

History of Corvanatics (part 1)

by the founder— Ken Wilhite

Originally in the Mar-Apr 1988 newsletter - published here unedited

It has been close to sixteen years since I acquired my 1961 95 van and since the formation of CORVANATICS. Yet, in retrospect, you cannot tell the story of the van without mentioning CORVANATICS, as they are both enmeshed! About three years ago your faithful and obedient newsletter editor Ken Krol contacted me about doing an article on the history of CORVANATICS. I agreed to "see what I could do", providing that he could forward me as many of the old CORVAN ANTICS newsletters as he could. After reading through the newsletters and reminiscing I was disappointed at not being able to glean much information from them that could be used in an historical narrative. It was very frustrating for me at the time and, due to other commitments, I decided to "pigeon-hole" the project till now, when I decided I would try to write a "history" of CORVANATICS and about my 1961 95 van, since for the most part, the conception of CORVANATICS was a direct result of my acquiring the 95 van.

It was the Summer of 1972 and at the time my daily transportation was a 1960 700 4-door sedan, presented to me the year before by my parents who were moving to Atlanta, Georgia and didn't want to take the '60 with them. At that time vans were really popular, along with customizing and conversion kits. I had a friend who had one of the early '70's Chevrolet "Handivans" into which he had installed a '69 Z-28 engine! It was only a matter of time before I decided to get myself a van. Since I favored the Corvair an FC was only natural. I knew of a 1962 Loadside that had been used by Lake Shore Country Club as a "grounds maintenance vehicle" but found that it had been taken away a few years earlier. The search was on but I failed to turn up anything worthwhile. It was when I was scanning an edition of a local "pay only if you sell" newspaper that I spied an ad for a "1961 Corvair Van" for the amount of \$200. The van was behind one of the "then-unrestored homes in the Lockerbie Square area (Lockerbie Square is just east of downtown Indianapolis and is the birthplace of James Whitcomb Riley, the famous poet and author). The van itself was a sight to behold, tires flat, with all kinds of items "stored" inside, on the roof and underneath. It was a faded yellow in color and had crudely welded supports on the

roof for ladders, etc. The owner (Who reminded me of "Bluto" in the Popeye cartoons) informed me that it was running two years ago but that the battery was shot. Everything appeared to be in order, three-speed transmission and it appeared to me that it had a passenger car engine instead of the original FC engine. We took the battery out of my '60 700, added some gas to the FC and, after protesting for quite some time, started with clouds of smoke! It ran but just barely. I parted with my \$200, obtained the title and a receipt of sale and informed him I would return to pick them up. I had to drag my then-girlfriend into assisting me in picking the FC up - she would follow me home. We started out and I was amazed to find that I had no brakes, other than the emergency brake, so I drove it home that way. The trip was uneventful. Closer scrutiny of the FC proved to be very depressing, as it seemed that everything needed repair and/or replacement. The only positive that I noted was a lack of severe rust. I decided not to try and repair-it as I drove it, but undertake an "amateur restoration". I found that the engine had, at some time in its life, thrown a rod through the block, being hastily repaired with a piece of flat aluminum and sheet metal screws! If I can remember the engine was a '62 102HP with the original '61 3-speed, transmission. I removed the whole powertrain and traded it for some other parts I needed.

It was around this time that I became aware of the fact that scant information was available in the COMMUNIQUE on the FC's. I came to the conclusion that maybe it would be a good idea to form a satellite group within CORSA that would cater to the owners of FC's. I obtained the CORSA Directory and went through the listings, finding all the FC owners, then forwarding "letters of intent" regarding the formation of CORVANATICS.

There may be some question as to how I came up with the CORVANATICS name. It was with the help of my girlfriend who at one time referred to me as a "Corvair Fanatic". That's how I came up with the name, which in turn led to the newsletter as well. So the credit should go to her for the CORVANATICS name.

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The initial response was slow but picked up after a few months. I was preparing the newsletter using an IBM Selectric at work, and then then running the newsletters off on the photocopy machine in our administrative offices. If memory serves me right, the first newsletter was sent in September 1972 to 17 members. Through correspondence with these members I was able to gather much information that helped me, and I was able to pass this info on to others in the newsletter. I had one member who stopped by to visit, as he was on a cross-country trip East (I cannot remember his name) plus he wanted to pick up some gas heaters from a fellow I knew who was selling reconditioned Volkswagen gas heaters (manufactured by Stewart Warner). He bought five of them! I was also contacting some of the van conversion outfits to see if they would be offering any plans for the Corvaire FC's, but they usually replied "there just wasn't enough demand". I also put ads in most of the auto related publications and got quite a few members, one of whom owned the "Brown's Bus" which Car & Driver magazine modified. quite heavily - maybe some of you remember that FC.

Work continued on my FC. The brakes were completely rebuilt. I built the back area up level with the engine lid using marine plywood, with the top being hinged for access, while underneath it was "compartmentalized" with storage for the gas heater, tools, spares, etc. The lid was carpeted all the way to the rear doors. The walls were done with walnut panelling (a friend remarked that I had so many screws holding the panelling in place that it looked like the outside of a submarine or ship!). The original front seat was reupholstered with black "tuck and roll" and a curtain installed in back of the seat, California outside rearview mirrors. A Spyder dash was installed, along with Stewart Warner Oil Pressure/Temperature gauges and an Ammeter located where the original radio was. An AM/FM/8-track was installed in a console under the dash. I had obtained a basket-case 140 HP engine for the amazing price of \$25, which I rebuilt in the basement of the house I was living in at the time. It took six of us to get it up the stairs from the basement and during this journey one of the stairs collapsed, almost plunging us into the

abyss below! The transaxle was a 3:89 ratio with 4-speed, and I had to wait a long time till I was able to obtain a 4-speed crossmember! I also attempted, unsuccessfully, to install the later improved shift mechanism, installing the correct fuel tank (purchased brand new!) only to find that it wouldn't work, as the FC's with the later shifter had additional bracing where the shifter attached to the floor, so I had to keep the "soup stirrer". The FC ran very well indeed, but the camshaft couldn't have been a stock 140 HP, as the idle was fairly "lopey" but it sounded good!

Membership in CORVANATICS continued to increase, but not to the point where I couldn't still just photocopy the newsletters. I was then enjoying a healthy correspondence with Nico Dejong (I haven't seen his name mentioned lately in the newsletter) and was in touch with Ed Gridley and many others on occasion, and I'm happy to report that I still see some of these people on occasion. The newsletter received some revisions at this time which improved its appearance greatly, plus being granted access to a mimeograph machine, which streamlined operations quite a bit.

Work continued slowly on the FC. At this time I installed a set of aftermarket alloy wheels which nearly ended in disaster. I had purchased a set of aftermarket "dish mags" from a local speed shop. They were used but appeared to be in great condition, so I installed them with new blackwall tires. Soon thereafter I was traveling on the Westbound leg of I-465 (I-465 encircles Indianapolis) heading South toward the airport, when the passenger side rear tire/ rim separated from the hub of the wheel. Of course the left-rear dropped among a shower of sparks, etc, while the rim/tire combination sailed over a fence (I never did find it!). Needless to say this event really was quite frightening considering the fact that I was traveling at around 65-70 MPH! After this I will always advise anyone buying a used set of alloy or aftermarket wheels to have them run through NDT (non-destructive testing), also known as magnaflux or xyglo.

- to be continued

The final portion will be printed in the next edition.

History of Corvanatics (part 2)

by the founder— Ken Wilhite

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In late 1973 my interest in vans diminished and I sold the 95 to a local resident by the name of Mike Tingle, who drove the 95 out to Las Vegas (on his honeymoon!) and then back with no problems, although he indicated that it seemed to be missing a bit, later diagnosed as a loose nut on one of the rocker arms! I continued with the CORVAN ANTICS newsletter for awhile and then turned the editorship over to, I think, Nico Dejong.

I then acquired a 1962 Austin Mini-Cooper "S" which was a fun car ("You'd fix one thing and something else would break") then to an NSU Prinz 1000 TTS {997 cc SOHC 4-cylinder, dual Weber 4 DCOE's, 110HP@9-10,000RPM. This little car was really something, and on top of that, the styling was copied from the early Corvairs. I then progressed through several other cars and, in 1978, obtained from my father another Corvair, unfortunately not an FC, but another 1960 700 4-door, -1'3- which my father had purchased from a Winder, Georgia wrecking yard. I drove this '60 daily until November 1985 when I decided it was no longer practical (or fun) to "fool with old cars" (I also had a '63 Pontiac Catalina) so I sold the '60 to a guy who needed a beater to drive in the winter (he had a Porsche 911) and the Pontiac was sold the following July. I succumbed to the "Japanese Invasion" and purchased a Mazda GLC, which I am quite happy with, although parts and labor are a bit steep. At the present I am considering the purchase of a Pontiac Lemans GSE (Opel design, manufactured by Daewoo in Korea, with an Australian 95 HP engine). I still on occasion manage to drive a Corvair, my father's 1965 140 HP Coupe, and it does bring back memories.

I never imagined in my wildest dreams that CORVANATICS would grow to the size it is today, and even have their own little mini conventions, one I managed to attend in Southern Indiana a few years back. I appreciate receiving the CORVAN ANTICS newsletters which I read and then donate to the library of the Circle City Chapter of CORSA. Kenneth T. Wilhite, Jr.

(ed. note: To complete the story ... Beginning in June 1974 Nico Dejong took over the publication of CORVAN ANTICS. Between August 1973 and February 1974 there were no newsletters,

then at that time Ken announced his inability to continue the editorship. Four long months later the next issue came out, with a brand new format and a brand new editor. At this point I believe a quote from Nico's column in that issue could best describe how he took the reins and single-handedly saved our club:

"This issue of CORVAN ANTICS is a rather presumptive one in several respects. First, in view of the absence of recent newsletters, I assume that no one is taking up Ken's job as editor. I can't stand the thought of CORVAN ANTICS dying a premature death by default, so - even though I'm not sure I'm qualified and despite the fact that my time is very limited - I am willing to serve as your editor-publisher for the remainder of 1974."

Well, Nico not only continued until the end of 1974, he published the next 14 issues until Winter, 1977, he established a full, new slate of officers, tripled the number of members and generally established the form the Club remains in to this very day.

The Spring 1978 issue came out on schedule with a new "temporary" editor - then-Sec/Tres Pat Miller. Pat's temporary editorship continued until the Winter 1978 issue when Dave Anderson, previously staff cartoonist, took over the duties of Editor. Dave held down the fort for almost five years, at which time (January 1984) I took over.

In June 1974, Nico nominated Ken Wilhite for honorary membership. The motion was unanimously accepted by the members. Ken remained on as president until the Spring of 1977, at which time Cecil Miller began his term. Ed Gridley was next in line and became chief executive in 1978. By the Fall of 1981 Tom Silvey was in charge and, of course, remains in that position to this day. Well, that's the "rest of the story" as I was able to glean from the back issues in the Club archives. Long live CA!

