



the National Corvette Museum

Great Garages

APOLLO 11 AT 50: ONE SMALL STEP FOR AN ASTRONAUT, ONE GIANT LEAP FOR CORVETTES

written by David M. Brown

'We choose to go to the moon in this decade, not because that will be easy but because it will be hard . . .'

—John F. Kennedy, September 12, 1962, Rice University

Corvettes and Apollo 11 link up like “Blast” and “Off.”

Answering the slain president's bold challenge, Commander Neil Armstrong, in a 25-layer haute-couture space suit, descended the ladder of the Lunar Module, “Eagle” July 20, 1969, more than 238,000 miles from Earth. Fifty years ago, 550 million people tuned in live to the black-and-white feed, including an emotionally moved television anchor. We all watched in wonder, with Walter Cronkite.

A decade before, jolted by the Soviet Union's Sputnik launch and other space ventures, the United States chose its first seven astronauts, the Mercury Seven: Alan Shepard Jr., Scott Carpenter, Gordon Cooper, John Glenn, Gus Grissom, Wally Schirra and Deke Slayton.

This was the beginning of “one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind,” the memorable words Armstrong spoke when he stepped on the moon. This successful Apollo program has been followed by Space Shuttle, Skylab and the International Space Station. Before us now: Mars, the solar system, the cosmos.

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of that achievement, the National Corvette Museum (NCM) in Bowling Green, Kentucky, with NASA and the Marshall Space Flight Center, recently featured *From Gas Station to Space Station: How NASA Conquered Low-Earth Orbit*.

As part of this, five Corvettes driven by astronauts were featured, the “Astrovettes”: Alan Shepard's 1968 Corvette convertible, Alan Bean's 1969 Corvette, and Al Worden's and Dave Scott's 1971 Corvettes.

Let's take a ride in these and other star-connected 'Vettes:

•Virgil ‘Gus’ Grissom's 1967 Corvette Sting Ray — The second U.S. astronaut in space piloted the Mercury-Redstone Liberty Bell 7 July 21, 1961, for a suborbital flight lasting 15 minutes and 30 seconds to an altitude of 103 miles. He also was the first person to fly in space twice, partnering with John W. Young on Gemini 3 for three orbits March 23, 1965.

Grissom had the L71 427/435-horsepower tri-power big block, although this Corvette did not appear in the NCM exhibit.

Jim Rathmann, who won the Indy 500 in 1960 and competed in the race 13 other times “witnessed many a race at the expansive Cape Canaveral NASA complex between Grissom and Shepard, who drove an identically-equipped Corvette,” Moore recalls.

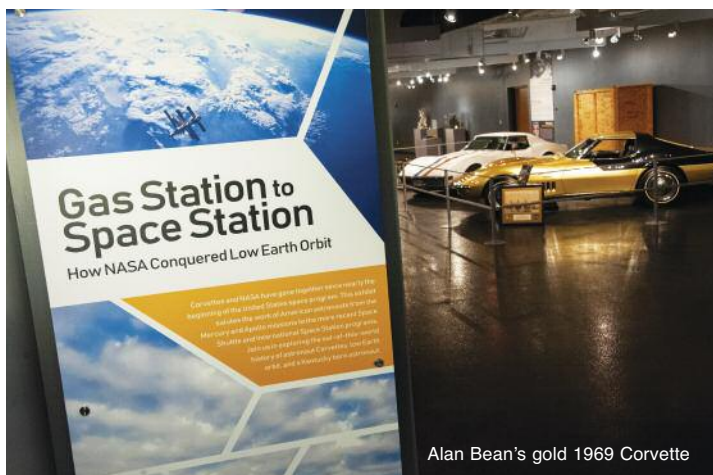
Not quite book ends, apparently. Grissom differentiated the cars by installing a 4:56 rear end. This, it's said, frustrated Shepard in 1/4-mile face-offs.

Tragically, the scheduled commander of Apollo 1, with Ed White and Roger B. Chaffee, died in a pre-launch fire, January 27, 1967, at Cape Kennedy, Florida.

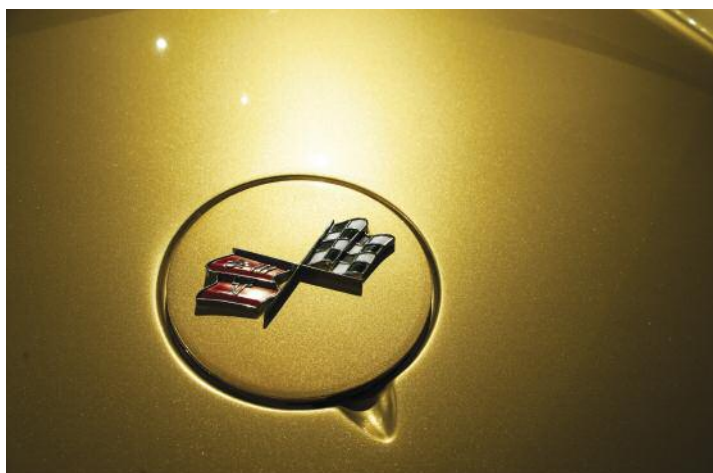
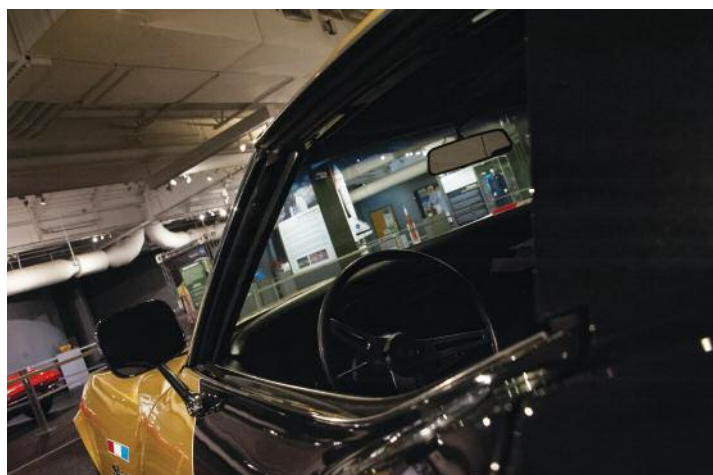
The Corvette convertible went through some ownership changes during which it was painted red from the original blue; other changes were made. The car was sold at Mecum Auto Auctions' Kissimmee, Florida, event in January 2014 to an in-state collector.

•Alan Shepard's 1968 Corvette convertible — Shepard started the NASA Corvette love when he drove a '57 to the astronaut's training base, explains Derek E. Moore, the NCM curator.

Born November 18, 1923, the Naval Academy and Naval War College graduate became the first American to travel in space, on May 5, 1961. His Mercury-Redstone Freedom 7 capsule lifted 116.5 miles above the Earth and reached 5,134



Alan Bean's gold 1969 Corvette



Al Worden's white 1971 Corvette
David Scott's blue 1971 Corvette



miles per hour in 15 minutes and 28 seconds. A military helicopter retrieved him. Americans cheered: The feisty red, white and blue tortoise might still catch the crafty Red hare.

Instantly a hero, he became one of the first astronauts to receive a Corvette for his space efforts; in 1962, General Motors President Ed Cole made the presentation. "Mr. Corvette" kept this car for about a year.

Later, he received this behemoth 427-cubic inch 435-horsepower Corvette with aluminum heads and tri-power carburetion as part of Jim Rathmann's \$1 lease program for astronauts.

The Rathmann Courtesy Car program was created by the 1960 Indy 500 winner who owned the Florida Cadillac/Corvette GM dealership in Melbourne, Florida. "Many of them from the Mercury Program through Apollo 12 took Jim up on his offer, forever forging a connection between Corvette and the space program," Moore explains.

"Rathmann just got it. Being a bit of a thrill seeker himself as an accomplished race car driver, he saw Corvette as the perfect car for people who live on the edge. The sleek and fast look of the Corvette went with the personalities of the astronauts, while the power and reactive way that Corvettes handled appealed to those who have been test pilots and fighter pilots."

Shepard would also participate in Apollo 14; he became

the fifth man to walk on the moon and the oldest astronaut, at the time, 47. He drove golf balls on the lunar surface, another first for this exceptional Earthling.

•**Alan Bean's 1969 Corvette** —The three crewmembers of Apollo 12, the second moonlanding mission, all had their 427-cubic-inch, 390-horsepower 4-speed Corvettes painted gold. The other two were Charles Conrad Jr. and Richard F. Gordon. Everyone selected air-conditioning as well.

Legendary automotive designer Alex Tremulis, who designed the Tucker Torpedo, added black "wings" and, at Bean's request, a white pinstripe separating it from the gold.

Distinguishing the three Corvettes were red, white, and blue painted bars on the front fenders. Bean's has "LMP" noted over the blue bar: Lunar Module Pilot, his assignment on Apollo 12. Conrad had "CDR" over red, Gordon "CMP" on white.

Bean was born in Wheeler, Texas, on March 15, 1932, and was commissioned into the United States Navy after graduating from the University of Texas in 1955. Following naval flight training, he was assigned to fly jets. In October 1963, he was named an astronaut by NASA.

The Apollo 12 mission began November 14, 1969, and the spacecraft splashed down in the Pacific Ocean ten days later.

Bean was also on Skylab II with Jack Lousma and Owen



Alan Shepard's white 1968 Corvette Convertible



Virgil 'Gus' Grissom's 1967 Corvette Sting Ray



Neil Armstrong's 1967 Corvette

Garriott; this was the second mission where astronauts boarded and worked on America's first space station. The three men were on the space station for 56 days.

Corvette and NASA aficionado Danny Reed, a resident of Austin, Texas, purchased the car August 12, 1971; it changed his life.

"When I get questioned about Alan Bean's Astrovette at car shows and events, my first comment is 'The car has a better life than I do.' That's a fact.

"His car has been almost like space travel to me, as it has opened so many doors," says Reed, who, after serving in the Army, began following the space program in the early 1960s. "The Astrovette introduced me to NASA, where I have met and made so many friends: astronauts, mission control directors and the everyday people that have made space travel a reality."

Bean's car has been on *Jay Leno's Garage*, *Wheeler Dealer* with Mike Brewer, *Classic Car Rescue*, *Corvette Nation* with Michael Brown and *Top Gear* with James May and featured in many car magazines, Reed says.

The moon-landing spirit of the 1960s was unifying amidst fragmentation and polarization: "Vietnam was tearing this country apart," he recalls. "The Apollo Space Program not only brought our nation together; it brought the world together."

•**Al Worden's 1971 Corvette** — The three astronauts of the Apollo 15 mission ordered Corvettes through the Rathmann Courtesy Car program, each with a patriotic color.

Worden's 454-cubic inch, 390-horsepower car is Classic White; the other two were Mille Miglia Red for Irwin and Bridgehampton Blue for Scott. All had a double stripe placed down the length of the car, with the other two colors of

the American flag.

Born in Jackson, Michigan, February 7, 1932, Worden graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. After serving as a pilot and armament officer, he became one of the 19 astronauts selected in April 1966 for the Apollo missions.

The crew lifted off on July 26, 1971. He was the command module pilot, staying in lunar orbit while crew members David Scott and James Irwin landed on the moon. The mission returned to Earth August 7, 1971.

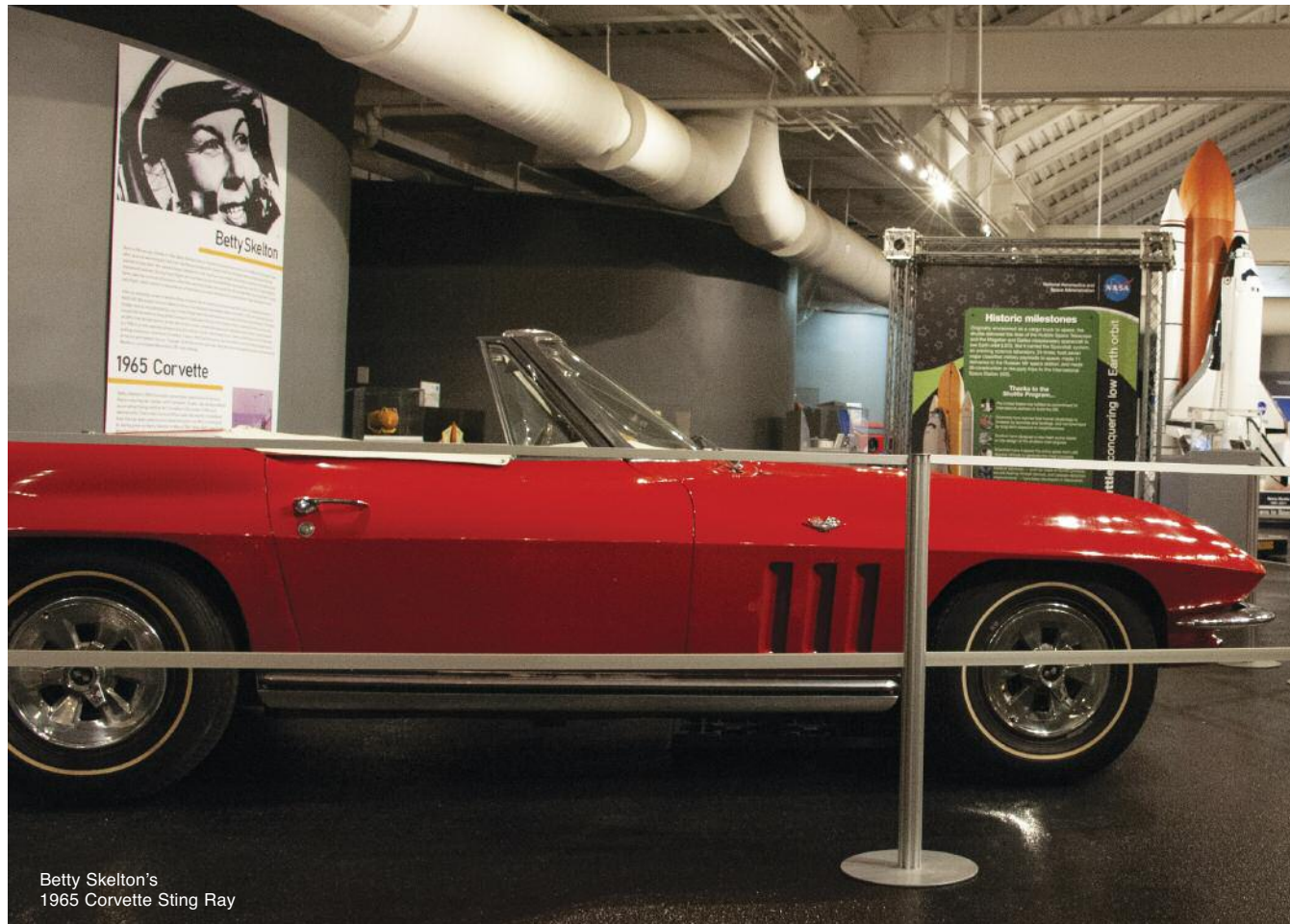
His car had been stored in an open field in Texas for several years, and Reed purchased it in Austin, Texas, July 20, 2017, the 48th anniversary of the first moonlanding.

•**David Scott's 1971 Corvette** — Of the Apollo 15 Corvettes, Scott's was the Bridgehampton Blue with white and red stripes. He chose the small-block 350-cubic inch/270-horsepower engine with a Turbo 400 Hydromatic.

Born in San Antonio, Texas, June 6, 1932, he was the son of Tom Scott, a fighter pilot in the United States Army Air Corps. After graduating fifth in his class from West Point in 1950, he joined the United States Air Force and became a test pilot at Edwards Air Force Base. In 1963 he was named an astronaut.

He piloted the Gemini 8 mission, March 16, 1966, commanded by Neil Armstrong. The primary objective of the mission was to perform the first docking between two vehicles in Earth orbit.

For the Apollo 9 mission, March 3–13, 1969, Scott was Command Module Pilot, with Commander James McDivitt and Lunar Module Pilot Russell 'Rusty' Schweickart; the crew performed the first docking of the Lunar Module and Command Module while in Earth orbit.



Betty Skelton's
1965 Corvette Sting Ray

BETTY SKELTON: 'MERCURY 7 ½'

Betty Skelton's — "The First Lady of Firsts," "Mercury 7 ½," and "The Fastest Woman on Earth" — was born in Pensacola, Florida, in 1926. She drove a 1965 Corvette.

When she was young, Skelton told her parents she wanted to be a pilot, and on her 16th birthday, she made a first legal solo flight and became successful in both aerobatic flight and speed records. Later, she met Bill France, the founder of NASCAR, who persuaded her to drive at the Daytona Speed Weeks where, from 1954 to 1955, she set records in Dodge racers.

She then became a part of the carmaker's team that set records at the Bonneville Salt Flats. In 1965, land speed racer Art Arfons offered her the opportunity to drive his "Cyclops" at the Salt Flats where she set the Women's Land Speed Record at a 276-mph average.

In 1956, at the Campbell-Ewald advertising firm for General Motors Chevrolet Division, she was GM's first female technical narrator for auto shows and appeared in television and print ads.

In May, General Motors gave her this car, which was probably used in print advertising for that year's model.

She was never an astronaut, but *LOOK* magazine worked with NASA to put Skelton through the same tests as the Mercury Seven, and she passed the tests, earning the nickname "Mercury 7 ½" from the astronauts. On the cover, she was in a pressure suit and a helmet, next to the headline "Should a Girl be First in Space?"

Skelton's 1965 Corvette was recently found in a Pennsylvania garage and remains as it was when removed.



Neil Armstrong's 1967 Corvette

And, in his third and final space mission, Apollo 15, July 26–August 7, Scott, commander, and James Irwin, the lunar module pilot, landed on the moon.

His 1971 Corvette was later purchased March 5 this year in Florida by Reed; beautifully kept, it has just 42,477 original miles.

•**Neil Armstrong's 1967 Corvette** — This very special 427 was purchased by the first man on the moon December 26, 1966. More than a decade later, Joe Crosby of Melbourne, Florida, saw the car in Atlanta during the summer of 1979 or 1980 and spoke with the owner.

This one has the 390-horsepower big block with the 4-speed transmission, air-conditioning, electric windows, tinted glass, power brakes, radio, wood steering wheel, electronic ignition and an alarm system installed at Rathmann Chevrolet. The car was not in the NCM exhibit.

"I didn't but did not know the car belonged to Neil Armstrong till Christmas of 1985," he recalls. "It came to light during a conversation with the owner, and I kept in touch for the next 30-plus years."

In February 2012 he decided to sell. The car remains in original condition, just as Armstrong left it. Imagine: The man who piloted this Corvette steered the LEM to a safe resting place on the moon, with precious seconds of fuel remaining.

"I watched Apollo 11 lift off in person, I saw Neil Armstrong step onto the moon on live TV. I have lived in Brevard County where the Space Center is located since 1967 and probably sat in traffic with Armstrong at some point; we traveled the same roads," Crosby recalls.

He notes that Armstrong also flew 78 combat missions

during the Korean War as well as the X-15 super-supersonic test jet.

"Sharing this car has been the main priority for me during the past seven-plus years," Crosby says. "Neil Armstrong is a man who will always be an American icon, and his Corvette will always be a piece of history."

That space history will continue because of Armstrong's and his associates' efforts five decades ago.

"Apollo captured the world's attention and demonstrated the power of America's vision and technology, which has inspired generations of great achievements in space exploration and scientific discovery," says Mark Geyer, director of the NASA Johnson Space Center in Houston. "NASA is returning America to the moon in the next five years. This time we won't go alone, but in a way that reflects the world today — with government, industry, and international partners in a global effort to build and test the systems needed for challenging missions to Mars and beyond."

"Our goal 50 years ago was to prove we could land humans on the moon and return them safely to Earth," he adds. "Our goal now is to return to the moon to stay, in a sustainable way."

The NCM is open daily 8 a.m.–5 p.m. central time; admission is \$12 adults, \$10 seniors and \$7 children 5–12. Children under 5 are admitted free, and groups of 15 or more may book in advance to receive a special rate. More information is at corvettemuseum.org or by calling 270.781.7973.

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