent and the gaps were very good, so the body didn't need to be removed for the restoration. The car was taken apart and the body and engine compartment were soda-blasted to remove the old, cracking paint. Soda blasting is like sand blasting, except the blasting media is softer; it removes paint but won't gouge or damage the fiberglass beneath. This provides a clean surface to begin the bodywork needed to bring the finish back up to snuff.

Trade Secret Auto Care in Plano did the bodywork. Once the surface was smooth and level, the shop repainted it in the original combination of Roman Red and Ermine White, but used a Nexa base coat/clear coat to make the finish more durable and easier to maintain—again, the aim was to make it a driver. The exterior chrome was re-plated, the aluminum was polished and a new grille was attached. (In 1961, a handsome single-horizontal-bar grille design replaced the toothed grilles from previous models). New reproduction rearview and side mirrors were fitted, as well.

Underhood

The original engine was rebuilt, and a few improvements were made in the process. The block was bored-out 0.030 inch, and fitted with TRW cast pistons, new ARP rod bolts and new bearings. The crank was turned slightly—0.010/0.010 inch—and high-performance Comp Cams K12-230-2 hydraulic flat-tappet cam, lifters, springs and rockers were installed. The original heads were rebuilt with new stainless-steel valves, bronze guides and hardened seats for use with modern unleaded fuel.

The original intake manifold mounts the original Carter four-barrel carburetor, which was treated to a rebuild. Although the distributor looks stock, it's been fitted with an M&H Electrical 1-wire points conversion kit. The stock cast-iron exhaust manifolds have been port-matched and ceramic-powder-coated in Cast Gray. The Magnaflow mufflers are aluminized steel reproductions of the period, optional high-performance mufflers.

After balancing and blueprinting, the engine is estimated to produce about 300 ponies, enough to give the '61 the performance of the old fuel-injected versions, which turned low-14-second quarter-miles back in the day. And although the 230-bhp engine came with standard, orange-painted, stamped-



Above: Thanks to a few well-considered engine modifications that generate an extra 70 horsepower over stock, this C1 gets down the road in a hurry. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Before the restoration, the interior was in bad shape; the same was true of the engine compartment; original carb was retained; show-quality interior.



steel valve covers, Lainson likes the look of the cast-aluminum finned Corvette covers used on hotter engines, and has bolted a set to his mill. (Naturally, he kept the originals.)

The original cast-iron Powerglide automatic transmission has been rebuilt, along with the differential. The driveshaft was re-balanced and fitted with new U-joints. The rear brakes are stock, but have been completely rebuilt with new hardware, including drums. In front, disc brakes have been installed to provide increased stopping power, although the original drums are in storage and can be easily re-installed down the road if desired. (In the early 1960s, the Corvette drums were considered to be pretty good, but once disc brakes came out, their shortcomings became obvious, particularly in heavy rain where they pulled unevenly.) Lainson also had new stainless-steel brake lines and hoses installed, as well as a Classic Performance Products dual master cylinder in place of the stock single-master cylinder setup. An Anderson baffled fuel tank replaces the original.

The suspension was rebuilt with new bush-

ings and contemporary gas-charged shocks, while a sway bar was installed at the rear to improve handling. The original wheels and wheel covers were restored and are fitted with Coker radial tires.

The wiring harness was replaced with a new one from Lectric Limited and the instruments were restored and recalibrated by D&M Restoration. The original tach-drive generator was rebuilt, as well. Halogen headlights light the way, while reproduction tail-light lenses are used in back.

Inside Job

The interior was complete but had suffered badly from the extended storage, so it was stripped and everything was refinished. The door panels, seats, dash and carpet are all Al Knoch reproduction parts installed by Carr's. DynaMat and Quietshield panels were installed under the carpet to keep out noise and heat. The windshield was replaced with a new one, but the door glass was retained. The heater system was disassembled, soda-blasted,

primed and repainted to look and work like new. Finally, all the weather stripping and the window felts were replaced.

Back on the Road

Now that the '61 is finished, Lainson has been driving it regularly; he says it's a treat to drive. Lainson and his wife are once again having a ball in the "family" Corvette, and plan to drive it to a gathering at the National Corvette Museum soon. In the meantime, the car has trophied at numerous shows.

In 1961, *Road & Track* said, "Continual refinements since 1954 have made the Corvette into a sports car for which no owner need make excuses. It goes. It stops. It corners." Today, with a minimum of sensible, easily removable upgrades, that can still be said about classic first-generation models like this one. It really isn't necessary to build a full-on restomod with lots of late-model componentry to turn a live-axle model into a regular driver. And as the Lainsons can tell you, the cars are definitely worth keeping. ○

