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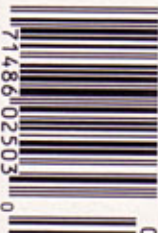
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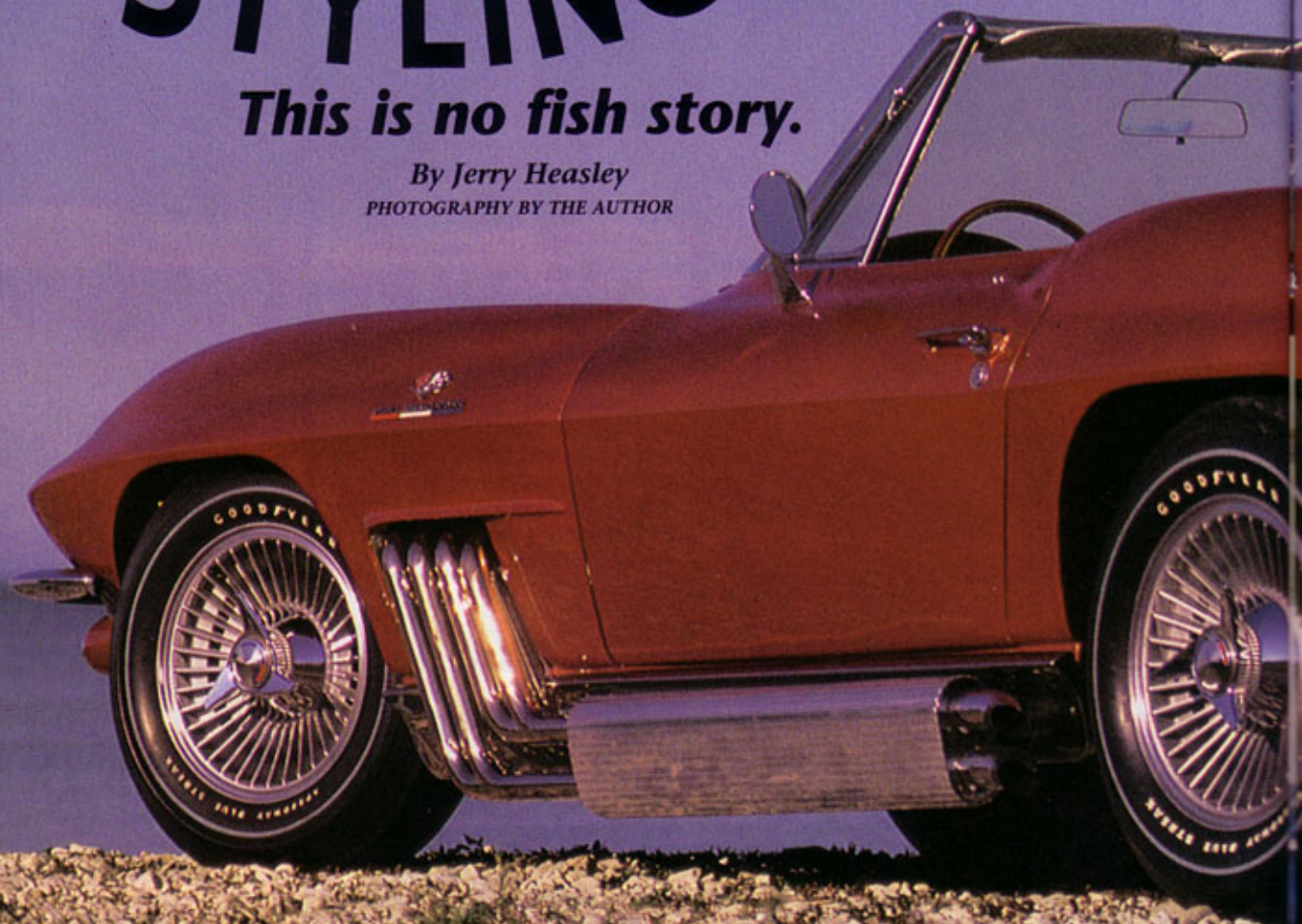
BUNKIE KNUDSEN'S 1963 CORVETTE STYLING CAR



This is no fish story.

By Jerry Heasley

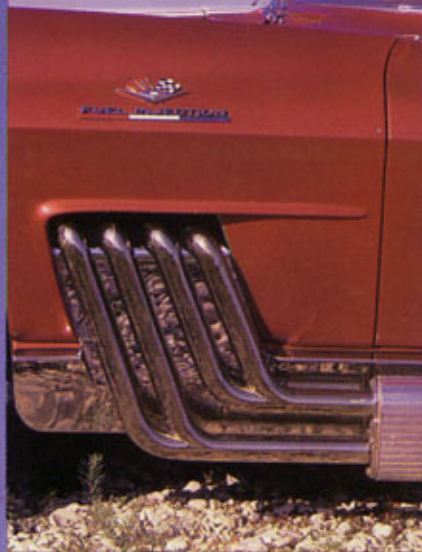
PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE AUTHOR



It is odd, indeed, that a fish could have been the revelation for a sports car. But, when Bill Mitchell, the soon-to-be chief stylist at GM, mounted a shark on his wall that he had caught at Bimini, that blue body with the white belly gave him the inspiration for a new-era sports car.

In the mid-1950s, the styling baton was soon to pass from Harley Earl to Bill Mitchell, and there would definitely be a new Corvette with a totally different body and chassis.

First, Mitchell created his own personal 1959 Sting Ray racer He paid for it out of his own pocket, his way of getting a new, exciting Corvette to the public eye in a matter of months. It normally took three to four years to go from the drawing board to a new production car. The revolutionary Sting Ray did debut after about that length of time, 1963.

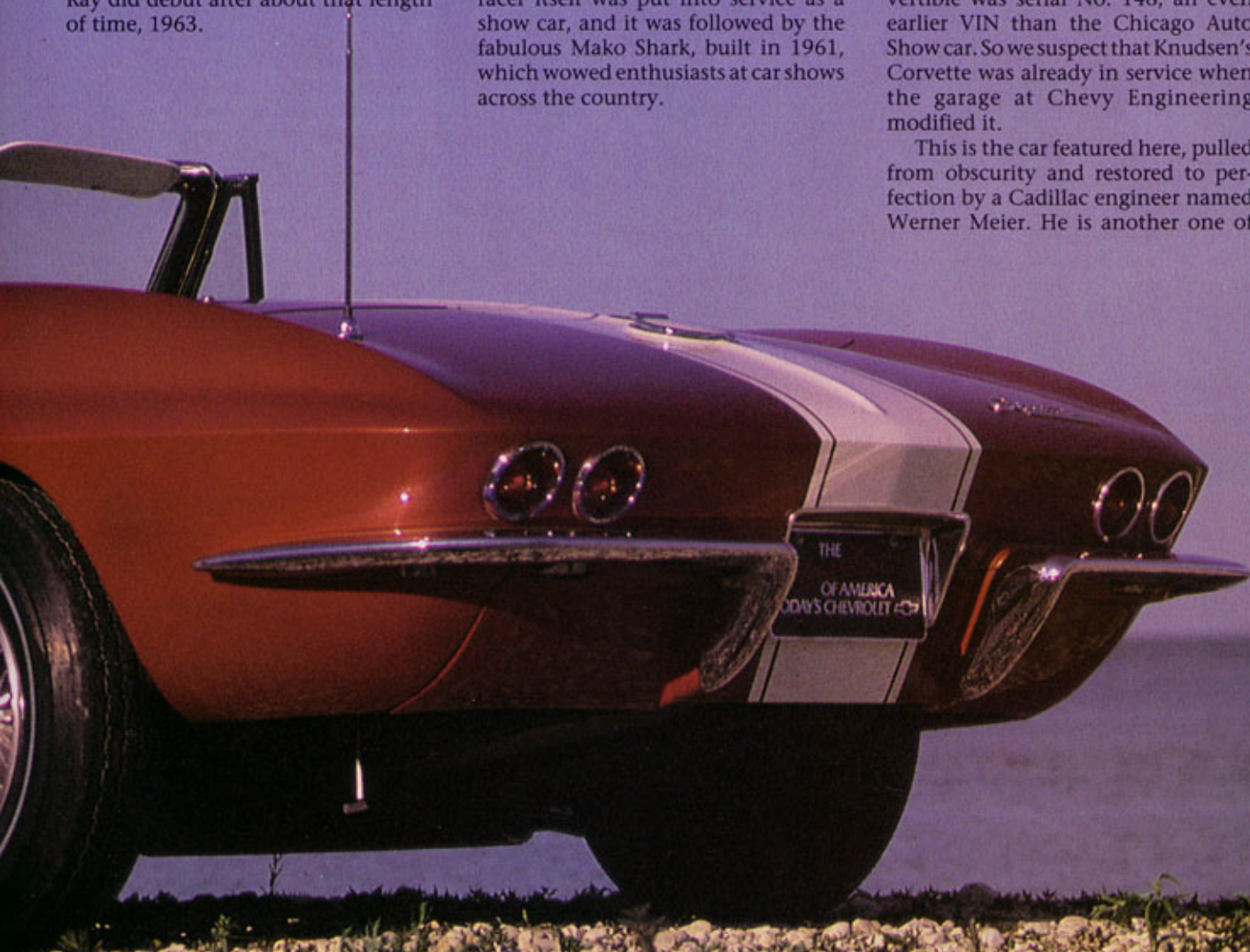


Along the way, there were more racing and show cars with the Bill Mitchell/shark look. The Sting Ray racer itself was put into service as a show car, and it was followed by the fabulous Mako Shark, built in 1961, which wowed enthusiasts at car shows across the country.

Following the Mako Shark, and built on a production-car chassis, was a roadster put together for the Chicago Auto Show by the Chevrolet Studio of General Motors Styling. It had a lot of design elements of the previous Sting Rays. The most obvious common look was a special set of side exhausts that really gave the car a shark appearance, resembling the razor-sharp teeth of the man-eating fish.

This Corvette was serial No. 352, put together by the styling department at Chevrolet. The general manager at the time was a super car enthusiast by the name of Semon E. "Bunkie" Knudsen. Apparently, he liked this show car so much that he engaged Chevrolet Engineering to build a copy that he used as his everyday driver. Interestingly enough, this 1963 convertible was serial No. 148, an even earlier VIN than the Chicago Auto Show car. So we suspect that Knudsen's Corvette was already in service when the garage at Chevy Engineering modified it.

This is the car featured here, pulled from obscurity and restored to perfection by a Cadillac engineer named Werner Meier. He is another one of



Jerry Heasley, a long-time Vette contributor, resides in the panhandle of Texas and has written about cars longer than he cares to remember. His garage houses one of the few automatic AC Cobras ever built, and he's never even offered us a ride.

those rare combinations of car enthusiast, collector, researcher, historian, restorer and GM employee.

We pick up the story in the early 1980s. The Knudsen convertible has passed through six owners in the Detroit area and has been used all its life as a daily driver until it reached a sad state of repair. Stored in a garage where it is used as a scaffold, the rear deck is broken from people standing on it. The frame is corroded, the paint is in poor condition, the interior is worn out. Basically, the car is undrivable.

Luckily, however, enough is left of its special features to attract the attention of Corvette collector Wally Abella, who suspects it is more than a common modified. Wally asks Meier to share a look at the dilapidated car, to determine if it is something unique. Werner assures Wally the car is a one-off or styling or show car of some kind. He trades a 1971 driver Corvette, even up, for this still-quiete-mysterious '63 roadster, which is obviously historic.

However, after taking apart the car and starting a quality rebuild on the chassis, Wally realizes this venture is not the typical restoration because of the roadster's unique features. Even the seats are special, and standard reproduction parts will not help in the



reconstruction of this 1963 Corvette.

The decision to sell comes slowly, but in 1984 when Wally decides to get out of the project, he lets the '63 roadster go to his friend Werner, who spends three full years restoring the car. It is a large job due to the fancy exhaust system, the unique body work on the car and the complex interior trim.

Werner found that his very special 1963 convertible started life as a red, fuel-injected roadster, and the modifications, including the paint work and stripes, were done after it left the assembly line—most likely after it was put into street use by Knudsen.

The most complicated part of the restoration was replacing the side exhausts, reproduced in exact size, shape and make by the combined talents of eight different craftsmen, starting with Werner's father, a tool maker. He cut out and trimmed all the flanges, and then took the job to Chuck Watson of Watson Engineering in Detroit. There, some real artists fabricated the pipes from straight tubing and mandrel bends. (A mandrel is a metal bar that serves as a core around which metal or other material is bent and shaped.) After fabrication, the pipes had to be welded together and then polished to erase all weld seams.

After completion of the pipes, the craftsmen fabricated the covers for the mufflers. They started with a flat sheet of 1/4-inch-thick aluminum inserted on a numerically controlled boring mill, programmed to cut grooves. After the aluminum was machined, it was trimmed to size, then placed over custom-built wooden mandrels and beaten into shape with rawhide mallets.

Once the pipes and covers were complete, the last job was to fabricate the rocker moldings and the "close-out" that goes behind the pipes. This was quite a chore. The original ones were done in brass, but Werner really



wanted to make the reconstruction last. He chose stainless steel, which is more durable, but also more difficult to roll into shape. For that reason, craftsmen had to make the inserts that go behind the pipes (where they exit, behind the fenders) out of cold, rolled steel, which is more malleable and easier to work with.

The remainder of the metals had to be either chrome-plated or polished. It is amazing the number of people who turned down a 7-foot piece of stainless that needed polishing.

Completing the restoration was no piece of cake. Werner discovered that the interior of the car was far from 1963 stock. Seats were reshaped to reflect 1964-type, the difference being that the top of the seat backs do not come to a point, as on 1963 models. But they form a square top, created by adding foam pads. Upholstery is white leather with maroon accent stripes.

Interior items

The interior also features floor grilles, very typical of cars built in that era. Door panels are naugahyde with stainless-steel plates and crossed-flag emblems. The steering wheel has unique dual spokes with two types of wood inlaid in the rim. The console is also a prototype part, a forerunner of what came along in 1964. Carpeting is tight-knit, similar to that of the late '70s.

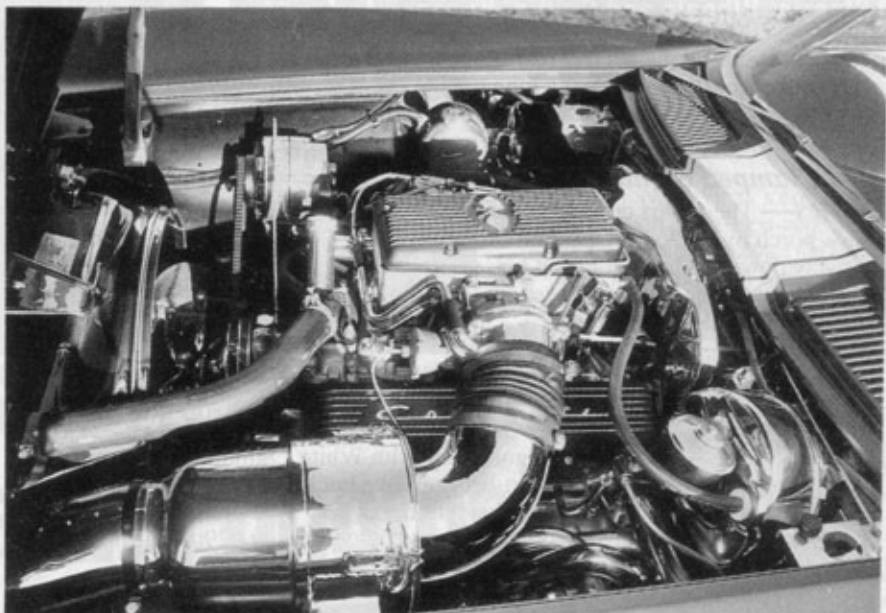
Instrumentation is 1964 variety, and Werner learned that the cluster, along with other features, was updated in the car's history when it was driven by Knudsen and still owned by Chevrolet. Seat belts are the 1967 variety with retractors, and '66 date-coded. Although they are not 1963 stock, they are historic and accurate for this car.

The engine is stock except for cosmetic modifications of chrome and crinkle finish in place of cast-aluminum surfaces. The engine bay had to be modified to make way for the special pipes, with the heater box trimmed for clearance and the battery relocated to the trunk from its normal position.

Special metallic red paint, accented with white LeMans-type stripes, set the car apart from production models. Knudsen also had a Nova, a Corvair and an Impala, all convertibles, finished this same color for his personal use. His wife usually drove the Corvette. It wore "M" plates (manufacturer's plates), and was turned back to GM in 1967. Although not officially a styling car, it was built as a twin to the styling car and is part of the historical line of cars that emanated from the original Sting Ray.



The interior of the Knudsen car (above) is anything but stock. Note the floor grilles, steering wheel and door panels. Seats are genuine leather. Enginewise (below), a stock but prettied-up fuelie powered the car. The battery had to be relocated to the trunk to make room for the exhaust headers.



Where The Sharks Are

Currently, there are three known Shark Roadsters. The first one is the original, built for the Chicago Auto Show. Werner Meier also owns this car, but he acquired it just recently, six years after he bought the Bunkie Knudsen 1963 Roadster seen here. This is his next Corvette project.

A second Shark Roadster was built for Harley Earl, who was already retired from Chevrolet in 1963. This fully restored '63, painted blue and white, is currently in the possession of George Crocker of the "Rear View Mirror Museum." This car was converted to carburetors so it could be equipped with air conditioning to accommodate Earl, who was living in Florida.

The pipes look the same, but are nonfunctional. Also, the passenger's side dash panel is fitted with an accelerometer, a clock and functional gauges.

The third vehicle is our feature car. It has drum brakes instead of 4-wheel discs, and the hood is a '63-style with the fake chrome vents; the styling car had a hood that was flat, with no fake vents.

There could be more Shark Roadsters out there. Werner heard a rumor that there were nine sets of special door panels made for these vehicles. Some non-Shark '63 midyears, in fact, may still be running around with these special door panels.

—J.H.