

HISTORY / An Idea Rising

Anyone who wants to understand how the National Corvette Museum came about should take a lesson from the Mississippi River. This greatest of all U.S. rivers traverses the country north and south, travelling 2,339 miles from northwestern Minnesota south to the Gulf of Mexico. By combining with its two major tributaries, the Missouri and Ohio Rivers, it becomes the third largest river system in the world, able to carry massive watercraft.

While not exactly seaworthy, the National Corvette Museum is also like a great vessel, massive not only in actual size and weight, but in the scope of its aspirations. No meandering creek could ever have set it afloat. Not even the tide of enthusiasm released by a dedicated group of Corvette hobbyists could raise it. But when that river of enthusiasts met up with a stream of supporters within Chevrolet and a groundswell of aid from the proposed host community, the Museum was launched.

The building of the NCM, like a trip down the Mississippi itself, was a long, sometimes convoluted journey. This particular history does not pretend to know every mile of it. It is more like a small window on the past offering a view of the scenery as it slips by.

Small Beginnings

Terry McManmon had an idea. The burly 43 year-old with the free-flowing beard had been a member of the National Corvette Restorers Society (NCRS) for four years and shared its passion for the preservation of all things Corvette. Attending his first NCRS convention in August of 1984 at Copper Mountain, Colorado, McManmon spoke up in the general membership meeting in favor of establishing a not-for-profit foundation to gather Corvette-related materials into a common library or archives. "It occurred to me that it was not prudent for us to be in competition with each other for a limited amount of literature," says McManmon. The idea was discussed in the NCRS Board of Directors meeting held during that convention and at the next meeting held November 3, 1984 in Indianapolis. The Corvette Restorer Magazine (Volume 11, Number 3) reported that: "John Amgwert presented a plan to the Board for instituting a Technical Library. The possibility that this Library could eventually become a museum was discussed."

NCRS President Keith Kibbe sent out a memo on September 26 to the NCRS Director/Advisory Board encouraging them to submit lists of materials for a technical library, and by July of 1985 some modest gains had been made in assembling library materials (mostly technical texts and bulletins) and ideas for fund raising were being discussed. In a paper for the upcoming Board of Directors meeting entitled "National Corvette Technical Library & Museum", Amgwert wrote: "For the purposes of soliciting donations by individuals as tax deductions, the library/museum must establish itself as an educational organization and not as a recreational hobby organization (such as NCRS). Therefore, the library/museum should be incorporated as a separate entity."

Kibbe recalls that the need to establish the proposed not-for-profit entity apart from NCRS was stressed by the society's treasurer and financial director, Jon Brookmyer.

“Jon was very much the little man on our shoulder telling us about the need to keep both at arms length,” he said.

Sparks Ignite

As the 1986 NCRS convention approached, Terry McManmon took stock of where his idea was headed. Building on the relationships he had established within the organization in the last two years, McManmon had been quietly campaigning, but official channels were moving slowly. Although influential individuals in the NCRS leadership like Kibbe and his successor Bill Clupper were in favor of a library/museum, they had not yet persuaded a majority of the Board to formally declare the project as an organization goal. After nearly two years, the library/museum was still in the theoretical stages, unincorporated and unfunded.

McManmon wrote to Amgwert on March 18, 1986, expressing his sense of urgency: “Per our conversation on Feb. 4, let me urge you and the NCRS board to move forward with the organization of the foundation. We need to preserve the material relating to the development and production of the Corvette. Even as we are talking about organization, material that is important to restorers is vanishing.”

McManmon had been doing what he could to research the necessary steps in setting up a not-for-profit foundation and shared the information with Amgwert and Kibbe; at the same time he offered his services to the proposed foundation. Kibbe wrote McManmon in April formally inviting him to make a presentation to the NCRS Board during the upcoming convention in Sparks, Nevada. Feeling a bit nervous, McManmon made his presentation to the Board on July 28 explaining the advantages of a not-for-profit library/museum foundation separate from the NCRS. He suggested a committee be formed to study the foundation question. The Board approved his suggestion and appointed him chairman of what would eventually be called the Library/Archives and Museum (L/A & M) Committee. Composed of 13 men, the early committee would come to include three others besides McManmon who would follow the project through to its end: Dan Gale, Jon Brookmyer and Ray Battaglini.

On June 1, 1987, Battaglini sent McManmon a letter from his office in New Mexico. Having “read with great interest” in the Spring, 1987 issues of Restorer magazine about the “Committee to develop plans and strategies for an NCRS Museum,” wrote Battaglini, “I would like to ‘volunteer.’” A former hot-rodder from Southern California, the 37 year-old Corveter now worked as a professional fund-raiser and grant writer for the American Heart Association. His offer was readily accepted.

With committee members scattered from New Mexico to Massachusetts, correspondence began crisscrossing the United States pondering the distinctions and advantages of libraries, archives and museums, 501(c)(3) tax exempt filings, fundraising strategies and possible locations (at that time McManmon felt that Lincoln, Nebraska and Detroit were the logical choices). McManmon asked committee member and lawyer John Parette to prepare an analysis of the legal implications of a 501(c)(3) filing.

L/A & M Committee members present for the January, 1988 NCRS Winter Regional Meet at Cypress Gardens, Florida were presented with a startling offer. Ray Quinlan listened to some of the ad hoc meeting going on outside the hotel bar.

“He said, ‘You’re a bit shortsighted,’” recalls McManmon. “‘If you make a museum, I’ll give you my car.’ Some of us thought he had imbibed a bit more than the rest.”

But Quinlan meant every word. His offer to donate his 1953 Corvette was contingent upon the gift being tax deductible, making the tax exempt status even more desirable. When Parette completed his detailed analysis (all two pounds of it, as McManmon liked to point out) it stressed the fact that in order to obtain the 501(c)(3) status the foundation must serve a public educational purpose beyond the NCRS membership. The current was clearly shifting in favor of a museum.

Another Corvette Museum?

In 1987, L/A & M Committee member Dan Gale visited the Monterey Historic Races in California. Chevrolet was the featured marque, and Gale fell into conversation with Edward Lechtzin, the assistant director of public relations for Chevrolet. To Gale’s surprise, Lechtzin revealed that Chevrolet was also looking into the possibility of a Corvette museum. Fellow Committee member Bill Clupper was asked to investigate. As an employee of Packard Electric (a division of General Motors now known as Delphi Corporation), Clupper had enough names in his rolodex to at least start making inquiries. He traced the museum plan back to the Corvette Assembly Plant in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

Joining Up With Chevrolet

Paul Schnoes speaks in a quiet but forceful voice tinged with a Pittsburgh accent, although he called many places home during his long career with GM. In June of 1984 he came to Bowling Green, Kentucky to take over as Corvette Assembly Plant Manager and presided over the drafting of a five-year business plan that included a Corvette museum on plant property.

Enthusiasm for such a project ran high at the plant, but at GM headquarters, it was a different story. Schnoes remembers being pulled aside by then-GM president Bob Stempel while attending a meeting in Detroit.

“He says, ‘Paul, I keep hearing about this museum that you folks in Bowling Green are talking about. Tell me about it.’

“So I gave him a short synopsis of what we had thought we’d like to do. He looked at me. He said, ‘Well,’ he said, ‘you gotta understand, we can never help you fund that. If I fund that one then I’ve got to fund the Camaro Club, I’ve got to fund the Buick hobby ... General Motors is not in business to do museums, we’re in the business to build cars.’”

Although Schnoes understood that no museum was likely to be built on GM grounds, neither he nor his staff abandoned the idea completely. One of Schnoes’ engineers who was working with the Human Resource & Development department began drawing up plans. His name was Darrel Bowlin, a bulldog of

a man who was nearing his retirement from GM. When Bowlin heard of the NCRS project he invited Clupper to attend the plant's museum meeting scheduled for May 18, 1988. Clupper thought McManmon would be the better choice to present the NCRS case and advised his friend to bluff his way through security — which he did, telling them he was there “for the museum meeting,” recalls McManmon. “Darrel was making a pitch on building a museum. Chevrolet did not want to take on the expense. They wanted someone from the outside to provide an umbrella. I had the perfect thing for them.”

The contacts made at that meeting would prove more important than the plans being presented. In addition to Schnoes and Bowlin, Chevrolet Public Relations Director Ralph Kramer and C-P-C Civic Affairs Manager Kathy Tanner became supporters of the enthusiasts' efforts.

Laying the Foundation

On July 11, 1988, McManmon presented the “Final Report of the Library/Archives & Museum Committee” to the NCRS Board of Directors in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Acting upon the recommendation of the committee, the Board approved the formation of the NCRS Foundation and \$2,000 start-up costs. Finally there was a commitment to create a Corvette museum. McManmon drew a sigh of relief. He had been working on the project for four years. He didn't know then there would be another six to go.

In an informal memo to Ray Battaglini shortly after Lancaster, McManmon discussed who should serve on the Foundation's board of directors.

“I guess you & I have a place there also,” he wrote, “but as I told you, I need some room to finish some other NCRS projects. You should run it. I'll catch some other title as it comes by. Maybe I could do well as secretary, or vice chair. I have the facilities for the secretary's job.”

Battaglini had been busy. He had secured the help of the legal department of the University of New Mexico in drafting a set of bylaws and articles of incorporation which were duly filed on November 3, 1988. The initial board of directors listed five people: Battaglini, McManmon, Brookmyer, Bowlin and Dan Gale.

Some ten days later an organizational meeting was held at the Auburn Cord Duesenberg Museum in Indiana. Although the surroundings provided inspiration on what their museum could be, the task before the attendees was tedious. Five board members—Battaglini, who was elected president, Brookmyer, the new treasurer, McManmon, secretary as predicted, Clupper and Keith Kibbe—plowed through the proposed bylaws and made arrangements for the 501(c)(3) filing. The list of board members included Zora Arkus-Duntov, although his name was misspelled.

Additional board members were added during the first BOD meeting on January 22, 1989 at Cypress Gardens, including, Larry Shinoda who was working on a logo for the new foundation and Jerry Burton, editor of Corvette Quarterly magazine. Kent Keech and Dale Fiet, professional architects, were assigned along with Bowlin to the Building and Grounds committee. Bowlin, recalls Fiet, showed him a museum

design that had been developed within the plant in the shape of the Chevy bowtie. Fiet was not impressed. After all, he pointed out, you'd have to go up in a helicopter to even realize what the shape of the building was. Appointed chairman of the committee in May, 1990, he initiated an organized search for an architectural and engineering firm.

Now the question of where the museum was to be located came to the fore. Sites in Nebraska, Michigan, Florida and Nevada had all been seriously considered. But all along, Bowling Green, Kentucky, the home of the world's only Corvette assembly plant, had seemed the intuitive choice. In the end, the museum would belong to the community that wanted it the most.

Home of the Corvette

Bowling Green at the end of the '80s was a community with ambitions. Surrounded by fields of wheat, corn and burley tobacco, the South-Central Kentucky town of less than 50,000 was enjoying greater prosperity and a new-found notoriety since GM opened the Corvette plant in 1981, but it was hungry for more. When the city leaders caught wind of the proposed Corvette museum, they pushed hard to bring home what they believed would be an economic watershed for the town and the region.

A task force was organized, led by Dennis Griffin of the Bowling Green Chamber of Commerce. "I can't tell you how much time and effort we put into it," comments Griffin. The group, which included local banker and later executive director of the museum Wendell Strobe, traveled to Cypress Gardens, Florida, in January of 1990 to present a package to the NCRS Foundation Board. What they promised eventually took shape as: a land donation of 32.9 acres close to the plant and visible from the interstate; complete infrastructure provided at no cost to the Foundation; and, a 4.3 million tax-free bond issue to help with the financing. The Board accepted. At the same meeting, they reviewed proposals by architectural design firm Neumann, Smith & Associates and Exhibit Works, a museum display company. Both would eventually be hired.

There was a heady feeling among the cadre of Corvette museum founders in the months following the January meeting. They had their location, their land, a promised bond issue, architectural and display firms.

All they needed now was a little cash.

No Flow

"I am pleased to announce that the Foundation and National Corvette Museum are working hard to achieve a construction start date of December, 1991 or sooner," wrote President Ray Battaglini on July 15, 1990, in a sunny memo to his fellow Board members listing the many revenue-generating opportunities before them. There was possible aid from Chevrolet, access to the dealer network which could raise "six to 11 million," raffles, grass roots support, not to mention the Bowling Green bond financing — if it was needed. Maybe all the money could be raised up front.

"We were naive in the beginning," observes Dale Fiet.

The first reality check came from Jim Perkins, head of Chevrolet. In a meeting with Battaglini, he expressed his enthusiasm for the idea, but, says Battaglini, “Jim Perkins told me, ‘Ray, if we don’t start selling cars, we are going to be a museum.’”

As Perkins points out, ‘89–’91 were the “toughest years in [GM’s] history. It surely appeared that we might have to turn the lights out.”

Asking Chevrolet dealers for contributions, although the letters came from Perkins’ office, did not generate the hoped-for millions.

Consultants were hired in July of 1991 to raise 12 million through a “Capital Campaign.” Recalls long-time Board member Gary Mortimer, “[This company] was going to handle all the fund-raising. All we had to do was sit back and wait for the money to roll in. It never happened.” Expected corporate sponsorships for the most part did not materialize either.

“It’s like they say, If you need a helping hand, it’s at the end of your arm,” says Mortimer.

So the museum proponents prepared to roll up their sleeves. If this was going to happen, they would have to make it happen.

Gale Force

Dan Gale was already famous in Corvette circles before he piloted the National Corvette Museum to completion. He was a founder of the Northeast Chapter of the NCRS and a fixture at Corvette events, where his hijinks were legendary.

“Dan Gale ... was one of the most improper Bostonians I’ve ever run into,” affirms Ralph Kramer. “He was one of the most enthusiastic, intelligent, entertaining, exasperating people I’ve ever known.”

Conspicuous for his wide girth and hearty laugh, Gale had the soul and sometimes the occupation of a used-car salesman, but in photos he looks at the world through doleful eyes.

Gale had been with the museum project since 1986 as a member of the original Library/Archives & Museum committee. At the 1990 board meeting, Gale, in his role as public relations contact for the Foundation, cautioned the Board that the close identification of the NCRS Foundation with the NCRS in the minds of many created an obstacle to support. Other directors were of a similar opinion, and one year later the Board voted unanimously on Battaglini’s motion to change the name, becoming popularly known from that point on as the National Corvette Museum Foundation. Not coincidentally, at the same time three appointed Directors positions automatically assigned to the NCRS were deleted and four were allotted to leading Corvette club umbrella organizations. The National Corvette Museum would now harbor all enthusiasts. Grass-roots support increased.

Annexed

In 1990, Gale, Bowlin and Battaglini also united behind the idea of a temporary, “storefront” museum called the Annex. Conceived as a self-sustaining gift shop with exhibits, the main purpose of the Annex

was to signal the Corvette community and the city of Bowling Green “that we were real ... we were coming,” remembers Battaglini. But some worried that such a project would drain scarce resources from the final goal. Terry McManmon was strongly opposed, but in the end was overruled by fellow members of the Executive Committee. Even the fiscally cautious Brook-myer, after warning of the “worst-case scenario” associated with the failure of the Annex, appended his personal comment in an October 22 memo: “Let’s do it!”

The NCM Annex opened to great fanfare on November 2, 1990. Present were a host of Corvette luminaries including the eighty year-old Zora Arkus-Duntov. When it was his turn to approach the podium he spoke in a wavering voice of the seminal Corvettes and engines that had been scrapped or sold, concluding, “It’s an absolute necessity to have a museum!”

“It was a battle cry,” remembers Paul Zazarine, then-editor of Corvette Fever and NCM Board Member. No less so for Gale, who idolized Duntov and desperately wanted his friend to see the museum completed before he died. The time was right to step up his personal involvement.

At the January 20, 1991 Board meeting, Ray Battaglini, a recent widower, spoke to the assembled members. “A periodic change of leadership is healthy for any organization,” he told them, inviting them to choose a new president of the Foundation. Bowlin nominated Gale who was elected unanimously.

“Ray was graceful enough to step aside and let Dan take over,” comments Burton. “He also had the grace to stick around and do what he could.” Battaglini would later serve as Gale’s vice-president and then as executive director of the Museum. For the time being, however, Paul Schnoes stepped in to the vice-president’s office. Brookmyer and McManmon continued on as treasurer and secretary.

Ground Breaking

Help was streaming in steadily from Chevrolet now, sometimes through the front door, and sometimes through the back.

On March 5, 1992, a fund drive was begun with the cooperation of the United Auto Workers union allowing Corvette Assembly Plant workers to make contributions to the NCM Foundation through payroll deductions. This significant step eventually raised \$170,000 according to Schnoes; and although Bowlin had been working almost exclusively on behalf of the museum project for some time, he was still on the GM payroll.

At Chevrolet headquarters, Kramer was lobbying strongly on behalf of the struggling museum. “It seems like Ralph was talking continuously to me about it,” recalls Perkins, who told his people to “Do what you can, short of writing a check,” says Jim Minneker.

Minneker had only recently joined Corvette engineering when he was invited to speak at a Corvette event on the East Coast. He was two slides into a 50-slide presentation on the history of the Corvette when a voice rang out: “To hell with that, tell us about the new ZR-1.” It was Dan Gale.

Before long Minneker was serving on the NCM Board. Both his engineering department under Dave McLellan and the design team headed by Jerry Palmer and John Cafaro provided exhibits for the Annex and later the Museum. Cafaro also got involved with the Buildings and Grounds Committee advocating for a cutting-edge architectural design. Perkins approved the donation of the “One Millionth Corvette” to the still-unbuilt Museum, as well as the 999,999th Corvette to be used in a raffle fund-raiser.

Chevrolet was able to provide something else — media exposure. Kramer recalls a choice bit of showmanship ring-mastered by Gale, the June 5, 1992 ground breaking ceremony scheduled to coincide with a Chevy press show at the Corvette Assembly Plant. The Foundation had neither the funding nor the final plan for the building in place. Still, Gale could not pass up the two busloads of reporters that Chevrolet was willing to send his way.

“Dan saw it as an opportunity to get some media attention ... which would translate into money,” says Fiet. “It was an opportunity not to let the momentum die.”

Gale coaxed the hot and tired reporters off the buses with the spectacle of the elderly Duntov, his vintage racing helmet on his head, manning the controls of a bulldozer with a hand-painted Corvette cutout hanging from the side. Soon, reports Kramer, people were down on their hands and knees, scraping up the rocks and dirt for souvenirs—even some of the reporters. Never mind that the whole ceremony took place on the parcel of land where a Wendy’s sits today. It was great theatre, and it signalled the next step.

By now Gale, determined to push the project through, had been living in a Bowling Green hotel for three months, and there he would stay until the Museum had opened. And that date was still anybody’s guess.

Although thousands of dollars in donations had been received from private individuals, plant employees, the local community, clubs and hobby organizations and Corvette-related businesses, thousands were also streaming out for pre-construction costs. The Annex was showing a modest profit but would never be a significant source of income, nor was it meant to be. The entire project was now projected to cost in the neighborhood of \$15 million. There seemed to be no alternative but to seek a loan in addition to the bond issue.

Based in part on a startlingly optimistic economic impact study, the NCM Foundation secured a \$6.6 million loan from local banks. On June 1, 1993, the Bowling Green/Warren County Tourist Commission agreed to act as partial guarantor for the initial bond payments; shortly thereafter, the city and county stepped in to guarantee the remaining bond payments. Finally, the NCM was afloat. Construction began soon after.

The National Corvette Museum opened its doors on September 2, 1994, ten years and two weeks after Terry McManmon stood up at Copper Mountain, Colorado and proposed a Corvette library. That trickle of support which began with the NCRS had become a flood of Corvette enthusiasts and supporters from within Chevrolet and the Bowling Green area that together raised the National Corvette Museum. It

was, according to Zazarine, “a divergent group of people who all believed the same thing at the same time”— a powerful idea that is still growing.