

What's the Most Significant Car Ever Made?

Beyond a doubt, it's the Chevrolet Corvair

By Robert Marlow

The Detroit, MI-based American Automobile Centennial Commission – whose purpose it has been to trumpet the impact of the car on American life over the past 100 years – compiled not one, but two lists of “most significant” milestones in American automotive history. One list covered the most significant cars, and the other one covered the most significant automotive innovations.

On the list of innovations, the commission included the introduction of safety systems. However, on the list of automobiles the commission ignored the car that started it all: the Chevrolet Corvair.

The Corvair lies at the root of today's litigious, and lawyer-driven, society. Ralph Nader – and his attack on the automobile industry in *Unsafe At Any Speed* – laid the foundation modern consumerism. As we know, the effects of this on today's society, and economy, are far-reaching. Huge settlements for spillage of McDonald's hot coffee can be traced to it. So can today's staggering auto insurance and health insurance costs.

Unsafe At Any Speed dealt with the domestic auto industry as a whole, but the first chapter was devoted to the Chevrolet Corvair. The Corvair automobile immediately became synonymous with the title. Practically overnight, product-liability lawsuits became not only big business, but big news.

The lawsuits against General Motors, citing the Corvair's design as the cause for accidents (which were previously considered to have been caused by driver error) were part of that news.

While he was practically unknown before *Unsafe At Any Speed* was published, Ralph Nader became a celebrity, and he made a career as the founder of modern consumerism. His professional training was as a lawyer.

While it can be said that consumerism has allowed us all to benefit from better and safer products, the greatest benefits have accrued not to consumers, but to contingency-fee trial lawyers. William Safire, writing in The NY Times on March 21, said of Nader: “His consumerism has long been the lawyers' gravy train. Nader inveighs, the lawyers sue; he gets principled satisfaction, they get filthy rich.”

In a 1991 speech to the Corvair Society of America (CORSAs) Convention in Washington, DC, Nader said that he targeted the Corvair not because he considered it to be any more dangerous than other cars, such as the VW Beetle or Renault Dauphine, but because it was a clean-sheet-of-paper design by the world's largest automaker. If anyone had the opportunity to build a safer car, Nader reasoned, General Motors had it with the Corvair, and, in his opinion, the company squandered that opportunity.

This kind of reasoning – what you do vs what a lawyer thinks you should do – has brought us to the point where, today, there are warning labels on everything from plastic bags to soft drink cans. The Model T Ford put Americans on the road. The Corvair put us in the hands of lawyers.

This is why the Corvair is clearly the most significant car of the past 100 years. Its influence on modern American life has gone well beyond the subject of automobiles, and well beyond the time of the car's production. The Corvair has affected the lives of all of us over the past 3 decades – and it still continues to do so, even today.

This year – after spending 30 years passing opinions on product-safety issues, corporate-responsibility issues, and political practices, Ralph Nader became the presidential candidate of the little-known Green Party. During the campaign, he said that he was a serious candidate, and that he did not allow his name to be placed on the ballot simply to draw attention to the party.

“I’m in this campaign to stay,” Nader said. “I know I can’t win. But this is to break the paradigm, to end the two-party duopoly.”

Nader’s presidential aspirations prompted concern among the pundits about the effects trial lawyers’ candidate might have on the election. It was suggested that Nader could hurt Clinton - the incumbent president – in much the same way as Ross Perot might hurt Bob Dole. A poll conducted by the LA Times earlier this year, showed Nader pulling seven percent of the vote among California voters.

No other car in the 100-year history of the automobile provided the first platform for an influential future presidential candidate. No other car prompted the creation of the National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration, and all the automotive and non-automotive product standards legislation that have followed. No other car triggered an ongoing explosion in product-liability lawsuits. No other car gave consumerists their very careers.

No other car has the significance of the Chevrolet Corvair.

Robert Marlow is an automobile enthusiast whose collector cars have ranged from a '36 Chrysler Airflow to an '88 Pontiac Fiero. He still owns the Corvair his father bought in 1966.

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