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## The Poor Man's Classic Car

By JAMES V. O'CONNOR

WHEN Ralph Nader declared the Chevrolet Corvair "unsafe at any speed," most people wrote it off as a failure of American automobile engineering. For the members of Resurrection Corvairs here, it became a lifetime passion to defend what was supposed to be the American answer to the Volkswagen.

Resurrection Corvairs is a group of about 20 hard-core junkyard engineers and weekend mechanics who collect, rebuild and race Corvairs. The Corvair was what club members consider the only true 1960's-era car because it was only in production between 1960 and 1969. What seems to be the common thread for most members is that they believe that the Corvair design was really too advanced for its time.

"The Corvair design is very much like a Porsche, Mercedes-Benz or a BMW," said Nick Pasquale, president of Resurrection Corvairs. "It was the 1960's answer to an economy car because it was air cooled, inexpensive and easy to maintain."

Collecting and rebuilding Corvairs is not a rich man's hobby. Mr. Pasquale said that it is possible to buy a running Corvair that looks good for \$1,500 to \$4,000. One that runs and looks bad will cost \$500 to \$1,500. Tim Allen, star of the television show "Home Improvement," is a Corvair collector and a regular at Corvair shows. Ron Yaskovic of Yonkers, a member of the club who uses his auto body shop for club meetings, also races Corvairs. "I have had my car up to 120 miles per hour and I drive it every day," he said. "This is the poor man's answer to the Porsche 911." What brought an end to the Corvair was Mr. Nader's declaration that the car was unsafe at any speed. The car burned considerable oil because the seals made for the car at that time could not withstand the heat that the air-cooled motor generated. What has made the car such a success with collectors is that with newly designed plastic and rubber the engine can be rebuilt with better materials to correct the oil-burning problem. A rebuilt Corvair with new components is virtually indestructible, Mr. Yaskovic said.

Resurrection Corvairs is a member of the Corvair Society of America, which has 6,000 members. The annual convention will be held in Lake Placid, N.Y., this summer. Club members have attended conventions with their cars throughout the country. Conventions usually include rallies, judged car shows for mint-condition vehicles and autocrosses, where owners race around obstacles in a parking lot. "We have won a few trophies, but the best was an honorable mention for rebuilding an engine between races and still finishing fifth," Mr. Pasquale said.

Owning and operating a car that had a limited production run like the Corvair requires a lot of networking with other owners and collectors. The club here keeps a stockpile of old parts on hand for members whose vehicles break down. Usually parts are traded or sold at a nominal cost. Members also usually keep a "parts car," a nonrunning Corvair, which they use for parts when needed.

Corvair enthusiasts have a Web site called Virtual Vairs on the Internet with thousands of collectors willing to give advice on repairs and help in locating a part for someone who is rebuilding. There were hundreds of responses from around the United States and Canada for information regarding this article.

The Corvair had several different models of the same basic design, including a van, a sedan and a camper.

The Corsa model was the top end of the line, coming with a 140-horsepower, four-carburetor, four-speed automatic transmission with a turbocharged engine. Members of Resurrection Corvairs own about 25 cars of various models in various conditions. They meet about once a month to tinker with a car, doing a small repair or a complete rebuild. For Corvair owners, labor is almost always free.

To operate a Corvair, an owner must be prepared to work on the car because almost all of them require attention. Show cars in nearly perfect shape can be bought through Corsa for about \$4,000, which is considerably less than other running American collectibles, which start around \$25,000.

The way the car handles is another reason for owning it. With its low design, rear engine and absence of power steering, Mr. Pasquale said, a Corvair corners like a slot car, a toy that speeds around an electrified track. "I got my first Corvair from my father when I was 8 years old," he said. "I took my driver's test in a Corvair, and I have been hooked for life."