



# ***the fifth wheel***

DECEMBER 2012

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## **John Cooper Fitch 1917 - 2012**

**War Hero - Racing Champion - Safety Advocate -  
Corvair Enthusiast**



*John Fitch at the age of 93 enjoying his Corvair-based Fitch Phoenix prototype sports car.*

*The Fifth Wheel* is published monthly by the Lehigh Valley Corvair Club (LVCC), Inc. We accept articles of interest to Corvair owners for publication. Classified advertising of interest to Corvair owners is available free of charge to all persons. Commercial advertising is also available on a fee basis. Please contact our newsletter editor, Allan Lacki for details.

LVCC is one of the many regional chapters of the Corvair Society of America (CORSA), a non-profit organization that was incorporated to satisfy the common needs of individuals interested in the preservation, restoration, and operation of the Chevrolet Corvair. LVCC caters to Corvair people who live in and around the Lehigh Valley Region of eastern Pennsylvania. This is a very special car club! LVCC dues are \$10 a year for CORSA members or \$15 a year for non-CORSA members.

## **REMEMBERING JOHN FITCH, by Bob Marlow**

The Corvair had no greater friend than John Fitch, and at the mention of his name those of us in the Corvair hobby immediately think of the Fitch Sprint and the Fitch Phoenix. But the Corvair was only a small part of the extraordinary life of John Cooper Fitch, who died in late October at the age of 95. Piloting a P-51 Mustang, he shot down a German Messerschmitt jet fighter during World War II. He was later shot down himself and spent three months in POW camps. Taking up racing after the war, he was the only American driver invited to join Mercedes' factory team and became the lead driver on the Corvette's first racing team. He raced for Briggs Cunningham and he was the SCCA's first national champion.

He was kissed by Eva Peron, the legendary Evita, after he won the 1951 Grand Prix of Argentina, and he set a speed record at Lime Rock...for driving backwards. He drove Glenn Pray's Cord 8/10 through a block wall to demonstrate the impact resistance of the car's Cyclac body, and he helped design, build, and manage the Lime Rock Park track. During his racing career he was teamed with drivers ranging from Phil Walters, who raced oval track midgets under the



*John Fitch driving a Mercedes Benz 300 SLR (Car 106) in the Tarqa Florio in Sicily, 1955.*



*John Fitch piloting the American-built Cunningham C5, 1953.*



*John Fitch at Daytona, 1956.*

name of Ted Tappet, to Sir Stirling Moss, with whom Fitch was reunited during the 2012 Vintage Festival at Lime Rock. At age 88 he attempted to set a land speed record at Bonneville, to go along with the speed record he set on the Daytona Beach sands in the 1950s.

While Fitch won many significant races, a career highlight, and one which he remembered with pride, was winning the GT production-car division at the 1955 Mille Miglia endurance race in Italy in a Mercedes-Benz 300 SL.

He hobnobbed with everyone from Orville Wright to Noël Coward to the Duke of Windsor, and he was happy to hobnob with Corvair owners. He moved gracefully through high society, the halls of industry, and the racing pits.

Whether you realize it or not, you have seen his work. He invented the Fitch Inertial Barrier, the sand-filled yellow plastic barrels at highway exit ramps and bridge abutments that progressively slow a car and cushion the blow in a crash. The Fitch barriers have saved many thousands of lives and



untold millions of dollars in property damage and medical expenses.

The patent for the Fitch barrier was one of over a dozen patents awarded to Fitch, most of them for safety improvements for racing and for highways. His passion for safety was inspired by the horrific 1955 crash at 24 Hour race in LeMans, in which the car driven by his teammate, Pierre Levegh, left the track and killed more than 80 persons, including Levegh.

While Fitch stopped racing competitively in 1966, he never stopped thinking, inventing, creating. It was in 1962 that Fitch introduced his modifications to the Corvair, transforming it into the Sprint, a car that in Fitch's view more fully exploited the Corvair's potential to be a true European-style GT car. He then developed the Phoenix, which utilized Corvair mechanicals, but the passage of the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act in 1966, with its requirement for crash-testing, killed plans to produce the Phoenix for public sale.

Fitch retained the one prototype of the Phoenix and continued to drive it regularly for more than 45 years. NJACE had the honor of displaying the car at the 2010 Franklin Lakes show. The 1966 Fitch Sprint that is owned today by the Corvair Preservation Foundation is on display at the Automotive Museum in Saratoga Springs, New York. It is our understanding that Fitch arranged for the Phoenix to go the Saratoga Museum as well.

Fitch remained a staunch defender of the Corvair against allegations of safety defects and remained dismissive of Ralph Nader, whose writings he termed "fictions." At the same time, Fitch remained miffed at Chevrolet for, in his view, copying the style of the Phoenix for the 1968 Corvette.

Fitch is survived by his sons Stephen, John and Christopher, and several grandchildren. His wife, Elizabeth, died in 2009.

The authorized biography of John Fitch published in 1993 is entitled, "Racing Through Life." It was an extraordinary life, the life of a genuine hero, a gifted driver, a brilliant innovator, and a true gentleman.

—Bob Marlow

### ***INTERMECCANICA & THE PHOENIX, by Al Lacki***

Intermeccanica is a company based in British Columbia, Canada that manufactures high-end replicas of the iconic Porsche 356. These are not kit cars, but finely crafted hand-built roadsters with modern suspension and power-train components. Would you like to buy one? Call the proprietor, Henry Reisner, at (604-872-4747) and be prepared to write a check for \$70,000!



*1963 Fitch Sprint. owned by CORSA member Rick Loving.*



*1966 Fitch Sprint owned by CORSA member Tim Mahler.*



*The Fitch Phoenix prototype at Franklin Lakes. LVCC members Ron Peles and Allan Lacki discuss the Phoenix with NECC President Brian O'Neill. Brian and Bob Marlow were personal friends of John Fitch in his later years, and helped to maintain the Phoenix in good running order.*



Intermeccanica was originally established in 1959 by Henry's father, Frank Reisner, in Turin, Italy. Frank was not an Italian by birth. He was born in Hungary of Jewish parentage, fled to Canada with his parents during World War II, was educated as an engineer in the United States, moved to France, and settled in Italy, more or less because he liked the Italian life style.

Frank was multi-lingual, knew the local dialect of Turin, and had business savvy. His wife, Paula, was also a World War II refugee. Her father had been a vice president of the Czech motorcycle manufacturer, JAWA, and she shared Frank's enthusiasm for things automotive.

In the beginning, Frank and Paula's

company, Intermeccanica, made tuning parts for small racing cars. But Turin was a bustling manufacturing town, and its population included many men who knew the subtle art of shaping sheet metal into complex forms using basic tools. It did not take long for Intermeccanica to enter the business of building custom car bodies for fledgling auto manufacturers.

By 1961, Intermeccanica had been commissioned by International Motor Cars Company to construct bodies for the Apollo GT sports car. The business relationship lasted until 1965, by which time, Intermeccanica had built 100 of these Buick-powered coupes. Frank Reisner's small company was beginning to get noticed.

Robert Cumberford, a designer who had left the GM Styling Department, decided to join Frank's staff. Cumberford penned a beautiful two-seat body for a Chrysler-powered sports coupe engineered by John Crosthwaite, who had worked for Cooper, Lotus, BRM, and Mickey Thompson. The project was backed by Jack Griffith, who had been an importer for TVR. Jack named the car the Griffith GT, but after a run of only fourteen cars, Griffith's firm foundered.

The Griffith GT was too good to be abandoned, and another financier, named Steve Wilder, commissioned Intermeccanica to continue the run. Wilder renamed the car "Omega", and switched from Chrysler power to Ford

*(Continued on page 5)*

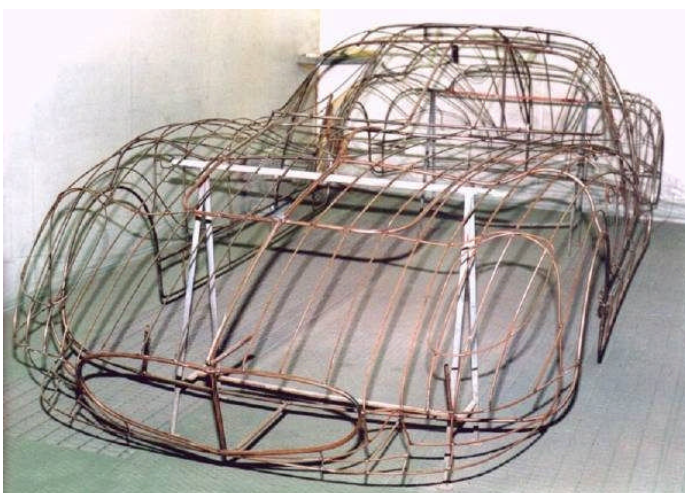
*Intermeccanica produced the Ford-powered Italia sports car around the time John Fitch commissioned the Fitch Phoenix.*



*Little is written about it, but for a short while, John Fitch was the American importer of the sleek Bizzarrini 5300 GT.*



*Example of a wooden station buck. Bertone made this one for production of bodies for the Alfa Romeo Giulietta Sprint.*



*Example of a wire form for an unnamed sports car. This is the kind of form used by Intermeccanica for the Phoenix.*

power, but like Griffith, Wilder ran out of money.

Frank Reisner decided to take on the project himself and obtained financing from an Italian bank. Frank renamed the car "Torino", but Ford Motor Company already had rights to that name. So, the name was changed once again, this time to "Italia", and the attractive hand-built sports car finally entered series production.

Intermeccanica turned out approximately 100 Italias per year for about three years.

#### Enter John Fitch.

Around this time, John Fitch became interested in working with Italian specialty car manufacturers, and for a very short while, his company became the sole American importer of the Corvette-powered Bizzarrini 5300 GT. Although the Bizzarrini was not associated with Intermeccanica, Giotto Bizzarrini was an acquaintance of Frank Reisner, and perhaps John Fitch was introduced to Frank Reisner through Bizzarrini.

John Fitch had been contemplating building a car under his own name for some time. His friend, famed illustrator Coby Whitmore, drew sketches for a racy Corvair-powered two-seater which embodied John's thoughts and ideas. John's plan was to have the body fabricated in fiberglass, but when he visited the Intermeccanica shop in Turin, he was highly impressed by the quality of the steel bodywork being done for Frank Reisner's other clients. And so, John Fitch commissioned In-

termeccanica to craft the prototype Phoenix. John talked about a run of 500 cars per year, but his first order was for just one car.

Coby Whitmore's drawings provided a starting point, and work progressed very quickly to a full-scale mockup. After John Fitch and Coby Whitmore were satisfied with the mockup, Robert Cumberland transferred the mock-up's

sive dies, but this is clearly uneconomical for prototypes and small-runs. Workers at Intermeccanica used small tools, such as hammers, dollies, English wheels, planishing machines, tubing notchers, bead-ers, sheet metal brakes and shears. To determine the shape of the panels, they used patterns, full-scale three-dimensional patterns.

There are several methods of building 3D patterns for prototype cars. Craftsmen who work in fiberglass often make sacrificial forms out of plastic foam panels. But craftsmen who work in steel typically use either wooden "station bucks" or wire forms. They are the skeleton over which the shaped metal is checked.

A station buck is made out of sheets of wood which, when fastened together, take on the appearance of an oversized egg crate. It is not a full-surface representation of the body of the car, but its outside edges include all the edges, creases, and transitions between the body's concave and convex curves.



*Before initiating work on the Phoenix, John Fitch made a proposal to SCCA for a low-cost formula racing car, supported by these illustrations by Coby Whitmore. Racing car engineer Jerry Mong fabricated a steel chassis for this Corvair-powered "Super Sprint" special, but the bodywork was never finished. Fitch's proposal was trumped by Formula V. These illustrations were not for naught, for they served as the basis for Fitch Phoenix a few years later.*

dimensions onto paper taped to sheets of plywood. These full-scale drawings were sent to the Intermeccanica shop in Turin. Meanwhile, Reisner and his craftsmen had cut apart a 1965 Corvair purchased in Europe, shortening the platform and getting ready to build the custom steel body.

#### Building Bodies in Steel.

Big manufacturers stamp out steel body panels using huge presses with expen-

Typically, a station buck has a vertical center section and a horizontal section, which serve as the buck's backbone. "Stations" are attached all along the backbone approximately five inches apart. The outer perimeter of each station represents the cross-sectional shape of the final body at its particular location. The skills employed in constructing a station jig are akin to those used in the making of custom furniture. A wooden station buck can be used over and over again, and it be used as a



tacking jig - a holding device to allow accurate alignment of metal parts for tack welding. However, it is not intended for actual welding or hammering. Its purpose is similar to a dress-maker's form, to check the shape for accuracy and fit as the part is being fabricated. The working of the metal is done when it is off the buck.

Wire forms are similar in function to wooden station bucks, but they are made of steel wire instead. Full-size wire forms are made from heavy wire or light rod, typically 1/4 to 3/16 inches in diameter. The wires and rods are relatively easy to form and, once they are welded or brazed together, they remain stiff. Like a station buck, all of the important shapes and section changes must be reflected by the wire form. A good wire form can be put together faster and cheaper than a wooden station buck, but it is not as strong, and therefore, wire forms are generally used for single prototypes rather than longer production runs.

Frank Reisner was apparently happy to have John Fitch's business, but he had plenty of experience with entrepreneurs like Griffith and Wilder who, despite their credentials, could not weather the financial strain of launching their own motor car company. Frank did the smart thing; he had his craftsman build a wire form, rather than a wooden station buck, for the Fitch Phoenix prototype. And his decision proved right in the end, for only one Fitch Phoenix was ever built.

#### Dose of Reality.

This is not to say that John Fitch had any intention of negotiating in bad faith with Frank Reisner, for just the opposite was true. The Phoenix prototype was completed in 1967, and correspondence between Intermeccanica and Fitch outlines a production schedule calling for between five and 15 cars to be produced in the balance of the year.

And Fitch shipped another Corvair to Turin to get Intermeccanica working on the second Phoenix.

But quite unexpectedly, the new United States Highway Safety Act of 1966 imposed a requirement for crash-testing new vehicles, and at that time, the possibility of an exemption for the Phoenix seemed remote. At the same time, Corvair sales dropped like a stone; fallout from the Corvair safety scare. John decided it was simply not prudent to carry his plans for the Phoenix any further forward.

That second Corvair, by the way, was used by the Intermeccanica staff for some time after until it was finally stolen by gypsies! And of course, John Fitch kept the one-and-only Phoenix prototype until he passed away on October 31st. John Fitch "loved the Phoenix," said Paula Reisner. Indeed, he did.

#### Sources:

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robert\_cumberland

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### ***A WORD OF THANKS***

The lead article in this month's issue of the Fifth Wheel, "Remembering John Fitch", originally appeared in the December 2012 issue of "the Fanbelt", which is the newsletter published by the New Jersey Association of Corvair Enthusiasts. Bob Marlow, the author, granted permission for it to be published here, for LVCC members to enjoy.

Bob is quite likely the leading writer in the Corvair hobby today. His articles are succinct, poignant, and always entertaining. And it especially fitting that he should share his thoughts about John Fitch, for he knew him well.

*(Continued on page 7)*



***Bob Marlow transporting the Fitch Phoenix to the 2012 CORSA Convention in Sturbridge. July 2012.***

The Fitch Phoenix remains a fully-operational road-going car today largely due to the maintenance and loving care that Bob and his friend, Brian O'Neill devoted to that car for the last dozen years. They and the members of NJACE transported the Phoenix from John Fitch's home in Falls Village, Connecticut to shows around the Northeast, serviced the Corvair power train, upgraded the electrical wiring, and washed and waxed the car so that it looks as good as it did back in 1967.

The Corvair hobby is as vibrant as ever because of people like Bob Marlow.

Bob, We thank you!

*Thanks*

## FOUR LITTLE CORVAIRS

Four little Corvairs found new owners on December 6!

LVCC President Bill Remaly thought carefully about his collection and realized he has neither the strength, time nor space to care for his four Corvairs the way he would like to do. And so, he offered them up for auction this month. Every one of them was sold.

Bill made sure LVCC members had the opportunity to participate in the auction. If you are an LVCC member, then you received notice about the auction either by email or by US Postal a couple of weeks ago. And indeed, a good number of members participated in the auction, including Scott Oberholzer, Dennis Stamm, Wayne Trexell,

and Dick Weidner.

After the auction, Bill spoke to the successful bidders, and he feels confident that the new owners will take good care of his cars. May the four little Corvairs live happily ever after!

## LVCC MEETING NOTES

Aha! There are no meeting notes! We're off for the holidays!

But be sure to attend our next meeting, which will be held on Wednesday January 23! Usual time and place.

Call Al Lacki if the weather forecast looks grim. You can reach Al at (610) 927-1583 (home) or (610) 774-6723 (office).





## ***LVCC Calendar of Events!***



### **Friday through Sunday, January 18-20, 2013 :: Auto-Mania Parts Flea Market & Corral.**

Allentown, PA - Auto-Mania 2013, 23rd Annual Indoor Automotive Parts & Memorabilia Flea Market and Car Corral at the Agricultural Hall Allentown Fairgrounds. PA's Largest HEATED Indoor (NOW 50% Larger) Automotive Parts & Memorabilia Swap Meet and ALL NEW indoor & out door Car Corral (limited Car Corral Space so call ahead!) Admission \$7.00, Friday 12:00 noon - 9:00 pm, Saturday 9:00 am - 6:00 pm, Sunday 9:00 am - 3:00 pm!, P.S. This Event Does Not Cancel For ANY Reason! e-mail: tonyabilliii@yahoo.com or <http://www.automaniashows.com>

### **Saturday, January 19 – Sunday, January 27, 2013 :: Philadelphia International Auto Show.**

See all the new cars, including many exotics! Location: The Pennsylvania Convention Center, 1101 Arch Street, Philadelphia PA 19107. Show Hours: Saturdays: 9AM - 10PM. Sundays: 9AM - 8PM. Weekdays: 12 Noon - 10PM. Ticket Prices: Adults (age 13+): \$12.00. Seniors (age 62+): \$6.00 (weekdays only – must purchase at box office). Children (age 7-12): \$6.00. Children 6 & under: FREE with paid adult. <http://www.phillyautoshow.com/>

### **Saturday, January 19, 2013 :: Annual Snow Show at Jacktown Grove.**

Not a Corvair event, but one of the first shows of the year on the East Coast, it is on January 19 from 8AM to 4PM snow or shine. Make sure you are dressed for the weather. There will be a Gas Engine display, food available on the grounds and bring an empty soup can and get some free Hobo Stew. Blue Mountain Antique Gas and Steam Engine Association, Inc. <http://www.jacktown.org/index.htm>

### **Wednesday, January 23, 2013 :: LVCC Membership Meeting.**

Regular LVCC Club Meeting. 7:30 PM at the Lehigh and Northampton Transportation Authority (LANTA) office building in Allentown, Pennsylvania. The LANTA building is located at 1060 Lehigh Street Allentown, Pa 18103.

Call Al Lacki if the weather forecast looks grim. You can reach Al at (610) 927-1583 (home) or (610) 774-6723 (office).

Directions: From I-78: Take Exit 57, Lehigh Street. At the end of the exit ramp, go east toward the City of Allentown. Follow Lehigh Street of approximately 2 miles - past the Parkway Shopping Center on the right and Faulkner Volkswagen on the left - until you reach the LANTA entrance on your left. It is at the intersection of Lehigh and South Howard Streets, right across from a Hess service station. Drive around to the auto parking lot and enter through the office entrance. Our meeting room is on the second floor.

### **Thursday, January 24 - Sunday, January 27, 2013 :: Motor Trend Auto Show Pennsylvania Auto & Boat Show.**

Location: Harrisburg, PA. At the Pennsylvania State Farm Show Complex. Located at 2301 N. Cameron Street corner of Cameron and Maclay Streets, Exit 23 off of I-81. Event Hours: Thursday 1:00 pm - 9:00 pm. Friday - Saturday 10:00 am - 9:00 pm. Sunday 10:00 am - 5:00 pm. Admission: adults \$8.00 Senior Citizens (62+) - Active Military (w/ID) - Students (w/id) \$5.00 Children 7-12 \$3.00, 6 & under are free.. e-mail: Shaun.Foley@sorc.com or <http://www.motortrendautoshow.com/home.jsp> or [www.AutoShowHarrisburg.com](http://www.AutoShowHarrisburg.com)

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## ***SEASONS GREETINGS from LEHIGH VALLEY CORVAIR CLUB***

### ***Mail Dues to:***

Lehigh Valley Corvair Club  
c/o Richard Weidner  
2304 Main Street  
Northampton, PA 18067

### ***LVCC Club Officers:***

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Secr-Treasurer: Richard Weidner. Phone: (610) 502-1414 Email: rcwvair at rcn dot com  
Newsletter Editor: Allan Lacki. Phone: (610) 927-1583 Email: redbat01 at verizon dot net

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## ***Next Membership Meeting: Wednesday January 23, 2013***

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