

# I Drive a *Corvette*

When he was 10 years old, Werner E. Meier's family moved from Detroit, where he was born, back to their ancestral home near Lugano, Switzerland. Although the family spoke German, young Werner and his sister learned to speak Italian in school, a fact that confounded his parents as they tried to decipher letters from summer camp in the Dolomite Alps. Had he stayed in Switzerland, Meier today probably would be collecting rare Alfa Romeos, Lancias or Ferraris. Instead, Meier's family moved back to the Detroit area, where the purchase of a new 1969 Corvette subsequently blossomed into a lifetime passion for not only driving Corvettes, but collecting and restoring rare Corvettes as well.

# Werner Meier

Consider some of the jewels in Meier's current Corvette menagerie: a Firefrost Red 1963 Corvette Sting Ray Convertible styling car prepared for Chevrolet general manager Semon E. "Bunkie" Knudsen, and currently on display at the National Corvette Museum; a 1964 Corvette Sting Ray Sport Coupe styling car specially prepared under the direction of General

Motors styling chief Bill Mitchell for his close friend, wealthy industrialist and racing sponsor Ozzie Olson; and a 1965 Corvette Sting Ray Convertible (Shop Order #10500) first displayed at the Chicago Auto Show in 1965.

Meier's 25-year odyssey through Corvette ownership has taken him through about 70 different Corvettes over the

years, 16 of which he still owns. He keeps several of them in a 1200-square-foot garage behind his Farmington Hills home in suburban Detroit. Another three Corvettes, in various states of repair and restoration, reside in a workshop converted from the home's family room. There are also four Corvettes on loan to the Donald Gilmore Classic Car Club

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BY JOHN MULHERE & PHOTOGRAPHED BY COLIN CURWOOD

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Museum near Kalamazoo, Mich., in addition to the car on loan to the National Corvette Museum in Bowling Green.

Meier, who has worked at General Motors for more than 25 years, credits his ability to have owned so many Corvettes to: knowledge, a little luck ("Being in the right place at the right time") and a lawn mowing business he started as a youngster shortly after moving back to the United States.

"My parents found that after living in the States for a number of years, they were too Americanized to return to Europe, so we moved back to the United States," Meier says. A couple of years later, he adds, he started a lawn mowing business which grew to about 15 clients "I was very industrious as a kid," he says. A few years later, at age 17, Meier lied about his age to get a job in a machine shop.

All the time Meier was saving his lawn-cutting and machine shop earnings so that when that fateful day in 1969 arrived, he had the resources to buy himself an 18th birthday present: a 1969 Corvette Convertible Coupe, his first new car.

"It was somewhat of an accident. I was going to buy a used 1964 Corvette Coupe," Meier says. "I knew very little about cars, but my dad said to me, 'If you're going to buy a car, buy a new car,'" he says. "I was getting ready to go to college at General Motors Institute in Flint, and he didn't want me to have any problems with a used car. So instead I bought a new 1969 Corvette."

Meier says he selected a Corvette for a couple of reasons. "My family had always driven Chevrolets — we always had sedans and wagons. And anybody who likes cars and grew up in the '60s was definitely into the Corvette." Lastly, Meier says, his cousin had a 1963 Silver Sebring Split-Window Corvette Coupe. "I remember the feeling driving it around with him."

Having been bitten by the Corvette

bug, Meier next decided to get into Corvette racing. He sold his new '69 Vette and bought a '65 with a 350-cid engine that had been set up for autocross racing and began tweaking the car and running gymkhanas.

"The car was extremely impressive," he recalls. "We were getting 250 horsepower at 5600 rpm off of the rear wheels on a dyno. But the car was better at performing than I was," Meier admits. "It was an awesome car, but I'd spin out and was always breaking pieces and having to repair it. Finally, I decided I was putting more into the car than I could ever get out. After that I started to get into restoration projects."

Meier began focusing on high-performance Corvettes from the midyears. "I looked for the car with the biggest engine in each year," he says. After buying and selling some 70 Corvettes, Meier says he has only lost money on two — his first car, which he sold too quickly after purchasing it new, and his racing Corvette for obvious reasons.

In addition to the cars mentioned earlier, Meier says he owned one other Corvette that was truly significant — a

1964 Corvette Sting Ray Sport Coupe - GPV 61, that he sold to Dr. W. Vance Shappley of Germantown, Tenn. Bunkie Knudsen had the car made through Styling and Engineering for his wife, Florence. In addition to such styling cues as a special cast eggcrate grille designed by Bill Mitchell for the 1964 New York World's Fair show car and front fenders from the 1965 model, the car stands out for its unique color — pink, specially mixed to precisely match the color of the Knudsens' Florida home. In addition, the car was equipped with pink-wall tires and a pink and cranberry interior.

"As I was buying new cars, I'd always hold onto the most desirable ones and sell the least desirable," Meier says. "But

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Meier's completed Corvette restorations have been invited to: the Bloomington Gold — including the Special Collection in 1993, the Meadowbrook Concours D' Elegance, St. Ignace, the National Corvette Museum and the Gilmore Classic Car Club Museum, and have been featured in many Corvette books, including the Corvette Genealogy poster.






**Meier with his 1957: "As I was buying new cars," he says, "I'd always hang on to the most desirable ones and sell the least desirable."**

"I think one of the things that got me into restoring Corvettes was my experience tearing down the big diesel engines," says Meier, who spent his first 13 years with General Motors working at Detroit Diesel before moving over to the Cadillac Division for several years. One of his biggest professional thrills was working on the Allante project while at Cadillac, where his involvement brought

him over to the Pinninfarina Carrozzeria in Turin, Italy. Currently Meier works at the Services Technology Group as manager, service methods and equipment development.

"Basically, I'm a lobbyist for the service industry. I try to make cars easier to service." Meier has been married to his wife Christine for 17 years and has four children: Erich, 15; Dolly, 14; Patrick, 10; and

Brian, 8. Although work and his family demand most of his attention these days, Meier still finds time to work on restoring classic Corvettes.

"I'll never outgrow my lust for cars," he says. The three Corvettes in varying states of restoration in his home workshop provide ample evidence of that. 

Freelance writer **John Mulhere** is a former managing editor of *AutoWeek* magazine.