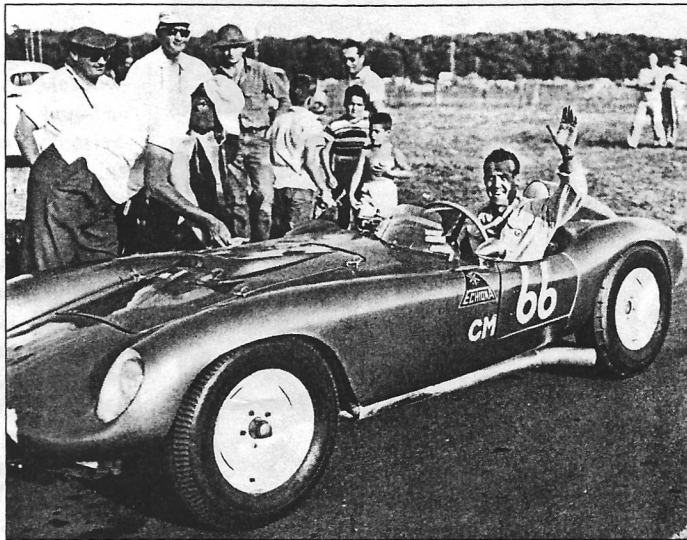


ECHIDNA



The Amazing Echidnas from Hibbing, Minnesota

— by —

B.S. Levy

photo

BILL LARSON

Eveleth-Virginia Airport, Eveleth, Minnesota - July 1959
Overall race winner Ed Grierson is pictured with John Staver
(bending over in front of the Echidna).

photo courtesy Jim Bartlett

Hibbing, Minnesota is probably best known for mountain ranges full of iron ore, long, hard winters and a folksinger-cum-Cultural Fulcrum named Bob Dylan. But it is also real Sports-car Country, as Hibbing is the birthplace of three of the most interesting, iconoclastic, enduring and ultimately successful racing Specials of the late 1950s and early '60s: The Echidnas.

The Echidna project blossomed out of the friendship and shared motorsports addiction of three Hibbing-area enthusiasts named John Staver, Ed Grierson and Bill Larson. All three had competed in assorted Jaguars and Corvettes, and the notion to build their own car evolved from a very simple premise: If Jim Jeffords and Dr. Dick Thompson could go damn near as fast as a Ferrari, D-Jag and Maserati "modifieds" in their 3,000-lb. "production class" Corvettes, what could the same mechanical entrails do in a 2,000-lb. package?

What, indeed.

The three Minnesotans were in a unique position to turn such cocktail-hour conjecture into steel and fiberglass. John Staver owned a metal foundry, which provided backing for the project and access to much-needed tools and materials. Chief designer/builder Grierson (who worked for Staver) was a gifted seat-of-the-pants engineer with lots of hands-on mechanical experience, while optometrist Bill Larson had been racing stock cars and sports cars successfully for years and was regarded as something of a hotshoe in both arenas.

What set these three apart from most would-be Specials builders was an uncommon degree of commitment, a refreshing practicality of approach and an absolutely startling lack of preconceived notions about how a racecar *should* be built. Never envisioned as clean-sheet-of-paper World Beaters destined to steamroller Europe's finest, the Echidnas were rather designed to be tough, simple, reliable track weapons that offered lots of performance — and fun — for the money invested and could run even-up with the best cars in the area. That they succeeded on all counts is a matter of historical record.

Besides their disarmingly straightforward philosophy of design, the Echidna builders enjoyed another advantage in the very long, cold Minnesota winters that made Hibbing such unlikely sports-car country in the first place. The snowbound evenings and weekends of late 1957 and early 1958 provided Staver, Grierson and Larson ample garage time to turn cocktail-hour imaginings into nuts-and-bolts reality. Also unlike your typical "backyard Specials," *everything* for the Echidnas was purchased in sets of three, as a car for each team member was the goal from the very beginning. This introduced economies of scale not usually associated with home-built sports/racers.

Throughout the project, the three protagonists were guided by a healthy irreverence for established conventions, a biting sense of car-shop humor and they all subscribed to a single, shining mechanical ideal: Will it *work*? Consider, for example, the Echidna chassis, which is simply a junkyard 1955-57 Chevrolet passenger car frame (!) shortened some 20 inches, narrowed by six and stiffened with a few carefully-placed new crossmembers. Although the frame channels look positively monstrous by sports-car standards, Grierson dropped a random chunk on a meat scale and discovered it weighed but 5.5 lbs. per foot. Not world-class, perhaps, but not bad, either. And puh-lenty strong. Front suspension was likewise pirated from boneyard Chivalays, and though Colin Chapman or Enzo Ferrari might blanch at the inelegant stamped steel A-arms with lightening holes drilled across the top, Grierson and company figured they were stout enough for any

2,000-lb. racecar and light enough (at 7.5 lbs. each) to be worthy. Will it *work*, remember?

The Echidnas likewise eschewed Webers, Hilborn injection, Vertex magnetos and the rest of the popular hop-up tricks of the era, preferring to stick with the sorted and proven Rochester fuel injection and "Duntov"-profile cam used by most contemporary B Production Corvettes. Disc brakes were never even considered — too heavy, too problematic, too awkward to adapt — and the Echidnas made do with Corvette ceramic-metallic competition linings fitted into specially-cast finned brake drums produced in John Staver's foundry, the only "custom-built" parts employed on the cars.

Staver's chassis was completed in early 1958, and covered with a Devin fiberglass body that functioned more like a canopy over the mechanical bits than any kind of structural member. The final touch was the Echidna name, contributed by Ed Grierson's wife. An avid crossword puzzle buff, she recalled an Echidna was a pudgy, bristly, waddle-prone Australian ant eater of little evident speed, grace or agility. The three racers agreed it fit the unlikely underpinnings and scarpard genealogy of their new Special perfectly.

By 1959, all three partners were racing Echidnas, Larson and Grierson running C Modified with stock-displacement Corvette engines and Staver in B Modified with a punched-out 339-c.i. unit and an experimental coil spring/Watts linkage rear end. They were winning races, too. On the local front in Minnesota, running unlikely venues like the Eveleth-Virginia regional airport and the parking lot of the Metropolitan Stadium in Bloomington, the Echidnas proved the fastest cars around, often finishing 1-2-3 overall. ▶

THE ECHIDNA PROJECT

AMAZING CORVETTE POWERED RACE CARS

by Ken Amrick



Above: The entire production run of Echidnas

In 1957 three race drivers saw the performances of Dick Thompson and Jim Jeffords in production Corvettes and wondered, "If all that is possible in a production Corvette weighing over 3,000 pounds, what could be possible if all that Corvette muscle were packaged in a car weighing 2,000 pounds?" So, our three race drivers in their mid 30's from Hibbing, Minnesota, Ed Grierson, John Staver, and Bill Larsen, became a team and worked late into the frigid northern Minnesota winter nights fabricating a race car. They were building a "special" to compete in B/M and C/M classes. A single "test bed" car would be built with plans of building two additional cars to be race ready the following year.

Every design aspect of the project would meet their goals of simplicity and sturdiness. Simplicity in design, they reasoned, would take less time, money and effort. Being race drivers, they were well aware of the need for racing reliability. Build it sturdy and DNF's could be reduced or even eliminated.

CONSTRUCTION BEGINS...

CHASSIS & SUSPENSION: At a time when tubular frames were becoming the latest thing in Specials, their frame design was almost laughable. A '55-'56 Chevrolet passenger frame was shortened, narrowed here and there, modified, and stiffened by building an integral roll bar into it. The '55-'56 frame is a ladder type unit and much lighter than the "X" braced solid axle Corvette frame, which is actually the '49-'54 passenger car frame. For suspension the typical ball joint, unequal-length "A" arms and a Morris Minor rack and pinion was used. Shocks were the Corvette heavy duty version all around.

Wheels were standard Corvette, but over time various wheels were used including passenger car wheels. During the second season Stavers car had Dayton wire wheels because, he said, they looked nice. Though they had the disadvantage of being heavy, over the entire season they had never broken or even adjusted a spoke. The weight of the completed chassis with wheels,