

# A LONG TIME COMING

Jeff Glenn discusses Tom Pelletier's '58, a 20-year project car.

Photography by Bill Erdman.

The flashy 1958 model is a bit of an anomaly in Corvette design, and in most cases it's a love-hate kind of car. For Tom Pelletier, this Panama Yellow example was just another notch on his personal Corvette bedpost. Aside from his '58 and the '57 and '65 that share the garage, Pelletier has previously owned some 30 examples of America's flagship sports car. Despite this experience, Pelletier was hardly jaded about restoring this '58. "I've always had a soft spot for this year," he smiles. "Mostly

because it had so much chrome on it!"

Pelletier's enthusiasm for Corvettes began in 1968, shortly after he completed a couple of tours in Vietnam. Returning home, he landed a job as a mechanic at a service station that specialized in Corvettes. Thanks to that experience, Pelletier says, "I was hooked. Since then, I've had just about everything from 1956 to 1974, including two '67 427/435s, '69 big blocks—you name it."

The '58 is not a new addition to Pelletier's

stable, but it wasn't always in the condition seen here. "I found this car in North Carolina in 1985," he remembers. "I believe I paid \$1,200 for it." At that time, the car was mostly in pieces, and its ownership history was a mystery. Still, it seemed like everything was there, and the odometer indicated a reasonable 59,000 miles. "I had every intention of restoring it right away," Pelletier explains. "But then a divorce came about, and it sidelined everything for a while."





In this case, a while would end up being more than two decades. In March of 2006, Pelletier finally grew tired of his friends asking about the hulk languishing in his garage corner, and dove head-first into a full restoration.

Pelletier had completed two major restorations prior to tackling the '58—another '57 and a '64. The solid-axle machine wound up being a show winner, and Pelletier finally had to admit that it was too nice to drive. That car

was replaced with his current '57, which he doesn't mind taking for the occasional spin. "That one is mostly a survivor with most of the original paint still on it," he says. "I've gone to radial tires and a four-speed to make it more enjoyable on the street."

**A**t the start of the '58 rebuild, Pelletier wasn't sure what direction it was going to go. "I told everyone that it was going to take on a life of its own. Luckily, my girlfriend understands me, because every night and every weekend I was in the garage. We didn't see much of each other!"

The first step of the build was removing the body from the frame, and sending off most of the major components for media blasting. The bits that remained were carefully labeled and bagged. Though the car was mostly complete, a significant percentage of the parts had to be refinished, reconditioned or replaced altogether. The stainless trim was hand-polished, and the chrome was replated. Thanks to the car's relatively low mileage, Pelletier was able to retain the original shocks and rebound straps. All of the work—which he did himself, aside from rebuilding of the factory dual-quad 283/245 smallblock—took two years and an estimated 2,000 hours of labor.

Reflecting on the build process, Pelletier comments, "They say the last 10 percent takes 90 percent of the time, and in my experience I've found that to be true. To fit everything right and make it perfect—that's where a lot of the time is. The body on this car wasn't too bad, it didn't need any major work; but to get it to the stage where I could paint it—where it was perfect—that took about six months of work. I blocked it, sanded it, blocked and sanded it again, primed it, then blocked it and primed it again. I think I

Above: With over 9,000 produced, '58 Corvettes are hardly rare, but only 119 were built with this car's combination of Panama Yellow exterior paint and dual carburetors. Left, top to bottom: No shortage of chrome on this nose; optional dual four-barrel carb setup unleashes 245 horsepower from 283-cubic-inch V8; show-ready details. Below: Pelletier standards were so exacting that prepping the undamaged bodywork for painting took six months.



sanded it a total of nine times before the car was finally finished.”

All of that hard work paid off in the end: “It came out gorgeous,” Pelletier grins.

Picking an exterior color was easy, as the original Panama Yellow was somewhat rare among the 9,100-plus Corvettes that rolled out in 1958. “I believe they made 119 Panama Yellow cars with the dual-carburetor option,” says Pelletier. Finishing off the restoration was a rebuilt stock 3.73 rear end and a set of period-correct bias-ply tires.

Since he tightened the last nut and finished the final pieces of the restoration, Pelletier has devoted a total of about 300 miles to the car. He has no plans to put it on any kind of competitive show circuit. “I don’t show my cars anymore,” he says. “Years ago, I got involved in that, and I’ve taken just about every award that you can get! I must have had 100 trophies downstairs, and I wound up giving them all to my nephews and nieces.”

With plenty of show success under his belt, Pelletier feels that he’s earned the right to simply enjoy his Corvettes. “I’m starting to get tired of long restorations,” he remarks. “I’m getting too old for this kind of work.” With the ’58 completed, Pelletier is content to drive his cars, though he admits the ’58 will hardly be a daily commuter. “I just don’t want to



drive it too much,” he says. “That will take away from its value.”

Fortunately for his gearhead buddies, Pelletier isn’t completely bent on keeping the ’58 in the garage. Recently, his friends suggested he bring all three of his current Corvettes to a vintage show. He replied, “It would be nice to rake all three, but I can’t drive all three cars at once. Of course, they turned around and said, ‘We can.’ I caved and said, ‘All right, every-

body can drive one.’”

As far as Pelletier is concerned, that kind of shared passion is the essence of the Corvette hobby. Though he had to put a few miles on his ’58 to fuel that example of Corvette camaraderie, he figured it was a small price to pay. And, naturally, if any of his friends were among those Corvette enthusiasts who find the ’58 to be too glitzy, they certainly didn’t show it. ○

