

1969 CORVETTE ZL-1 PROJECT

How it all started:

About 10 years ago, a co-worker approached me about an engine she had. She told me about her recent divorce and that she ended up with the house and the contents of the garage. This included a 1967 Chevelle SS 396. She said that there was some sort of a Corvette motor in the Chevelle, but had the original 396 and knew it would be worth more with the correct motor. She asked if I would be interested in the Corvette engine. I drove over to her house, and sure enough there was a 427 in there. Her son started it up and it ran (although a bit rough). At the time I had a 1968 Corvette vintage race car and thought this would be a nice upgrade from the 350 in the car. We struck a deal on a fair price for what I thought was a decent running 427. After her son pulled the motor, I brought it home and began to clean it up. I didn't know what I had at the time, so I called a friend to come over with his Corvette by the numbers book. I have always been a C1 and C2 guy so to be honest, I really didn't know much about C3's.

My friend came over with his book and we began to look over the motor. As he scanned through the book, I could see he started to get excited. He asked if I knew what I had, to which I replied "no, that's why you are here". He said this is a ZL-1 engine. I heard about the L88's but was not familiar with the ZL-1. That's when I learned the engine that I thought was painted silver, was in fact aluminum. I began digging in the books to learn more about the ZL-1 Corvette, and it all started to add up. The engine pad revealed that it was made in May of 69' and destined for a Corvette with a manual transmission. There was no serial number on the pad indicating that it was not used in a car. I asked my co-worker how her husband came across the engine, and she said that he "horse traded" parts with some guys in Detroit all the time. I knew that I need to learn more.

The research begins:

I read as much as I could find about the ZL-1 Corvette, but I knew I needed to dig deeper. I have a 1956 Corvette that I have owned for about 30 years and have been an NCRS member ever since. I made a few of calls and contacted a retired engineer from Detroit. He told me that he knew a retired engineer from the Tonawanda plant who was the real expert on special engines. He gave me his name but said that he hadn't talked to him in years and didn't have any contact info. Armed with just a name, I began to look up similar names in the Tonawanda NY area. Four matches came up and I began to make calls. That was before robo calls, and people answered the phone. On the third call I struck gold. I found the engineer. He had an incredible history of Chevrolet performance engines and had kept many of the records.

He dug into his files and we emailed back and forth. He told me that the ZL-1 engines were extremely difficult to build because the aluminum used was still just somewhat experimental at the time. He said that it would take a full day to build one. Once they had a good block, they

would assemble the engine and run it for a pre-determined period. They would then disassemble the engine, inspect it, reassemble, and would test run it again. He remembers building seven Corvette specific engines (identified by the engine pad code) and sending them to the St. Louis Corvette plant. Engines didn't receive a serial number until after they were installed in cars, so that is why it had only a build code. He said that only two ZL-1 cars were built, and the remaining five engines were sent back to Detroit. He remembers that in the early 90's one of the engines was sent back to him at Tonawanda to clean up and send to the Corvette Museum for display. He believes that my engine is one of the four that was left. He has since provided me with more information.

The plan (or so I thought):

Realizing the importance of this engine, I gave up on the idea to put it in my race car. My plan at the time was to build a display and bring the engine to Corvette shows. After all, I have been doing that for years with my 56', so I had a pretty good idea what Corvette guys like. My wife on the other hand didn't see the fun in dragging an engine around and suggested that we build a ZL-1 re-creation (yes, she really does exist). After all, I really do enjoy the hunt more than the kill. And so, the hunt began.

If I was going to build an exact re-creation, I decided it should be based on the only fully documented ZL-1 on the planet. That is the yellow one owned by Roger Judski of Roger's Corvette Center in Florida. I contacted Roger and told him of my intentions. I also told him that out of respect I would not build a yellow car, as there is only one true one, his. He graciously invited me to come down, and on a business trip to Florida one day stopped by. Roger was very interested in my project and allowed me to record and photograph everything! Interesting, Roger's ZL-1 engine was built within a few days of mine which helps to substantiate the "one of seven" story. Armed with this info the hunt for the car began.

Finding the cocoon:

The hunt started as it always does at Corvettes at Carlisle. Ten years ago, rare parts were somewhat easier (and less expensive) than they are today. If you were armed with the right information, you knew what to look for. As we were passing through the isles in the swap meet area, my wife spotted a small sign that read "1969 Corvette project car, no motor or trans". I talked with the owner, and he said that the car was in his shop in the Pittsburgh area. Since we live in Ohio, we pass right by there and stopped on the way home to see the car. It was a perfect match for the project, even the color, red not yellow as I promised Roger. It had all the right options (or lack of) and even had a build date of a month before Roger's. This also provided a good base for the date coded engine. It was even a 390-horse big block according to previous owner and other telltale signs. The car was in great shape with none of the early C3 problems in the bird cage. We reached a deal and arranged to have the car delivered to Ohio.

The hunt continued:

Now that we found the correct car, the real fun began. Over the next few years, I have been able to collect all the correct and rare parts to replicate Rogers car. From the J-56 suspension, to the factory side exhaust, the mandatory smog pump, the radio delete plate, the correct dated M22 trans, it is all there. While the hunt went on, the car received a body off frame restoration. It then spent two years in the body shop. You must be patient and work with the schedule of whoever is willing to take on the paint project. Once the old paint was removed, it revealed a beautiful no hit body. The correct red paint and unique moustache front stripe was then applied. The black interior is ready to go and the reassembly process had begun.

The project comes full circle:

As so often is the case with a restoration project, life gets in the way. Unfortunately, the project has been idle for the last couple of years, as other projects have taken priority. I had hoped to have it complete for the 50th anniversary. When I knew that wasn't going to happen, I thought maybe the next best thing...the engine. And that's where we are today. So, it looks like my plan to drag the engine around isn't such a bad one, if only for this years Corvettes at Carlisle. If nothing else, it has given me a boost to keep the project moving.

That's our story. I hope I didn't bore you!

Dave & Rochelle Maccarone