

# Ignorance Is Not Always Bliss!

by Ronald Melaragni



Ron Melaragni's 1961 Corvette

Cars are a big deal in Detroit where I was born. I had been fascinated with Corvettes since I was a youngster and watched them with delight year after year as models changed, performance improved and races were won. When I was finally old enough to drive and had enough money in my pocket to buy my first car, I started scanning the Detroit Free Press want ads car section Sunday after Sunday, looking for the Corvette of my dreams.

One Sunday afternoon, I thought I had hit pay dirt. My brother and I decided to chase down a '54 that I had found in the ads earlier in the day. I loved the body style but was not too excited about the engine being a 6 cylinder. After getting permission from the owner to look

it over, we opened the driver's side door to look inside and the door trim piece fell off onto the pavement. We were spooked. We looked no further, slipped the piece into the car, closed the door and quickly left.

Since then and over the years I have had the opportunity to own several Corvettes, but due to finances & raising children (and college costs), the Corvettes always got sold. After a bit of time went by and family finances took a turn upwards, I just HAD to get back to owning another Corvette, maybe even a project car.

Again perusing the Sunday Detroit Free Press, I came upon an ad for a '61 that "needed work." I traveled to the owner's location in Milford, Michigan. To my surprise, when I entered his garage he also had several Corvettes, including a '67 427 air coupe, a '65 big block convertible, a '57 fuelie and this advertised '61. I saw immediately that it didn't look like a '61.

He had decked it out as a '62 with fuelie badging, and he was right, it definitely needed work. Wrong color, wrong seats, no trim around the coves, no fuel injection-just a 1 x 4 carbureted base 283 4 speed-but it had a hardtop and a convertible top and it ran, just not well. I examined the underside area of the car and noted that there was rust in the usual spots on the frame, on the rear crossmember and at the kick-ups just in front of the rear axle, all repairable areas. So, my long desired challenge to restore one was right in front of me—and it had a trunk!

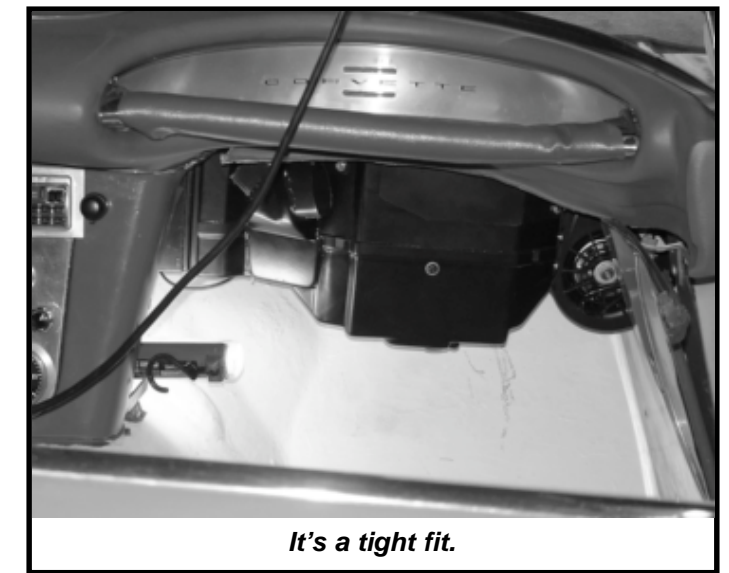
The owner told me that all of the original chrome, and the cove pieces, were either on the car or in boxes that went with the car. The '62 trim pieces were a bonus. Most of the '61 trim looked decent, though some were slightly dented but fixable. We negotiated the price a bit, settled the deal and off I went with my new purchase. I drove the car back home to Flint, wondering if I would make it. The engine seemed to be running on 6 cylinders, not 8, but I made it home safely. I spent some time and laid out a plan to restore my new challenge.

I contacted a friend, a gear head freshly back from Viet Nam, who had been involved in the restoration of a local dentist's '58, so I hired him to help me restore my '61. We eventually got it to run better but the engine was obviously in pain. In the middle of a cold mid-winter afternoon, we took the car to a local car wash and steamed

This is the time to reroute refrigerant hoses towards fender sides to facilitate future battery removals. A better alternative is to relocate the battery to the trunk.



All of this has to fit under the dash.



It's a tight fit.

. Check compressor and refrigerant closed hood clearances BEFORE charging the system. You may want to rotate the hoses depending upon compressor positioning with various fan belt lengths.

G. Mount the condenser coil as low as possible, particularly if a pusher fan will be used. The front edge and frame of the hood protrudes several inches into the area in front of the radiator.

H. The condenser coil mounting brackets need to be tweaked to point straight, not flared out from radiator frame. Also, the dryer mounting bracket needs trimming to prevent hood clearance interference.

I. Mark all hood mounting bolt holes and brackets well before removing hood. Tape hood edges to minimize paint damage. Closed hood clearance issues required numerous hood removals and reinstallations. Hood clearances should be checked at the extreme travel point of strut latching. Otherwise, the hood will contact the coil or fan each time hood is opened.

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**Lessons Learned** – Keeping in mind my skills are Bubba level and Monte is a skilled fabricator, we learned that a lot of things didn't fit or work as planned, which extended the "journey" accordingly. A skilled professional like Mike Coletta can make anything work and makes it look easy. But for the rest of us, if I had to do it again, here are some recommendations:

A. Don't install raingear wipers and vintage air systems together. The raingear motor and drive contacted the vintage air vent distributor as well as the cowl vent. Get another wiper system unless you are prepared to do a lot of tweaking.

B. Install radio speaker first thing after everything under dash has been removed (Mike Coletta suggestion-Also, extend the speaker ring studs to make them longer and easier to attach nuts.) Also, continue to check for wiper cable/arm interference throughout the process. Once the evaporator unit is installed, all you can see under the dash is evaporator and black hoses!

C. Remove seats, seat frames and steering wheel to improve access. Disconnect battery. Also, keep carpeting or padding on the floor if your bones are more than 50 years old.

D. Get a low mounted alternator mounting bracket with adequate adjustment travel. Do not use the Vintage Air unit which gives you alternator to closed hood clearance problems as well as hood strut clearance issues as it does not swing straight back - it angles off towards distributor. The strut will hit the distributor or wiring in closed hood position. The stock steering box prevents a very low alternator mounting.



*Fabrication is needed to solve hood strut clearance problems.*



*Charging unit, now an alternator, is relocated to the left side. Compressor is located to the right.*

Getting the hood to open and close was a good two week project, ably assisted by Monte and his ingenuity, note he had to make a special bracket for the hood support rod. I ended up dropping the 13" electrical fan about 3" lower than the condenser coil due to hood lip issues. I also had to adjust belt lengths in 1/2 increments to get them to fit, ended up with a 54 and a 58 inch belt

E. Evaporator installation is best done using two people, longer firewall studs, and larger mounting holes in the firewall.



cleaned years of grease off of the engine compartment and surrounds. It was heavy and sludge-like but most likely had protected a lot of the metal parts in the engine compartment from rusting. Next the frame had to be repaired and I had it properly restored at a local frame shop. After the frame was done, the body was back on the frame, and at my friends suggestion, we replaced the original engine with a smooth running 283/230 out of a pickup truck.

My first instance of ignorance-I let the original engine get away, Time went by and within a year and an investment of about \$15K the '61 sported a new paint job, a rust free frame, newly re-chromed bumpers and restored cove trim—it was looking like a '61 again, and it ran fine with the truck 283 in it.

Fast forward a couple of years: I was home cutting the lawn one day when I saw my wife frantically waving to me to come into the house. As I entered the house. she held the phone close to her, covered the mouthpiece and whispered to me that "the state police are on the phone and want to talk to you."



*...but it doesn't look like a truck motor*

I am a retail pharmacist and had been involved in turning some forged prescriptions over to the police and thought that was why they were calling. To my surprise, the Michigan State Police (MSP) detective on the phone identified himself as being a representative of the stolen vehicle division of the MSP and that although my car had been properly registered; some "irregularities" had cropped up.

Though properly registered and being driven for a couple of years, there was apparently a current title request submitted to the Michigan Department of Motor Vehicles to register another Corvette WITH THE SAME VIN NUMBER as was on my title! I felt certain that a mistake had been made, but began to shudder and shake at the knees as the inference from the detective was that one of us MAY have a stolen vehicle. He asked how long I would be home....it was a Saturday and I was planning on being home all day. He was calling from Lansing at the Michigan State Police headquarters there and asked me to stay at home, he would be at my home in Flint within an hour—to EXAMINE MY VEHICLE. Well, he wasted no time and arrived within 45 minutes, in a 4 door unmarked police vehicle. He was dressed in a 3 piece suit and tie and was very polite as he showed me his credentials. I invited him in to our kitchen for coffee and donuts. After some small talk he got down to business and asked for a copy of my title, which he reviewed.. We went out to the vehicle and looked for the VIN tag on the steering column.....it was not there-my second instance of ignorance. I knew nothing about VIN tags.

He let me know, in no uncertain terms, that if after examining my vehicle and finding that the component numbers did not match the Corvette VIN number on the title, he would be calling an MSP wrecker to take the car back to Lansing with him as a stolen vehicle. The vehicle would then probably be turned over to the individual seeking to license the vehicle that had the correct VIN tag, and I would lose it with no compensation. OMG!

He went out to his car, opened his trunk, took off his suit jacket and donned a pair of shop shoes and a full length shop coat with "MSP" emblazoned all over the back of it and a large MSP badge embroidered on the front (what must the neighbors be thinking?). He spent the next hour and a half over, under and around my vehicle. I waited inside my kitchen and paced back and forth awaiting the outcome of his findings. Soon I heard a mild knock at my side door and it was the detective, apparently satisfied with what he had found. I let him in and his first words were: "would you like the good news or the bad news first?" I asked him to start with the bad news. His findings, including graphite rubbings of the numbers on body parts, did not accurately match the VIN number on my registration. He did, however, indicate that after examining them closely that numbers like 3's, 6's, 8's and 9's sometimes are partially rusted or grimy and frequently do not show up completely and correctly on the graphite rubbings and tracings. Eight's could look like sixes or three's, etc. THAT WAS THE BAD NEWS. He also indicated that if he used his imagination that the numbers and the sequence of the numbers could properly match the VIN. THAT WAS THE GOOD NEWS!

The bottom line was that he was almost satisfied that I had the correct vehicle. To be certain he advised me to take the car to a Corvette restoration specialist in the area, in this case Paragon Restorations, which was 10 miles away in Rankin, MI. He suggested that Paragon specialists pull the driver side seat, raise the carpeting and cut way the fiberglass at the point where the body rested on the frame and where GM had the frame manufacturer stamp the vehicle VIN on the frame at the factory. I was to have Paragon certify the VIN number they found and to provide a graphite rubbing of the stamping. Usually the stamp would be clear as it was covered by the fiberglass and provide undisputed proof of the VIN. I complied with his suggestion and he agreed to wait until Paragon representatives certified the findings before he made his final decision. After a week of nail biting, I got a call from Paragon certifying that the registered VIN number was indeed correct and that it matched the number on the frame. Paragon provided me with the rubbing and certified their findings in writing, they re-glassed the area, replaced the carpeting, reinstalled the driver's seat and I picked up my correctly registered vehicle, none the worse for wear. The next step was to get the certification papers to the MSP detective, which I did the following day.

After about 48 hours, I received a call from the detective asking me if I would like my VIN tag back. I almost shouted "yes" but I simply said "yes, please." The detective gave me the name and phone number of the individual that had the tag. I contacted him by phone, told him what had occurred and let him know I would like my tag returned to its rightful owner--ME. He didn't skip a beat and let me know it would cost me \$1,500 to get the tag back. Of course, I was shocked. I declined his offer. My next call was back to the MSP detective, who had suddenly become my "comrade in arms." I let him know of the outcome of my call to individual with the tag. He chuckled a bit then told me, in no uncertain terms, that the tag was mine and that it MUST be returned to me ASAP. He let me know that to help the process along an MSP officer would visit the gentlemen in question and "encourage" him to return the tag, without charge and for me "not to worry about it." Easy for him to say.

About two days later I got a call from the individual asking to meet me in Flint so he could return my tag. Apparently he had been convinced to do so by a visit from a gentleman in uniform. I met him at a restaurant in Burton, a suburb of Flint and we had a nice, "friendly" discussion about the situation. After some small talk, he pulled an envelope which contained the tag from his jacket and handed it over. It was really in nice shape, almost

pristine, and I thanked him for getting it to me so quickly (I'm sure the blue uniform helped). He had driven about 70 miles to return the tag, so I offered him \$25 for his gas and his time, and left the restaurant without turning back and with a big grin on my face.

About a week later I returned to Paragon's and had them spot weld the tag on the steering column. Mission accomplished! Total cost: a couple months of sleepless nights, \$200 charge from Paragon to access the proper spot on the frame and do the "rubbing", another \$25 to spot weld the tag back on the steering column and another \$25 to the nefarious chap that had my tag. Total: \$250.

Though I hate to admit how uneducated and unprepared I was in buying and restoring my C1, I have certainly learned a lot. Fortunately this story has a somewhat happy ending. I write this hopefully to help anyone that may be shopping for or restoring an older Corvette and to educate them so they don't repeat my mistakes! The moral of this article is: "do your homework when buying a used Corvette!"

No, IGNORANCE IS NOT BLISS.....



Reunited: The original VIN tag was re-installed by Paragon Corvette

deck lid, as a lot of heat comes through that rear glass. Mike uses the very pricey lizard skin coating as well as insulating sheets on all his cars, Monte and I opted for some Florida made insulating beads to be mixed with your choice of paint at significant savings as compared to lizard skin. Selection of insulating sheets can be overwhelming, but keep in mind you are interested in heat insulation and R value, not sound insulation. Some insulating sheets end up working as heat sinks once they get warm. Bill Fleckinsteen's insulating efforts are directed towards keeping the heat under the car; Roger would like to seal off the door opening gaps as well as insulating inside the doors.

Engine/Condenser cooling requirements greatly increase with the running of the AC. Options include modifications to factory fans, cowls, baffles, insulators as well as the addition of pusher or puller electric fans using various control systems. Electric fans up front of the radiator have to be small because of interference with the hood, whereas additional fans behind the radiator can be much larger. Hood geometry and travel in front of the radiator must be recognized and addressed - It required lots of tweaking on my '60.

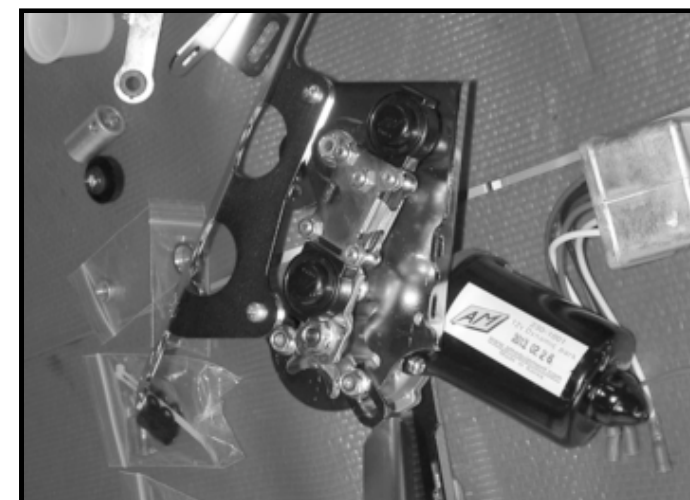
Project Creep - My "while you're at it list" includes electric fan, conversion to alternator, changing out both exhaust manifolds with Por manifold dressing, new brackets, pulleys, raingear wipers, new Al Knock padded dash, replacing original Wonderbar radio and speaker with aftermarket units, electronic tach, insulation coating and fabric and installing Stewart Warner vacuum gauge in space previously occupied by the clock. Monte Hagerman's assistance in materials, technical expertise and encouragement has been invaluable.



Beginning of the interior insulating process.



"Project Creep" results in windshield frame being removed for new dash pad.



Along with the vintage A/C installation, I decided to install a new Raingear electric wiper system.



Raingear wiper motor interferred with the vintage air duct.



## The Willet Run Garage

### Installing Air Conditioning in My Solid Axle Corvette

by Tom Blount

Perhaps an alternate title for this article should be: How I spent my summer vacation!



Monte Hagerman and I recently decided to upgrade our rides via Vintage Air so we could enjoy our cars throughout the year. There are many considerations involved when making that decision. Monte and I went on slightly different directions, but it has been an interesting journey. Special thanks to Roger Lester, Mike Coletta and Bill Fleckenstein for their advice. I, hopefully, have quoted them correctly. My original one month journey, unfortunately, evolved into a four month saga. But as Monte says, "The fun is in the journey." And, as some like to say, "Are we having fun yet?" My '60 went down on Memorial Day, but Monte's '61 hasn't been on the road in 20 years and he is rebuilding the drive train. As luck would have it, my '60 had cold air on the first day in autumn. How's that for timing? Just one season off!

Our goal is the ability to drive our classic cars in typical Florida summer weather with cool air and clear fog free windshields. I actually did this on 9/25, first time in 48 years! There still may be a need for large towels in case our cars happen to be one of those rare solid axles which experience some minor water seepage.

**BASIC** - A bare installation requires removal of the heater and associated controls. The new unit will require mounting the evaporator assembly, new controls, hoses, compressor and the new condenser. You will also need to replace the crankshaft and water pump pulley with a dual pulley. It is also advisable/neater to mount the compressor on the driver's side, thereby requiring the relocation of the generator to the driver's side. These installations required extensive tweaking due to closed hood clearances.

**OPTIONS** - To insure the unit works well enough to cool your car under all conditions, you will probably have to install insulation, hardtop, additional cooling via electric fan, and convert to a higher charging current alternator. This expands the scope of the project significantly. Choice\$\$ abound! Conversion to electronic tach may be the easiest way to keep this particular function. My options and extras essentially doubled the cost of the project.

Insulation is very important, as you have to not only worry about engine/exhaust heat, but you have to contend with air flow through the car at higher speeds. Roger Lester reported his car would freeze your knees at 55, but you wouldn't know it was on at 80! Mike Coletta taped up his first restomod driver's door and windshield, and then blocked off hot air coming from behind the seats and the glove box. He also put a WHITE towel on the rear

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