



Diggin' Up Bones

Warren LeVeque

Apologies to Randy Travis for using his song for an introduction.

Archaeology is the science of using fossils, bones, and other remains to discover the history of a past human life, relics, or culture. I feel that for the last two years I have been doing just that to discover all that can be found about the Chevrolet Division/Bill Thomas/Doug Roe 1960 500 coupe race Corvair. Both iterations of the car were major features in every automobile magazine of the era. They were also in *How to Hotrod Corvairs* by Bill Fisher and *How to Select and Install Turbochargers* by Hugh MacInnes.

In 1968 through 1972, I was SCCA road racing a Ford GT-40 replica in the A/Sports Racing class in Indiana. This is the club version of the Can Am series. This special was Corvair engined and suspended at first, then Olds turboed and then Chevy V-8 powered. At the very same time Doug Roe was racing and winning with the ex-Bill Thomas Corvair coupe in very modified form in A/Sports Racing in Arizona.

If you think that this a fascinating bit of déjà vu, just wait until you read further.

When I heard about this in the 1970s, I went to the local library to photocopy the March 1969 *Hot Rod* spread about the Roe car. I was fascinated by the ingenuity involved at this time by an individual not unlike myself.

I went on to road race a Yenko Stinger, but that is another story.

In 1987, Jim Schardt hired Jim Rice, Fred Bybee, and myself to take his Stinger to Monterey, California to run in the Historic Vintage Races at Laguna Seca and to crew for him. This was the year

when Chevrolet was the featured marque.

It was inspiring to see the Chaparrals, McLarens, Grand Sports, etc. and their famous drivers and owners, but what dropped my jaw was to see Doug Roe and the famous Hugger Orange Corvair. Ed Connolly (the owner at that time), the Cactus Corvair Club, and Doug had made a heroic effort to get the car restored and on the track. They had only driven the car around the block before it went to the track. Virtually overnight they had made last-minute changes to satisfy the apparently bullying tech inspectors. The car always ran window-



PHOTO LESTER NEHAMKIN

Above: 2005.

Right: Circa 1960, Mike Jones driving.



Photo Rick Norris



Photo Rick Norris



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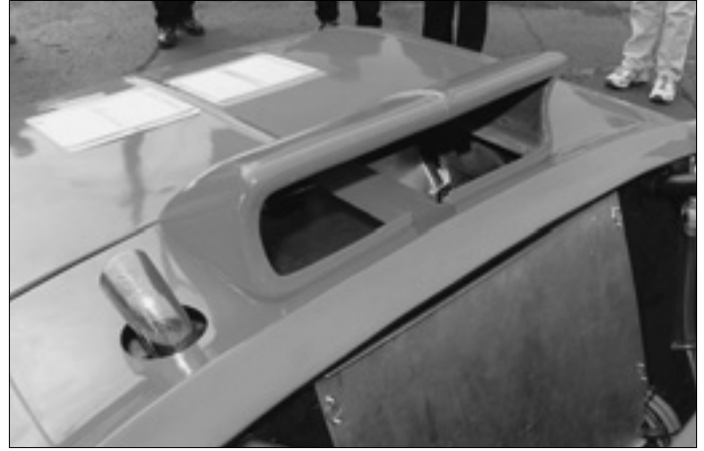


Photo Rick Norris



Photo Rick Norris



Photo Rick Norris

Top left: Modern FIA race seats in older appearance; safety with vintage style. Passenger seat, harness, and horizontal bar behind seat are easily removable for carb and turbo servicing.

Top right: Ten point roll cage, front frame to rear frame, but concealed behind stock body panels wherever possible. With doors closed, nothing is visible but front and rear down tubes. Vintage gauges are aircraft style. Modern gauges added on right hand

side of radio console and glovebox. All switches and fuses moved from the floor into a shortened radio housing.

Middle left: Barely seen is one of the two water tanks and fillers. Driver's side tank is for carb intercooling. passenger side tank for fan inlet.

Middle right: Wastegate outlet where original exhaust was located, beside the rear air scoop. At one time all exhaust went out here, since Doug did not run a wastegate.

Lower left: Scoop to fan ducting added by current owner. The turbo, carburetor, and wastegate were moved to the rear seat area to reduce overhung weight.

less, but they had to install a windshield and raise the car up to accommodate the mandated treaded street tires. Then it had to run in Group 7 with the windowless, slick tired, Can Am and Prototype cars. It looked like Herbie the Love Bug among the McLarens and Cobras.

I loved it anyway. Its run was short-lived due to an oil plumbing problem.

I spent a good bit of time talking with Doug at Monterey. He was very friendly and forthcoming; I just didn't know the right questions to ask. He did say to not get too hung up on the car's current state of preparation; it was different every time that it was raced. He passed away a year later—at the same age that I am now.

The Monterey Classic was by invitation only. It was a great honor to be invited. The Thomas/Roe car made it because



PHOTO RICK NORRIS

Top: Doug ran with only interior mirror. Exterior mirrors added to meet current rules.

Middle left: Engine compartment vents where scoop was temporarily installed at Monterey.

of papers submitted by Paul Prior, stating that he and Vince Piggins of the “Economy, Safety, and Performance Group” contracted with Bill Thomas (of Cheetah fame) to race the Corvair in the small sedan groups, just after the AMA industry racing ban. You might call this a “skunk works” effort, which all of the manufacturers were doing.

Bill Thomas had a specialty shop for Corvair speed parts, so he and Mike Jones prepared Bill's wife's car of only two weeks to be drag raced and road raced. This car can always be identified by the three holes in each rear fender, initially scoop covered, to induct intake air.

The car in naturally aspirated form drag raced in the low 13s in 1960, and

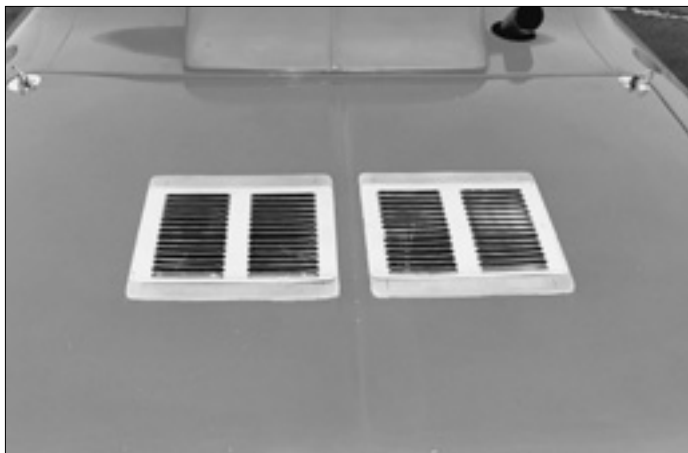


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PHOTO WARREN LEVEQUE

won nearly every road race entered. Mike Jones even once beat Jimmy Clark in a factory Lotus Cortina.

When Chevrolet and Thomas were through with the car, Doug Roe bought it in January of 1964. Doug had moved from Michigan to a job as an engineer at the Arizona proving grounds. He had been winning autocrosses in his family Corvaire in nearly stock form. It was natural then to take over the Thomas car and develop it to the nth degree and run it in the western hillclimbs, road races, circle tracks, and autocrosses.

Forward to the present. I had turbocharged my Yenko Stinger YS015 in the Doug Roe manner with the relocated turbo. I had given Doug credit for this on the air filter housing. I also had built a tube framed, fiberglass bodied, Corvaire supercharged, mid engined, formula car suspended, early model replica and took it hill climbing. Is this too much déjà vu?

This replica was to be the absolutely, positively, last big car project for this retiree!

Ed Connolly contacted me and asked if I would be interested in mechanically restoring the Thomas/Roe car. Would I? He shipped it in the fall of 2003 via Horseless Carriage, riding along with a Buick Grand National and several Maseratis. Before the restoration could be started, Ed's mother died and he inherited the New York estate to care for. Would I like to purchase the car? Would I?

The car arrived as a rolling shell with a

lot of "hard core" parts inside for a possible future use. The inside was also shared by many California native plants, nuts, and dead critters. This is when I first thought of the "Diggin' Up Bones" part.

In lieu of information from the previous restorers, every part was inspected as a relic from the past.

The mechanical rolling parts were in excellent condition. There was no rust at all. The wiring was identified with 17 year old paper tags, unreadable now, and

the remote oil and fuel systems were degraded. I decided to just start over.

I just happen to have (déjà vu) a freshened turbo engine removed from the Stinger and replaced with a 13:1 compression naturally aspirated engine. It wasn't too hard to adapt the turbo engine to the early model body. Linkages were a real problem, though.

The safety systems have been upgraded with older looking modern FIA seats, belts, straps, and nets. The new roll cage, while fully currently legal, is as unobtrusive as possible. Body damage was repaired and the paint buffed out. The windshield is now removable.

Both treaded and slick tires will be used. Thirteen inch wheels have been made in the style of the original 15" magnesium wheels. Doug and Bill also used wheel sizes to change gearing for different purposes.

While not intended to be a full time racer (I have other cars for that), the car will at least participate in a hillclimb, a vintage road race, and several Corvaire/CORSA/NECC/SCCA events.

Doug and Bill would want it this way.

Modifications

During its racing history this car was extensively modified and developed. This is just a sampling of what was found.

It already had an experimental quick steering gearbox.

All of the early spindles and hubs were replaced with five-bolt parts from Chevelles, and Greenbrier rear axles.

The suspension used very heavy coil springs and an adjustable front anti-roll bar. Double shock absorbers were added to the rear.

Brake linings were metallic NASCAR type.

Body and chassis parts were lightened extremely.

Front and rear deck lids were fiberglass. The entire rear cover and tail light area was removable for service. The engine and drivetrain could be removed like a drawer. Reportedly, clutches could be changed in 20 minutes.

The large AirResearch turbo and four-barrel carb were moved to the rear seat back area to lessen "swing weight."

All of the windows were removed. The front and rear window removal allowed unrestricted air flow to the huge rear air scoop over the relocated turbo and carburetor. The top and window pillars were also streamlined to aid this air flow.

Mike Rubaner did the customizing, stating "a car this fast should have the looks to go with it." The snowplow front air dam and the large single headlights are the primary features.

The engine was prepared for durability to accept the boost received. A large front oil cooler was used as well as water injection for charge cooling and engine cooling. Intercoolers were rare at the time. Doug used his right foot and a large industrial pressure gauge instead of a wastegate.

The dash gauges were of aircraft vintage, remember, this was the 1960s.

Top: Doug Roe at Monterey in 1987.