

# HAPPY 30TH!



## Chevy's "Totally New Trucks"...

### Thirty Years Later

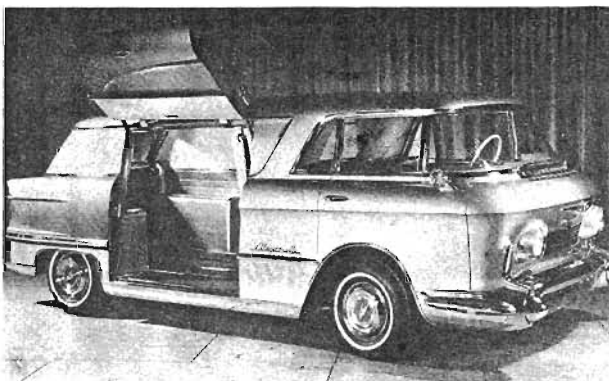
### By Dave Newell

Ever wish you could have bought one new? Some of us did. October 7th, 1960 marked the date on which you could officially indulge. If you were only eight years old, about all you could do was get high on that new truck smell, bounce the hell out of that full-foam cushioned seat and realize that those Corvaire trucks were something special. At least I did. And hope I could pilot one someday, instead of playing Greyhound bus driver behind the wheel.

Looking back after thirty years, it's harder for me to bounce at will. Instead my head hits the roof on big bumps courtesy of the famous FC pitch. But when they were new, what effect did these radical Chevis have on trucks in general? Were they more than just an ill-fated design exercise? Let's take a look back.

Today, over half of Chrysler Corporation's production consists of minivans. Volkswagen may have opened this market here in the 1950's, but the Greenbrier popularized the van-type station wagon. Made it much more mainstream and acceptable. What gave it the edge?

The Corvaire 95 truck versions - Corvan, Rampside and Loadside - were but three entries in Chevy's 189 model "Sturdi-bilt" lineup for 1961. Fleet users and buyers conditioned to conventional trucks looked at them skeptically and didn't buy many. Today, the small pickup market continues to boom, but with mini-trucks from the traditional mold. What went wrong?



FORERUNNER OF THE CORVAN, GMC L'UNIVERSELLE HINTED AT CORVAIRE 95 STYLING AND LOW FLOOR

The Greenbrier concept at GM's Styling Staff was born in the GMC L'Universelle created for the 1955 Motorama shows. Yes, this highly chromed show truck was front wheel drive. But the package - a car-like, stylish forward-control van with low loading floor height - is what's important here. The legendary Harley Earl, still in charge at Styling in 1957 when our trucks were born, was fascinated with the idea and pushed it.



ORIGINAL CONCEPT OF THE GREENBRIER WAS MORE CAR-LIKE THAN THE PRODUCTION VERSION. NOTE CAR-TYPE BUMPER, REAR-HINGED SIDE DOOR AND WRAPAROUND CORNER WINDOWS ON THIS CLAY MODEL, IN GM STYLING'S ADVANCE ONE STUDIO, 10-25-57. NED NICKLES WAS IN CHARGE.

The original sketches and clay models done in Ned Nickle's studio at Styling, of what was then referred to as the Holden Suburban, were much more car-like than the production versions we know. Developed alongside the Holden sedan, it was lower in profile and used Holden car lights and bumpers. More of a station-sedan version it was the only wagon initially planned. Not until Nickle's work was transferred to the Chevrolet Truck Studio were commercial versions designed, and the concept then took on more truck characteristics.

With this in mind, and the unavoidable use of what were basically car chassis components, it's not surprising that the FC package was more successful as a passenger car than a truck. Sales figures bear this out. Greenbriers were also marketed and registered as station wagons, while the 95's were sold as trucks.

When put head-to-head with an early Ford Econoline, (Ford's VW killer, also introduced in October '60) an FC acts much more like a car. It's quieter, smoother riding, far more roadable and best of all, fun to drive. And lest we bemoan our overworked 80-horsepowered trucks lack of "go" today, a VW Bus climbing a hill is nearly stationary by comparison.

Greenbriers and camper-equipped Corvairs and pickups found a healthy niche with sportsmen, camping enthusiasts and vagabonds in general. Despite all the Corvair maladies (what oil leaks?), FC's helped change America's image of a truck camper from that of a crude aluminum topper aboard a hard riding work truck (complete with unshaven outdoorsmen and even smellier fish) to a vision of a comfortable cruiser the whole family could enjoy.

But just because 'Briers and 95's behaved like cars and were a ball to drive didn't necessarily make them successful as trucks. Their unique layout and relative high quality were expensive, not only to design and build but also to buy. Their low floor, superior traction, air cooling, near perfect balance, etc could be appreciated and rationalized (versus their cost) by small fleets and owner-operators. Those who had hands-on contact with the trucks (again the car charisma surfaced). Most of these operators could only use a few 95's at a time, delivering diapers, exterminating pests, repairing TVs, etc.

Ed Cole personally toured the country before Corvair trucks were publicly introduced, trying to sell the large fleet buyers on the upcoming new models. Their commercial success relied heavily on sizable orders from the likes of A, T & T, Bell Telephone and utility companies nationwide. All of these companies were eagerly seeking an improved vehicle to replace their traditional pickup cab/utility box service trucks, in which workmen could be out of the weather. So far, VW's just hadn't been up to their standards.

Trial orders were placed for both Corvair 95's and Econolines, but it wasn't long before the tinny Ford affair got their nod. Not that fleet users were impressed with the Ford's obviously cheap, crackerbox construction. But in both in initial cost and operating cost there just wasn't any comparison. At least not in businesses where a one mile-per-gallon savings per year can amount to many thousands of dollars.

Downtime, or the amount of time the Corvair 95's spent off-the-job and in the shop was, according to one phone company official, the worst in Ma Bell's history. And servicing the Econoline was easier, cheaper and didn't confuse the mechanics. Despite all this, additional Corvair orders did follow, but not enough to save the day.

During Chevrolet's development of the 95's, cost had plagued the project from the beginning. Early prototypes featured more sophis-

ticated control linkages (even a hydraulic clutch!), drop-down side storage doors on Loadsides, a larger ("panoramic") rear window option for the pickups, better dust sealing and other neat features... all axed to bring down the cost.

Throughout the 95's lifespan, Chevy took every opportunity to take the cost out of the trucks and make them more price competitive. Even to the extent of removing standard features starting with the 1963s. Rear grilles were deleted from standard models, rear door windows made optional on Corvairs and glove box doors removed. The doors were hastily reinstated when complaints poured in from dealers that assembly workers had goofed, or that thieves had vandalized their Corvair 95s!

Improvements did find their way into production, partly due to regular Corvair car development. The '64 95's and Greenbriers with 164 cu. in. engines were finally reliable and gutsy trucks and could turn in miles of hard service. But the changes came too late. El Caminos, small Chevy Step-Van 7's (small four- or six-cylinder seven foot step-van, very small for a step-van) and conventional Chevy panels and Suburbans were all eating away at 95 sales.

It's not surprising to see how the FC's fared better as cars than truck's as we've seen, much to the chagrin of the Chevy Sales Department. Just the opposite took place with the Econoline, and their "Station Bus" model never caught on until later years. Neither the small Ford pickups or later Dodge A100 pickups went much farther in the marketplace than our Rampsides and Loadsides. It just wasn't socially acceptable in the early 1960's to use a pickup as one would a car.



THE LOADSIDE PICKUP TAKING SHAPE IN THE CHEVROLET TRUCK STUDIO AT GM STYLING. (1-2-59)

Now it probably sounds like I've been too hard on our favorite trucks. I assure you I am just as enthusiastic about their virtues as any CORSA member alive. The enthusiasm

felt by Chevrolet's advertising department, in terms of dollars for the Corvair truck line, wasn't quite as strong. Especially after it became obvious that the models were in deep sales trouble.

The 1962 and 1963 season each saw a different campaign, designed to emphasize toughness and reliability. Elephants walked the rampgate in '62. Corvans were dropped ten feet onto the pavement from magnetic cranes and driven off unscathed. The following year, dealers were urged to "Prove Corvair 95 Quality" and to demonstrate all the myriad ways in which 95's had been "improved". It was a weak effort that got little participation or enthusiasm from dealers who were largely burned out trying to promote Corvair trucks against the Econoline. There was a slight rally in Corvan sales for '64 but it was too late.

While those under-budgeted campaigns were running their course, Chevy's Falconesque Econoline beater was being designed. Hurried into production, the Chevy Van greedily borrowed the '64 Corvan instrument cluster, glovebox door and other hardware.

Since the passenger-toting Sportvan version couldn't come on line until January 1965, the Greenbrier was allowed to bow out slowly as a '65 model until December 1964, after only 1,528 units were built.

Enthusiasts today who cherish and covet Greenbriers and 95's are a breed curiously similar to buyers who were delighted with their trucks when they were new. Intelligent, free-thinking individuals who took to the outdoors in their Greenbriers or found creative, novel uses for Corvair trucks to promote their businesses and attract attention. It's fitting that the same kind of enthusiasm keeps us united under the CORVANATICS banner.

In retrospect, for such a radically different vehicle, Chevrolet did a remarkable job to design, build and merchandise as many as they did. To give us perhaps the brightest and most imaginative American truck ever built. For that we have to thank Ed Cole and especially Harley Earl for his confidence in the concept and ability to sell a new project. Three totally new trucks and the Greenbrier Sports Wagon. Now that was product innovation!



PRODUCTION CORVAN WAS POPULAR WITH OWNER-OPERATORS OR SMALL, SPECIALIZED FLEETS. THIS 1961 MODEL IS SHOWN AT A TV SALES AND REPAIR CONVENTION, DISPLAYED BY A LOCAL CHEVROLET ZONE OFFICE.



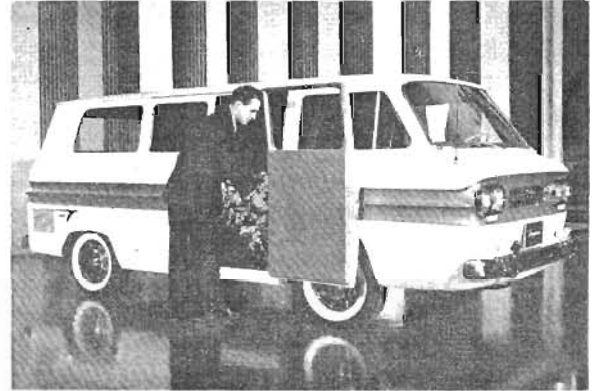
FIBERGLASS PROTOTYPES. NOTE LOWER LOCATION OF COOLING LOUVRES. ONE HALF IS A GREENBRIER AND THE OTHER HALF IS...



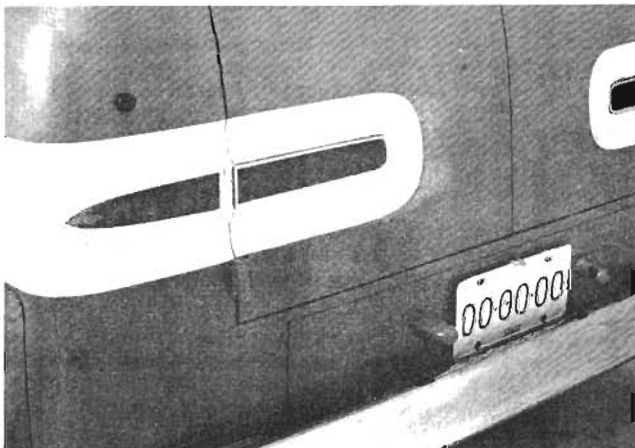
...A CORVAN. NOTE ONE PIECE LIFT TYPE REAR GATE WITH FULL-WIDTH WINDOW. ALSO WHITEWALL TIRES ON 'BRIER SIDE AND BLACKWALLS AND SMALL HUBCAPS ON TRUCK.



PICKUP IS A TRUE LOADSIDE WITH A FULL LENGTH FLAT FLOOR AND OPTIONAL PANORAMIC REAR WINDOW.



GREENBRIER PROTOTYPE IN ACTION, OBVIOUSLY RETURNING FROM A SPIN UP TO THE FLORIST SHOP. NOTE MAN'S SUIT!!! KITSCH!



FIBERGLASS MODEL CLOSE-UP SHOWS EARLY PLAN FOR THE TAILLIGHT HOUSING. LOW-DOWN COOLING LOUVRES HAVE BEEN COVERED OVER.



PROPOSAL FOR 1962 FACE-LIFT IN CHEVY TRUCK STUDIO SHOWS THEY DID US A FAVOR BY NOT ADOPTING THIS GRILLE. FLOW - THROUGH VENTILATION WAS REAL!