



IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL SHOW

Jeff Glenn went to Effingham for Funfest, now the biggest Corvette meeting in the world, to see why the crowds keep pouring in. Photography by the author.

Look past the sea of mostly late-model Corvettes and there's a cornfield in the distance. Anyone walking around hears the joke 40 times over the weekend, always delivered in the same familiar stage whisper: "*If you build it, they will come. Haw Haw!*" But the joke was the truth. Mike Yager built it, and they came. Lots of them. Thousands and thousands and thousands.

For the last 12 years every mid-September, Mid America Motorworks' Effingham, Illinois corporate campus is transformed into a Corvette-themed, no-entry-fee, family-friendly amusement park. Entertainments and attractions magically pop up all over in place. Suddenly, there are tech talks and resto seminars with big-name Corvette authorities; Corvette-

themed fashion shows; bazaars of Corvette artwork, some fairly bizarre in its own right; loudspeakers constantly barking out door prizes, giveaways, upcoming activities, and nostalgic American rock tracks; guys under lifts installing hotrod exhaust systems; and tents upon tents full of *stuff*—accessories, trinkets, food, replacement parts—for the faithful to buy. The doors of Mid America's My Garage Museum—essentially, Mike Yager's own collection turned into a public show space—are thrown open. A motorized tram, looking like nothing more than a giant airport tug hauling people instead of their baggage, crisscrosses the property picking up dog-weary walkers whose own legs have run out of gas. Wanna see what 12,000-odd Corvettes look

like from the air? There's a \$20, five-minute helicopter ride you can take. Mid America even brought over The Beach Boys—okay, technically, they brought Two Beach Boys—for a free concert.

Still, for all the activities and hoopla, what the bulk of the 50,000 or so visitors seem to *really* enjoy in these cornfields isn't a specific activity, but rather a chance to do nothing in particular. Just weaving through acres and acres of Corvettes, chatting amiably with their fellow fans, swapping stories and lies, comparing accessories, and idly admiring cool cars is the real draw. That's why they drive their Corvettes all the way out to a cornfield in Illinois from upstate New York, south Florida, Arizona, and points farther.

Acres of every Corvette vintage—but mostly late-model drivers—crowd the Funfest lawns. This year's count ran to about 12K, the highest yet.





Elmer and Nancy Schramm drove their '74 convertible all the way east from Glendale, Arizona. "I'm originally from Illinois, so this is a big homecoming trip," Elmer explains. "We've made it for seven years in a row: The key is to get 1000 miles done in the first day so you can slack off when you don't feel like driving all day by the third." Elmer then lowers his voice. "We've got a late-model TPI motor in there, too—that helps with the long trips."

"It's only about a six-and-a-half hour roll for us," pipes up Bob Newberry from Massillon, Ohio. Bob is parked in front of his yellow 2000 coupe on a folding chair with a built-in sun canopy—he and three other members of the Buckeye Corvette Club have just made the trip together. "This is the only Corvette I've ever owned, but I bought it in August of '99 and the car wasn't even three weeks old [the first time] I had it out here."

"It's just a ball to do things like this—to get around a bunch of Corvette owners. It's like a wealth of knowledge; anyone can know

more than anyone else on certain subjects. I was an electrician for 30 years and I know a lot about the computers and the wiring. Talk to someone else, and it turns out they're a GM mechanic or engineer. My son's an engineer for Bosch brakes now—he's put the active handling on these things. When I talk to people about it, they ask 'how do you know so much about that stuff?'

"I like driving the car, too—I've got 65,000 miles on it. We've raced out at the Highway 318 Open Road Races in Nevada, been on the track at Darlington and Indianapolis.... We were even caught in a sandstorm crossing Kansas once." As for attending Funfest, "...every year, on the way out, I make my hotel reservations for the next one."

While ogling a pre-production 2006 Z06 together, Bowling Green Assembly plant-manager Wil Cooksey falls into conversation with Bill Suprenand from Port Washington, Wisconsin. It turns out that Bill worked for AO Smith in the 1960s and 1970s making frames



Above, left: Elmer and Nancy Schramm drove their TPI-powered '74 convertible east from Arizona.

Below, left: Bob Newberry (l) and his Buckeye Corvette Club buddies from Ohio.

Below: Les Gooley, Kevin Moore, and Joe Dixon from the Chicago Crossroads Corvette Club.

Right, bottom: Danny Phillips drove a '65 smallblock he restored himself; a 396 is under way at home.

for second- and third-generation Corvettes. He has a '69 at home, and drove his modified '98 C5 to the event. "I've been coming since '96," he mentions as an aside. "It's great to be able to talk with everybody here. I was just telling Wil about the old frame-building process, and how I followed my own 1998 down the assembly line when it was made—what a thrill that was."

Kevin Moore and Joe Dixon, from the owners' club Chicago Crossroads Corvettes, set up





Above: Cars segregate into groups of their own: Yellow is a natural one.

Below: Original Beach Boy Mike Love (r).



in the shade of the open hatch of Moore's '98 just looking to shoot the breeze. "I've had mine for about four years—it's my first one, and my only one," Kevin says. "Really, it's all about the camaraderie. When you go to events like this one, people wave, they stop, they talk to you. That's why I do it. Everybody around here is a Corvette owner, and everybody's nice to talk to."

"That's it. You come out to enjoy everybody's company and talk about cars," buddy Joe agrees. "We met another club from St. Louis, the Show Me Corvette Club, and they invited us down next year. So we'll go down there and fraternize—just hang out."

Kevin again: "It's a way of life; that's why people do this. There's two trips we make each year with the Crossroads Club that are a given: [Funfest and] the Kentucky trip down to Bowling Green, which is really the same thing as this one—thousands of Corvettes, the same kind of friendly atmosphere. You're meeting new clubs, you're always inviting them to come to your things, and they're doing the same. I was just talking to a friend of mine who's been down here since Thursday. He called up some people from Kentucky they met last year, and originally the guy he was talking to wasn't coming down. After hearing how much fun they were having already, he said 'I'll see you in three hours.'"

"I love to drive them. That's what it's all about," remarks **Danny Phillips** beside his '65 smallblock roadster. "We drive them everywhere. Came up [to Illinois] from Kentucky through some pretty good rain on Thursday. The other reason we come up is that ever since I was this high"—Danny points to his knee—"I've always just loved Corvettes. Never could afford one when we had kids, then we got those through college and we started doing it for real." Phillips is a self-described amateur restorer; he's also got a 1965 396 roadster at

home and has "...been taking two steps backward for every step forward on that car. I think it's really gonna be coming along now, 'cause I've run out of backwards steps! I was hoping to have both cars here, but you know how that goes. This is my second time at this show, but it's his"—Danny points to a C3 roadster parked next to his midyear—"tenth. I went to Bloomington for a bunch of years when it was still in Bloomington, and I'd really like to get to Carlisle, but that just didn't work out this year."





Finally, Phillips adds, he enjoys the sheer enthusiasm and affection he feels from the rest of the crowd. "For every one of these cars, each owner is just as proud of theirs as I am of mine—whether it's a mid-'70s, mid-'80s, or brand new. That's what I think makes it neat: They're all just as excited as I am."

This is not to say many attendees don't come away from Funfest with plenty of swag parts, DVDs, books, Corvette-logo undies, and other more tangible mementos. **Robert Bean**, of Cherryvale, Kansas, is spending the weekend carting around the plastic LS1 rocker shroud from his 2000 coupe acquiring Corvette-related autographs. "Well, I was really hoping Dick Guldstrand would be here"—the legendary racer isn't anywhere to be found—"but that's okay." Bean has already moved on to other activities: "There are so many underhood detailing tricks and paint schemes out here that this is a great place to see what other people are doing. I want to make sure mine is a bit different, and now I've gotten a new idea for the front—and it *doesn't* involve flames, I can tell you that."



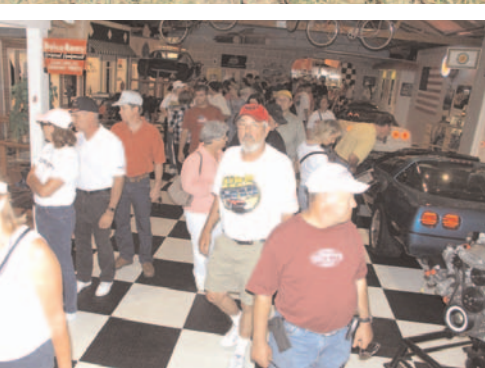
While wandering around the field by myself taking notes, I'm immediately drawn to the original black-on-yellow California plate of Lance Bettencourt's silver 1958, which Lance is (predictably) still hanging out next to. "It's my first time here," he tells me. "Actually, I just retired to Bowling Green, Kentucky from Vacaville, California. I've only been there about three weeks so far, and I haven't even made it over to the Corvette Museum or the assembly plant yet." Bettencourt bought his period-modified Corvette in 1972 for \$500

Above, left: Lance Bettencourt recently moved to Bowling Green from Vacaville, California.

Left: Jim Shaw came up from Paducah, Kentucky.

Below, second from right: The Yagers opening the show—Michael Jr., Mike, Lori, and Blake (l-r).

Bottom, right: Dead factory pipes piled up near the buy-'em-here exhaust-installation hoists.





FIRST LOOK SLP Corvette ZL465

Funfest isn't usually about new-model intros, but the launch of a new C6 tuner car did generate lots of attention this year. The upcoming ZL465—a joint effort between SLP Performance (the New Jersey gang best known for F-body specials like the Pontiac Firehawk) and Funfest's own Mid America Motorworks—will be built in a limited run of 100 turnkey editions. Starting with a stock Corvette LS2, the ZL465 package adds SLP powerplant bolt-ons such as headers, high-flow cats and exhaust, cold-air induction, new rocker arms, and dyno-tuned computer recalibration to generate 465 peak horsepower. Series-built cars also receive a 3.90 rear axle, lowered ride height, custom interior details with prominent ZL465 logos, and a "Letter of Authenticity" signed by Yager and SLP prez Ed Hamburger. Besides the 100 turnkey editions, individual bits of the package will be sold through the aftermarket.—*Jeff Glenn*



and drove it home that same day. "It's had three different engines and been driven the whole time. It even lived outside for a couple of years." I ask Bettencourt if he'd driven the '58 to Bowling Green when he moved there from the West Coast. He confesses he didn't: While the solid-axle and all his other stuff was being trucked east, he drove in his '92.

Southern Ohio's **Clair Steiner** is at Funfest for the first time with his very clean '63 split window. "I came down specifically for the Vets with Vettes display," he says. For 2005, the Center Stage parking area has been devoted to veterans of the military and their cars; proceeds from parking fees during the show are going to be donated to a local support group for the families of Illinois National Guard 2nd Battalion, 130th Infantry, which was sent over to Iraq earlier this year. Elsewhere on the grounds, a Red Cross mobile blood-donation center is doing brisk business, and contributions to Hurricane Katrina relief funds are

pouring in and being registered by volunteers from Mid America and Corvetteforum.com.

With all that going on, **Jim Sharp** of Paducah, Kentucky still isn't eager to leave the side of his Lou Gigliotti-tuned '01 Z06. "Man, I'm trying to show this thing all I can in the coming year: I've got a fortune in the paint, but I've put all this stuff in the motor, too. I think it's a ten-second car, and I don't care what anyone says—[next year] I'm going to put it on the track and enjoy it!"

For now, his elaborate flamed paint job attracts a Funfest judging award. This is decided not by heated, authenticity-weighted testing and expert judging but rather on the gut appeal felt by assorted media types and Corvette celebrities who've been encouraged just to recognize stuff that they like.

Within two days of Funfest's September 18th finish, Mid America declares it the largest Corvette event ever held—

and, given those 12,000-car, 50,000-attendee estimates, that's a viable notion. They all came despite no expectation of expert-judged competitions, no numbers-matching authenticity rankings, and no special displays of velvet-roped seven-figure theme cars. There wasn't even a nighttime cruise scene to bring them in—I checked, and the cruise culture in downtown Effingham consisted of two Buicks and one '78 Silver Anniversary.

Instead, what brought these enthusiasts together was the promise of an event all about community. In recent years Corvette Funfest has morphed into a midwestern, sports-car-themed Burning Man. It takes place on laws in the middle of a cornfield, not on some alkali *playa*, and the revelers tend to be better bathed and more thoroughly clothed. But trade the weird art installations for Corvettes, trade the costumes for Corvette-logo apparel, and trade a whole week of eating dust for a free week-end of unhurried ambling, and you've just imagined yourself at a Funfest. *m*

