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Bill Thomas Cheetah - The Cheetah Legend, Continued

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Bill Thomas: Chevy Tuner, Cheetah Creator
If you were (or still are) a reader of the '60s editions of our now-brother-in-law book Hot Rod magazine, then you know the handiwork of Bill Thomas, and his Anaheim, California-based Bill Thomas Race Cars-one of the early "tuner shops" that built and tuned Corvettes and steel-bodied Chevys for racing and high-performance street use.



Bill started building and tuning Corvettes for the Southern California road racing scene in 1956, and his C1s won on street circuits, airport/Air Force base runways and purpose-built tracks alike. Their successes impressed Chevy's top brass so much that they asked him to race-prepare the then-new Corvair for road-race duty, which he did-and like the Vettes he prepared, they cleaned up in their classes. That led to Bill's shop building specially-prepared Chevy IIs wearing fiberglass roofs and equipped with fuel-injected 327s and independent rear suspensions "borrowed" from the Corvette. However, the SCCA wouldn't recognize them as production cars, so they found their way into the hands of drag racers-and like the Vettes and 'Vairs before them, they were winners. (So were the 409-powered BelAirs and Biscaynes his shop built to race in USAC's and NASCAR's west coast stock car races, as well as the Pikes Peak Hill Climb).

In early 1963, as a way to beat the Ford-powered A.C. Cobra while getting around the GM corporate racing ban that killed the Corvette Grand Sport, Vince Piggins (head of Chevy's Product Performance Engineering crew) and then-Chevy division boss Semon "Bunkie" Knudsen green-lighted Bill to build a hundred "Cobra killers" using the 377-cubic-inch 520hp V8 for power. This top-secret program resulted in the Cheetah, and when Zora Arkus-Duntov tested the prototype at GM's Milford Proving Grounds, he said that it generated the highest lateral acceleration of any car he'd driven.



By the time Don Francisco's story on the Cheetah ran in Hot Rod magazine's March 1964 issue, Bill's shop was producing Cheetahs for the track and the street. However, no good deed went unpunished, as GM did away with Cheetah's "backdoor" funding/tech support in January 1964, and homologation rules changed to require 1,000 production units (instead of 100) for cars like the Cheetah to compete in Production classes. So, Cheetahs ran in Modified and Prototype classes instead-and, during the '64 season, they ran up front and won wherever they raced.

No factory support meant no new hardware (other than production '65 Corvette disc brakes) went on as upgrades for the upcoming season-and a fire

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at Bill's shop destroyed the Cheetah's production tooling, along with several cars in production.

Bill then turned his attention to steel-bodied Chevys-including special Chevy IIs for Dick Harrell, and he teamed up with Don Yenko and Dana Chevrolet to swap 427s into the Camaro in early 1967. Bill Thomas Race Cars was a prime source of Chevy factory heavy-duty and racing parts through 1971, when Bill closed the shop and turned to non-automotive pursuits.

Bill Thomas passed away on October 10, 2009, at age 88.

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