The Apprentice

Last issue I proved that Karl Ludvigsen, noted author of several Corvette books, was correct when he mentioned that Briggs Cunningham purchased a new 1953 Corvette for his wife. I found the photos and the story first published in 1954. Now I want to prove another cliché about the fact that Harley Earl wanted a sports car built by General Motors for college students. After the 1938 Buick Y Job, he built the 1951 Buick LeSabre. Its styling and promotion lead to the creation of the Corvette, which, like the LeSabre and Y Job, were one of 46 Motorama styling vehicles designed by Harley Earl. I wrote about all of them in this column some 10 years ago.

Many Corvette enthusiasts talk about this as if Harley Earl hired a staff of designers to help him draw each vehicle. In gesture this is great conversation, but it is not as it happened. I have known one of Harley’s team members, but did not know the full story until recently. It goes something like this.

In 1949 General Motors expanded its hiring of artists and stylists to assist Mr. Earl in the postwar vehicle development. Since new vehicles were in short supply right after the Second World War, no effort was needed to sell vehicles. Any new car commanded over list price, as this was more than 10 years before the window sticker (Monroney Act) was developed (another article I wrote about in this column several years ago). When demand was satisfied by 1949, auto manufacturers decided on exceptional styling and engineering to bring the next crowd into new car showrooms.

Harley Earl wanted an endless stream of sketches so he could pick what he wanted. Then clay models would be made, and the vehicle parts would be drawn and tooled up for production. One of his sketchers he hired was Herbert Roy Jaffe of the Bronx, NY. At 22 years of age, Roy was a college graduate who had made his own automobile models since he was 13 in 1940. He still has them. They were sent to T. E DuCharme in the Styling Section and an interview was set up in March. He was hired to work in Detroit with Art Ross in May 1949, right out of college. Salary was $325 per month, with $10 additional for a cost of living allowance. I have copies of both letters.

Roy, as he likes to be called, worked with Homer LaGassey, John Foster, Richard Teague, and Robert Scheelk. All they
did was do sketches of autos. Roy did noses, some half dozen a day. They were done in Prisma Color Pen on French mitientes paper. It has a knapp finish to hold the color. He worked with 3 or 4 clay modelers using 2 or 3 clay bucks. The important thing is each part was drawn as an art form first, before dimensions were assigned. He reported to Art Ross. Harley Earl would inspect the drawings at night, and tell the supervisors what he liked. Roy’s nose design was chosen by Mr. Earl to be used on the 1953 Oldsmobile Fiesta. Art Ross informed him of the news.

Roy left GM in 1953 and worked on many designs for many different companies in the New York City area. Many were automotive parts such as the Remote Control Mirror, and one was toy cars for the Ideal Toy Company. But one assignment was the beginning of Corvette development.

In 1950, after working at GM for about a year, Roy purchased a leftover 1949 MGTC from Inskip Motors in New York City. Roy had befriended Inskip since he was a child, as they sold many special European performance cars such as Mercedes and Jaguar. After purchasing the MG, Roy drove it to Detroit. It was in the parking lot every day, a young recent college graduate driving a sports car. He even did some Prisma color sketches of it for Art Ross to inspect, and Mr. Earl saw them.

In 1951 Roy was part of the team that brought the Buick Lesabre to Watkins Glen for the Grand Prix. The LeSabre was shipped and two carloads of people and supplies headed to the races. The race went thru the town in 1951 before a track was built. Hence his influence with the MGTC and the Watkins Glen Grand Prix and displaying the LeSabre did contribute to development of the Corvette Motorama car. One of the sketches Roy has is the driver side quarter panel of the LeSabre. When he left GM in 1953 he took many of the sketches, which would have been thrown out if not claimed.

Today at age 83, Roy has an 8 car collection including a 1963 Buick Apollo. He designs swimming pools for in ground installation. He also knows the building codes necessary for compliance, and as a Licensed Professional Engineer, can sign off on drawings. The GM employment does add prestige to his career, and he will be doing some Library Seminars on automotive design this year.

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