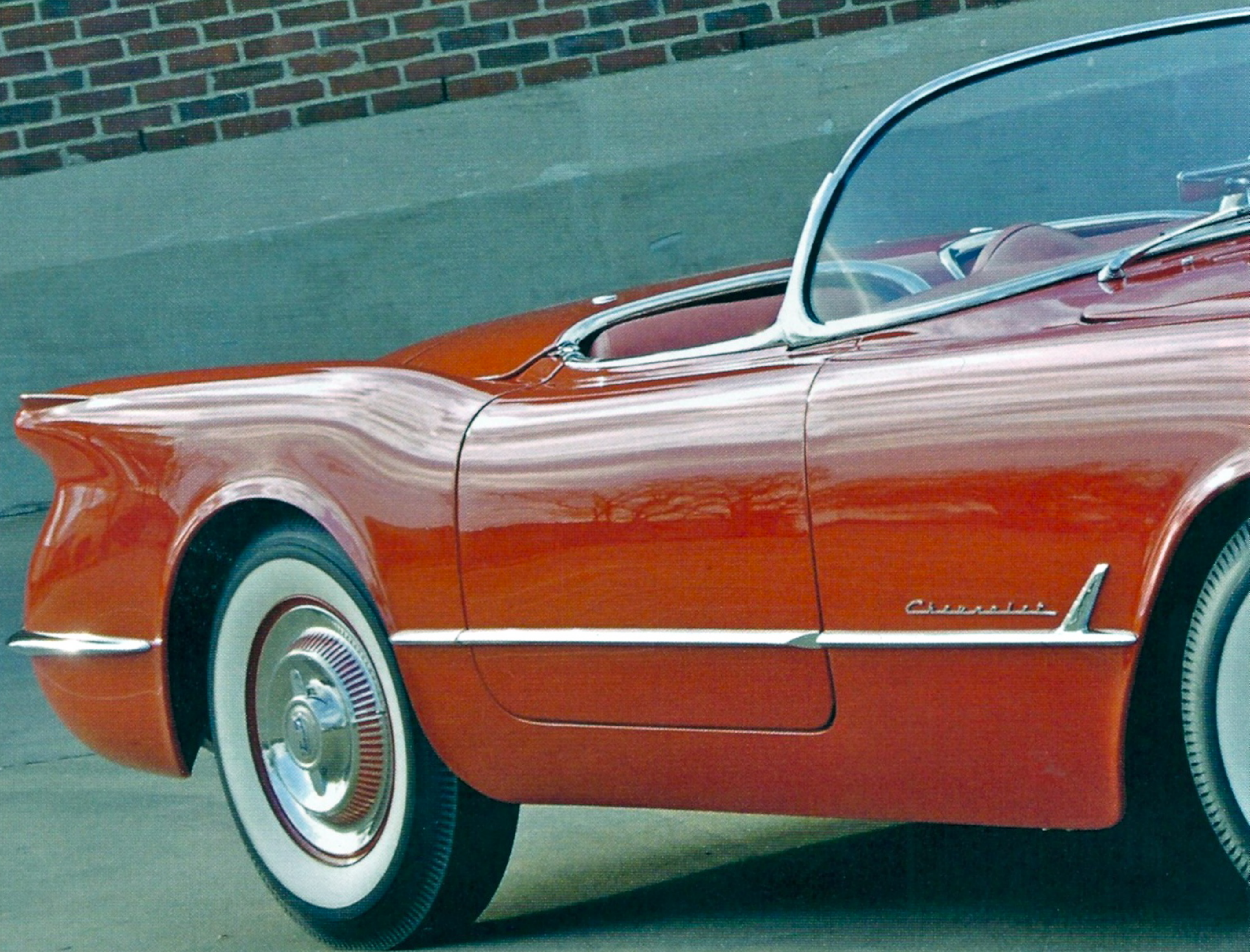


Red on Red

Even in a vast car collection that includes 22 other Corvettes, as well as prewar Cadillacs and Duesenbergs, this 1954 Corvette stands out from the pack.

BY STEVE STATHAM PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR





Above, left: Separating the body from the chassis was the first major step of the restoration; decrepit fiberglass needed lots of attention before being painted.

Left: The original Protek-Sorb bags were tucked away behind the rear license plate; these were installed at the factory to keep the plastic cover from fogging up.



Right: Original 235-cid Blue Flame inline-6 looks like new, and puts out 138 horsepower at the rear wheels.

Thank Heaven for anonymous, nondescript buildings. They sometimes house the most amazing treasures.

There's a nameless warehouse in Austin, Texas, for example, that contains the eye-popping car collection of automobile dealer Bill Munday. In addition to a wealth of prewar American classics, it includes 23 Corvettes, with at least one example of every model year from 1953 to 1967. The newest addition is the Sportsman Red 1954 Roadster featured here, the recipient of a fresh restoration recently completed by Jeff's Resurrections in Taylor, Texas.

About ten years ago, Munday decided he wanted to start building a collection of Corvettes. "I guess the reason I started collecting so many Corvettes is, when I would go to the auctions, I figured I knew what they were worth," says Munday. "I didn't know what anything else was worth."

Although Munday is a relative newcomer when it comes to the hobby of collecting vintage Corvettes, he's no rookie when it comes to the machines themselves. Munday has been in the automotive business for 57 years, and currently owns nine dealerships. He started his career at a Chevrolet dealership in Knoxville, Tennessee, when the first-generation Corvettes were still new cars.

"I was selling Chevrolets in 1955, just as a salesman, so I know the cars real well," he says. "Personally, I might sell two a year. In '54 and '55, they were having a hard time getting that car going."



Although the Corvette later went on to great acclaim, the first versions, with their Blue Flame six-cylinder engines, two-speed Powerglide automatic transmissions and 1940s-era suspension, did not stack up well against the European sports-car competition of the day. “They weren’t the cure-all for excitement in the ’50s,” Munday recalls.

As a salesman, Munday was also swimming against a current of automotive temperance. “I think people thought a lot differently, they were a lot more conservative back then,” he says. “They’d buy sedans or something like that for the family. They didn’t get too excited about any of those little cars.”

Of course, Munday knew a good thing when he saw it: “I was 21, 22 years old, I thought they were neat. They wouldn’t let me drive one for a demo, though.”

Fifty-seven years later, Munday has the means to indulge his younger self’s infatuation with the first Corvettes. The red ’54 shown here, however, was added to his collection almost as an afterthought. At an auction where Munday was targeting a first-year 1953 model, this ’54 came across the block. The car was no basket case, but it also was not exactly a beauty

queen. It ran, but barely. Add in the pitted chrome and gouged body, and it was clear that a complete restoration was called for.

As the crew from Jeff’s Resurrections began the teardown, they could see that the car had been resprayed once or twice, but the chassis was original. “The chassis when we started cleaning it up, still had a lot of inspection marks on it,” says shop owner, Jeff Snyder. Even the original date-coded spiral shocks were still in place. Another example of the car’s originality is even more obscure: Desiccant bags were installed at the factory to keep the plastic cover on the enclosed rear license-plate recess from fogging up. This ’54 still had the original Protek-Sorb bags tucked away behind the plate.

The first major challenge faced in bringing the ’54 back to life—really, the challenge any restorer encounters when dealing with a C1—was dealing with the decades-old fiberglass. “It was just old, nasty fiberglass, says Snyder. “Typical early Corvette condition,” “Those [panels] were all pretty much hand-laid. So the fiberglass is very porous.

“The only thing that is steel or aluminum is the hinges,” continues Snyder. “The rest of

the car is all fiberglass. There’s no steel firewall, the body is entirely fiberglass other than the aluminum rivets they use to hold the panels together while the glue was setting up, and the hinges and the latches. The windshield frame bolts directly to the fiberglass, it’s not supported to the frame by any steel or in the pillars or anything. So all that fiberglass over those years just starts sagging and moving around.”

Small complications popped up everywhere. For example, the factory assembly line workers used filler and fiberglass putty to fit the headlight buckets to the car. So trying to refit the headlight buckets today required more than just a standard bolt-on and alignment. “They’re difficult to do to a high standard because of the way that the fiberglass has moved around through the years, and poorly done repairs in the past,” explains Snyder. “The fit and finish wasn’t that great on them from new.”

Although Jeff’s Resurrections did not have to replace any panels during the restoration, the body required plenty of massaging. “Somebody had just gone after it with a 36-grit grinding disc, or 16-grit grinding disc, so there was lots of gouges that had to be filled,” says Snyder. Finding all the imperfections was

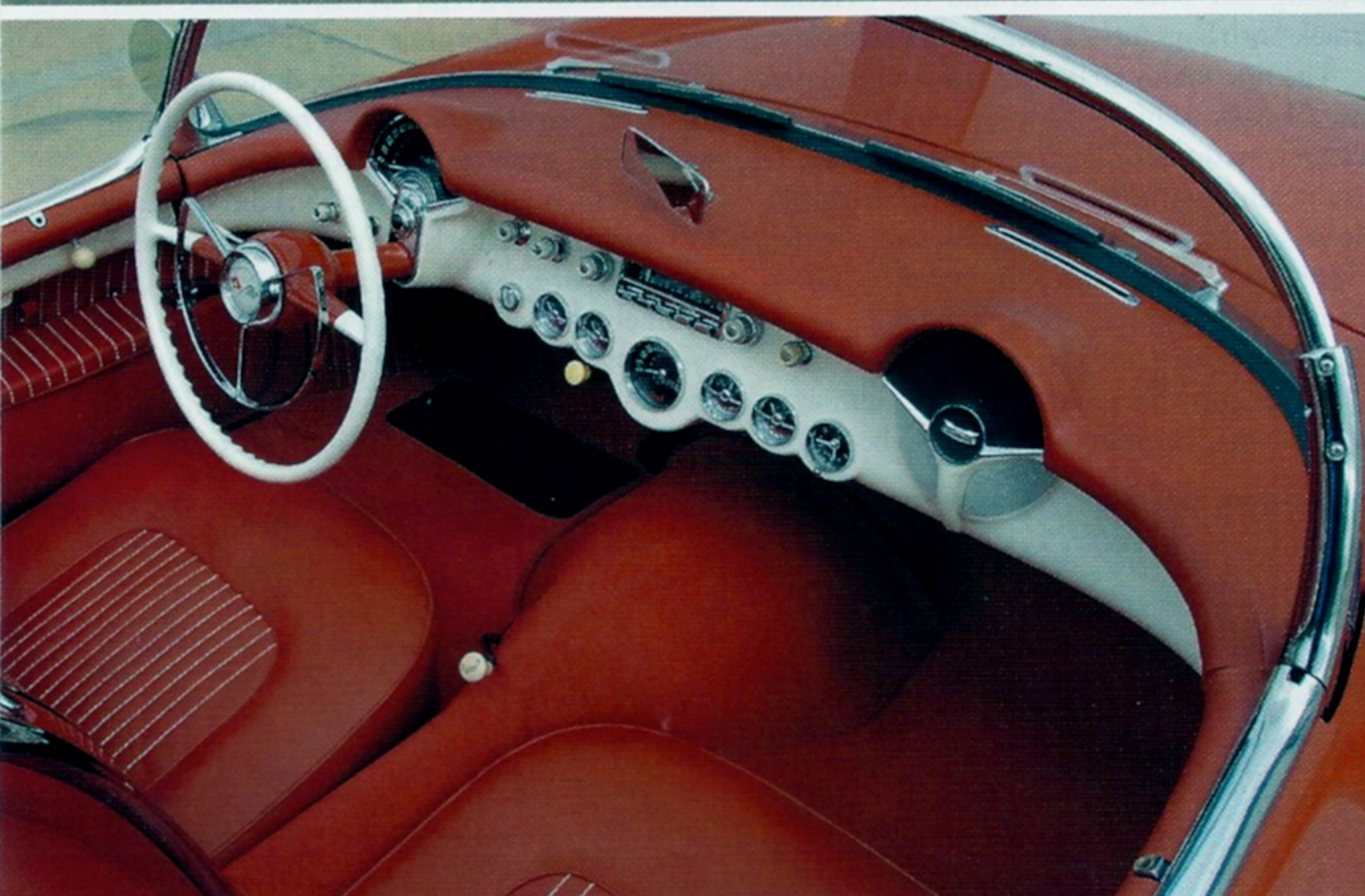




Inside the Warehouse

BILL MUNDAY'S 10,800-square-foot warehouse is crammed to the gills with vintage iron, but only about a third of the available floor space is dedicated to classic Corvettes. As the collection grew, it evolved into a museum of mostly prewar classics. Among the noteworthy stars are a 1930 Duesenberg Model J convertible Berline, a 1931 Chrysler CG Imperial and a one-off 1933 Cadillac V-8 355-C Dual-Cowl Phaeton.

To see the cars in Munday's collection, visit www.mundayautocollection.com.



Above: Bill Munday with his collection of American iron. Left: The restoration of the interior was just as painstakingly executed as that of the rest of the Corvette; preserving originality was paramount.

no small task. "You have to be very, very careful that you catch every crack. Some of those are very, very fine. Once we got the fiberglass stripped, we basically 'guide-coated' the entire car just so we could find the cracks." They used low-pressure sand blasting under the hood to remove chemical contaminants that had built up over the years.

To build back up a smooth body, they attacked the imperfections with 3M Reinforced Filler, which Snyder likes due to its cartridge system with mixing tips; it dispenses filler and hardener in precise amounts. After fixing all the nicks and gouges, the shop then gel-coated the entire car and applied polyester primer. "If you polyester prime the entire panel, you basically put a build primer on there that you can block down and flatten out, and the entire panel is going to shrink and swell at the same rate," explains Snyder.

Once the bodywork was completed, the '54 was sprayed with lacquer paint in the original Sportman Red. Chevrolet built 3,640 Corvettes for the 1954 model year; a very

small percentage came with the Sportsman Red paint combined with a red interior.

Restoring the trim pieces was equally challenging. "A lot of the chrome fits directly to the body," says Snyder, "so it has to be sent off and stripped and then sent back in copper so you can file-fit the panels and adjust the brightwork to fit the car."

The second significant challenge was replacing missing or damaged parts. The car was restored to National Corvette Restorers Society standards, so it wasn't just a matter of finding any old replacement parts—it was crucial to locate correct date-coded parts. In particular, small items like radio knobs and trim pieces were difficult to track down. A previous owner had drilled small holes in the original hubcaps. The shop was able to weld and repair two of them, but the other two were beyond saving, resulting in a long search to find two replacements.

Snyder says the two parts sources he relied upon most were Grossmueller's Classic

Corvettes and the Vette Gal. He also singled out the NCRS Judging Guide as "a really, really good source" for specific information. Ultimately, however, the crew at Jeff's Resurrections was forced to fabricate some trim pieces.

Fortunately, refurbishing the powertrain was more straightforward, and required less work. After the restoration was complete, the crew at Jeff's Resurrection put the car on the shop's chassis dyno and recorded 138 horsepower at the rear wheels; the original 235 cubic-inch inline-6 in the 1954 Corvette was rated at 150 horsepower at the flywheel. Fine fettle, indeed.

In all, more than 2,500 hours went into the restoration. Munday was very pleased to get the car back from the shop and into his collection. Today, the red '54 lives a pampered life, and is a standout even compared with the other two 1954 Corvettes that Munday owns. Just don't ask him to pick a favorite. "The last one I looked at is my favorite," he says. ○