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# **AMERICA'S** *Sports Car*

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## America's Sports Car Magazine Contributors

EDITORS

Deb Howard & Mariah Hughes

LAYOUT & DESIGN

Aaron Drexler & Moriah Mondragon

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Robby Berry, Andy Bolig\*, Kevin Brady\*, Sharon Brawner, Bob Bubnis, Michaela Hathaway, Deb Howard, Mariah Hughes, Bobbie Jo Lee, Sam Milam, Rick Montgomery\*, Andrea Rizk\*, Bruce Troxell\*, and Morgan Watson

PHOTOGRAPHY

Rachel Bagshaw, Robby Berry, Aaron Drexler, Mariah Hughes, & Moriah Mondragon

AD SALES & TRAFFIC

Mariah Hughes

\*Contributors not directly affiliated with the National Corvette Museum, NCM Motorsports Park, or NCM Insurance

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Please address all correspondence to: America's Sports Car, 350 Corvette Drive, Bowling Green, KY 42101 or [editor@corvettemuseum.org](mailto:editor@corvettemuseum.org).

# CLASS OF 1953

## WHERE ARE YOU NOW?

WORDS KEVIN BRADY  
PHOTOS SUBMITTED

If Corvette was a graduating class, this year would mark the 70th anniversary of the inaugural commencement from a small college (Project Opel) within a major University (General Motors). Thomas Keeting was Headmaster and Myron Scott was credited for naming the mascot “Corvette” after small, nimble warships. The year was 1953. American G.I.s had recently returned from WWII, and Dwight D. Eisenhower was President.

We all know the story by now. GM unveiled a concept car on January 17, 1953, in the lobby of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City during Motorama. Designed as an open two-seater, with no exterior doorknobs, attachable side windows, or sporty lines, it was intended to be an American alternative to European sports cars. Capitalizing on the enthusiastic response from the press and the public, GM expedited the production schedule. Keep in mind that this was a fiberglass concept car, not a production-ready version. Remarkably, with the uniquely American characteristics of ingenuity, resourcefulness, tenacity, and sense of purpose, a plant in Flint, Michigan was retrofitted, a production-ready design finalized including components from other GM vehicles to include a modified 6-cylinder engine, two-speed power glide transmission, and various other braking and suspension systems. A workforce and supply chain were organized so production would begin by June 30, 1953. I believe this could only be possible in a post-war United States whose industries had just proven their ability to mobilize quickly in response to the war. Three hundred of these cars rolled out of Flint between June 30 and Christmas Eve, 1953. All 300 were Polo White with Red interiors. This was a truly remarkable start to what has arguably become the most successful nameplate in US history - and the birth of America's Sports Car.

Presently, I am the *custodian* of serial number 32. I consider myself a custodian because I don't believe one can *own* history, particularly if you weren't there. I am a baby boomer born in 1960 while “Ike” was still President. Coincidentally, my birthday falls on January 17, so I share a “reveal date” with this

magnificent automobile (on its 7th anniversary). After years of watching these cars occasionally come to market, VIN 32 and I were united this year on, you guessed it, January 17th!

Over time as I have watched for these 300 cars, I often wondered how many of them have survived the test of time. If you Google it, the answer is approximately 225, but you would have to dig much deeper to determine if that is an accurate number or where they each are today. So, I did a little looking.

The first Corvette shown at Motorama in New York City was *not* one of the 300 production cars. It was serial number EX-122, an experimental concept car. If you add this but subtract numbers 001 and 002 which were evaluated and then destroyed by GM, you need to locate 299 cars. I guess destroying the first two is kind of like throwing away the first pancake. This makes 003 the oldest production Corvette, but interestingly, the chassis was replaced at some point. The cutaway Corvette in the NCM has the original chassis from 003. No bad marks in my book for 003. You were still captain of the football team in college if you show up at the class reunion with a replacement knee.

Efforts have been made to document these cars over the years, and I wasn't going to reinvent the wheel, so I gathered some earlier works and began to evaluate them. I found that the largest gathering of surviving 1953 Corvettes took place in Carlisle, Pennsylvania for the 50th Anniversary. Fifty-three cars including the famed EX-122 were present. The VINs and owners were also documented. Additionally, I found a couple of registries online. One is supported by the NCRS, and another is maintained by Corvette Action Center. My assumption is if someone took the time to register individual cars, they are likely legitimate survivors. With a good bit of overlap (although sometimes different details) these lists contain 178 and 187 cars respectively. Cross-referencing these three sources provided me with “evidence” of 213 surviving cars. There may be a couple of false positives in this number, but because of the significance of this collector car and perceived value, I assume that even though some of these

sightings are 10-20 years old they have a high likelihood of being real. I then turned my attention to the 84 MIAs.

Next, I looked at auctions or for-sale listings and found that number 192 was sold by Mecum at Kissimmee in 2011 but was not on the registries. I also asked NCM Insurance and ProTeam Corvette to review my MIA list and check if they have had any interaction with these cars. NCM Insurance underwrites most of the classic Corvette policies, and Terry Michaelis, 2014 inductee into the Bloomington Gold Great Hall, has likely seen or owned more 1953 Corvettes than any other person. He is also the one who helped me find number 32. They are keeping a lookout, but nothing to report. So, by my calculation, there are 214 survivors out there, and the Kissimmee find gives me hope that there may be another few cars yet to be found in a barn somewhere!

It would take a huge effort to track the 214 surviving cars that make up the class of 1953, and sadly there is not another gathering planned like the one at Carlisle for the 50th anniversary. The 83 unaccounted cars are missing, but not forgotten, and I hope the class of 1953 will be

active throughout this 70th Anniversary year. I would also encourage anyone who is a custodian to update one or both of the registries. There are links on MyVette.org to these resources and have number 32 on both registries.

Driving this car brings such joy and excitement - but for different reasons than driving a modern Corvette in terms of power and speed. A 150 HP 6-cylinder capable of 0-60 in 12 seconds can seem a bit underwhelming until you realize the historical influence of this automobile.

My favorite part of being this automobile's custodian is seeing the reaction of people who get to see the car that penned the first chapter in the Corvette story. The word "WOW" followed by a brief speechlessness

is almost always the reaction. Then, there's a lingering, take-it-all-in inspection to experience the styling, blue-flame engine bay, and inviting cockpit. Finally, a thank you is often offered for sharing this piece of history with the public. I never get tired of that emotional response, and this car will not be hidden away on my watch. The other question often asked is, "How many of these are there?" My answer is currently, **"214 and counting."**



## UNACCOUNTED VINS

010	045	078	102	131	154	166	179	197	216	226	242	270	287
013	047	080	104	134	156	167	180	203	218	230	248	271	289
020	054	081	106	136	161	170	182	208	219	235	249	275	293
036	059	090	108	139	162	171	188	209	221	238	263	277	294
037	070	092	111	146	164	172	189	212	223	240	264	279	295
042	073	095	114	152	165	176	194	213	224	241	269	283	