

# The '53 Mystery, Number 86

By Bill Eldridge

While attending the first SACE Convention in 1987, I was one of the members who had the opportunity of exploring over the remnants of Lanny Johnson's 25-year-old Corvette wrecking yard. The story of our adventure appeared in the second SACE Magazine, and Vette Vues carried Noland's story on the hidden paint codes for the 1958 thru 1962 Corvettes we discovered that day. I was part of this exciting find as I aided Noland in the infamous Quarter scraping. I was completely caught up in the excitement as we went from body to body searching for the green crayon markings in the trunks and behind passenger seats. Our search ended with the final available body.

I then began to look for some parts that I needed to complete my '59. I was looking specifically for a correct master cylinder cap (my cap was lost by Stainless Steel Brake Corp., when I sent my complete assembly in as they requested for rebuilding), when I came upon a tilt front end off a '53, '54, or '55. A short time later, I found the rest of this custom from the past. I pointed my find out to the rest of the group and we all commented on the quality of workmanship that had gone into this car. Roy Braatz asked Lanny "What year was it?" Lanny said "It was a 1953 serial number 86!" He then went on to say that he had sold the chassis and running gear, along with a 1954 body, to a man from Canada 15 years or more ago.

On May 31, 1988, I was visiting Victoria, B.C., Canada, with my wife Donna, our two children Malone and Billy, Donna's Aunt Charlotte, her sisters Judy and Sandy, and Sandy's husband, Kenny. While returning from the Bucharth Gardens, I spotted two Corvettes on the showroom floor of a Classic Car Dealership from the top seat of one of those old double-decker buses. The next day, Kenny and I set out to see if we could find the showroom with the Corvettes. Using the "Bird Dog" instinct I had learned from Noland, I soon found the dealership. Kenny and I entered... he stopped at the Pearl Pink Seventy-something with the blower sticking out of the hood. I zeroed in on the Polo White one, which I assumed would be a 1954. There were three men looking at a book and going over the car. The hood was up, and as I got closer I could see an air cleaner on the middle of the engine. A '55, I thought to myself. Closer inspection revealed a V-8 with staggered Corvette finned aluminum valve covers. I looked for some date codes to see if this was a '55. The three men continued to talk about the car. One of them opened the driver's side door and I tried to get a peek at the serial number plate. He leaned inside to look at the dash, and as he did so I was able to see the two screw holes, but no plate. I continued my date code check and discovered many parts missing: the fan shroud was gone, and so was the ignition shielding. There was a chrome lever that pushed down to open the trunk, however the intake manifold was dated #55, the radiator tag was E55,

and the block was stamped F55FG.

One of the men turned to me and asked me if I knew anything about Corvettes. I told him that I "knew a little!" One of the men suggested that that they should look at his Corvette and compare the two cars. As I continued to look at this car, I became aware that one of the three was very interested in buying this car, but knew very little about Corvettes. I was about to check on Kenny and the Corvette with the blower, when one of the three asked me if I knew anything about Corvettes. I repeated that I knew a little and he asked me what I thought about this '55? I said that I doubted the value of any car without the VIN plate! The owner of the dealership came over and asked if he could answer any questions. I asked him if he knew the serial number of this car. He said that the car was on consignment and he would go check. While he was gone I began talking with the others.

One of them, named Gary, said he had a 1953 Corvette. Well, you can all guess my next question... it's the same one that will be asked first every time you meet a '53 owner: "What's the Serial Number?" He replied "Number 86!" "Oh, how long have you owned the car?" I asked. "I've owned it for years," he replied. "How many?" "Fifteen or sixteen!" "Where did you buy it?" "Oh, I bought it from a man who tried to bring it into Canada without paying duty and got caught!" "Where did he get the car?" "He said he brought it up from California!"

"I know where your body is!" I said. "I just saw it in a Corvette wrecking yard. It had a tilt front end, filled-in trunk lid, racing-type gas filler neck through the deck lid, molded dash, and custom grill area." "No, it can't be mine!" he said. "Give me your name and address and I will send you some pictures of it!" "No, that's okay, it's not my car's body!" he meekly replied. "Yeah, you're probably right."

The owner of the dealership returned and announced that the serial number of the '55 is number 1333, and that the owner wants \$30,000.00 (Canadian). I thought to myself as I approached Kenny, who was still looking over the seventy-something with the flames and chrome engine, that the price would be within reason if the VIN tag was on the car, and not... your guess is as good as mine on this one!

As a lot of you know and others have found out first-hand, things may not always be what they seem. If your Corvette gives you happiness and joy, then it's doing what the people at GM intended these cars for in the first place. Enjoy it all you can because some day you may have someone tell you a far-fetched story about your car once being a totally radical custom from California.

**Editor's Note:** *Bill's right about the body being a custom. I bought it from Lanny for \$50, that's right, \$50, but only the body... just to show people, and I have since given it away.*