

# An automobile ownership retrospective

By MMOCC Member Steve Hall

1965 Corvair Monza Coupe

## **Brief history about me:**

I grew up in Claremont, New Hampshire and ever since I was too young to remember I have had a strong interest and proficiency in working on mechanical devices. I was known for taking toys and my father's tools apart and putting them back together for fun. My parents were unaware of the tool disassembly until years later I wrote an essay for school where I described disassembling a reciprocating sander and reassembling it without the part needed to change the direction of the eccentric device for the reciprocating mode. The sander worked but my Dad told me later that after he tried to use it and only one direction of the reciprocating mode worked, he always wondered why. My parents think I was about 6 or 7 years old at the time I worked on the sander. My interest in mechanical repairs migrated from toys to sanders, bicycles, mopeds, washers, dryers, vacuums, snow blowers, lawn mowers, #2 oil fired furnace burners, and eventually to automobiles.

## **Stumbling across the 1965 Corvair:**

In 1988 my high school friend Patrick and I were looking through a local salvage yard in Wethersfield, Vermont, about a twenty minutes drive from my home in New Hampshire across the Connecticut river. Pat is about 10 months or so older than I and he had his drivers license and I didn't. Pat was searching for air horns from a semi so he could outfit his 1971 Chevy Chevelle with a more startling sounding horn. (and yes, it was startling when he got that installed in his Chevelle) The bulk of the salvage yard contained late model 1970's and 1980's vintage autos. In addition to the horn search we were exploring the yard and noticed a road leading to an upper terrace and ventured up there to a clearing where there were a number of '50s & 60's era vehicles.

I remember clearly a VW Karmann Ghia, Studebaker Lark, a couple of Ford Edsels with the transmission push button in the steering column center. In the middle of the clearing was a white 1965 Chevrolet Corvair Monza Coupe with a couple of other cars, the make and models of which I don't recall clearly. The Corvair was complete and had the automatic two speed Powerglide transmission with the shifter on the dashboard. Although I was not looking for a vehicle since I had my 1961 Corvair (my first car which is a story for another article), this fortuitous find peaked my interest. There was rust in the usual places - around the doglegs and upper wheel wells. I opened the engine lid and noticed immediately that the vehicle had a complete factory air conditioning option which, for a young New Englander, was a rare sight. Most cars in New England were not optioned with air conditioning in those days. I thought about it 'overnight' and decided to purchase the Corvair. I paid \$325.00 for it on May 27, 1988. At the time, New Hampshire did not have a title requirement for vehicles more than 10 years old so it was a Bill of Sale transaction. I don't recall discussing this with my parents, but I must have since my Dad went with me to purchase the car. I'm listed as a co-owner with my Dad on the Bill of Sale. I was 15 years old at

the time and would not have been able to purchase the vehicle on my own without a guardian's co-signature.

### **Bringing the Corvair home:**

I hired the salvage yard to tow the Corvair home. I began going through the interior. There were quite a lot of personal papers, bank records and receipts from the prior owner in the vehicle most of which had significant water damage. I remember distinctly that there was one golf club wedge iron on the floor of the back seat. I saved most of the ownership papers that could be salvaged. I remember the driver's vent window was broken presumably so the vehicle could be unlocked (there was no key when I purchased it.).

### **The Corvair's History:**

In the pile of paperwork I found a Bill of Sale from three of the prior owners. The ownership records are not complete. The earliest paperwork indicated the car was purchased by one of the prior owners from Earl Wallace Ford, Inc., Delray Beach, Florida, on September 21, 1976 which likely explains why the car had air conditioning and no windshield washer option. This is the earliest ownership record I have for the vehicle. The owner that had it before the salvage yard purchased it from Green Mountain Classics, a local auto restoration shop in Springfield Vermont, on September 9, 1983. I have not attempted to conduct any ownership research beyond this.

### **The Condition:**

The underbody of the Corvair was relatively rust free in the critical areas of the rocker panels which also was a clue that this car did not spend most of its life in New England. For those of you unfamiliar with the Connecticut River Valley of New Hampshire and Vermont, the winters are long, subject to significant snowfall, and road salt is used ubiquitously. Most of my parent's daily driver cars would last about 7 to 10 years before critical structural and cosmetic rust would take hold and warrant considering vehicle replacement. My parents told me a story about one of my maternal grandfather's large Chevy sedans was replaced when the motor mounts rusted to such an extent the engine dropped out one day.

I tried to get the Corvair engine started but the starter would just make the dreaded 'chezzzzz' sound of the starter gear grinding out on the torque converter ring gear. I removed the starter to find a very ground down ring gear on the torque converter. I was able to turn the engine freely but it would 'lock' about half way through a full rotation in either direction. At that point I decided the engine needed to come out for a proper diagnosis and for the torque converter repair.

I dropped the engine, which on a Corvair means you build a low profile dolly cart with casters, lower the car with two floor jacks until the engine and transmission assembly 'just rests' on the dolly (not supporting the body weight of the vehicle). After removing all the control linkages, drive shafts etc... unbolt the three motor mount nuts and then jack the car up until the engine clears the body and you roll the engine out on the cart.

I started taking the engine apart and soon discovered the valve train had significant wear on the rocker and valve stem area and rocker ball galling (the worst I have yet to see any subsequent engine I have worked on.) The oil was some of the blackest sludge I've ever seen. The odometer was reading about 13,000 miles, but certainly the odometer had turned over at least once. At that point I decided to scrap the lower end of the engine.

### **Repair and Modifications:**

My Dad had a 1966 Corvair sedan model 500 with a three speed that he picked up for parts for his 1965 Convertible (which was the first automobile engine I restored and a story for a future article.) My Dad let me have the engine. I reused the original heads from the 1965 Monza since they had the bolt pattern for the air conditioning hardware and shrouds which is a different bolt size and pattern than the 1966-1969 heads. I would learn almost 20 years later that using the original high mileage heads was probably not the best idea. I put it all back together and got the engine working for less than \$300. Since my Dad had the 1966 parts car, I decided to swap out the Powerglide for the parts car's three speed and salvaged all of the manual transmission components cables pulleys etc... and converted the 1965 Monza to a three speed manual. I did this rather than replace the torque converter in the high mileage Powerglide (of unknown condition). That arrangement worked pretty well for a while. I taught my middle brother Josh how to drive a manual transmission in this car in a parking lot at a local factory.

The Corvair parts car was model 500 four door sedan with the three speed transmission. The model 500 was the lower cost 'no frills' Corvair model option. The three speed floor shifter had the 'H' shift pattern such that reverse is where first gear is on most contemporary 4 and 5 speed manuals that were in use at the time. I had to be mindful of this at stoplights as I was driving a variety of vehicles with 5 speed manual transmissions at that time and 'muscle memory' could inadvertently cause one to put it in reverse at stop lights when first was intended. A number of years later I converted the transmission back to a Powerglide due to an issue with the three speed's transition from second to third gear and for convenience.

I used the 1965 Corvair as my 'primary' driver in high school and my first year in college. I installed a ski rack for it and would drive it to my high school ski team practices. The car has good traction in snow due to the rear engine and power train. My college parking permit is still on the rear driver's side window. While at college, which was located on the north shore of Massachusetts, I would periodically drive friends to Boston in it. On one of those college midnight study breaks a college friend and I drove it to Denny's restaurant in Beverly, MA where a group of us would go from time-to-time. On the way back we heard a 'pop' and what sounded like 'tdtdtdtdtd...'. I pulled over and one of the spark plugs had strip out of its socket (remember what I said about using those high mileage aluminum heads original to the car?). I drove it back to the dorms and arranged to purchase a repair kit and my Dad graciously drove down one weekend with the special tap and steel insert so that we could make the repair in the parking lot. (Thanks Dad!)

### **The Corvair sits for a number of years**

In 1993 I went to a shop to have the 1965 Monza state inspected and a ball joint was bad and rust had opened up in the rear wheel well and would not pass inspection. In New Hampshire there can't be any holes in the body panel skins what so ever to pass inspection. I was busy with school and moved on to another daily driver. The car sat for a number of years and when I started it one day a valve stuck on one head and bent a push rod. I decided it was time to rejuvenate the car. I met my wife Jamie in late 1999 and relocated to Jefferson City, MO in 2000. Jamie and I towed the vehicle out together on a trailer attached to the U-haul truck. Soon after we were married, my son Darby and daughter Josie were born, so the 'restoration' of the Corvair progressed very slowly over a number of years. I finally pushed myself to finish the car in 2012.

So what did I do to refresh or 'restore' the car? Well, basically 'everything'. As you probably can tell by now I drive my old cars frequently. My goal was to make the vehicle reliable enough to be my daily driver if I chose to do so. Therefore, I replaced all of the suspension bushing, wheel bearings, brakes, and all suspension bolts. I overhauled the engine with a turned crankshaft, new pistons, reconditioned rods, seals and more. I decided to hand ream the valve guides to the next larger size valve stems which was possible 20 years ago and is actually the manufacturer's recommended procedure. In retrospect I should have pressed out the old valve guides and installed new guides, but this is not a trivial operation in the Corvair aluminum heads, so I took the hand reaming approach and installed valves with oversized valve stems.

### **Body work:**

Let me first start by saying I 'hate' doing bodywork and I'm not the best at it. However, doing the bodywork myself saves a significant amount of money that... guess what... goes into other car projects! I'm also not very diligent about documenting my work on my vehicles since I'm using them for my own pleasure rather than preparing them for resale. The only reason I have some of the restoration photos for this article is that when Jamie and I got back from our honeymoon in 2001 there were several camera shots left on the roll of film in our camera (remember the days of camera film ASA rating, shutter speed and F-stop settings?) and needed to use them up so we could get the film roll developed. The Corvair was manufactured of unit body construction, which is good for strength and stability, but most unit body vehicles of this era and others suffer from the propensity to rust where the body panels are spot welded together with layers of overlapping steel panels. This has the unfortunate consequence of trapping any water and moisture that makes its way onto a car floor, rocker panel, wheel well or countless other locations in the body. Although, my 1965 Corvair appears to have spent its early life in Florida, it spent enough years in New England to require attention to areas of the body. The most significant area of rust was the rear wheel wells where the inner and outer body panels are spot welded together. Basically it all rusted away around the edges. In the late 1990s I repaired the left side wheel well area by welding metal to make the repair. The issue with that method was there are many compound angles in the wheel well and I had to 'excessively' skim coat the repair and it took hours of work. In the early 2000's I took a different approach to the right side rear wheel well. I purchased a fiberglass piece from Clark's Corvair Parts. I cut out all the bad metal and bent recessed 'tabs' roughly evenly spaced over the radius of the wheel well to act as a support for the fiberglass piece. I pop riveted the fiberglass molding to hold it in place while adding layers of fiberglass to it and the

wheel well. This method took significantly less time and looks, to the discerning eye, quite a bit better than the other side. Note to restorers- If you use the pop rivet method to align the panel you should drill out the pop rivets when you finish the fiberglass overlay and fill the holes. This will help prevent future flexing of the rivet/panel spot, paint chipping, and corrosion later.

**Acknowledgments:**

I thank my friend Patrick Stapleton, dad Harold Hall, and brother Joshua Hall who provided their memories of my time with the Corvair to piece together some of this history. And last, but not least, I thank my wife Jamie for letting me use her side of the garage for many years while restoring the Corvair. Now that's true love!

**Photos (caption above photo):**

Corvair after bringing it home from the salvage yard in 1988 (engine lid required replacement)



Parts car inverted for donated parts Circa 1988 (Grandpa Hall's Datsun 620 Pickup in background)



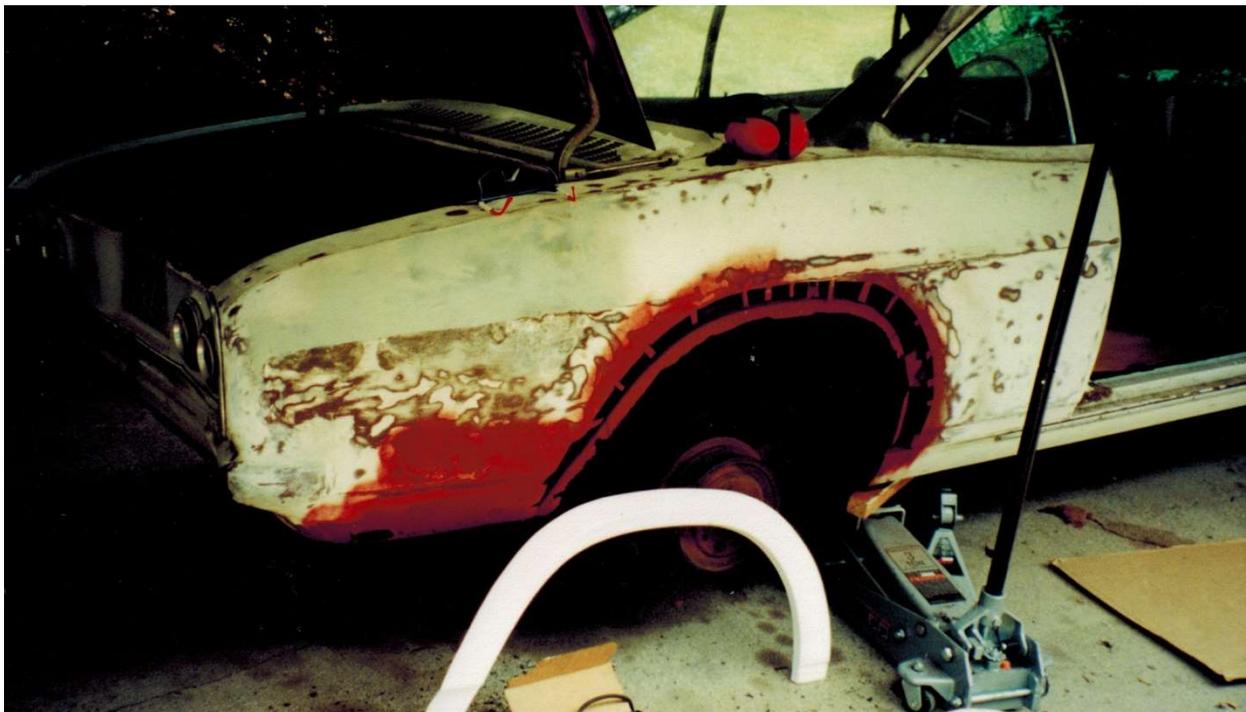
Me with the 1965 Corvair Monza circa 1990, Claremont, HN.



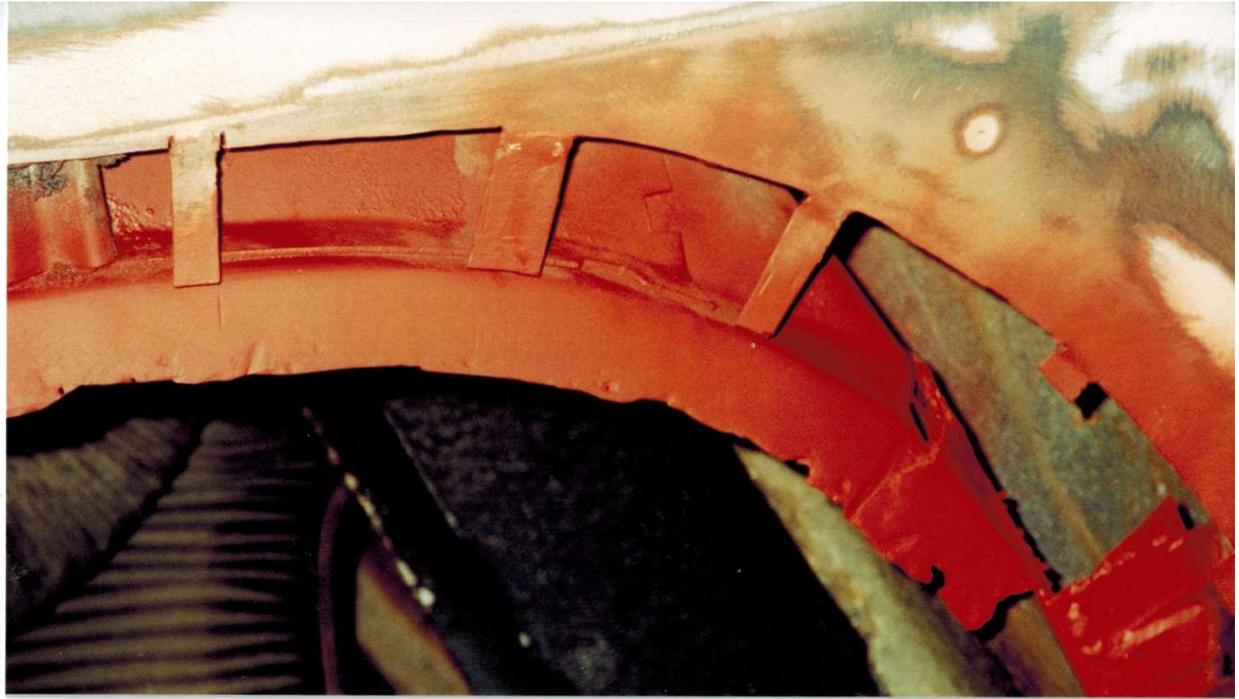
Towing the Corvair from NH to MO circa August 2000, my Dad by the U-haul truck.



Wheel well area with rust cut away in 2001



Fabricating metal tangs offset to receive & support fiberglass patch panel in 2001



Repairing the wheel with fiberglass molding in 2001.



Front dog leg and door pillar area with metal panel patches welded in (red primer area) 2001



1965 Corvair Monza 'restored' November 2012

