BY ANDY BOLIG

FIRST FUELIE FINISHED

HAVING THAT "JUST LIKE NEW" APPEARANCE – FOR THE SECOND TIME

IT ALL STARTED WITH A PHONE CALL FROM JOHN AMES AT J&M ENTERPRIZES IN BROOKSVILLE, FLORIDA, WITH HIM SAYING THAT HE HAD A CAR AT THE SHOP AND I MIGHT WANT TO COME OVER AND TAKE A LOOK. I WASN'T TOTALLY CERTAIN AS TO WHAT I WAS LOOKING AT.

I knew by the car's serial number that it was a very early production '57 – a pilot car if you will. Due to various circumstances, the 1957 production run was the first time that Corvette used pilot cars on the assembly line. Even so, option RPO-579, which provided fuel-injection V-8s for Corvette, wasn't ready when the pilot line cars were rolling off the line. Only the single- and dual-carburetor V-8s were scheduled for production on the line, spliced into the run of the last 1956 Corvettes in mid-August 1956.

For the 1957 Corvette pilot line run, all 20 of the cars were painted Cascade Green with Shoreline Beige interiors. All carried 1957 serial numbers and were considered part of the 1957 production run. One of those cars, serial number E57S100010, was equipped with the new-for-1957, RPO-469C, Duntov-cammed 270hp, dual-quad 283ci engine and both tops, including the power top option. While this would make for an incredibly fun package for anyone to own, the car was actually destined for a higher calling. It was picked from the line of similarly colored pilot cars to be sent to the Chevrolet Engineering Center in Michigan

RIGHT John Ames and son Tim stand proudly beside the car that they restored in their shop J&M Enterprizes. **FAR RIGHT** Restored back to its original Cascade Green and Shoreline Beige interior, the first fuelie looks inviting and classic. Some items like the steering wheel were sourced by various folks within the industry. This is an unrestored, original piece from the storehouse of enthusiast Jim Hornaday.

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for evaluation purposes and for track testing. It was selected to be re-powered with one of the hand-built, 283/283hp engines, using one of the production-based fuel-injection systems just beginning production. The engine was hand-built by the folks at the Flint V-8 plant, and it received its Rochester, Model 7014360 fuel-injection unit, serial number three. The engine was assembled just a week before it was transplanted into the car, which gave them enough space to give it a little dyno-time and make sure that everything worked as it should.

All of this work was in preparation for showing the new line of 1957 Corvettes to the motoring press. In fact, besides being the first production fuel-injection Corvette, this car was also the car that famed *Mechanix Illustrated* journalist Tom McCahill experienced and wrote about through his hands-on introduction with the car by the forefather of speed, Zora Duntov, himself.

Years later back at the J&M shop (www.jmenterprizesinc.com), all we knew at this point, was that the serial number was low, some parts didn't quite match up with factory '57 production pieces, and John felt there was more to the story. With a binder full of detailed photos of the car, John sought out early fuel-injection guru, Ken Kayser at the NCRS Winter Meet in Kissimmee, Florida.

After waiting his turn to speak to Ken, John started to reveal to Ken what he had, and what he KNEW about what he had. Ken asked him what the car's serial number was and when John told him "number 10," Ken's eyes lit up like he had just met an old friend. It turns out that Ken had a friend who started out documenting various '57 Corvettes and actually ran across number 10 some years earlier, while it still wore its Chevrolet Engineering Center-given fuel-injected engine, as evidenced by fuelie unit number 003 still residing on top. Ken knew of the car and had decided to make it his mission to locate the car and restore it. Years later, he even purchased the fuel-injection unit number 003 that once resided under the first fuel-injected Corvette's hood in hopes that one day, he could reunite it with, in his eyes, the only Corvette that was worthy to wear it. And John came bearing pictures.

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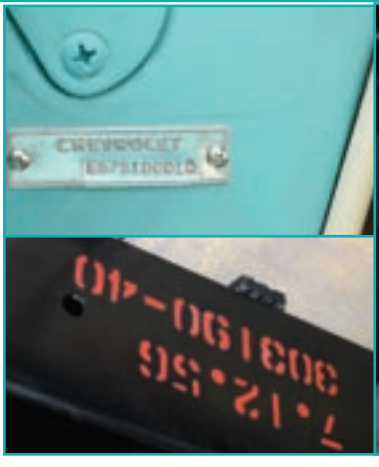
They talked for some time and Ken had a list of questions. He asked about the engine's wiring harness, various serial numbered parts and suspension pieces. All pointed questions to determine if this really WAS the



car and if it was, how intact it had remained over the years. John relayed as much information as he could, and Ken decided that he needed a closer look and scheduled to come to Florida and see the car. His trip would either confirm or condemn the car's true identity. He noted how the car still wore some of the RPO-581 HD suspension pieces that it is believed to have received while at the Chevrolet Engineering Center. Also, the provisions for, but lack of, the power top assembly helped him to seal the deal. The item that left no doubt was the engine wiring harness. As mentioned, the car was originally a dual-carbed car, but now it needed a harness for a fuelie. Ken examined the harness and concluded that it was indeed modified by the engineers at Chevrolet Engineering when the engine was installed. How convinced was he? Convinced enough that he let go of the earliest-known fuel-injection unit in the hands of mere mortals and christened the car's engine with its rightful crown.

Interestingly, John's hunch was correct. The car was QUITE significant, but Ken had some information that even John didn't know. Remember how we said that the pilot line cars were all painted Cascade Green? Well, Ken told John that he'd find green under all those layers of paint, but John, a painter for years, was skeptical. He hadn't seen any traces yet – but Ken was persistent. It was only after John started stripping the body down to bare fiberglass that he passed through a layer of Cascade Green. The car had been re-painted so completely, that any trace of green had been covered up, even where you typically wouldn't have

seen it. If there was any doubt in either of these gentlemen's minds that this was indeed the first fuelie, it was washed away in an age-old shade of green paint, freshly-revealed.

With Ken's knowledge of these early fuelies and J&M's ability to restore the car, the two men decided to take on the task of bringing the First Fuelie back to its previous glory. That was an especially daunting task because being one of the 1957 pilot line cars meant that not all pieces would be 1957 production pieces. Many 1956 Corvette components were scheduled to change for 1957 production, but if the changes were considered non-essential, the 1956 part was used for the pilot line run. For example, changes to the 1957 AM radio were the engraved "Wonder Bar" on the signal-seeking push bar and the AM dial with the Conelrad emblems.

The 1956 radios did not have these features and subsequently, neither do any of the pilot line cars. Likewise, the rearview mirror and the narrow chrome molding on the leading edge of the hardtop were also similar to all 1956 Corvettes, not 1957. There were various situations like this throughout the car, and deciding what would be "correct" for this car was more complex than restoring to a manual or judging sheet.

Throughout the process, various groups, people and businesses have contributed parts to make this restoration the best it can be. Many parts were swapped, purchased or donated, all contributing to the value of the car and the correctness of its restoration. The shifter knob and the steering wheel are unrestored, like-new pieces that had been previously residing in Jim Hornaday's shop, waiting to be called into duty. Other parts have a similar story, indicating the car's significance and acceptance within the hobby.

While the car's first showing when it was new was out to the automotive press and subsequently, to the rest of the enthusiast world through their respective magazines, we were honored to be able to have the car in our booth at this year's Corvettes At Carlisle this past August for its second coming-out party. Thousands of enthusiasts passed by and looked at the car. Some had come to see the car, as they knew that it would be in our booth, while others exhibited a level of disbelief, then amazement when they realized that this car was THE first fuelie, not just a '57, the first year for the fuelie. We've covered various parts of the car's restoration in previous issues of *CE*, and it only makes sense to show how nicely the completed car has come together. With such a significant past, it goes without saying that this car will have a significance to enthusiasts for years to come, and because of the milestones and the trials it has endured, it has earned the right to be held high and recognized for its accomplishments and for what it is. We've got a good feeling that from here on out, it will be a well-documented ride as well. ■

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ENGINE The engine as Chevrolet intended it. This is the third production fuel-injection unit manufactured, and keen eyes will note that the air filter is a very early styled unit, compliments of Ken Kayser's collection. John had the unit re-chromed, but opted not to curl over the seam so that the unit can still be serviced down the road. While correct for this car, these pieces are very rare so a "one-time-use" is not an option. You WON'T find another. **SERIAL** The frame stamping and the serial number tag both verify this car as the 10th one to roll off the assembly line for the 1957 production. **DATE** The frame's stencils were replicated; dated July 12th, 1956. **UNDERSIDE** The underside of the car was restored with an eye for details. The idea was not to over-restore the car, but make it as close as possible to how it left Chevrolet's Engineering Center. Note the quick steering adapter. The car also has the correct springs and sway bars necessary for the heavy-duty suspension, RPO-581. **IGNITION** The Delco-Remy 1110889 ignition is a warranty replacement unit. The manufacturer had a defect in the original August through November '56 units, resulting in no lower oil drain back hole. Oil was then forced up through the shaft seal, into the distributor cap which fouled the points. Our unit is dated 6L13 for 1956, December 13th.