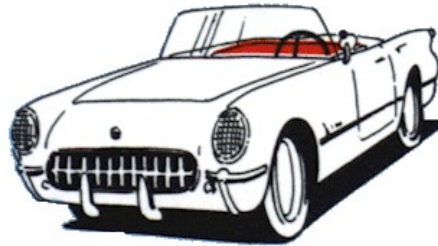


1954

Early in 1953, the St. Louis, Missouri plant had started retooling to deal with anticipated customer demand for the company's sports cars or mass-produced amounts would give production starting with the 1954 model year.



Chevrolet plant in St. Louis had been put on notice to start retooling with anticipated demand for the company's sports car field. Hand-built production in limited way to volume.

As with many rookies, however, the Corvette would suffer a form of "Sophomore Jinx." The renovated St. Louis plant was scheduled to manufacture 10,000 Corvettes annually, but sales engineers misjudged demand.

A number of reasons may be attributed to this shortfall, not least of which was a mistake in the marketing approach when the Corvette was first introduced the year before. When the prototype was unveiled at GM's Motorama Exhibit early in 1953, show visitors asked how soon would the car be available and for how much. The public was ready.

But, when production models became available later that year, they were not aimed at the general public, but as display or demonstration models so selected dealers could generate interest. Cars were moved from dealer to dealer within a given sales territory for brief appearances locally. And, in an effort to portray the Corvette as a "prestige" and "exclusive" automobile, sales were restricted to opinion leaders, favorite customers and VIPs in the respective sales territories. As a result, John Q. Public effectively was shut out of the market.

But, those target audiences were apathetic and the general consensus was that the company wasn't really committed to the Corvette over the long haul. Momentum was lost and GM management seriously considered pulling the plug and cutting its losses.

Despite being on less than solid ground, management remained committed to its mission. Modifications and improvements were soon moving from the drawing board into engineering, and production commenced.

The camshaft was modified in mid-year to increase the six-cylinder block's rating to 155 horsepower. The "Powerglide" automatic transmission remained standard, however, exterior color options were enlarged from basic Polo White to Pennant Blue, Sportsman Red and a limited number in Black; soft top roofs were also available in beige and production model tires were upgraded from tube-type to tubeless. The stainless steel exhaust pipes, located low in the rear fascia, had a tendency to stain the paint finish, so they were lengthened. The two-handle hood latch release system, found in the 1953, proved cumbersome and was replaced by a single release handle.

The basic Corvette sold for \$2,774, down from the inaugural year, probably due to economies derived from mass production. And, the number of options available increased significantly.

Extras included windshield washers, whitewalls, directional signals, radio and heater, a parking brake alarm and courtesy lights.

Despite the fact that the market wasn't solid, 1954 production rose twelve-fold to over 3,640 units, but about one-third remained unsold at year's end. The 10,000 annual production mark wouldn't be realized until 1960. Still, not too shabby a start for an upstart.

But, what could be done to regenerate the initial wave of interest and restore faith and confidence in a car that could be miles ahead of its competitors? Part of the answer would come in 1955.