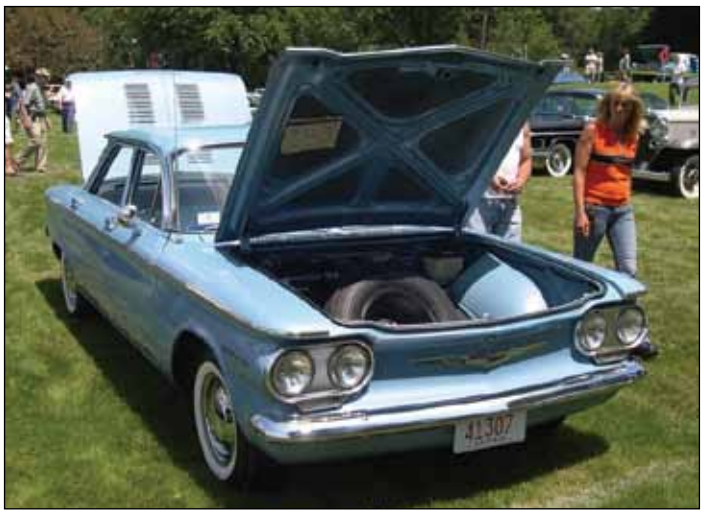
THE CHEVY CORVAIR:

RELIC OF AN ERA WHEN QUALITY WAS AN AFTERTHOUGHT



The 1960 Chevrolet Corvair four-door sedan (courtesy Stephen Foskett (Wikipedia user: sfoskett) and the Bay State Antique Automobile Club show).

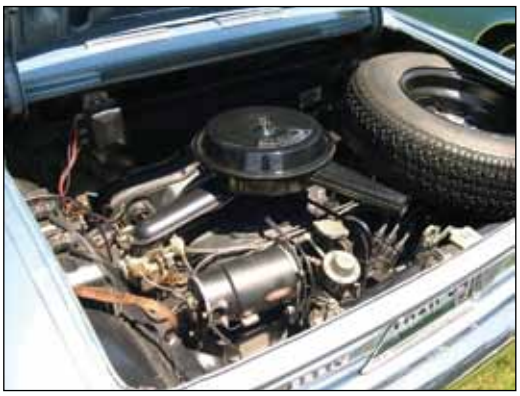


Photo of Chevrolet Corvair 164 Turbo rear-mounted engine—and spare tire compartment!—taken at Bay State Antique Automobile Club's July 10, 2005 show at the Endicott Estate in Dedham, MA (courtesy of User: Sfoskett/ WikimediaCommons).

The recent and continuing comeback of the U.S. auto industry has been something to behold. Sales are booming—relative to the sagging economy—quality is king and dealerships are reopening. Couple that with Toyota's recall nightmares and the future looks pretty rosy.

All of which—for no reason at all, really—might remind some people of a car that shall forever live in infamy and ignominy—the Chevrolet Corvair. The car debuted to great acclaim in 1960 and was unceremoniously dropped from the GM line after the 1969 model. Yes, 1960 to 1969—a time of auto industry-conceived "planned obsolescence," prematurely rusting Bodies by Fisher and on and on.

But all of that was just warming up in the bullpen compared to 1965, when Ralph Nader's groundbreaking consumer advocate tome *Unsafe at Any Speed* was published. The book had a profound effect on the U.S. auto industry and consumer education—seat belts were just one improvement. And guess which car Nader chose as a prime example of poor quality and unsafe engineering—yep—the Corvair.

Nader's book documented problems associated with the Corvair's steering, tire pressures and stability on the road. This resulted in many accidents that, Nader said, could have been avoided with a better-designed car. Former—and legendary—industry executives John DeLorean and Lee Iacocca agreed. (Prior to the car's launch in 1960, two Corvairs were tested at the Riverside International Raceway in Riverside, California for 24 hours. One car rolled over. But hey—the other completed the drive consuming only one quart of oil.)

So it was no surprise that the Corvair is introduced in *Unsafe at Any Speed's* first chapter: "The Sporty Corvair—The One-Car Accident." That just might be because the 1960–1963 models had a faulty swing-axle suspension design that was prone to buckle under certain conditions—like stopping, for example.

But enough aspersion casting. Fact is, the Corvair was a very popular ride in its day, soon morphing into models like the 900 Series Monza—"the poor man's Porsche." Did you know that the Corvair was the only American-made, mass-produced passenger car to feature a rear-mounted air-cooled engine? That it was *Motor Trend* magazine's Car of the Year for 1960?

But as with many cars—in those days at least—the engine was the attention-grabber.

The Corvair engine was an aluminum, air-cooled 140 cubic inch (2.3 L) "flat-six" that eventually evolved to 145 and then to 164 cubic inches. The engine produced 80 hp (60 kW) and, for extra oomph, offered in 1965 a turbocharged 180 hp (134 kW) Corsa engine option.

Depending on the model, the engine sported dual or quad carburetors—unusual for the time. Or as a Corvair fan site puts it: "The carbs sit right on the engine. The carbs make the engine appear complicated, one on each side. Mechanical linkages connect to the other carb on the other side of the engine. Testing showed that using either a two- or four-barrel carb (one carb with two or four barrels) perched in the center of the engine was problematic in maintenance and during cold and sub-freezing temps. Before changes were made, the carbs tended to take much longer to heat up in cold weather, or freeze to a light film that caused fuel problems."

A change in the 1966 model was a more robust four-speed synchromesh transmission using the standard Saginaw gear set with 3.11:1 first gear ratio used by other GM six-cylinder vehicles. But sales began to decline as a result of Nader's book, although that may also be attributed to the debut of the new Ford Mustang and "inside-auto industry" rumors of the upcoming Panther—apparently the code name for the imminent arrival of the Camaro.

Accounts at the time regarding the Corvair's demise ranged from "sadness and regret" that such a "fine car" could not survive to anger at Chevrolet's decision to continue making the car for as long as they did.

One final note—an ironic epitaph of sorts: Today, Corvair engines are used in many small aircraft because of their durability.