

Group Corvair Comments



GROUP CORVAIR'S NEWSLETTER FOR THE NATIONAL CAPITAL AREA

VOLUME XLIX, No. 7

July 2021



1991 CORSA International Convention, 30th Anniversary CALENDAR OF COMING EVENTS

July

20 – **Group Corvair Meeting**, 7:30 p.m. Yes, another Zoom meeting. Details will be sent the weekend before the meeting.

31 - NECC Track Day, Pocono Raceway North Course. Visit <u>www.neccmotorsports.com</u> for details.

August

14 - First State Corvair show; all day, Limestone Presbyterian Church, 3201 Limestone Road, Wilmington, DE.

14 – All-GM Show, 9 a.m. – 3 p.m., new location: Eagle Ridge Middle School, 42901 Waxpool Rd., Ashburn, VA. Dash plaques to first 100 registered. Open to all GM manufactured vehicles. \$15 pre-registration, \$20 day of show registration. Contact: Joe Padavano, 703-927-9196, email: <u>Joe_padavano@rocketmail.com</u>. Details: <u>http://clubs.hemmings.com/capitolcityrockets/events.html</u>

17 – Group Corvair Meeting, 7:30 p.m.

21 - FSK Antique Car Club 36^{th} Rose Hill Manor Show, 8 a.m. -2 p.m. (Rain date 8/22) \$15 entry fee, judging by other participants from other classes. Raffle tickets benefiting three charities. 1611 N. Market St., Frederick, MD.

September

18 – 42nd Annual Corvair Days, hosted by the Central Pennsylvania Corvair Club. Eastern Museum of Motor Racing, 100 Baltimore Rd., York Springs, PA. (It's on the Latimore Valley Fairgrounds, 314 Latimore Valley Rd, York Springs, PA.) Registration 9 – 12 a.m. Contact Dave Steigauf, 717-898-7927.

21 – Group Corvair Meeting, 7:30 p.m.

October

16 – Rockville Antique and Classic Car Show. The Rockville City website still shows this as being up in the air and we've been asked by the organizers not to publicize it. The city council has to make a decision as to whether the Covid-19 pandemic has subsided enough for this event to be safe to hold. Check their website for updates: https://www.rockvillemd.gov/667/Antique-Classic-Car-Show

19 – Group Corvair Meeting, 7:30 p.m.

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From the Oval Garage Bob Hall

A belated Happy Independence Day to everyone. This newsletter marks 30 years since Group Corvair hosted the 1991 International Corvair convention here in the DC area. Jim and I digitized 26 rolls of film that Ron Fedorczak took at the event to supplement our July newsletter. We hope those of you who were there in 1991 enjoy reminiscing about the event—and how none of us has aged a day since then.

As society gets better control of the Covid virus things are opening up more quickly than I thought. Amanda Knox, of Rockville city government, is waiting to see if the City Council will decide to go ahead with the Rockville autumn show this year. We're keeping our fingers crossed.

We had a carburetor balancing and fine-tuning tech session at Byron LaMotte's home at the end of June that included Jerry Yates, Jim Simpson and myself. Mike Coale had planned to attend, but work kept him away at the last moment. Our wives sensibly abandoned us so they could go shopping in St. Michaels. Jim Simpson led the process as we adjusted Byron's Fitch Sprint first and then Jerry Yate's Stage II Yenko Stinger clone. Jim brought his vacuum test kit as outlined in an article by Ken Schifftner in the Rocky Mountain Corvairs newsletter to compare the manifold vacuum readings for each bank of cylinders BELOW THE CARBS. This provided a check against the Chevrolet Manual's standard carb tuning instructions and our use of a Unisyn tool. Byron's Sprint benefitted the most from our efforts and Jerry's was pretty much spot on already.

The three of us drove Jerry's Stinger, Byron's Sprint and Byron's Super Spyder custom '64 to a late lunch at Doc's Sunset Grill in Oxford when we were done. I drove the Super Spyder back after lunch and thoroughly enjoyed it. What a sweet ride. We got more than a few smiles from pedestrians and other drivers on our trip.

Looking forward to "seeing" all of you at our July Zoom meeting. Stay safe.

Minutes of the June Virtual Meeting Marolyn Simpson

Members of Group Corvair started logging into the June 15 virtual meeting at 7:30 pm. Bob Hall, president, called the meeting to order at 7:40 with seven members online. Byron LaMotte made a motion to accept the minutes of the May meeting as they appeared in the newsletter, and Bob Walker seconded the motion.

Jim Simpson gave the treasurer's report. The check to reinstate the club's State of Maryland corporate status has been cashed; we need this in order to allow club officers access the club's bank account. He will start checking on the state web site to see if and when the state reinstates our corporate status. (It will likely take several weeks.) There were no other expenses or income for the last month.

Byron said that he had recently been to a cars and coffee on the eastern shore and there were two Corvairs there. He also reported on a car show at Kent Island that had taken place the week before.

In old business we discussed the tune-up session that Byron would be willing to host. The date was set for June 30 at 11:00 am at Byron's home.

Jim gave an update on the restoration work being done on his Corvair. One of the most difficult things is getting a good paint color match. Bob W. informed us that he has gotten the engine running on his car but is having a problem with the brakes.

Ron Fedorczak has located 26 out of the 27 rolls of film he shot during the '91 CORSA International Convention. Jim has digitized about half of them, and Bob H. is digitizing the other half. Jim is getting together information on the '91 convention, which was hosted by Group Corvair, and welcomes any pictures, stories, or other info.

There was a general discussion on the Corvair crankshaft and engine. This included the use of "billet crankshafts" in Corvair powered aircraft. The stock crankshaft was never designed for aircraft use and thus there is an aftermarket one available; unfortunately, they cost about \$2,500 each.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:50 pm.

Thirty Years Ago This Month Jim Simpson

July 23 through July 27, 1991 was a major milestone for Group Corvair. We hosted the 21st annual CORSA International Convention. While Group Corvair was not a complete stranger to hosting events – we'd hosted the 2nd CORSA National Convention back in 1972 in Gaithersburg – CORSA had since grown considerably, and the now-international conventions had evolved considerably. (The 1972 convention was effectively a day and a half long with a Concours and an Autocross being the main car events.)

By 1991, conventions had grown to fill a full five days of events plus a half day at each end. Not only was there a Concours and an Autocross, but we also now had a Rally, Econorun, and a "Funkhana" added to the moving events plus a car display independent of the Concours. In addition, there were formal CORSA meetings, tech sessions, presentations by people significant to the development and evolution of the Corvair, and meetings by special interest

groups. And we were now also catering to the tourists in the club with local tours and dinner outings. Yes, the convention was a LOT more complex!

How did Group Corvair get involved in the 1991 convention? As best as I can determine, the idea came about after the 1987 CORSA Convention that had been held in Chicago. Mike Harrison and Ward and Carol Bourgondien had attended. At the time, Mike was heavily involved in CORSA Concours and Ward was the Group Corvair president and on the CORSA Board of Directors. It's not clear whose idea it was, but we listed the 1991 CORSA Convention as an upcoming event in our October 1987 newsletter. And in November '87, Ward reported that Mike Harrison had volunteered to be Convention Chairman and was drafting a bid letter. Our "Letter of Intent" went into CORSA in January 1988.

In July 1988, we made our presentation to the CORSA board at the Ashville, NC, CORSA



Ward Bourgondien and Mike Harrison

Convention. Mike Harrison had put together the pitch and it went over very well. (It didn't hurt that about 40 members of Group Corvair attended the convention as a show of support.) Shortly afterward, CORSA notified us that we'd been selected to host the 1991 CORSA International Convention!

There were likely a lot of things going on over the next year and a half, but the next time the newsletter has anything significant to report was in April – May 1989. We'd put together the primary committees for the convention starting with what many people consider the most important – Hospitality.

| Hospitality: | Jane Lewis, Barbara Torbert, Bobby Trevet |
|-------------------|---|
| Program: | Aldo Argentieri, Warren Friberg |
| Vendors and Tech: | Bob Lewis, John Moody, Rich Morris |
| Registration: | Jim & Marolyn Simpson |
| CORSA Liaison: | Ward Bourgondien |

(Not listed was the Concours; but it's a safe bet that Mike Harrison had that in hand. Besides, CORSA itself takes a close interest in this event – so much so, that's it's almost out of the sponsoring club's hands.)

In November 1989 we started the design competition for our convention logo. Ultimately Pete Frailey won the design with a combination of themes that captured the Washington DC location, Corvairs, and our own club logo.

Then in December we formed a Convention Committee Board that met outside of the regular club meetings. We were in final negotiations with the hotel – at that time the "Howard Johnson Plaza Hotel" in New Carrollton. (That was an interesting



experience; the hotel changed names a couple times including "Sheraton Plaza", and finally settled on being the "Sheraton Greenbelt Hotel". And with every name change, there seemed to be a turnover in management as well. We had to re-educate the new team on the terms of our contract and what they'd signed up for regarding the convention.)

A major milestone was the 1990 CORSA International Convention in Ontario, CA. Several Group Corvair members attended to "show the flag" – Ward had printed some t-shirts in either fluorescent yellow or green to advertise our convention – but the major business was to present the CORSA Board with our convention package showing we had our act together. Overall, the Board liked our package; they did go over our planning with a fine

tooth comb with an emphasis on the budget. They assumed a somewhat lower turnout than we had, but in either case, the budget remained in the black. With regard to the events, they really liked our innovation of separating the Rally and Econorun into two separate events. And yes, the t-shirts worked. We got a lot of attention with questions about the convention and promises of "we'll be there".

In addition to our presentation to CORSA, in 1990 Group Corvair started practicing for the moving events. We held the first of three rallies as well as holding a couple championship Autocrosses. They all went well and gave us good experience we'd need for the convention.

By early December 1990, the host hotel already had 33 rooms booked for the convention; that was just the start. By the 1st of March, the count was up to over 130 with only 100 more available. The hotel was fully booked by the 1st of April with latecomers having to go to the nearby Holiday Inn, Days Inn and Red Roof Inn! And we hadn't started the convention's early registration yet; that started with the May issue of the CORSA Communique.

Finally, the big day arrived! Monday, July 22 and it was time to set everything up.





(Clockwise from the upper left: Marolyn Simpson and Ward Bourgondien delivering supplies. Ben Petree bringing a supply of "The Washington Times" newspapers with an article about the convention. Bob Lewis delivering the Fitch Phoenix from its home in Connecticut.)







(Clockwise from the upper left: The Fitch Phoenix is positioned and temporarily guarded by a phalanx of chairs. Ward Bourgondien and his mother Lois sorting Cathy Cotrofeld (on the right) supervising

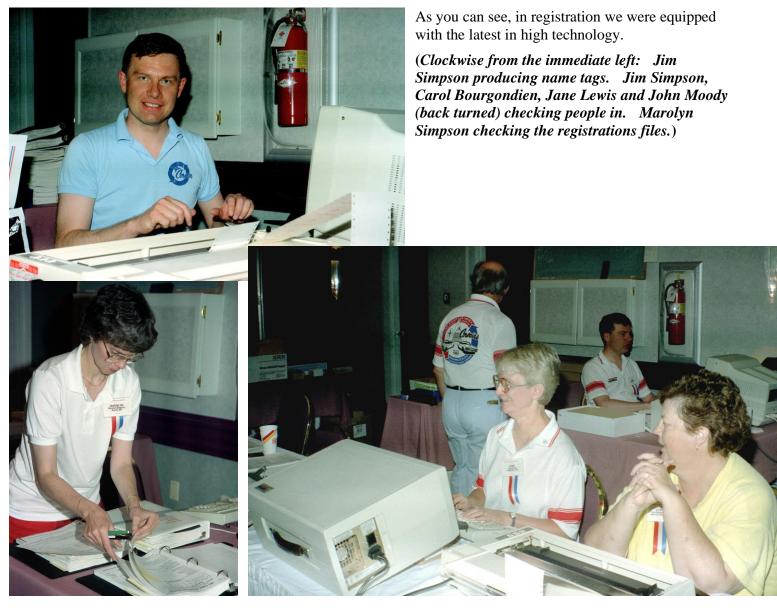
convention t-shirts. Registration is finally set up and ready to go. setting up the attendance map.)

Tuesday morning and we were ready to go. And the conventioneers arrived!





And of course, they all had to pick up their registration materials. (Thank you everyone who pre-registered! You have no idea how much that helped.)



While there are major events scheduled throughout every CORSA Convention, the earliest and longest running is the vendors and flea market.







(Clockwise from upper left: Outdoor vendors. Seth Emerson and his Silicon Wire Products. Gary Segal and his treasures for sale. Digging for buried treasures.)



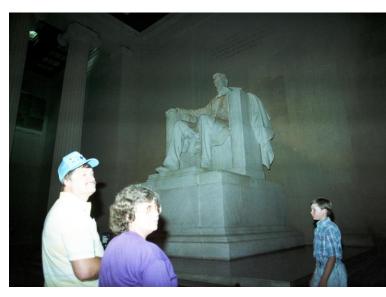
Tuesday night was the first of two night tours of Washington DC. For people who have never seen Washington by night, it can be truly spectacular.

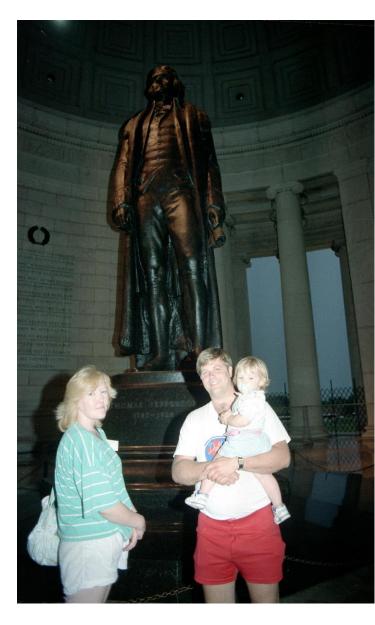




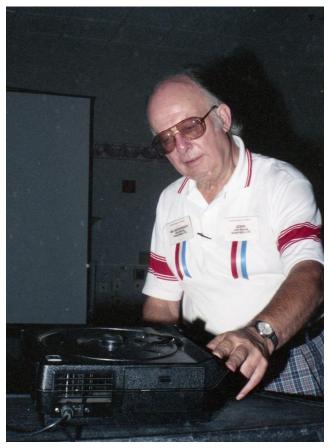


(Clockwise from upper right: United States Capital Building. Lincoln Memorial. Thomas Jefferson Memorial. Kennedy Center of the Performing Arts. Washington Monument and Reflecting Pool.)





Tech Sessions and tours were the highlights for **Wednesday**. Visitors from out of the area got to visit the historic capital of Maryland and home of the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis. For the rest, there were tech sessions and specialty group meetings.



(Left to right: John Moody preparing a tech session on the intricacies of the Corvair Fuel Pump. Maryland Capital Building.)



Thursday morning it rained! And of course this was the day for the Concours and car display. But when has a little water from the sky ever discouraged a Corvair owner? Besides, it was something of a respite from the heat...

By the afternoon, the rain had gone away and everyone could get out there and admire all the cars.

Thursday afternoon was time for the model car judging.



Mark Holmlund, Kemp Swiney, Randy Morris and Pete Frailey Judging Model Cars





Thursday night was party night, the dinner cruise on the "Spirit of Washington". Barbara Torbert was in charge and made sure everyone made it to the waterfront, boarded our cruise liner, and then arrived back at the hotel safely. Considering we had 374 rather independent Corvair owners involved, that was a major feat of logistics.





(Clockwise from left above: Barbara Torbert explaining how the transportation and dinner cruise will work – "You WILL be at the curb at 6 p.m. sharp!". Loading the buses. Revelers on the dinner cruise. Entertainers/servers on the Spirit of Washington.



Everyone seemed to recover well from the festivities on the dinner cruise so it was back to the business of the convention on **Friday** with the Rally, Econorun, and a presentation by the legendary John Fitch all on the schedule. As noted earlier, we split the Rally and Econorun events this year. Unlike the day before, the weather cooperated and it was bright and sunny (or more accurately, hot and humid – typical of Washington in the summer).





(Clockwise from upper left: Jim Simpson explaining the in's and out's of a Time-Speed-Distance (TSD) Rally. The glazed look on the Rally participants – "What have we gotten into?". Yes, both a driver and a navigator are required. Checking the cars out at the start of the Rally. Jim Simpson, John Moody, and Marolyn Simpson tallying the results of the Rally.

Gary Segal and the Corsa of Baltimore club took on the responsibility for the Econorun and did a superb job.





(At left, Gary Segal making sure each car is properly filled. Above, the Corsa of Baltimore team at work.)

Once everyone had returned from the Rally and Econorun **Friday afternoon** (and yes, we did have some folks get a bit lost), it was time for John Fitch's presentation. In the outside chance you aren't familiar with John Fitch, here's an excerpt from Wikipedia: "John Cooper Fitch (August 4, 1917 – October 31, 2012) was an American racing driver and inventor. He was the first American to race automobiles successfully in Europe in the post-war era.

In the course of a driving career which spanned 18 years, Fitch won such notable sports car races as the Gran Premio de Eva Duarte Perón – Sport, 1953 12 Hours of Sebring, 1955 Mille Miglia (production car class), and the 1955 RAC Tourist Trophy, as well as numerous SCCA National Sports Car Championship races. He was also involved in Briggs Cunningham's ambitious Le Mans projects in the early 1950s, and was later a member of the Mercedes-Benz sport car team. He also competed in two World Championship Grands Prix.

After retirement in 1964, Fitch was the manager of Lime Rock circuit, and a former team boss of Chevrolet's Corvette racing team. His biggest legacy is motor sport safety, as well as pioneering work to improve road car safety, and this has helped save countless lives. He had worked on advanced driver safety capsule systems. He was also a track design consultant, as well as inventing many other automotive devices. Even into his 90s, Fitch was still a consultant, and appeared at historic events."

Not mentioned in this short summary are John's involvement with the Corvair. He was the creator of both the Fitch Sprint and the Fitch Phoenix. When the Corvair first came out, John Fitch recognized its potential as a sports car long before Chevrolet made any moves in that direction. He created the "Sprint" package in which he tweaked just about all aspects of the car including the suspension, engine, lighting, and overall ergonomics to transform what had started as a rather pedestrian passenger car into a truly sporting road car. There were both early and late versions that are highly sought for today. In the mid-1960s he went a major step farther when he designed and built the Fitch Phoenix. This unique two place sports car used a modified late model Corvair platform – running gear and engine – with a body built by Intermeccanica of Turin, Italy. While there was one prototype built and shown at the New York Auto Show with numerous orders placed, it got tangled up in the newly instituted automobile safety regulations and was never produced. (There was no way that John Fitch could afford to build the requisite number of crash test vehicles needed to demonstrate the car's safety. He closed down the program and fully refunded all the pre-production deposits.)



We were extremely fortunate to have John Fitch come



to the convention and display his unique Fitch Phoenix. He gave an excellent presentation on his career, the Fitch Sprint, Fitch Phoenix and his contributions to automobile safety. (And we owed a special thanks to Bob & Jane Lewis who safely transported the Phoenix down from its home in Lime Rock, Connecticut and back again!)

(Clockwise from above: Early Model Fitch Sprint. John Fitch signing autographs. Late model Fitch Sprint and owner.)

Strangely, neither John Fitch nor the Fitch Phoenix were mentioned in the *CORSA Communique* writeups! No commentary, no photos, nothing. Ron Fedorczak was unable to locate any photos of the Phoenix other than the one with the chairs surrounding it.





(Clockwise from top: Fitch Phoenix on the transporter. The Phoenix's four-carb engine, rated at 170 Hp. A rare look at the interior of the Phoenix.)

The summer weather around the Washington DC area is very easy to predict – hot, hazy, humid, and chance of thundershowers. Usually, the thundershowers are in the afternoon, but on Saturday the rains came early and stayed most of the day. Unfortunately, **Saturday** was also the day for the Autocross! The good news is that the rain was a great equalizer – everyone ran on a wet track – and it also gave cars running on street tires a more equal chance.

After the Autocross, everyone returned to the convention hotel for a surprise presentation. Ralph Nader, consumer advocate, presidential candidate, and author of the book "Unsafe At Any Speed" came and spoke. And of course along with Mr. Nader came the press.

There were about 400 seats in the ballroom, and all were filled with more people standing in the aisles. It was packed.

Ralph Nader is an accomplished speaker and knows how to work his audience. He started out with placing –very carefully – a model 1960 Corvair on the podium, quipping "Gotta set it just right so it doesn't go our of control". Later he noted that a car magazine had pointed out "the Corvair presents a real challenge to driving expertise" and

then commented "So I'm convinced in this room are some of the best drivers in America". So when he was finished, despite his somewhat "dubious" reputation with Corvair owners, he received a standing ovation.



(Clockwise from the upper left: Michelle LeVeque in the "LeVeque Spyder" about to make her run in the rain. Chuck Sadek seemed to enjoy both the rain and autocross. Randy Morris flagging off Jack Dempsey on a demonstration run with a cameraman from "Evening Edition" showing just how well a Corvair handles even in bad conditions. The packed ballroom listening to Ralph Nader. Local TV press and Ralph Nader's "Evening Edition" film crews. Ralph Nader – note the small green early model Corvair model just barely visible on the podium.)



(Ralph Nader and Larry Rollow (President of CORSA) in an early Corvair. No, they did NOT go for a drive!)

So how did Ralph Nader come to be at the 1991 CORSA International convention? There are two sources to draw on. First are the articles in the September 1991 issue of the *CORSA Communique*. Ward Bourgondien's article led back to Ed Thompson of the Milwaukee Corvair Club. I (Jim Simpson) interviewed him over the telephone and here's the background story:

Ed Thompson said he is "one of three" people responsible for getting Ralph Nader to speak at the 1991 Group Corvair CORSA Convention.

In September 1990, he and some other Corvair enthusiasts saw an advertisement for a consumer/auto safety event in Milwaukee featuring Ralph Nader and possibly Joan Claybrook. This was the 25th anniversary of Nader's book "Unsafe At Any Speed" and coincidently the event cost \$25. They thought it would be an interesting event and a hoot to drive a Corvair to the presentation. (They did drive a "daily driver" Corvair and while it did catch some attention, it was 25 years after Nader's book. By then the Corvair had faded from the public's consciousness.)

After the event, they went up to speak to Mr. Nader. At the time, Mr. Nader had an assistant who buffered these conversations and most of the chat was with him. They spent some time talking about the Corvair and the influence of "Unsafe At Any Speed". During that conversation, Ed brought up the fact that CORSA had annual conventions and that the next one

Ed Thompson

(1991) was going to be in Mr. Nader's neighborhood – the Washington DC area. They suggested that Mr. Nader might be interested in speaking although Ed cautioned that he could not speak for either CORSA or the convention sponsors (Group Corvair) but that he was pretty sure that there would be no honorarium. He did promise, however, that they could provide transportation (in a Corvair) to the convention should Mr. Nader chose to come.

They did receive a card with contact information, but also something of a "brush-off" comment that "it was way in the future, too far off to plan anything".

This contact was relayed to Larry Rollow, then president of CORSA. He was somewhat skeptical and couldn't commit to having Nader at the 1991 convention since it was being organized by Group Corvair under Ward Bourgondien's leadership. In any case, the information was passed to Ward (and likely Kemp Swiney, president, Group Corvair). (At this point, the trail runs cold regarding who and when contacts were made.)

Ed Thompson was present at the '91 convention and acted as a scout for Mr. Nader's arrival. He noted that Ralph Nader arrived in a Sterling; the Sterling was a collaboration between British Rover and Japanese Honda. It was based upon the Honda/Acura Legend platform but with British interior design. (It also had some issues such as using Lucas electronics and overall poor build quality.)

And Ralph Nader still recalls the 1991 convention. From the August/September issue of *Road & Track:* "**R&T**: Since we're clearing the air, do you have a message for the Corvair fans? **Ralph Nader**: They should be worried about how the Corvair treated people. Just look at [John DeLorean's account] <u>On a Clear Day You Can See</u> <u>General Motors</u>. There's a lot of stuff on the Corvair from the executives themselves about the kids killed in Grosse Pointe and all that. You know, 30 years ago, I was invited to speak to the Corvair Society of America. They had a gathering in the Maryland suburbs outside Washington. They had hundreds of Corvairs in the parking lot, all nice and shiny. I walked in and everybody was very cordial, but there was a real silence in the room. So, I said, "Look, there's one thing we agree on: In this room are some of the best drivers in America – because you have to be." Have you ever been in a Corvair? They're unbelievably tight and uncomfortable if you're anything over 5'10". I don't know how anyone bought that car in terms of comfort. It's a pretty car, no doubt. You know, we have one at the tort museum."

So how did we do? The official records were that we processed 507 registrations, both family and individual and printed off 930 nametags. It's a bit hard to make comparisons with other CORSA conventions, but we had 131 cars combined in the car display and concours while there were 105 and 106 in the preceding and following conventions respectively. Similarly, we had 560 in the awards banquet vs 540 and 472 in those nearest conventions. So the raw statistics were good.

But probably the best way to determine just how things went is to go to the CORSA Communique, particularly the September 1991 issue, and read the reports. Virtually all were very positive; the only negative was a letter to the editor critiquing some aspects of the concours. (Concours is a perennial issue.) If you don't have a copy of the September *CORSA Communique*, and you are a member of CORSA, you can download it from their web site: https://www.corvair.org/index.php/publications/publication-archives-pdf/file/257-1991-september

Vair Vendor

For Sale: 1965 Corvair Monza 4-door sedan, 140 hp/4-speed. Restoration completed in 1984 at which time it scored 92 points at the CORSA N.C. Concours. Less than 20,000 miles and garage kept ever since. Tinted glass, reclining Volvo front seats, under-dash AM/FM/CD with four speakers, Corsa instrument panel, recent gas tank replacement. Painted 1979 Corvette "Frost Beige" with black interior. The main issue is some cracking of the lacquer paint applied in 1984. There is a small oil leak near the oil cooler. This is a nice driving Corvair with good power. Located near Petersburg, VA. Asking \$7500. Wade Lanning, cell/text 804-586-1023. Email wblanning@comcast.net for a pdf file with more details and lots of pictures.



More Pictures From the Convention (Photos of the Convention are courtesy of Ron Fedorczak and Bob Lewis)

