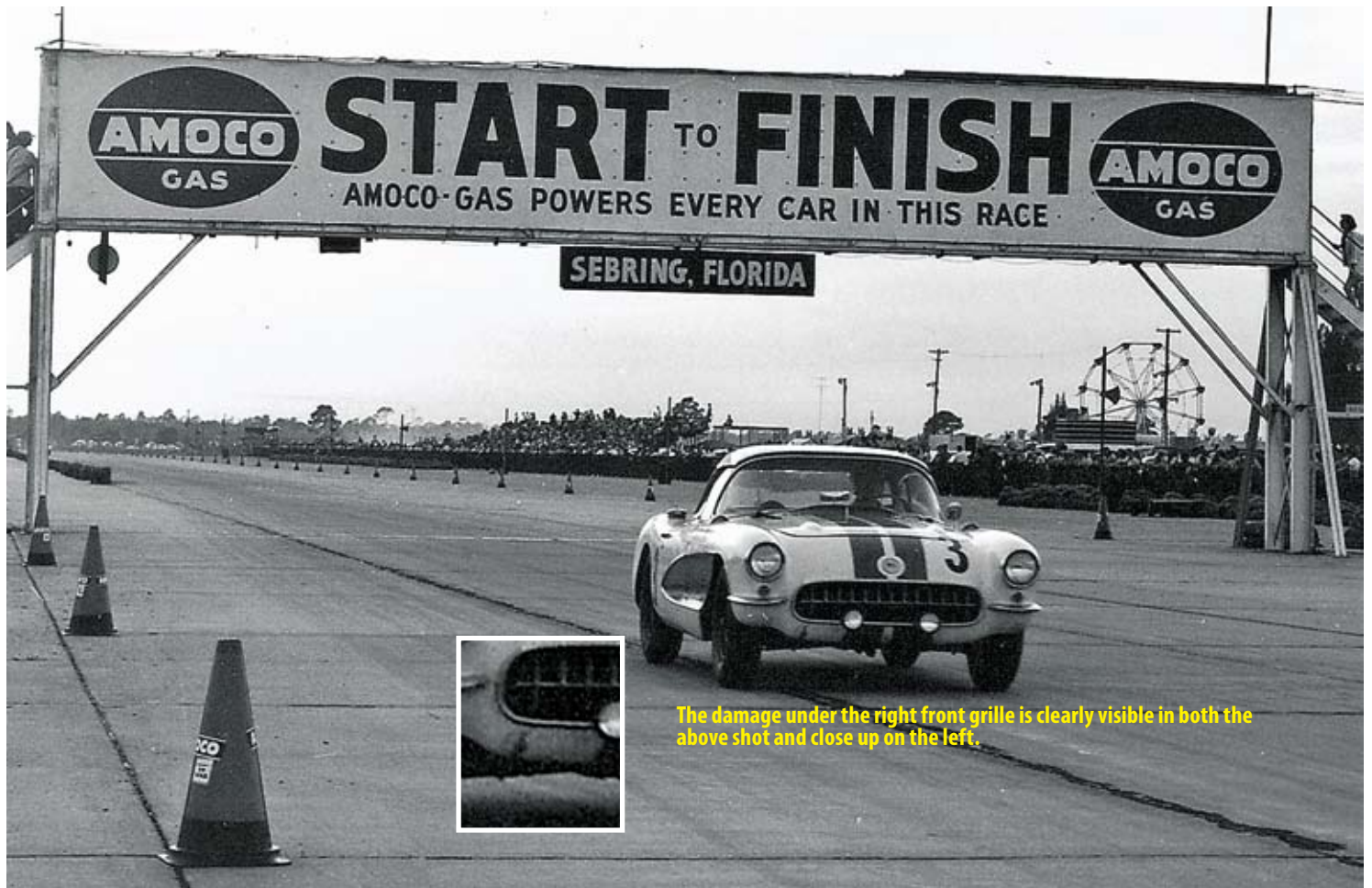


All These Years 1957 Sebring Car 3 Was Living in Texas... But Who Knew?



Like fireworks on the Fourth of July, two production Corvettes fitted with Chevrolet's brand-new Ramjet fuel injection, rocked the road-racing world at the Sebring 12 Hours in 1957. Then they vanished. More than half a century later, it seems clear that one of them--likely the No. 3 car co-driven by Jim Jeffords, Dale Dunkan and John Kilborn--has resurfaced.

That's the unanimous opinion of a panel of authorities on early Corvette racers after a daylong inspection of the latest addition to John Justo's car collection. Tagged VIN E57S101034, the be-draggled relic of four decades of drag races and slalom runs was brought to his attention last summer by California-based Vetterfinder Jim Gessner. In a late May examination of VIN 1034, Jim had found, among other things, a glassed-over area behind the passenger door pre-

cisely where he knew a fuel fill tube had been inserted on the '57 Sebring cars. "I thought, hmmm, that's interesting," smiled Gessner later.

What Justo hosted last August 1 was part autopsy, part archaeological dig. The idea was to understand the circumstances of VIN 1034's life, not the cause of death. The experts came to Justo's Providence, R.I., shop armed with books, pictures, old news accounts and event data, along with a file of engineering work orders pertaining to Chevrolet's 1950s racing adventures.

They found a Corvette sleuth's dream machine—a largely original rolling representation of Chevy's March 1957 thinking about how to fit out and set up a Corvette road racer. There were many big surprises. But it was a little thing—a tiny tear in the fiberglass below the grille

mouth—that led the group to conclude VIN 1034 and the #3 car at Sebring were one and the same.

The examiners were pretty sure going in that the car was one of a pair of factory-prepped production Corvettes that Chevrolet had dealt to Houston truck-



A photo in *Competition Corvette: From Street to Strip to Speedway Star*, published by Consumer Guide in 1980, showed the #3 car at Sebring with a tear below the grille mouth.

ing magnate Eb Rose right after Sebring. But which one?

Upon arrival, the group found the parts spread out on two long tables next to the car. Amid the awesome trove of original brake drums and backing plates, bright metal trim pieces, various hooks, hangers and fasteners, a date-coded 1956 canvas seat belt, prototype elephant ears and exquisitely fashioned tinwork, there were two short leather straps (actually parts of men's belts), which would become as significant as the nose scar in proving that Justo's relic was the Sebring #3 car.

But first, the group focused on the car's wounded nose: A photo in *Competition Corvette: From Street to Strip to Speedway Star*, published by *Consumer Guide* in 1980, showed the #3 car at Sebring with a tear below the grille mouth. If the car had seen further racing in the last half-century, it seemed likely that the original nose would have suffered further damage or been replaced. In that case, the scar would be long gone. But it should still be there if this were really #3.

About 10:30 a.m., Kevin MacKay dipped a cloth into a can of lacquer thinner and started dabbing the area. As the group watched, the scar began to materialize. MacKay held the photo up next to the scar. It was a match. Minutes later, areas of the cowl just below the windshield, became the focus of attention.

As insurance that hoods would stay in place on both Corvettes during the race, leather straps had been added to augment conventional retainer pins. One section was bolted to the cowl and another to the hood, then buckled together. They are prominent in many photos of the Sebring cars, which also show that their mounting angles were different.

It was further known that

- In storage since the late '90s, the car had been seen frequently for 40 years before that in drag race and slalom events around Texas and the midwest. It had been in Don Amendson's family since 1964.
- Gessner had posted simultaneous messages over the Internet to a number of clients and Justo had been the first to respond with a viable offer.
- Texas title work went back three owners to 1959.
- Amendson made statements about how an aborted restoration several years ago left the car in mostly raw fiberglass minus much of its drive train.
- A quantity of mysterious parts had stayed with the car for more than half a century.

Ken Kayser, long-time GM engineer whose knowledge of early fuel-injection cars is legendary, laid strips of masking tape across the filled-in boltholes to replicate the location of each strap. A comparison of the layout and the Sebring photos revealed what seemed another perfect match. Maybe more telling was a comparison with photos of the #4 car that showed an obvious mismatch. And that was enough to satisfy the examiners that they were studying the #3 car. With 1034's identity established, the day became a full-course voyage of discovery. What else could the car say about itself and about one of the most significant eras in Corvette history?



John Justo (left), 1034's new owner, and Cincinnati collector Bill Connell. The blue masking tape over the filled-in holes where a hood strap was bolted down helped identify the car.

In truth, the 1957 Sebring race looms large in Corvette lore. Not because two

stock Corvettes constituted the only entries in an also-ran class, but because the beautiful Corvette SS, Zora Duntov's one-off creation, was going for the overall win. (Actually, there were two SSs: the mule, a crude but quick beast built just for testing and the unready piece of gorgeous artwork that Zora was required to go with in the race. The SS stirred enormous pre-

race hoopla only to become an embarrassing DNF.)

Although the racing world paid less heed at the time to the production entries, there was nothing second-string about how Chevrolet prepared them. Chevy's goal was to make the biggest possible splash with its brand-new Ramjet fuel injection. For weeks before, General Manager Ed Cole's newly minted racing operation used the track as a proving ground. Practice cars were driven hard. Parts were tested to destruction, redesigned overnight, beefed up, flown in, and then destroyed again.



That's Ken Kayser applying masking tape across hold-down strap bolt holes. Watching closely are Bill Connell, Art Armstrong, John Neas and Kevin MacKay.

The list of authorities who accepted John Justo's invitation to examine VIN 1034 last August reads like a who's who of early Corvette racing history.

- Jim Gessner, Mentone CA, the energetic Californian who discovered the car
- Ken Kayser, Flint, MI, retired GM engineer, author of the History of GM's Ramjet Fuel Injection and Its Corvette Racing Pedigree
- Joe Trybulec, Bentonville, AR, whose collection includes a Nassau racer and a '57 Sebring drivetrain in a '54 Vette.
- Art Armstrong, Harsen's Island, MI, retired GM executive, collector of archive material relating to early Corvette racing
- John Neas, Tulsa, OK, whose collection includes the 1956 Sebring No 7 Corvette, the 1956 St Louis Production SR Corvette and the Bark Henry/Bob Rosenthal's 1957 Racer - the earliest known RPO 684 car.
- Bill Connell, Cincinnati, OH, who found and restored Bill Howe's '57 racer, the earliest known RPO 579D car
- Rich Mason, Carson City NV, whose collection includes Jerry Earl's SR-2
- Kevin MacKay, Valley Stream, NY, whose long list of Corvette restorations includes the 1960 Fitch/Grossman LeMans car
- Ray DeCesare, Mt. Bethal, PA, prominent collector of '56 and '57 RPO 581/ 684 C1s



Corvette racing historians didn't know until they saw this six-leaf rear spring, complete with experimental part number, that the suspension system at Sebring was different from the RPO 684 package.



Date coded safety belt looks like military issue. Notice the roll bar mount. The bar is a modern design meeting SCCA slalom requirements in the '80s, but the mount is original.

Come race time, the practice cars were put aside. Except for the SR-2, fresh machinery benefiting from all that pre-race testing went to the starting line. John Fitch and Pierre Taruffi were teamed in the SS, and Pete Lovely and Paul O'Shea in the SR-2. Dale Duncan and John Kilborn drove the #3 car, along with Jim Jeffords, who was a late addition to the team. Car No. 4 was piloted by Dick Thompson and Gaston Andrey. The race saw the SS be the only one to go down. Meanwhile, the other cars ran strong, salvaging much of the hype Ed Cole had hoped the SS would bring to the introduction of the Ramjet. The results were as follows:

- #4 Dr. Thompson/Gaston Andrey 173 laps, 12th Overall, 1st in class

- #3 Kilborn/ Duncan/ Jeffords 168 laps, 15th Overall, 2nd in class
- #2 Lovely/O'Shea in SR-2, 166 laps, C/Mod class, 16th Overall, 7th in class
- #1 Fitch/Taruffi out in 4th hour 28 laps, suspension bushing

Then, the music stopped. Warned that GM would abide by an upcoming industry-wide racing ban, Cole was supposed to destroy his cars and parts. Instead, he disbursed the stash to a variety of shops, individuals and dealerships. Eb Rose got the SR-2, the #3 car and one other Sebring entry. It might have been the #4 car or possibly #P3, a practice car. Additional cars went to the Dick Doane Chevrolet dealership in Northern Illinois and to other friendly havens.

Like fugitives in a witness protection program, they took on new identities. If VIN 1034 is typical, they've been out there amongst us all this time. What is especially remarkable is how thinly disguised this one was. True, various coats of paint applied over the years obscured that scar below the grille mouth, the glassed-over cutout for the telltale right-side fuel-fill tube and many more unusual nips and tucks. But those coffee-can-size holes alongside the radiator, a known feature of the brake cooling system at Sebring, were visible to anybody poking around in the engine bay.

And then there was 1034's undercarriage, almost all of it undeniably original. It fairly bristled with date-coded experimental and prototype parts and pieces,

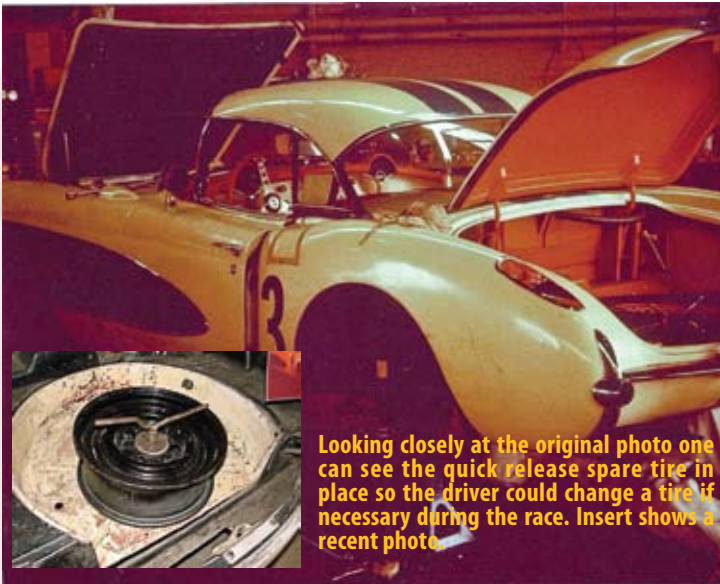
some of them unknown until now thanks to the Justo examining team. For half a century, students of early Corvette racing thought the Sebring production cars were fitted with the famous RPO 684 package of brake and suspension goodies, which was soon to be added to the Corvette order guide. But while the 684 option included five-leaf rear springs, the panel was astounded to find the springs on VIN 1034, which were original down to the carrier bolts, bore an experimental part number and had six leafs.

Furthermore, RPO 684 called for added wedge between the frame and the trailing edge of the front cross member. Tilting the cross member increased caster and forced shock mount and steering arm modifications. The Justo panel wasn't surprised to find those mods in place. But they were amazed to see nearly twice the wedge that RPO 684 would later specify.

They also found VIN 1034 still sported ultra-quick Sebring steering, which was something prior owner Don Amendson said everybody who ever drove it remembers well—that and the brakes. “If you thought about turning, you'd already done it,” Amendson said, “and if you touched the brake pedal and weren't ready, you had the wheel in your chest.”

Amendson said he obtained the car and boxes of mystery parts from fellow drag racer Jim Hickman in 1964. Title work shows Hickman bought it from the C.L. McClure family in 1959. Hickman says he was told that the car belonged to Rose before that. Records show two Rose cars—painted his signature black and pink and wearing numbers 64 and 65—were entries in at least two SCCA races in May 1957. A Texas chicken farmer named Carroll Shelby drove No. 64, and these might have been his only Corvette racing stints. Which of the Sebring cars was he driving? Who knows? But the Justo examiners did find evidence of black and pink paint in the right places on VIN 1034.

In the fall of '57, Eb Rose, Jr., was seriously injured in a racing incident that destroyed one of the cars. Whatever he was driving, it certainly was not VIN 1034. Had the car been wrecked, there would have been no treasure of original bodywork and unmolested machinery for the Justo panel to discover 52 years later.



Looking closely at the original photo one can see the quick release spare tire in place so the driver could change a tire if necessary during the race. Insert shows a recent photo



California based “Vettefinder” Jim Gessner was the go-between for Don Amendson and John Justo to make a deal for VIN 1034.



Photo at left shows the filler neck and lid on the passenger side and above photo is of the starting grid. (above photo by Bernard Cahier)



From top: Beneath the grime, original front shock absorbers and mounting plates still grace VIN 1034. Retainers were specially built with offset holes to reposition the shocks so they wouldn't touch the inside of the springs. Tank area for the 37 gallon gas tank. (Roll bar was a safety update done in 1987. Rear air duct. Rear metal ears that are attached to the rear backing plates.

From top: Shims at the aft end of the front cross-member tilted the front suspension and delivered more caster. The wedge is about twice what was specified in RPO 684. Original seat belt label. Original shock part number is on the original Engineering work order for the car. Gas tank area where the fill pipe entered the tank area.

From top: Among the treasure of original parts Justo obtained with VIN 1034 are the items shown here. The stash includes little things like mounting brackets for a 37-gallon Sebring fuel tank and big things like brake drums with inner edges of the fins filed down, and backing plates with oversize screening. Elephant ears and the two items on top are "joice bounce" bumpers with 'WOOD' centers. They control the amount of rear axel compression travel after a bump, like a shock. The 'WOOD' helps absorb the shock, so the 'shocks' don't have to work as hard. Finally, inside of elephant ears. Outside material is tan in color and inside is black, very similar to a fire hose.

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Photos in this article were contributed by Ralph Kramer, Jim Gessner and Jack Knab