



# *the fifth wheel*

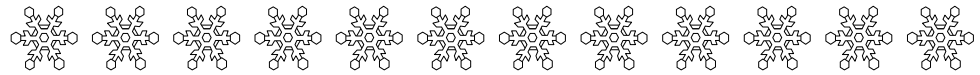
FEBRUARY 2014

[HTTP://WWW.CORVAIR.ORG/CHAPTERS/LVCC](http://www.corvair.org/chapters/lvcc)

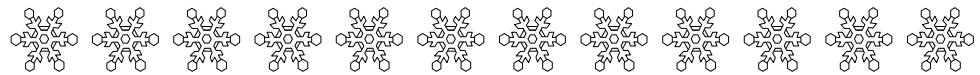
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# KING OF THE SNOW!



*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.

## KOVACS' CORVAIR

by Allan Lacki

Some sick nut maintains a web page that provides a list of all the celebrities who have been killed in car accidents. So far, he has identified 435 of them. The list includes Ernie Kovacs.

### Stork Party Tragedy.

On Friday night, January 12, 1962, Ernie Kovacs and his wife, Edie Adams, attended a "stork party" hosted by the famous movie director Billy Wilder and his wife Audrey Young at their lavish condo located at the corner of Wilshire Boulevard and Beverly Glen. [9, 17, 29]

The party was given by Billy and Audrey in honor of their good friends, Milton Berle and his wife, Ruth Cosgrove Rosenthal, who had just adopted a baby boy. Uncle Milty and Ruth had just asked Billy to be the baby's godfather, and in fact, they named their little son "William" after him. [23]

About twenty guests attended the party, including not only Ernie and Edie, but also Dean Martin and his wife, Kirk Douglas and his wife, Lucille Ball and her new husband, comedian Gary Morton, and French entertainer Yves Montand. This was supposed to be a happy occasion. [9, 10]

Ernie and Edie arrived in separate cars that evening because Ernie was working late on a project with Buster Keaton. Edie drove her new 1961 Corvair Lakewood to the party. Ernie didn't arrive until much later in his vintage Bentley. [5, 12, 30]

For some reason, as the party was breaking up, Ernie and Edie decided to switch cars. Edie was the first to leave, taking the Bentley back to their seventeen-room mansion, located up in Beverly Hills on Bowmont Drive. Ernie took the Corvair. It had been raining that night, a somewhat rare occurrence in southern California. [4, 12, 18, 24]

Ernie's intended route back home is unclear. But reporters were unanimous in observing that Ernie lost control of the Corvair near the Beverly Hilton Hotel. There, he slammed sideways into an electric utility pole on Santa Monica Boulevard. Ernie Kovacs was alone in the car. Apparently, there were no witnesses. [5, 9, 14]

The impact was so great that the left side of the wagon was caved in. One door on the passenger side had been torn open and Kovacs lay across the floor board, his head and upper body outside the right front door. Harry M. Vaughn, an ambulance attendant from Hollywood Receiving Hospital, said Kovacs was jammed inside the car with one leg under the seat and had to be pried loose. He said the driver's side of the car was completely caved in and the

vehicle "pretty well torn up." Kovacs was likely killed instantly when he hit the pole. [5, 6]

### Rage Against the Machine.

The world of car enthusiasts is filled with self-proclaimed automotive engineering experts whose knowledge is based on nothing more than hand-me-down third-party misinformation sourced in conjecture and outright lies.

It is no surprise that so many of these people blame Ernie's demise on the particular make and model of car he was driving when he was killed. But this is akin to blaming the death of Tom Mix on his 1937 Cord 812, or the death of Jane Mansfield on the 1966 Buick Electra in which she met her fate. It is



Over in an instant. Above: Ernie Kovacs and Edie Adams sharing good times. Below: Edie's 1961 Corvair Lakewood after Ernie's fatal accident.





like blaming Princess Diana’s death on Daimler-Benz AG. It is like blaming Paul Walker’s death on his Porsche Carrera GT, one of the most technologically-sophisticated cars of our time. In the case of Ernie Kovacs, the recorded facts do not provide sufficient evidence for it.

Anatomy of an Accident.

Accounts of the crash vary, as might be expected. There were no witnesses to the crash. Internet bloggers speculate that Ernie was either (a) over-tired and over-worked, (b) blind drunk, or (b) attempting to light a cigar by striking a match on the bottom of his shoe while driving. [18, 20, 25]

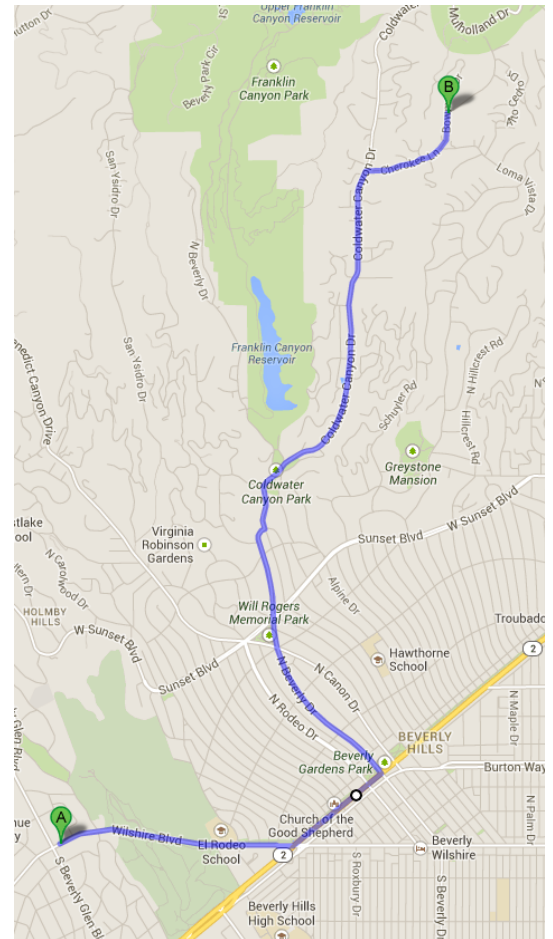
There are differences in recollections about the location of the crash, too. Some bloggers claim Ernie lost control of the Corvair while making a turn from Beverly Glen Boulevard onto Santa Monica Boulevard. Others claim Ernie lost control while making a turn from Wilshire Boulevard onto Santa Monica Boulevard. And yet another blogger claimed Ernie’s car crossed the median on Santa Monica Boulevard into the opposing lane before he crashed. [17, 18, 19]

Newspaper accounts do not delve into such prognostications. The reporters simply presented the facts as they understood them. The AP and UPI newswire services stated that the accident occurred on Santa Monica Boulevard approximately 100 yards away from the Beverly Hilton Hotel. There is no mention of the cause. There is no mention of the Corvair going out of control while negotiating a turn. [3, 5, 9]

Although many photos of the crash scene may have been taken, there are only two that appeared in the newspapers of the day. One shows the crash scene before the Corvair was moved. It is a shot from the rear of the Corvair, which was literally wrapped around a utility pole lo-



Beverly Hilton Hotel in the early 1960s. Wilshire Boulevard approaching the intersection with Santa Monica Boulevard.



Kovacs probably intended to take this route home that night:

Starting from Wilders’ condominium at the 10375 Wilshire and Beverly Glen Boulevards (Point A):

1. Wilshire Boulevard southeast,
2. Santa Monica Boulevard northeast,
3. Beverly Drive north,
4. Coldwater Canyon Drive, north,
5. Cherokee Drive, north, and
6. Bowmont Drive.

He never made it back to his home at 2301 Bowmont Drive (Point B). His ride ended on Santa Monica Boulevard near the Beverly Hilton Hotel.

cated just inches away from the curb. Another shows the Kovacs Corvair from the front, after it had been pulled away from the pole.

The photos were taken in the dark of night with flash bulbs and so background details cannot be distinguished. But the pole is substantial in girth and smooth in surface. It is no mere telephone pole or street light pole. It appears to be an electric utility sub-transmission pole, unscathed from the impact. A lesser fixture would have snapped in half.

There are two other photos attributed to the Ernie Kovacs crash scene. One shows a Corvair Lakewood wrapped around a pole, but the damage to the car is even more severe, (with the power train literally lying on the ground), and so it cannot be the wreck of Kovacs' car. The other photo appears to have been taken a day or two after the wreck was removed from the scene. It is an aerial photo with a white arrow that portends to identify the particular pole that Ernie hit, but the base of the pole in question is embedded in a concrete barrier, much like a modern Jersey barrier. Such a barrier does not appear in the close-up shots taken on the night of the crash.

This author is currently attempting to procure a copy of the official LAPD accident report. If it can be obtained, it may provide better insight on the nature and location of the crash, in which case, we may be able to determine if Ernie lost control of his Corvair while making a turn onto Santa Monica Boulevard from Wilshire Boulevard, Beverly Glen Boulevard, or some other street.

However, there are some things that we can conclude with certainty: Santa Monica Boulevard is and has been a major thoroughfare between the City of Los Angeles and the coastal town of Santa Monica, as demonstrated by scores of historic photos on the internet spanning back to at least 1938. And photos taken of the Beverly Hilton Hotel in 1960 show an edifice surrounded by major roads. Although they were

## QUICKIE KOVACS BIOGRAPHY.

Ernie Kovacs was born in 1919 and grew up in Trenton, New Jersey. After high school, he worked in summer-stock theater until 1939 when he contracted a whopping case of pleurisy and pneumonia which kept him hospitalized for eighteen months. [7, 10, 13, 28]

Kovacs commented: "After what happened to me, I figure I'm living on velvet. Every minute is a gift. I was there (in the hospital) a year and a half. It looked as though I would be a permanent resident. They (doctors) said I wouldn't live three months. They're still kinda angry because I didn't fulfill their prediction." And from that point on, he lived his life to the limit. [11]

After his recovery, he became a reporter and disc jockey for a local Trenton radio station, and that's where his talent for comedy became evident. His on-air gags became a sensation, and beginning in 1950, he landed a job as a host on a Philadelphia television station. There, he met his future wife, Edie Adams, who his producer hired to accompany him on the show. They eloped to Mexico City to get married in 1954. [13, 28]

Edie Adams recalled he would often work twenty-hours straight, without a break, and his craft was not unnoticed. He made a transition from Philadelphia to New York TV, auditioned on Broadway, and landed a couple of movie roles in Hollywood. By 1957, he was hooked on becoming a big star, and convinced Edie to move with him to Beverly Hills, California, where he continued his TV career. [13, 28]

They bought a seventeen room mansion with an indoor waterfall, decorated it to the hilt with original artwork, and drove around in a vintage Bentley. Ernie gambled on card games, drank the best booze, spent money like water, and deliberately refused to pay income taxes for several years, just as a matter of personal preference. [10, 18, 28]

By 1961, when he died, he was making big money, but he and Edie were deeply in debt to the IRS and other parties. [14, 28]

Although she was Ernie's television sidekick, Edie had already made a name for herself. In her youth, she had trained at Juilliard School of Music in New York with the goal of becoming an opera singer. [22]

That was not to be, but in the late 1950s, she traveled back to New York and gained a reputation as a talented actress on Broadway. It was that recognition that enabled her to obtain work in commercials and as a TV personality after Ernie died. [22]

She paid off the bills without declaring bankruptcy, stored tapes of Ernie's TV appearances, remarried two more times, and remained active in the entertainment industry, winning Emmy and Tony Awards for her performances. She passed away at the age of 81 in 2008. [22,28]



likely deserted at 1:30 AM, the risk of being T-boned must have been evident to Ernie Kovacs had he been thinking straight. In other words, he would have had to either stop or slow-down considerably to enter onto Santa Monica Boulevard from any other road; assuming of course, that he was awake and reasonably sober at the time. [16, 27, 27]

As noted above, some writers have speculated that Ernie Kovacs was inebriated when he took the wheel, but his friends denied it. They said Kovacs had been his usual “happy-go-lucky self” at the party. Wilder said Kovacs had little to drink and was completely sober when he left. But Ernie had a reputation for driving fast, and the little Corvair was certainly traveling much too fast when it hit that pole. [12]

Traffic policeman John Bettfreund told newsmen, “It appears that he may have been traveling faster than the posted limit in that area.” This is a classic example of understatement. [10]

#### Counterpoint.

The Kovacs Corvair did not go out of control due to its design. It did not go out of control because of its swing axle suspension. It did not go out of control because it was a rear engine car. Ernie Kovacs was driving the Corvair much too fast. And most likely, he would have been killed had he been driving any other kind of car.

There is no question that Ernie Kovacs’ Corvair was skidding sideways when it slammed into that pole. It is also possible that the car may have spun out before it hit the pole as a result of its rearward weight bias. A Corvair detractor may even argue that the car jacked itself up on its swing axle suspension, leading to the spin.

Such factors, if they occurred, could certainly cause a deadly one-car collision. However, none of those factors can account for the absolute severity of the crash as evidenced by the twisted

mangled wreck shown in the accident photos.

Corvairs may have faults but nobody can dispute the fact that the early Corvair unit body was a solid structure for its size; with deep door sills, thick door posts, plenty of gussets, and generous welds. The kinetic energy involved in that crash was extreme. It was due to speed.

It had rained earlier that evening and according to police reports, the roads were slick. Ernie Kovacs had a reputation as a fast driver. The fact that bias ply tires have poor traction in the wet could not have been lost on him.

And even if we entertain the notion that Kovacs’ accident was due to Corvair’s so-called designed in dangers, it is also worth noting that the intersections where the accident may have occurred had no attributes that would cause such foibles to manifest themselves. The junctions between Santa Monica Boulevard, Wilshire Boulevard and Beverly Glen Boulevard have been revised and re-designed over the years, but they are not now and were not then arranged in a way that would present a challenge for even an apple cart to negotiate.

Nothing about them should have caused Ernie Kovacs to engage in an abrupt maneuver that, in turn, would cause a Corvair to spin out of control. And the fact that plenty of Corvair enthusiasts autocross their early-series Corvairs to this day suggests that a Corvair can take an awful lot of abrupt maneuvering before a spin will occur on flat pavement like that.

#### No Way to Treat A Lady.

Ernie Kovacs and Edie Adams were known to their friends as a happily married couple. Having left the Wilders’ earlier than Ernie, she drove to their home and remained awake and waited for

him to arrive. He never showed up.

In the early morning hours of January 13<sup>th</sup>, Billy Wilder and other friends arrived and informed her of the tragedy. The grief was overwhelming. After being sedated by a doctor, she was put to bed. Jack Lemmon volunteered to identify Ernie Kovacs body at the morgue. [10]

In 1990, many years after that fateful night, Edie Adams’ wrote her memoirs in a book named “Sing a Pretty Song”: It chronicles her life and times during the years when she was married to Ernie Kovacs, including the aftermath which included custody battles with Ernie’s mother and former wife; and financial claims against Ernie’s estate. Edie, a strong-willed woman and talented entertainer in her own right, won the custody battles and paid down the debts, but the early 1960s were difficult times for her. [15, 21]

According to Edie’s account, Ralph Nader “called to ask me if I wanted to sue General Motors because the Corvair in which Ernie was killed had some structural faults.” She said no, she recalls, because “I was bankrupt, grief-stricken and had had it with lawsuits. Years later, I met Nader at a party and he said he had figured that I hadn’t sued because General Motors had paid me off. I couldn’t believe my ears.” [15, 21]



Edie Adams singing “That’s All” on the final episode of “I Love Lucy”. Vivian Vance, playing Ethel Mertz on piano.



## THE ZANY COMEDY OF ERNIE KOVACS!

The word “zany” is not often used to describe the humor of twenty-first century comedians, but it certainly applied to the skits and gags produced by Ernie Kovacs in the 1950s. So nutty, so ridiculous, so absurd!

Kovacs gave the impression that his on-stage antics were spontaneous, but they often involved behind-the-scenes planning and stage work at a level that was unusual for television entertainment in those days. And most of them were performed on-air, live.

In one gag, he altered the angle of the stage, arranged the camera angle to make it look level, and then appeared before the camera, sitting at a table with a bottle of milk. As the scene evolved, he attempted to pour the milk into glass. But much to his consternation of his television-viewing audience, the milk poured all over the table instead of into the glass. It often took several moments for his audience to catch onto his antics, by which point, he had already moved onto his next gag. [14]

Impersonating a sleazy car salesman, he pounded on the hood of a Nash Metropolitan to deliver his sales pitch and sent the little car through the floor of the stage, which had been specially rigged just for this momentary flash of a skit. [28]

While standing next to a television set showing his own image, he shut off the set. But it was he, and not the TV image, that disappeared. [14]

In one scene, a man walked into a darkroom and emerged as a negative image. [14]

Another man at a shooting gallery knocked down moving ducks with monotonous regularity until one duck stops, pivots, and brandishes a six-gun from under his wing. BANG-no sharpshooter! [13]

Perhaps his most famous TV show was “Take a Good Look”, in which he used a panel of guests as the foil for his unusual brand of comedy. In one sequence, he played a matador who tackles a bull and ties its horns into a knot. In another, he hammered the final nail into a college dormitory only to have the entire building crash down around him. And in a Christmas Eve telecast, he jokingly offered free nude photos of Santa Claus to folks in the audience who promised to write-in for them. [2]

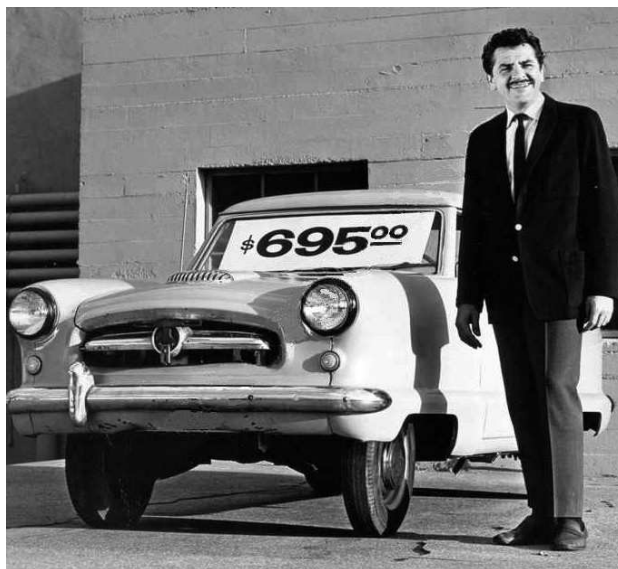
Recalling one episode, he quipped, “Zsa Zsa Gabor's Yorkshire terrier stole my thunder by barking at the wrong time. I suggested that Zsa Zsa offer him a cup of hemlock-'like Aristophanes drank to commit suicide.’ You should have seen my mail. Half was from animal lovers aghast at my suggestion. The other half pointed out it wasn't Aristophanes, it Socrates. Oh my...” [2]

Ernie Kovacs had the full support of his sponsor, Dutch Masters Cigars, even though he poked fun of them in his skits. But he had definite concerns about the way the television industry was leaning toward what we call political correctness today. [2]

“Unless pressures of censorship and sponsorship are controlled, TV will become a nice dull medium. You can't joke good-naturedly about racial, religious or national groups, even your own. You can't poke fun at bar-flies or political viewpoints or women drivers. People have forgotten how to laugh at themselves. They're running scared-and scared people never contribute to anything.” [2]



Ernie's pretty wife, Edie Adams, was a frequent guest on his TV shows.



Ernie blew the entire budget for one of his shows on a sixteen-second skit involving this little Nash Metropolitan!

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## ***SNOW KING CORVAIR***

By Dick Weidner

This is my Corvaire after 160 miles driving through a snow storm. In March of 2004, I went to a Corvaire Show in Myrtle Beach. On the way home, coming up US Route 15 in Frederick MD, it started to snow. The snow was coming down hard. After I crossed into PA things were getting pretty slick.

These were some of the scenes I came across on I-78. It took 3 and a half hours to get home from Frederick MD. I passed a couple of accidents and was held up behind salt trucks until I could get clear road to pass them.

The Corvaire behaved well. With only the heat and defrosters on (no blower), the windshield stayed clear and the interior of the car was very comfortable.

No snow built up on the trunk lid or roof of the car. The front of the car was a different story. It had a coating of an inch and a half or more of ice built up. I had the headlights on, but there were only tiny openings in the ice.

It's one great car in bad weather!

## ***PRESIDENT'S CORNER***

By Dennis Stamm

Happy New Year Everyone!

Well, here we are in the middle of winter. It's been a long time since it stayed this cold for weeks at a time. As I'm writing this, it's forty more days until spring, so we can look forward to that.

We decided to cancel January meeting because of snow. There is no sense in anyone driving and putting themselves in harm's way.

As we go through March, we can get ready to get serious about driving our Corvairs again. Don't wait until the last minute to get your Corvaire serviced and ready to cruise.

Members, write a short history of yourself and Corvairs, and give it to Al Lacki to be put in the newsletter. We want to hear more about you!

God Bless and Stay Safe,

Dennis





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

### **Saturday, February 15, 2014 :::: NJACE Corvair Parts Auction.**

Location: Ashley's Auto Body, 274 Hillside Avenue, Flanders, NJ. Plan on making a day of it. Due to the nature of how the auction operates, it is not possible to process any buyers or sellers until the auction is completed. Doors open at 9:00 for set-up. Bidding begins at 10:30 AM. Pizza lunch break begins at 12:30. Bidding resumes at 1:00 PM. Typically, the event finishes up around 2:30 PM. Only at that time can we tally the sales, collect from the buyers, and pay the sellers. Bring a chair. Any Corvair parts, new or used, may be submitted for selling by our auctioneers. NJACE will collect a 10% seller's commission on all items. Seller's may set a minimum acceptable bid, or not, or may donate items for the full benefit of the club. Free lunch for all sellers and buyers!

### **Wednesday, February 26, 2014 :::: 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. Latitude : 40.587607, Longitude : -75.474405. 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.

### **Friday to Sunday, February 28 - March 2, 2014 :::: 41st Annual Atlantic City Classic.**

Atlantic City, NJ. 41st Annual Atlantic City Classic Car Show & Auction. Largest Indoor Automotive Event: Auction, Car Corral and Swap Meet at the Atlantic City Convention Center. Phone: 800-227-3868. Website: [www.acclassiccars.com](http://www.acclassiccars.com)

### **Sunday, March 2, 2014 :::: 47th Annual Hamburg Swap Meet & Car Corral.**

Hamburg, PA - 47th Annual Swap Meet & Car Corral at the Hamburg Fire Co. Field House in the rear off Pine Street at 127 South 4th Street, Zip 19526. Sponsored by the Ontelaunee Region of the AACA. Set up at 7:00 am. Antique, classic & street rods welcome. Over 100 indoor spaces and unlimited outside vendors, car corral and parking on fully paved lot. We have increased our parking with shuttle service. Refreshments available. Indoor 10x8 spaces at \$25.00 apiece. Outside 25x17 flea market spaces at \$15.00 apiece. Car Corral spaces at \$5.00 for each vehicle. 8 foot tables available at \$2.00 each. Free parking. General admission: \$2.00 per person. Children 12 and under are free. For vendor registration: Contact Shirley Schaffer on 610-262-9718. For general information: Contact Lester Manwiller on (610) 823-4656 or email [lhedgehog1@aol.com](mailto:lhedgehog1@aol.com)

### **Wednesday to Sunday, March 19-23, 2014 :::: 17th Annual Great Lehigh Valley Auto Show.**

Bethlehem PA - 17th Annual The Greater Lehigh Valley Auto Show, held at 27 Memorial Drive West Stabler Arena, Rauch Fieldhouse & West Pavilion. Lehigh University zip: 18015. Event hours: Thursday - Saturday 12:00 am - 9:00 pm, Sun 10:00 am - 6:00 pm. For information, call (610) 758-9691. Website: <http://glvautoshow.org>

### **Friday to Sunday, March 21-23, 2014 :::: NorthEast Rod & Custom Car Show.**

Oaks, PA - NorthEast Rod & Custom Car Show at the Greater Philadelphia Expo Center 100 Station Avenue Oaks, PA 19456. For information, call (215) 896-2923 or sent an e-mail to [NEcarshow@comcast.net](mailto:NEcarshow@comcast.net). Website: <http://www.northeastcustomcarshow.com>

## **Clark's Corvair Parts®**

400 Mohawk Trail, Shelburne Falls, MA 01370  
(413)625-9776 [www.corvair.com](http://www.corvair.com)



## **Our 41<sup>st</sup> Year!**

**Get the New 2013-2018 Catalog**  
**If you did not get our new catalog in 2013,**  
**you can get one free on your first \$50 order**  
**during 2014.** (Additional catalogs \$3 with an order)

*The new Catalog includes parts from the last 5 Supplements as well as 100's of improvements. This is our most major revision ever.*

## LVCC Classified Ads!

FOR SALE: 1965 to 1969 Corvair wire spoke hub caps. Scratches around edges but good enough for a daily driver. \$100.00 for all four Dennis Stamm home 610-926-4723 cell # 484-336-3466



## Next LVCC Meeting: Weds, Feb. 26, 2014



It's been so long since we've had a meeting, between holidays and snow closings, we thought we'd remind you what the place looks like! Here is a street view, looking North on Lehigh Street. The big driveway entrance to the LANTA Community Center is located to the right of this photo!

**We Meet Here!**  
(Entrance to LANTA)

**Time 7:30 PM. Place: LANTA Community Center, 2nd Floor Meeting Room, 1060 Lehigh Street, Allentown, PA 18103. Latitude : 40.587607 | Longitude : -75.474405. Feel free to bring a guest.**

### Mail Dues to:

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

### LVCC Club Officers:

President: Dennis Stamm Phone: (610) 926-4723 Email: dmstamm at comcast dot net  
Vice Pres: Fred Scherzer Phone: (215) 234-4458 Email: jukeboxman at comcast.net  
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