

Technical Notes — May '09' - 1983 The Missing Year



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1983, the missing year. Since many FCCC members will make the 2009 Caravan to the National Corvette Museum, I thought I'd spend some time reviewing one of the most intriguing exhibits in that facility, the one and only remaining 1983 Corvette. As many of you already know, no 1983 Corvettes were sold to the public. Quality and production problems had delayed introduction of the new C4 generation, so 1983 was passed over. The reasoning for skipping what would have been the thirtieth anniversary of the Corvette was delineated by a passage from the book by Dave McLellan (the second Corvette Chief Engineer at Chevrolet from 1975 - 1992), *Corvette From the Inside*. "Because of delays with the introduction of the new generation (C4) Corvette, production started in the early part of 1983. The new car could be called a 1984 model. The federal government defines the model year by its emission certification rules, which state that the model year can contain only one January 1. There was a lot of spirited discussions at Chevrolet about the uninterrupted Corvette tradition, but in the end, Chevrolet opted for the logic of building for 17 months and the attendant reduction in paperwork of not having to rectify for the 1984 model year."

Actually, the press and public did get to see a real 1983 Corvette vehicle when a few were introduced at Riverside Raceway, California, in December 1982. However, the 1983 Corvette never saw the dealer showrooms. Production of the 1984 Vette started January 3, 1983 and ran for 17 months. Because of the long production run, 1984 was the second highest production run for any Corvette. The new 1984 vehicles hit dealer showrooms in March 1983 and a couple of months later in California.

So, what's the history of this car and the other 1983 cars produced in 1982? Well, first we need to clarify some semantics. As far as the Federal Government is concerned, there are no 1983 Corvettes. What we will discuss really pertains to the VINs used by Chevrolet when they first produce a subsequent year vehicle. In 1982, VIN numbers ranged from 1G1AY878\*C5100001 to 1G1AY878\*C512408, where the ninth number (\*) was a check digit and varied from car to car. In 1984 the VIN numbers ran from 1G1AY078\*E5100001 to 1G1AY078\*E5151547. For our discussion, the VIN number digit of concern is the tenth. You'll notice that the 1982 car had a "C" and the 1984 vehicles had an "E" in that digit. The 1983 VIN number was 1G1AY078\*D51XXXXX. Where the ninth digit was again a check digit and the last five numbers (XXXXX in the example) was the production serial number. Notice the "D" in the tenth digit. This was the 1983 VIN designation.

The introduction of the new generation of Corvettes was scheduled for October 1983. However, GM insisted the new Corvette be as defect free and of the highest possible quality. Unfortunately, the new design was a complicated update that incorporated much new technology. Remember, C3 cars retained a chassis identical to the C2 Corvette, so the C4 was a new from the ground up. GM also attempted to put in new technology never before seen on production vehicles like a LED dashboard display. Instead of fiberglass, body panels were made from reaction injected molding plastics, a sheet molding compound. Try as they could, the design team was unable to get everything ready by the fall 1982 production target. Even though there was a desire to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Corvette with a 1983 model, they could not make it happen.

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One immediate question is how many 1983 VIN Corvettes were actually made. Well, that's a bone of contention amongst the various Corvette sources. Some say 47, some say 44, but the majority seem to agree on 43. In fact, the Corvette Museum uses that number, so let's stick with it. Now, one source uses the terminology "prototypes" and "pilot-line" to describe pre-production vehicles. That source lists 18 prototypes and 43 pilot-line vehicles. The pilot-line cars were those that could be driven and used for testing, etc. GM sources seem to agree that of the 43 1983 Corvettes produced, 33 were sent to the GM proving grounds for testing, including crash testing, and ten were left at the factory to assess the assembly process put in place at the assembly plant. In the end 42 of these cars were either crashed to crushed. However, a few forward looking individuals, who recognized the need to retain one 1983 Corvette for posterity, essentially hid one vehicle until they could finally get GM to agree to donate that car to the National Corvette Museum where it rests today.

One source, Roger Phipps, a Paint Technician at the Bowling Green plant who became the cars' caretaker while it was in Bowling Green, has much of the history of the one remaining 1983 car. He and vehicle engineer Tom Hill championed an effort to save the vehicle. Here is a brief history of the remaining Corvette. The car, VIN 1G1AY0783D5100023, was originally built on June 28, 1982 as Pilot Car number 4. Following its build, the car was taken to Michigan for evaluation and testing. It ultimately returned to Bowling Green and endured an ignominious existence sitting behind a wall near the plant's employee entrance. Tires went flat, the summer sun faded the carpet and seats, and it was never driven or moved. To avoid further damage to the car, these individual used it for a campaign to select the most "Patriotic" paint scheme for the car. One was chosen and the paint department personnel changed the solid white body to Red, White and Blue flag theme. It was not an awe-inspiring design to many who saw it, but the car was moved inside the plant and used as a display for visitors awaiting plant tours. At least it was out of the elements. The car was later repainted to its current solid white, and rather than return it to sentry duty by the wall, it was placed on loan with the NCM.

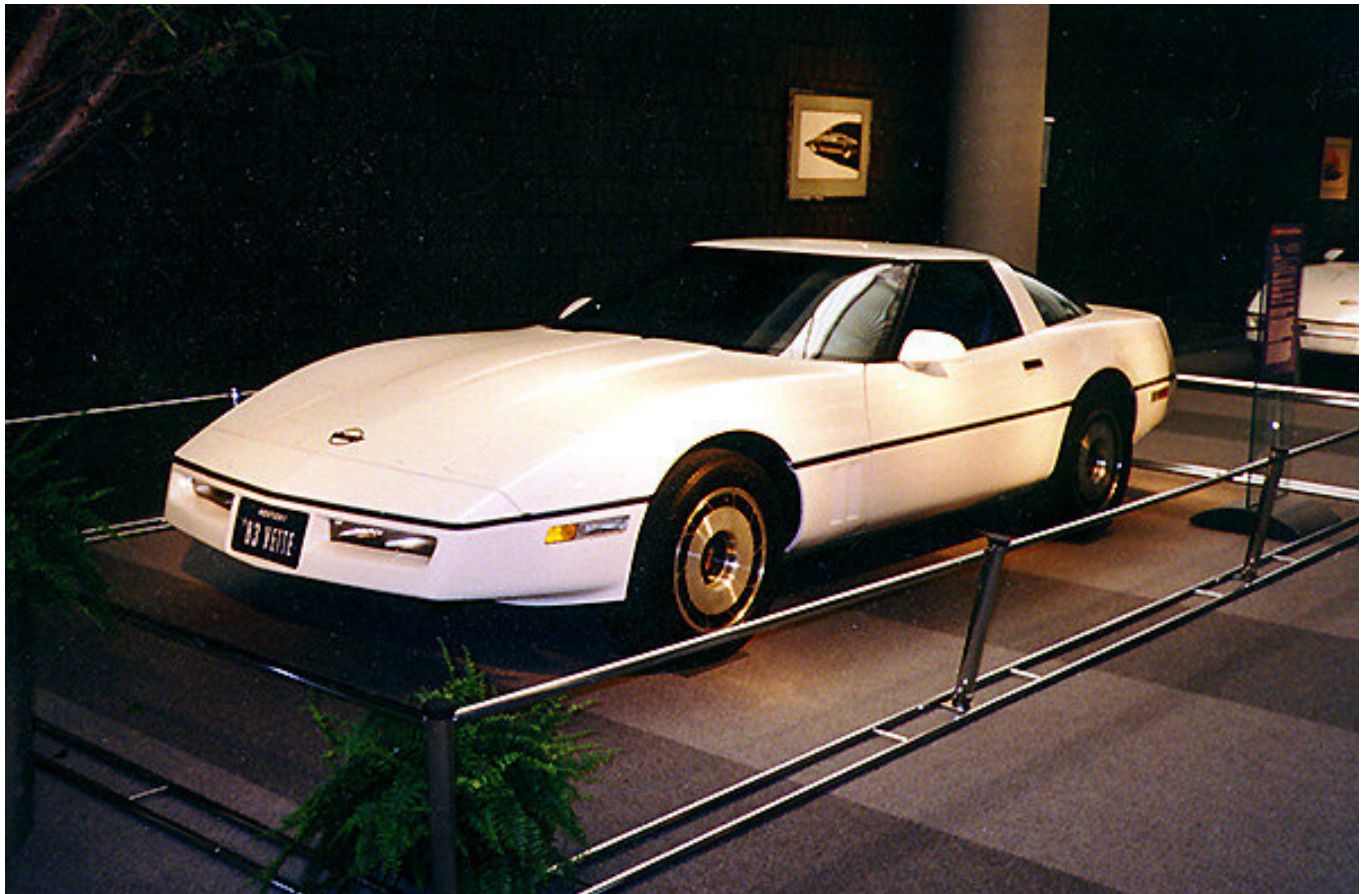
One vehicle component that is rather unique is its wheels. A set of aluminum wheels was discovered in an old storage barn in the late-1980's on the Milford Proving Ground. Some folks recognized those wheels as being from a book by Michael Lamm on *The Newest Corvette* (page 27). The wheel design had been developed as an optional 15-inch wheel as a backup in the event the planned 16-inch wheels could not be delivered in ample quantities. The picture shows the wheels on a Design Center Corvette prototype. Since the wheels were of no further use to GM, and would likely be scrapped, they were recommended to Fraser Smithson, the PG Director, that they be donated to the NCM. He agreed and they were delivered to Dan Gale in the early 1990's. The NCM hadn't been built at that time, nor had the '83 been donated, but the wheels found the perfect home on the only remaining '83 Corvette. It is ironic they are now on the car for which they were intended

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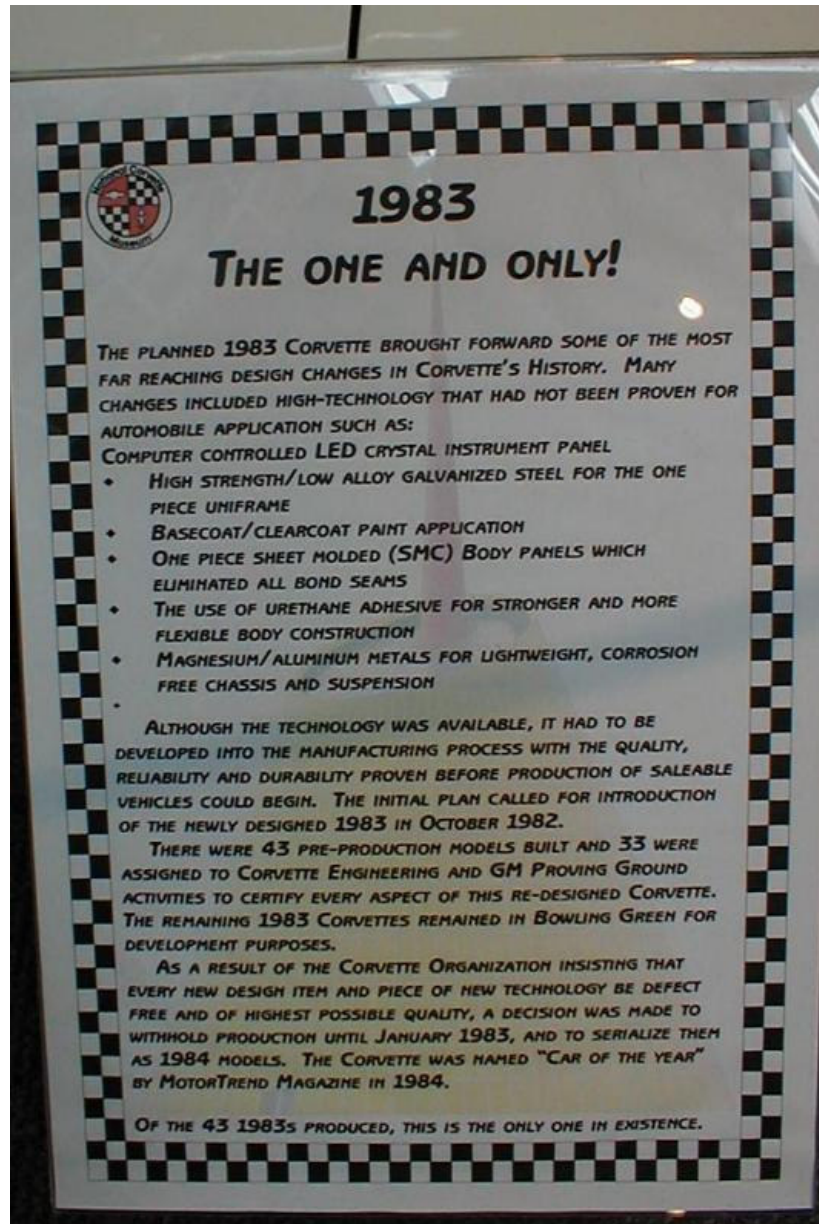


The lone remaining 1983 Corvette is white with medium blue interior and sports a L83 350ci, 250HP V8 with a 4-speed Automatic transmission. Actually, this car maintains two lineage features of the Corvette: The unbroken string of production year vehicles and the unbroken string of the one color common to every year of Corvettes, white. When you visit the National Corvette Museum, see if you can spend some time looking at the rarest of all Corvettes. Here's what to look for:



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And, now for those folks who actually read every word of these articles, here's the pop quiz for trivia. Remember I said that the 17- month production run of the 1984 Corvette led to the second highest yearly production. One year with a normal production run topped the 51,547 1984 vehicles produced with 53,807. What year Corvette was that? Uh oh, no cheating by using Google or the Corvette Black book - try and guess.