



This is a story of what might have been. The place was right, and so was the time. Anaheim, California. The early 1960's. There, and then, men with vision to build their idea of what a race car should be had the perfect circumstance to do it. Bill Thomas was one of the men who tried.

Thomas was a self-taught engineer who began his career as an aircraft components manufacturer. In Southern California's hotbed of sporting enthusiasm, it was perhaps inevitable that he should become involved with cars. He wisely chose the Corvette for starters and, fielding the first successful pre-Stingray V-8 Corvette in California sports car racing, he earned the nickname "Mr. Corvette." Thomas-prepared cars won over 100 races in five straight seasons; his C.S. Mead-sponsored Corvettes won 54 out of 56 events entered. Instrumental in this phenomenal string of victories were Thomas' improved Chevrolet fuel injection units . . . which did not go unnoticed in Detroit. Soon he became a high performance contractor to Chevrolet Motor Division.

ratio, the Cobra proceeded to leave the Corvette, and just about everything else, in the dust.

In February of 1963, General Motors decided there would be no more corporate racing, and issued an edict to that effect. Chevrolet was stunned. Prior to the introduction of the Stingray, development work had begun on an ultra-lightweight version for racing. It was called the Grand Sport, and Chevrolet intended to build 125 of the cars for homologation purposes. Only five had been produced, however, when the corporate axe on racing fell. The Chevrolet racing research and development areas, the fabrication shops and engine dynamometer rooms—all fell silent. Thereafter, Chevy people stood helplessly on the sidelines and watched America's only sports car—their sports car—lose out to Shelby's British-American hybrid.

Something had to be done. But whatever was to be done had to be undercover. Any future racing vehicles must be designed and built off GM premises. General Motors wasn't racing anymore.

renew, Stroupe's contract.

With the arrival of Shelby's Cobra and the GM racing ban, it was Bill Thomas' turn to call Chevrolet. Chevrolet was very interested.

"I went to Ed Cole," says Thomas, "about getting into some kind of program to beat the Cobras. When we first talked about it, we went over many things, even considering running a rear-engine car with Corvair components in the drivetrain and so forth. That was decided against because Chevy wasn't building any rear-engine cars other than the Corvair, and they weren't building any Corvairs with V-8 engines." After further discussion, it was decided to go front engine/rear drive.

Because of the undercover nature of the project, many Chevy enthusiasts are unsure to this day of the extent of Chevrolet's involvement in seeing the Thomas car go racing. "That was the intention of the whole thing from the beginning," Thomas insists, "and the only reason Chevrolet was interested. They figured they could absorb about 100 of my cars, that they wouldn't be any competition for the Corvettes in numbers. To Chevrolet, a hundred didn't amount to much. To me, it was considerable!"

For a builder like Thomas, who had never produced more than a handful of any one type of racing car in a series—and often just one-offs—the prospect of building 100 identical cars was awesome, and posed a few problems. The practical matter of just where to build the cars presented itself immediately, because Thomas did not have adequate space. In rounding up personnel for the project, he contacted Don Edmunds, who had been a fabricator for Stroupe. Through Edmunds, Thomas learned of an available building on East Julianna in Anaheim and, with Chevy's backing, leased the space.

Once ensconced in the new facilities, Thomas laid out the parameters for the car. "We knew what we were going to do with the engine, what we were going to use as a transmission, a rear axle, what kind of brakes and front spindles to use, and all the other things—the size of the frame, the wheelbase, the tread—the whole bit, and I put Don Edmunds to work on it."

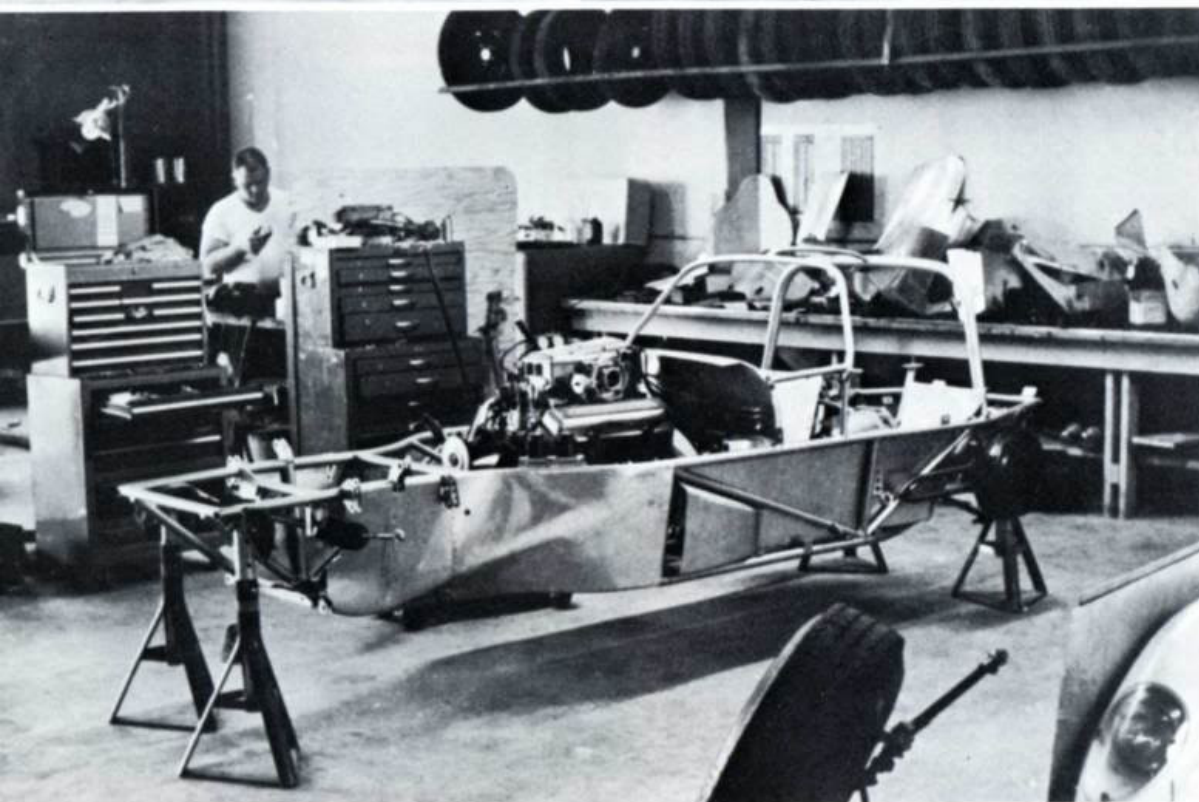
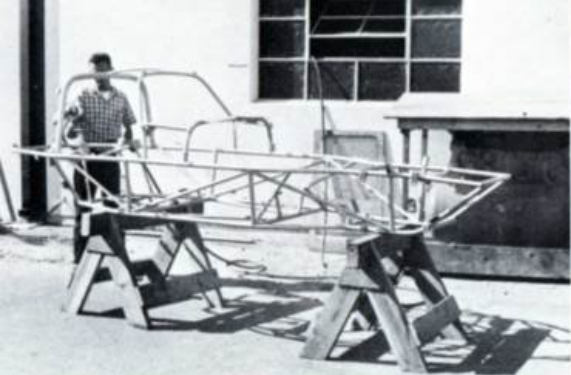
BILL THOMAS' FAST-MOVING CAT

Bill Thomas did not limit his efforts to road competition. Expanding into drag racing, his cars carried Don Nicholson and Hayden Proffit to four successive National Championships in the NHRA Super Stock class. Thomas-prepared Chevies were also highly successful in both NASCAR and USAC competition. Chevrolet naturally gloated over all this.

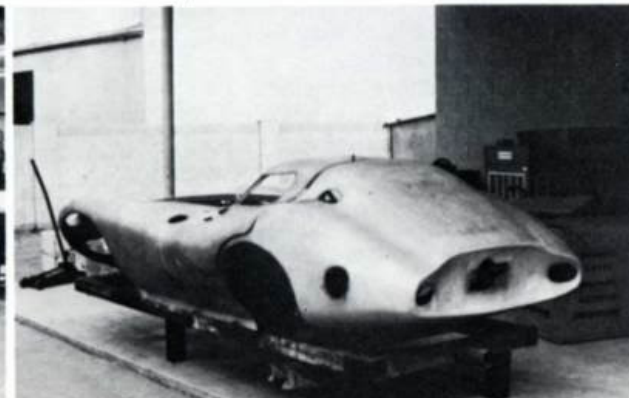
In October of 1962, the Stingray appeared. With the Corvette's winning reputation and striking new looks, the stage seemed set for great things. It probably would have been more of the same for Thomas if a certain gentleman by the name of Carroll Shelby had not decided to race a little pocket rocket called the Cobra . . . which did not go unnoticed in Dearborn. Ford's backing of Shelby and his Cobra assured homologation in the SCCA Production class. Because of its superior power-to-weight

Enter Bill Thomas.

Two years earlier he had strengthened his ties to Chevrolet via another West Coast high performance contractor by the name of Bill Stroupe. Stroupe regularly worked with Ford, but in 1961 he had no contract and phoned Ed Cole at GM with the hope of snaring one. Subsequently, Chevrolet called Bill Thomas and asked that he talk to Stroupe, and Thomas did. Later, Ed Cole and some other Chevy people visited Stroupe as well. The upshot was a one-year contract for Stroupe with, as Thomas says, "the proviso that I would be the general manager of the work done there." Thomas oversaw the installation of V-8's in nine Chevy II's, the first so equipped, as well as cars for the Mobil Economy Run and, naturally, Corvettes used in racing. Thomas left before the full year was up; Chevrolet finished out, but did not



Working on the Cheetah at Bill Thomas' headquarters in Anaheim.



Edmunds came up with a series of drawings. The first one, of the car itself, was done on Thomas' desk. "The rest of the drawings," says Edmunds, "consisted of one primitive frame drawing, two very elementary suspension layout drawings, and two scraps of paper with a bunch of dimensions of rear ends and wheels. I've always kept them because they are the damnedest collection of drawings. I thought it was kind of funny. Jerry Titus and other people who later became involved with the things were always convinced that somewhere there was a roll of prints that had come in from some mysterious place that we were working from."

Utilizing a wheelbase of 90 inches, and a front and rear track of 59 and 57 inches respectively, the semi-space frame was constructed of 1- and 1.25-inch diameter 4130 chrome-moly steel tubing. The suspension was fully independent. Up front, 1962 Chevy heavy-duty spindles were used with tubular control arms connected to the chassis via Heim joints. Monroe coil-over shocks were specially wound and could be adjusted to change ride height. Rear suspension

BY ANTHONY YOUNG

was a modified '63 Corvette assembly, located by trailing torque arms. Similar coil-over shocks handled the springing and damping.

Thomas chose drum brakes all around and explains the simple reason why: "I felt disc brakes would be more effective but they weren't building the Stingray with disc brakes We went with the heavy duty cerametallic passenger-car drum brakes, the same ones we used on NASCAR stock cars." Mounted to them were 15x7 American Racing five-spoke magnesium wheels, shod with Goodyear tires and tubes.

In the middle of all this was a Chevy 327 small block fed by Thomas' massaged fuel injection unit. The engine was so far back in the chassis that the exhaust headers actually went over the footwells, down, and converged in a four-inch-diameter chrome collector on both sides. To

give a further idea of the engine's placement, the transmission output shaft fed immediately into the special aluminum Positraction differential, with only one universal joint in between. Thomas could get away with only one universal joint because both engine and differential were bolted to the frame. Running through a Corvette aluminum transmission and bellhousing were the gear ratios: first, 2.2; second, 1.68; third, 1.31; fourth, 1.1 to one. The outboard gas tanks were fed by a common filler pipe at the rear. (Later cars would have independent quick-release caps on the sides.)

As the rolling chassis progressed, work began on the coupé body. Why a coupé? Again, a simple reason. "A coupé was more aerodynamic than a roadster," explains Thomas. On a straightaway the Thomas car would soon prove the advantage of that. Edmunds designed and built a wood buck, which was sent to California Metal Stamping in Los Angeles where .063-inch aluminum was power-hammered over the form. The thirty individual panels were returned to Thomas' shop, where Don Borth had the task of hand-hammering and welding the panels together, producing the five finished body pieces. (Of Borth, Thomas says, "He's probably the best aluminum man I've ever seen.") Plexiglass was used for the windshield and rear window. The body, left unpainted, was joined to the frame with six bolts and Dzus fasteners, facilitating quick removal of any section for chassis work.

The first car was completed and by now it had a name. Originally, it had been coined during a conversation between Bill Thomas and Vince Piggins of Chevrolet's Product Promotion Engineering department during a fastback Chevy II project Thomas handled after leaving Stroupe's. The Chevy II's had been referred to at one point as "cheaters." Piggins put on a southern accent and "cheaters" came out "cheatahs." Then it came to them. Cheetah. For some reason, the name never stuck to the Chevy II project cars, but it was still fresh in Thomas' mind when he began the car to beat the Cobra.

"I liked the name," says Thomas, "but a couple of the drivers really hated it." Piggins liked the name, too, and later suggested it to Chev-

rolet management when he was developing a high-performance Camaro. He was voted down, and the regular production option number was used instead: Z-28. Ironically, in the animal world, the Cheetah and Cobra inhabit the same regions of Asia and Africa.

In California, the new Cheetah was fired up and driven out of the shop. Then it was put on a trailer and taken to Riverside International Raceway to see what it would do. The Cheetah was true to its dictionary definition. It was "a fast-moving cat."

Publicity was paramount. The world had to know the Cheetah was here. Help arrived. The first outsider to drive it was Jerry Titus, then technical editor of *Sports Car Graphic*. The Cheetah went back to Riverside. To Titus, the car's layout seemed fairly straightforward, but what stunned him was its dry-weight—1510 pounds. In his report in the November 1963 issue, Titus observed: "Acceleration out of the turns was impressive. Only in second gear, while still in the process of leaving a tight corner, could we get the rear tires to bust loose. At the end of the long Riverside straight it was possible to go in as deeply as the best Modified. . . ." Titus went on to predict that Bob Bondurant would be Thomas' first driver, but in fact it would be Titus himself. Before racing, however, the Cheetah was sent to Jim Gamage to have molds made from it for fiberglass production bodies.

Meantime a second aluminum-bodied car was built and shipped to the General Motors Technical Center in Warren, Michigan. Under a shroud of secrecy, the car was spirited off GM grounds to a nearby country club parking lot. Thomas was there to discuss the Cheetah with Chevrolet general manager Semon "Bunkie" Knudsen and with Walter McKenzie, who had been in charge of Chevy's racing publicity before the ban and who now worked in the production promotion area.

"I'm not sure where they tested it," says Thomas, "but it could have been the Milford Proving Grounds." Based on those tests, Charlie Simmons of Chevrolet's Research and Development wrote a glowing report stating that the Cheetah had the highest lateral acceleration (1.18 g.) and level of handling of any

front-engine/rear-drive car the division had ever tested. Today, however, Simmons doesn't recall ever having written the report. Admittedly, all this happened two decades ago, and memories can fade. But it is also true that GM's ban on racing is still very much in effect, and Simmons still works for Chevrolet.

Thanks to Titus' *Sports Car Graphic* piece, Bill Thomas had little trouble drumming up drivers and sponsors. Some contacted him before he



could even get to them. The first fiberglass car was purchased by Alan Green Chevrolet in Seattle, Washington for race driver Jerry Grant. This was also the car used in internally-generated literature to attract sponsorship advertising, a concept then in its infancy, but one Thomas pushed aggressively, later hiring the public relations firm of van Barneveld & Ellis to assist. John Grow of Friendly Chevrolet in Rialto, California had already kicked in money

to back Thomas. From Hammond, Indiana came Ralph Salyer and Bud Clusserath, both Corvette racers, who planned to race independently, but hired Gene Crowe to be their mutual mechanic.

By now a mini-assembly line had been set up to produce the fiberglass coupés, but Bill Thomas was new to this production car business. Gene Crowe remembers: "I went out to Thomas' to pick up our cars and they were



nothing but a bare frame when I got there. I ended up helping put them together." The prototype was being tested at Riverside at the time and Crowe recalls further that "they couldn't get it to cool. It had a full bellypan on the bottom and it really did not have enough room for air to get out from behind the radiator. Fortunately, I had a friend who was a cooling engineer at Oldsmobile, Bill Mitchell."

"Gene knew from the experience of the

prototype Jerry Titus was driving that they had some pretty serious overheating problems," explains Mitchell, who should not be confused with GM's former vice-president of styling. "Their attempts at solving this—cutting larger holes in front of it—weren't really producing the desired effect. The Harrison Radiator Division of General Motors in the mid to late Fifties had made for the Pontiac stock cars the biggest aluminum radiators they had ever manufactured. We figured out this would fit in the car and, in addition to sealing of the radiator into the front bulkhead to prevent air from leaking around it, added some baffling behind the radiator to make sure that the air exited properly." Crowe amplifies, "We had to open up the bellypan and add a 45-degree-angle plate in order to draw the air out." This kept the Cheetah's engine sufficiently cool, but the problem of keeping the occupant cool would plague every driver who got behind the wheel.

Now there were more of them. Allan Grant (no relation to Jerry) joined the Cheetah fold for the 1964 racing season. He had worked for Carroll Shelby and had raced a Cobra in 1963, but thereafter had joined the Army reserves for six months to avoid induction. "I was supposed to drive for Shelby in '64 on the Cobra team but when I got out they had their team all set," says Grant. "They wanted me to come back in an administrative capacity, and I said no, I wanted to be a race car driver. I had done fairly well with my Cobra roadster. In fact, I had raced against the factory team at Riverside in '63 and came in second, so I was bound and determined to further my racing career." Bill Thomas had seen Grant's performance at Riverside, so when Grant approached him about lining up a ride in a Cheetah, the answer was an immediate yes. Grant then lined up sponsorship through Alan Green.

It was clear to Thomas now that there was no way for him to complete a hundred cars fast enough for homologation. Thus, the Cheetah would not be competing in Production SCCA events and other races that season but instead would have to face up to the stiff competition in the big bore Modified class. Rather than Shelby's Cobra, Cheetah would be taking on Chaparrals, McLaren's and Lolas. Although

scarcely an appealing prospect, Thomas was undaunted. He set his sights on the Riverside Grand Prix in October for the car's introduction. It did not go well. Before qualifying, another driver, Don Horvath, asked Thomas if he could take the Cheetah for a spin—literally, as it happened. At turn nine Horvath slammed into the wall. Cheetah's first leap was then moved to January and a California Sports Car Club Pacific Coast race. Jerry Titus was at the wheel then. He didn't finish, but he didn't crash either.

These racing Cheetahs were not powered by the bone-stock Chevy 327's, of course. The 4.00-inch bore was retained, but the stroke was increased from 3.00 inches to 3.75, for a displacement of 377 cubic inches. The engines, prepared by Thomas together with John Garrison and Hal Rawson, used forged aluminum pistons, high-lift camshaft, heavy duty bearings, forged crankshaft, ported heads and such other modifications as dual air metering on the fuel injection. Testing on the dyno at the Champion sparkplug facilities in Long Beach produced horsepower figures in excess of 520.

It was this tremendous power, coupled with the Cheetah's incredibly low weight, which literally bent the car out of shape under racing conditions. As the 1964 racing season commenced, each Cheetah driver and mechanic developed his own method of solving this. "The torque arms that attached the rear wheels to the chassis on the side were not stiff enough," says Gene Crowe. "The rear wheels would be steering whenever you accelerated, decelerated, or hit bumps, so we changed the whole rear suspension setup on ours to get away from the problem, as opposed to just trying to stiffen it." Allan Grant, working with mechanic Larry Webb, took a less sophisticated approach, but it was just as effective: "We came up with a two-by-four box section to prevent torque steer. However, when the big tires were installed, we had to cut into the box section for them to fit."

Trying to document the Cheetah's racing success is difficult. Records of the car's wins, places and DNF's in 1964 are maddeningly deficient. The SCCA, in whose events the Cheetah was most often contested, is notorious

for lackadaisical record keeping. Complete race results are kept for no more than a few years; when they become dated, they are destroyed. Reportedly, the organization does not have the space to store the data, and cannot afford to put it on microfilm. One is left only with the recollections of the drivers and the handful of race reports published in the enthusiast periodicals of the time.

Unquestionably, the Cheetah's performance in competition was influenced by its development problems. Sorting out the car's unique handling characteristics due to its oversquare wheelbase to track and centrally-located engine certainly took time, and its toll. "We took one of the first fiberglass cars to Daytona and Jerry Grant drove it down there," Don Edmunds recalls tensely. "My heart was in my throat the whole time the thing was running because I don't like things to break and hurt people."

Ralph Salyer was also at Daytona that weekend, and he remembers Edmunds expressing concern. The Cheetah was so fast the unequal air pressure created inside the car would wreak havoc with the fiberglass body. "There wasn't enough strength in the hood for one thing, so it started to billow like a balloon, and one of the doors blew off," says Salyer. "I brought it in and Don said, 'Ralph, you're driving the car too fast.' I said, 'What do you mean, Don?' He said, 'I don't think you ought to drive it that fast yet'—because it would really move. We had to reinforce a lot of fiberglass on it to hold it together."

Bud Clusserath also encountered the Cheetah's disconcerting habit of literally blowing its own doors off as it was figuratively blowing the doors off the competition. He temporarily solved this with duct tape. "I got to thinking, after I got into the car for the race and they taped me in . . . If I got hit, there would be no way of getting me out of it in a hurry at all. Later on, I thought about it and became a little frantic over that. Then we built quick-release locks on them."

Another problem could not be solved by either locks or tape. Because the Cheetah was a coupé, it was terrifically hot inside. "Your legs and feet were right in between the headers and

the motor and you were sitting right alongside the transmission," explains Gene Crowe. "You were so close to everything you just couldn't get away from the heat." Bill Mitchell concurs, saying, "It had a tendency to cook the driver. I can recall dragging Ralph Salyer out of the Cheetah at one race in Wisconsin where he was just overcome by heat. He doesn't even remember coming into the pits. Gene ran up and asked what he was doing in the pits because, as I recall, he was leading the race. Ralph said he didn't know. It was then I knew he had had too much." Finally, Crowe cut the roof off of Salyer's car and remodeled the rear end. It was the only Cheetah so modified.

Squirrely handling, buckling fiberglass and sweltering heat—it is ironic, but seldom did any of these pull a Cheetah from a race. Invariably it was something small—always the race car's Achilles heel—that resulted in a DNF. Titus suffered several such frustrations. In his first race with the Cheetah, at the Riverside Divisional, he burst a radiator hose, dumping water on the wheels. During the FIA National Open, a fan pulley broke, its fragments ricocheting off the track and puncturing holes in the oil pan. And, with three laps to go in the U.S. Road Racing Championship at Riverside, Titus lost a secure third place when the oil plug simply fell out.

Allan Grant had similar experiences. A split tire sidelined him in the Players 200 at Mosport. During another race at the same track, the differential blew a seal; the API ran a wirephoto of him leaping from the smoking car, even though it wasn't on fire. Halfway through yet another race, at Riverside, the crankshaft broke, but this event at least did have its memorable moments for Grant: "That was the only time I ever got to run with Ken Miles in his 427 King Cobra. I was turning faster lap times than he was, and actually I ended up coming onto the straightaway with him and blew him off going down the straight."

It was the Cheetah's unsurpassed power-to-weight ratio that many times put it on the front row after qualifying, and kept it competitive against the Chaparrals, McLarens and Lolas. "It was kind of fun on short tracks," says Bud Clusserath. "You could lose a lot in the corners and still make it up on the straightaways." On

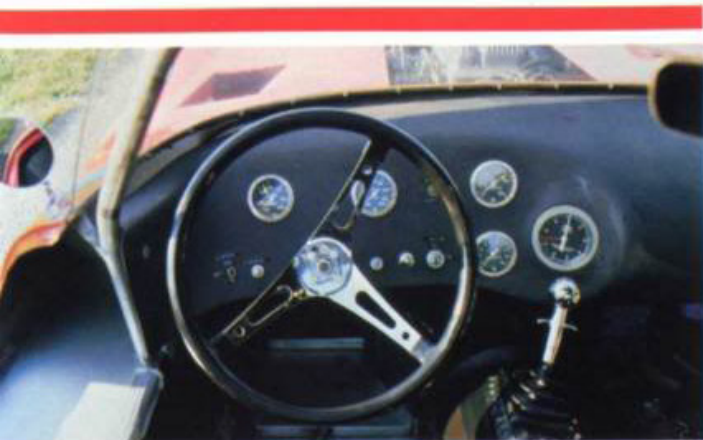
long tracks, the Cheetah could really display its prowess. "When it would go on a track like Daytona," he notes, "there was just no holding it back. I was racing up against Fireball Roberts. We never had a chance to qualify the car so both he and I and a couple of others were way in the back. He was on my left coming around the start. When I could see the flag coming



down and we started going, I just got up on the rail and I must have passed all the traffic. I think I was seventh going into the first turn after starting from twenty-fourth. But what I didn't know was that Roberts was right on my can and he was running a Ford Falcon! I don't know how you could call it a sports car; he was running a 427 cubic-inch engine in that thing. He

finally forced his way inside of me and I had to back off."

Clusserath remembers another incident at Daytona, this one with Phil Hill in a prototype Ferrari: "I waited until I got to the exit of the infield coming back out on the oval again. He passed me on the outside and we hit it together and went through the gears. I must have had



him by eight car lengths by the end of that straightaway. Just about the time I hit the brakes for the first turn, I heard him go by and I never did see him again. With the stump-puller I had, there was no way he could stay with me in low gear, but when he got wound up, that was something else."

That stump-puller was also quite loud. "[The

Cheetah] was the noisiest race car anybody ever heard," laughs Clusserath, "I'd love to sit in the paddock with everyone sitting around right at my doors. They wouldn't see me get in the thing. I'd turn that thing on and it would fire up instantly—*balaam*—and these people would jump right out of their skin."

As the Cheetah became a more frequent sight at the tracks and in the buff magazines, it developed a small cult following. Some were actually driven on the street. For just under \$8000, you could walk into Bill Thomas' shop and drive out with your own Cobra beater. "We sold several street cars," Thomas recalls. "Alan Green's wife in Seattle bought one. She used to take it to the dragstrips and have a great time with it." A member of the Mamas and Papas, a popular singing group of the Sixties, saw a Cheetah on display at a dealership and bought it on the spot.

Speaking of dragstrips, the Cheetah was fantastic in the quarter miles of NHRA and AHRA competition. Says Ralph Salyer, "Once you got that damn thing pointed, and punched it, all you had to do was hold your breath so you could catch it the next time." On the dragstrip, the Cobra was no match against a Cheetah. "It couldn't compete at all," says Bill Thomas. "... The 427 Cobra ran the quarter mile at 112 mph. The Cheetah ran at 135 mph, and we were doing it with small block engines!"

Not all Cheetahs seen at the strips were of Bill Thomas origin. Some had kit car bodies manufactured by Allied Industries in Fremont, Nebraska. Dean Morrison is president of Allied, and his family has produced esoteric transportation since 1928. Morrison says the owner of a Cheetah had stopped by his factory one day and Morrison's father asked if he could take molds from the car. The owner agreed. Allied still makes the Cheetah body, in addition to offering a complete car built to customer requirements. In an effort to cash in on the Cobra kit car boom, his catalogue includes 289 and 427 bodies as well.

Just how fast could the Cheetah go if given enough room? Thomas recalls a practice session at Riverside: "We were running down the back straight, when Hall was there with the Chaparral. According to the timing shed, the

Cheetah was running 198 mph. Frank Winchell was out there and said he wanted to take the car back to Chevrolet and have another look at the aerodynamics of it because it was running faster down the back chute than Hall was in his Chaparral. Jerry Grant said he could have gone faster but he had to start slowing down for the turn. He didn't want to make a hole in the wall. At Daytona, they were supposedly clocking Salyer at 215."

The Cheetah set numerous track records around the country. Salyer put up a trap speed record at Elkhart Lake qualifying for the June Sprints in '64, which he went on to win. "There was a controversy over the trap speed: 185 mph," says Salyer. "Nobody believed it. But [the Cheetah] did the same damn thing in September of the same year there, so they had to enter it in the record." The record stood for several years.

By the end of 1964, Cheetah had won eleven races in the toughest class there was, C-Sports/Modified. In the final event of the year, The Race of Champions at Riverside, a Cheetah finished second in class. This admirable record was tempered, however, with a new FIA rule. "During the time we were building it," says Thomas, "the homologation requirement of production cars went from 100 to 1000 units. Chevrolet wasn't ready to go with 1000."

Bill Thomas' dream of taking on Carroll Shelby and the Cobra now seemed more remote than ever. So he went forward with another plan: to make a production street version called the Super Cheetah. "When we looked into the Super Cheetah for production—contacting Chevrolet dealerships and such—that was without Chevrolet's blessing. By that time they were out of it," Thomas says.

For the Super Cheetah, he bought back the aluminum-bodied car he had sold to Chevrolet. It's one thing to convert a production car into a race car, and quite another to do the reverse. Thomas' plan was to extend the wheelbase eight inches so it could be dropped over the readily available Corvette chassis, and extend the rear end eight inches to provide for luggage space. This stretching permitted the necessary enlarging of the gullwing doors, which on the Cheetah were so small one had to







be Houdini reincarnated to get into and out of the car. Instead of a flip-up front end, the Super Cheetah had a conventional hood. A new wood buck was built and the necessary new aluminum panels shaped and then grafted onto the car. It was virtually new from the cowl back. Curiously, the spare tire was moved to the front, between the radiator and the engine. Powering the car would be a stock 327 with a high performance 327 and 396 cubic-inch engine available. Optional equipment was to

include automatic transmission, air conditioning, even fitted luggage.

In September of 1965, before the Super Cheetah body was sent out for fiberglass molds to be made, a fire broke out in Thomas' shop, destroyed the wood buck, tooling and several other Cheetahs under construction, and damaged part of the Super Cheetah. At that time only twenty-seven Cheetahs had been built, including the two aluminum cars. Edmunds bought the Super Cheetah body and

kept it awhile, but eventually placed an ad in *Auto Week* and sold it for \$2500. Edmunds never saw or heard of it again. Today he spends his time on his first love, the building of sprint cars.

Salyer, Clusserath and others raced their Cheetahs in '65 in what was essentially the car's last year of competition. Both Salyer and Clusserath sold their cars at the track. Clusserath's Cheetah is now owned by Sam Goins of Ohio.

Had not the fire sent Thomas' dream up in smoke, the Cheetah story might have ended differently. As it was, Thomas decided to abandon pursuit of that dream, but not without recalling the many challenges and rewards it had offered him—not the least of which was putting his stamp on the world of racing with an All-American GT.

Ralph Salyer is sympathetic to the Cheetah's quirks: "These are things that are universal in a new car. Everybody has these problems the first

time around. Basically, it was a real good automobile and it was too bad Bill couldn't have kept on with it because a couple of years of building them and they would have done nothing but get better."

Thomas did not stop building cars, however. He produced a number of road-racing Camaros, a 427 cubic-inch-powered Chevy II, and was one of the first to build a funny car, used in drag racing, on the West Coast. He marketed a line of engine swap kits, tubular

front-end kits for Chevy II's, and exhaust headers. He built racing engines up to 1970. As a legal consultant in matters automotive and otherwise, he is no longer in the race car business, but his son is actively involved in sprint car competition.

The Cheetah had some tantalizingly good things going for it. Fluke circumstances prevented its realizing its full potential. For Bill Thomas, what might have been shall always remain tantalizing, too. ♦