Tech Talk Q&A

By Mike McNessor

Safer at any speed

Q: When gas prices were spiraling up to $4-plus a gallon last year, I pretty much stopped driving my 14 miles-per-gallon SUV, and found myself driving my 24 MPG 1963 Corvair Monza convertible more and more. My Corvair came equipped with just lap belts at the front seats. Feeling naked with just lap belts, I would like to upgrade the seat belts to three-point belts in front and back, but I don't have a clue as to how I would install these in a convertible. Any tips would be greatly appreciated.
Tom Cepak
Fort Worth, Texas

Don't feel bad, because we don't know either. Luckily, we have Corvair expert and The Vair Shop proprietor (www.vairshop.com) Larry Claypool's e-mail address memorized. Here's what he had to say:

"The factory did offer shoulder belts on all Corvairs, including convertibles, beginning in mid-1966. Coupes and sedans, of course, mounted the top of the shoulder belt to a special reinforced roof brace; on a convertible, they attached the upper part of the belt to the top, forward mounting bolt that secures the convertible top framework to the body. This bolt is behind the easily removable trim panel that covers the folding top arms when lowered. The belt then exits this area going straight forward, putting it pretty much at shoulder height.

"Back in the '60s, GM used a separate belt for each function, so you'd have had a lap and a shoulder belt, each with its own buckle. These days, you can buy a three-point, universal, non-inertia style belt that can utilize the factory floor mounting points plus the aforementioned top frame bolt. This is a pretty easy install.

"A retractable-style three-point would be more of a challenge, since the inertia reel won't handily fit behind the trim panel; plus, it must be mounted in a specific orientation. Street rod parts suppliers might have something that would work, but some fabrication would certainly be required. Keep in mind the severe stress the mounting points will be exposed to when the belt actually does what it's supposed to."

Drop till it stops

Q: First, regarding positive-ground systems: I was under the impression that the corrosion that appears on the battery terminals of negative-ground cars appears instead at the point where electrical devices ground to the chassis on positive-ground cars, causing electrical trouble spots to be hidden away at dozens of inaccessible spots rather than right up top on the battery. Any truth to this?

And now here's a mystery that has puzzled me for years. As a young man, I had a series of six-cylinder flathead Mopars, all with the same syndrome. After driving my then-23-year-old 1950 Dodge for some time, as the engine warmed up, oil pressure would drop. It always had perfect pressure at a cold start, but as this problem grew over time, it had less and less pressure sooner and sooner. It got to the point where on a five- or 10-minute drive, the oil pressure was zero to 10 pounds. With continued driving, of course, this caused me to ruin the engine due to no lubrication. I later purchased another Dodge with a good engine and good oil pressure, and did an engine swap.

Before long, the same problem arose, and right behind it, another blown engine. Thinking that there may have been a run of bad engines in 1950, I then purchased a 1954 Dodge in good running shape, drove it for several months to satisfy myself that the engine was good, then did the engine swap. Sure enough, the same problem ensued.

Before blowing this one, I tried several approaches to fix it. I used increasingly heavy grades of oil, to no avail. Replacing the oil pressure relief spring…no good. Placing washers behind the spring to increase tension caused the oil pressure to go dangerously high at cold idle, but as soon as it warmed up…no oil pressure.

I had an old-time mechanic come by and perform a bearing leakdown test on the crankshaft and he said there was no problem there. The only suggestion he had was that worn camshaft bearings might be causing a loss of pressure. At the same time, my best friend lost his 1950 Chrysler Windsor, with a larger but very similar engine, to the same malady.

Does anyone know if perhaps there was a run of soft cam bearings on Mopars, which may have caused this problem? Whenever I see an old flathead Dodge, I ask the owner about the engine. I get the same response every time: "Engine's never been touched; they're bulletproof, you can't kill these things."
Lou Pane
Point Pleasant, New Jersey

Regarding the corrosion: I have heard this too, but never witnessed it. Frankly, though, I'm not sure how the corrosion that appears on battery terminals could appear on the other end of the cables no matter how the system is grounded. It's my understanding that that white gunk is caused by acid vapor leaking out from around the bases of the battery posts—which is why those felt or neoprene washers work so well at keeping corrosion at bay.

As far as your oil pressure problems go, it sounds like you covered the bases and the cam bearings could be suspect. But you didn't mention the one thing that I'd have checked first… the oil pump. Did you ever replace the oil pumps in any of those cars?

Second opinions

I received quite a bit of mail addressing two Tech Talk questions in the June issue, one about a transmission leak and another about old gas. Casey Anderson of Burley, Idaho, nicely summed up in his letter the concerns you all seemed to share, so I'll let him do the talking…

"Mike, I have seen the transmission leak problem as was described in issue #57. Another possible leak area is the shift shaft seal. It will appear to leak from the pan gasket, but will run onto the pan rail and drip from the pan. I have a 1957 Chevrolet with 47,000 miles from new which leaks during storage, but when topped up will not leak if run regularly. I believe it is because the converter drains back when idle, and overfills the transmission case.

"As to running vehicles with old gas, I would caution against it, because you run the risk of varnishing the valve stems and guides, causing them to stick and bend either pushrods or valves. You should always drain the fuel if it smells stale and replace it with new, clean fuel."

Send questions to: Tech Talk, c/o *Hemmings Classic Car*, P.O. Box 196, Bennington, Vermont 05201; or e-mail your question to: mmcnessor@hemmings.com.