

Corvair Amblewagon 1 back in service

Back in 1960, a neat white building at 2191 Cole St., in Troy, Mich., had an awning over the door with lettering above it. The larger letters on top said "Amblewagon." Below this were smaller letters identifying the Automotive Conversion Corp.

It wasn't hard to figure out that this company was involved with converting station wagons into ambulances. By producing medical transport vehicles from modestly modified wagons, the firm helped many small American communities fill their need for ambulance services.

Unlike traditional, custom-built ambulances that sold for \$5,000-\$6,000 at that time, the Amblewagons were priced around \$3,000. They filled a growing market niche, but had some drawbacks in roominess and functionality. The lack of a stretched chassis and "high-headroom" roofs made for a tight fit when attendants climbed inside with their equipment and patients.

By 1962, Automotive Conversion Corp. had grown larger and moved to new facilities in Birmingham, Mich. To go along with the expansion, the company developed some concepts for new products. One idea the designers came up with was a roomy compact ambulance based on the Corvair truck line introduced in 1961.

Corvair trucks were a stylish line of driver-forward vans and pickups. They represented Chevrolet's answer to the popular Volkswagen Kombi. Built on the Corvair platform, these trucks had an air-cooled "pancake" six and transaxle mounted in the rear. The windowed Greenbrier model was merchandised as a Sports Wagon in the passenger car line. Panel vans and pickups were sold as trucks.

Known as the Corvan, the panel shared the same 95 inch wheelbase of the other models. It stretched 179.7 inches in overall length and stood 68.5 inches high. There were two standard side load doors and double rear panel doors. Power from the 144.8 cid "Turbo Air" engine was rated at 80 hp. A three-speed manual shift was standard, with four-speed and Powerglide options.

With production of 47,567 Greenbriers and trucks in 1961, the new Corvair commercials initially looked successful and plans were made to continue all models, with minimum changes, in 1962. This is where John Bell and Kyle Bess came into the picture.

Bell was president of Automotive Conversion Corp. Bess was his production manager. Sometime during 1961, they approached Chevrolet with the new Amblewagon concept. With some simple conversion work and the addition of \$1,600 worth of ambulance equipment to the \$2,289 Corvan, they felt they could create an extremely practical medical transporter for under \$4,000. It would be very similar to ambulances seen in Europe, but more powerful. Naturally, Chevrolet was interested in the chance to serve a new market.

Plans were made to pull the first 1962 Corvair panel off the assembly line for



A combination of treasure hunting a good luck helped in locating authentic emergency equipment.

the conversion. This would allow the work to be completed in time for Chevrolet's 1962 model National Sales Convention. Though the projected retail price of the 1962 Corvan was up \$7, the net dealer price for the R-1205 model was still only \$2,070.89. Adding \$1,567.43 worth of ambulance equipment, brought the special net dealer price of an Amblewagon to \$3,638.32, well under the \$4,000 threshold.

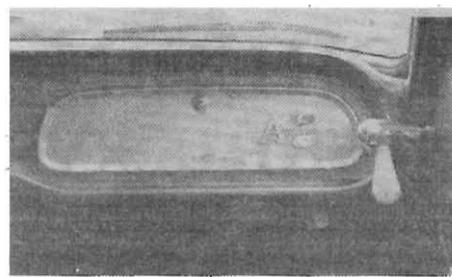
John Bell recalls that the Corvair conversion was one of his favorite projects, but unfortunately, factory production records were discarded after Automotive Conversion Corp. closed up shop in 1982. Kyle Bess, however, was able to dig up diagrams of several optional interior layouts and drawings depicting how the conversions were done. He also found some old negatives showing details of the work. Copies of these were sent to Dr. George W. Johnston, a Beloit, Wis. chiropractor who purchased the original "display model" Corvair Amblewagon in 1988.

Serial number 2R125F10001 confirms that this vehicle was the first Corvair 95 Series R-12 truck made in Flint, Mich., in 1962. Although it resembles a Series 500 Greenbrier, the code number clearly shows that it is a Corvan with full window options.

Of the 13,491 panels built in 1962, few had these 2003A and 20003U window treatments and only a handful received ambulance conversions. Bess says that fewer than 20 Corvair Amblewagons were ever built.

After appearing at the Chevrolet National Sales Convention, Dr. Johnston's Amblewagon was specifically mentioned in a letter sent to dealers in Chevrolet's Milwaukee sales zone on March 15, 1962. L.K. Donoho, the Zone Truck Manager, advised that the unit was available for immediate delivery f.o.b. Birmingham, Mich.

According to Donoho's memo, the display model had the following Chevrolet features: 521A white paint; 482A full-



The manufacturer's symbol is located on the glove box.

width seat; 138J heater; 355A windshield washer; 674B tires; 2003A and 2003U windows; 988277 locking gas cap; 98836 dome lamps and 988285 mirror.

Ambulance equipment on the truck included a 10-lb. dry chemical fire extinguisher; recusitator with two oxygen cylinders; two one-quart thermos bottles; a 36-unit portable first aid kit; an elevating heart patient cot with mattress; a wheeled collapsible emergency stretcher and two extra "E" size oxygen cylinders.

The conversion work involved installation of heavy-duty electrical circuits, four corner red flashing lights, a Federal-Signal roof-mounted siren and light combination, ventilating roof fan; dual spotlights; Ferno-Washington ambulance cot and cot hold-down hardware.



Dr. George Johnston demonstrates what it's like to sit in the attendant's seat of his Corvair ambulance.

Interior cabinetry was designed and constructed to conform to original specifications. A jump seat for the attendant was located just inside the rear side door. Installation of communications equipment could be ordered from the factory at extra-cost, or taken care of locally.

Apparently, Donoho's letter convinced a dealer in the Milwaukee Zone to purchase the Amblewagon. It was probably put into service in either southern Wisconsin or northern Illinois and may have been used for emergency runs for 10 years.

In 1972, a Volkswagen dealer from the Green Bay area purchased the truck at a Milwaukee dealer auction. An area contractor saw it on the used car lot and decided it would make a good workhorse. Apparently, he used it hard during numerous Wisconsin winters, eventually repainting it with a heavy coat of house paint to hide the dents, rotted metal and rust holes.

Sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s, a man from Madison obtained the Amblewagon. In 1988, he sold it to Dr.

Johnston, an avid Corvair fan, because he wanted to see it restored and didn't have time to do the job himself.

The vehicle was first sandblasted to expose all body deterioration. It then spent an entire year in a body shop getting new metal panels welded in. Some new old stock (nos) parts were picked up at swap meets. Many factory original and reproduction components were sourced from Clark's Corvair Parts, of Shelburne Falls, Mass. Other panels had to be hand-fabricated.

When the body work was finished, endless hours of metal filling and block sanding followed. Finally, the truck was ready to be painted inside and out. An original, bronze-like color was used to refinish the interior. The exterior was done to match the factory's white-with-red-stripes combination.

Dr. Johnston towed the Amblewagon to his home in July 1990. Then, he proceeded to replace the window mechanisms and trim, rebuild the brakes and detail the engine and transaxle, which were both in good mechanical condition.

Since the interior cabinetry had been removed, replacements were fabricated next. The diagrams and other advice supplied by Kyle Bess came in very handy. Dave Newell, of the Corvair Society of America, provided literature and historical data. To permit the ambulance cot to be rolled in from the rear, the interior cabinetry was built into the side of the load-high white vinyl floor trimmed with aluminum angle moldings. The front bench seat, sun visors, arm rests, cot pad and attendant's seat were reupholstered with red vinyl.

Replacing the emergency appliances with other correct for the vintage of the truck took a combination of treasure hunting and luck. Failing to locate the right type of siren and lamp at flea markets led Johnston to contact Federal-Signal Co. in Illinois. Yes, they still had four of the 1962 style devices in inventory, but the price was over \$800. However, when the restorer explained what he was doing, the firm came up with a "hobby" price in the \$400 range.

The nearly 30-year-old cot came from the Clinton, Wis. volunteer fire department, which was ready to toss it out, since it no longer fit the cot hold-downs in modern ambulances. An oxygen recusita-

tor kit of proper vintage was also located.

After two years of work, the Corvair Amblewagon looked nearly new again. The next step was a trip back to the body shop — under its own power — for the final paint buffing. Then, the exterior emblems, emergency lights and decals were added. The first Corvair Amblewagon was "back in service."

Following completion of the project in the spring of 1991, the truck took a first in show at a CORSA regional meet in Fond du Lac, Wis. This was followed by another first place trophy at the annual Beloit Autorama. In its third outing, The Corvair took another win at the Madison Wisconsin World of Wheels.

So far, the Amblewagon's performance on the show circuit amounts to a string of unbroken wins. Dr. Johnston is very happy with the recognition that it's getting as a first-class restoration and as an historical vehicle. At the same time, he'd love to learn more about the missing links in its history, such as where it was first used as an ambulance and who its subsequent owners were.



Although the Amblewagon looks like a Greenbrier Sports Wagon, its rare serial number shows that it was made from a Corvan with two optional window packages.