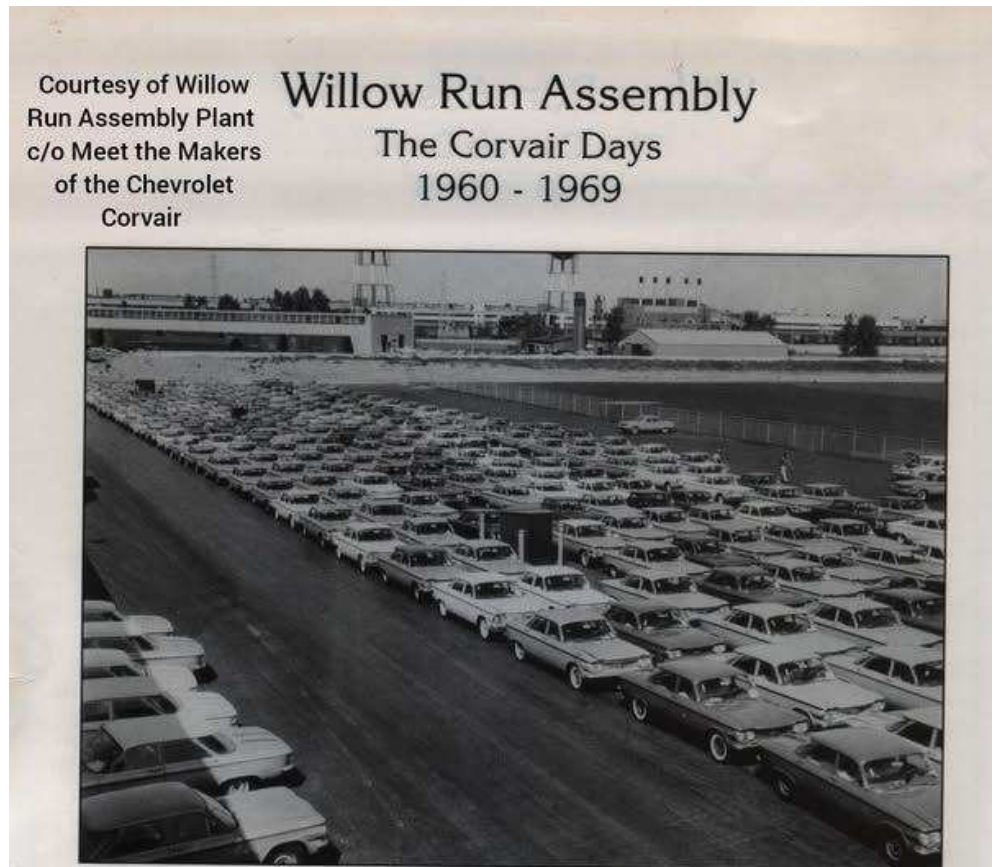


Meet the Makers of the Chevrolet Corvair

By Eva McGuire Corvair Historian/Creator Meet the Makers of the Chevrolet Corvair
(Photos courtesy of GM)

This day in Corvair History... On April 11, 1958, the secret that General Motors would build a small compact car at the Willow Run Assembly Plant in Ypsilanti Twp., Michigan, was leaked out by United Auto Worker, Dave Mann.



I have a small story to add to the leaking news of the Corvair being made by GM at the Willow Run Assembly Plant (where most were built). Several former Willow Run UAW auto workers, who were there back in the day when those first Corvairs rolled off the line, told me that the Corvair Plant Manager had ordered lots of heavy material to be carefully placed on the fence around the perimeter of the Willow Run Plant to ensure no one (especially the press) could see what was going on inside the parking lot area.

After the first day of production on July 7, 1959, many of the newly made 1960 Corvairs were being held in storage until they could be carrier transported by rail and truck to Chevrolet dealerships awaiting to be purchased by excited buyers on their official public introduction date of Oct. 2, 1959. It was a big deal back then to keep newly made vehicles under wraps until they were unveiled to the public, but this car was especially unique due to it being the first American mass produced compact car with new features of an air-cooled rear mounted aluminum engine, integrated transaxle, four-wheel independent suspension, and GM's first unibody constructed car. The Corvair's unibody construction

meant the body and chassis were integrated into a single, lightweight structure.

That being said, it was relayed to me that a reporter was found snooping around the plant grounds and found a poked out hole in the fence material and was able to take a photo of the fender portion that was pressed up against the fence of one of these new cars. Was this fender discovery an accident? Nope!

I was told that the Plant Manager himself had that hole poked out on purpose and in that specific spot so that someone (namely, a curious reporter) could discover a small portion of this car with the hopes of them publishing a sneak peek photo. The manager was careful not to reveal too much so more excitement would be generated making people more curious and wanting to purchase one of these cars.

We don't know if that photo was ever published in the local newspaper. I doubt it was as the workers saved items like this; but it definitely created a local buzz among the plant workers through word of mouth. Vairy clever marketing. It makes me wonder if the manager did that of his own accord or did that idea (or directive) come from higher up PR officials within General Motors? Hmmm. You decide.

***BONUS FIRST HAND STORY...**At one point, there was no more room to store the first several thousand newly made 1960 Corvairs at the plant before the launch date of October 2, 1959, so they transported the overflow of cars to be stored at the GM Milford Proving Ground until they could be shipped out to dealerships. One day at work, auto worker Dominick Orlando, (the gentleman who started the first made Corvair) was approached by Bob Hatfield, the Assistant Superintendent of the Willow Run Plant. Dominick was in the Department of Traffic at the time. Bob and Dominick both had a love of fishing and had previous talks about their favorite pastime. On this particular day, Bob asked Dominick if he still owned his fishing waders because he wanted to take him out to Milford. Bob didn't give Dominick any details of what was happening. Dominick told Bob that he did, indeed, still have his waders and got excited thinking that Bob was going to take him fishing because Cass Lake was near Milford...but that wasn't the reason.

When Dominick and Bob arrived at the GM Proving Ground, Dominick saw something that he said he'll never forget...approximately 250-300 Corvairs drowning in a lake! Apparently, some of the Corvairs that were parked were stored in a dry lake bed that hadn't seen water in many years, and there had been a terrible rain storm that occurred drowning the cars. When Dominick saw these cars, Bob then asked him, "Do you know what these waders are for now?" Dominick responded with an affirmative deflated mutter, "Uh huh." According to Dominick, they had guys pulling these Corvairs out and; at one point, they even tried using snorkels on the exhaust pipes in attempts to start some of the cars while under water! Dominick stated, "You're trying to start a Corvair using a snorkel? Come on, guys!" Dominick was not amused. He also mentioned that he sat in a few of those drowned Corvairs in the middle of the lake bed trying to start them and the water level covered his lower legs and knees, and even went up to the seat level!

Another former Willow Run worker, Dave Polmounter, was also sent to the Proving Ground with other plant workers to help fix and restore the drowned Corvairs. After putting in a regular shift at the plant, Dave told me they would take workers from different departments at Fisher Body, transport them by bus out to the GM Proving Ground, and work under tents. Dave stated that some of the cars started and some didn't. His department had to change all the trim including floor mats, seats, door panels, and even some of the headliners had to be replaced because of water damage. They did manage to fix all the Corvairs and they all got sold...

***BELIEVE IT OR NOT...**The 1960 Corvair was officially first introduced to the world in Europe at the Paris Auto Show on October 1, 1959, (one day prior to the U.S. launch). Europe saw it first! I'm sure there was press at this show (including GM Photographers) who took pictures, but; back in those days, you couldn't send a photo that quickly to the U.S.A. (not like today)...so introducing the Corvair to the U.S. market the following day on Oct. 2, 1959, guaranteed that no photos were leaked out until after

that U.S. launch date. I'm sure that GM/Chevrolet purposely made the decision to showcase their new compact car in Europe as they didn't want to miss out on such an opportunity to introduce this unique Air-cooled Wonder at a prestigious auto show where a lot of new production and concept cars were introduced. I will even go so far as to speculate that GM possibly chose the date of Oct. 2nd to officially launch the new Corvair to the U.S. market because of the Paris Auto Show starting on October 1st.

***CORVAIR LAUNCH A SUCCESS...**The Corvair design was well received worldwide and was considered a new revolutionary benchmark in styling with its simple unbroken wraparound belt line which became known as the "Corvair Line." This line visually divided the car into upper and lower sections with various downward dips and curves. Other car manufacturers took design cues from the Corvair for their own vehicles such as the British Sunbeam, early Fiats, Lancia Fulvia Coupé, Daf 44 and Volkswagen T34 Karmann Ghia and the 1961 NSU Prinz were just a few good examples of incorporating partial Corvair lines.

By: Eva "Corvair Lady" McGuire, Corvair Historian/Creator
Meet the Makers of the Chevrolet Corvair
#preservingcorvairhistory

(Photo of plant parking lot courtesy of General Motors and Willow Run Assembly Plant)

***Please contact the writer of this article to obtain permission for reprinting. Thank you.**

Glen Rittenhouse follows sales on Bring-a-trailer. Last month he spotted this Corvair listed on the site.



Project car, yet parts may be worth more then selling price - \$1,250



Reasonable priced for both buyer and seller. Win/win. Sold for \$12,250



Nice Car, tastefully modified. Buyer may have come out better then seller on price. Sold for \$22,000



1961 Rampside sold for \$19,250. Good price for this truck. Closer inspection shows rust bubbles under the paint.



1963 Monza Spyder Convertible. Nice car, well equipped, priced right. Sold for 26,000

Repeat AD: Mike Hall is trying to reduce the size of his Corvair fleet. This includes a 62 Spyder Coupe, a 65 red coupe, and a late model 4 door. It also includes a Parade ready Rampside equipped with PG - good for parades. These are all show ready although maybe note top notch Concours, they would all score well. Give Mike a call – work out a deal – and have fun playing with your new toy.