

CAR and DRIVER

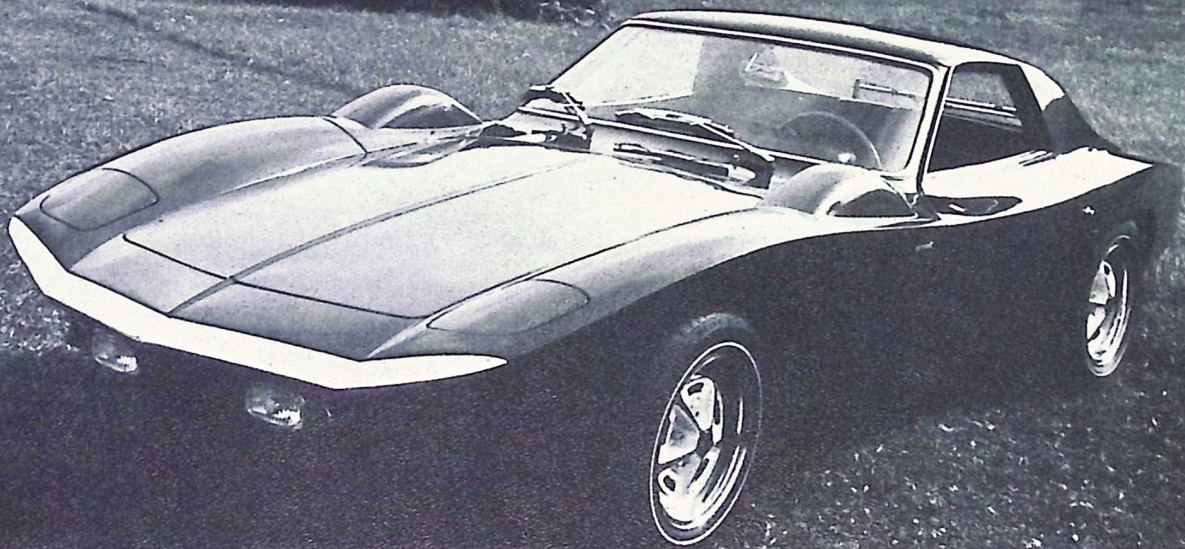
MEMO

FROM: David E. Davis, Jr.

TO: Steve Smith

SUBJECT:

FITCH PHOENIX



So, Semantic Man, I've caught you at last! You were wrong about the Fitch Phoenix. It is *not* a dumb car, not by any standard of measurement. It's a helluva nice car, in fact, and I think old John Fitch is going to sell a bunch of them. He and I drove it all over those keen little roads around Lime Rock, and I had a blast. I don't know if Fitch had as much fun as I did, but at least he didn't try to bail out or anything—not even when I busted the clutch cable about twenty miles out in the deepest boondocks and had to nurse the little dear all the way home clutchlessly, if not altogether graunchlessly.

All that jazz you were trying to lay on me about “no Corvair is worth \$8700” is hogwash. This car is no more a Corvair than the Porsche Speedster was a Volkswagen. It uses the basic Corvair engine and drive train, and a lot of other bits, I suppose, but it's an entirely different sort of a car. And it's worth the money.

It's something else, Mate. It handles like a cross between a late-model Porsche and the best Corvair you ever drove in your life. The bodywork is wild. It doesn't look like anything you're used to, but you know instantly that it's SOMETHING! Rich! Virile! Republican!

If you try to fit it in any of the usual categories, you're going to be in trouble, because it's DIFFERENT! It costs as much as a Mercedes 220 SE Coupe, with performance like a Pontiac GTO, but it just can't be compared with either one.

John Fitch & Company, Inc.
Falls Village, Connecticut 06031
is the constructor of
The Phoenix
Phone: 203-824-5113

MEMO CONTINUED

The whole concept is different from anything else I can think of at the moment. Maybe he should call it the Fitch Phenomenon, har, har. Sorry.

It's something else, Mate. It handles like a cross between a late-model Porsche and the best Corvair you ever drove in your life. It has the same wheelbase as the stock Corvair, but it's so much smaller overall, and so much lighter, that it's a lot quicker and more responsive than its Corvair ancestry might lead you to expect. It steers and stops and gets off the line with real authority. It's *tight*, you know what I mean? It's a genuine sports car—not a GT, and not a hoked-up "modern classic" either. Wait'll you drive it—it's a gas!

The notion for the Phoenix was born years ago. I remember an idea that John was trying to sell to somebody in Detroit in 1958 or '59. He wanted one of the manufacturers to build low-cost production sports cars using standard sedan components, and it was a good idea—as Carroll Shelby later proved. After the initial success of his Corvair Sprints, John figured that he might resurrect that other concept, using his basic Sprint engine and running gear.

He sat down with Coby Whitmore and they roughed out this crazy-looking sports machine with removable fenders and stuff like that—they were thinking about a low-cost racing car, à la Formula Vee, that could be used on the street. But before they ever got that one swinging, Formula Vee came along and beat them to the punch. With the racing side of the thing thus killed off, it was back to the old drawing board.

Fortunately they managed to steer clear of the "campy" concept that led to cars like the Excalibur SS and the Mercer Cobra. They wanted it to look like a Fitch Phoenix, and nothing else. Whitmore says that they had no intention of trying to come up with an "ultimate GT car," and Fitch says, "It was planned only as a two-seater car of better-than-average performance, but with unique identity and character." And that's what it is. They've managed to retain virtually all the things we traditionally expect from a sports car, added a lot of very up-to-date luxury stuff, and wrapped the whole thing in a shape that's quite different without looking weird.

I went over to see the car at Abercrombie & Fitch (no relation) when they first announced that they were going to be selling it. It didn't look exactly smashing, wedged in among all the badminton sets and barometers on their first floor, but I couldn't help being impressed by the great mob of Madison Avenue types and tweedy dowagers that was standing around ooh-ing and aah-ing about it. I figured that he could sell a lot of them then, and now that I've spent some time driving the car, I'm convinced.

Fact: The Phoenix is 174 inches long, 45 inches high, 70 inches wide, and it weighs 1950 pounds.

Fact: The Phoenix has a Corvair engine which produces 170 horsepower with the help of Weber carburetors, plus the usual Fitch Sprint engine treatment. It will cruise comfortably at well over 100 mph, and will accelerate 0-60 in about 7.5 seconds. It features

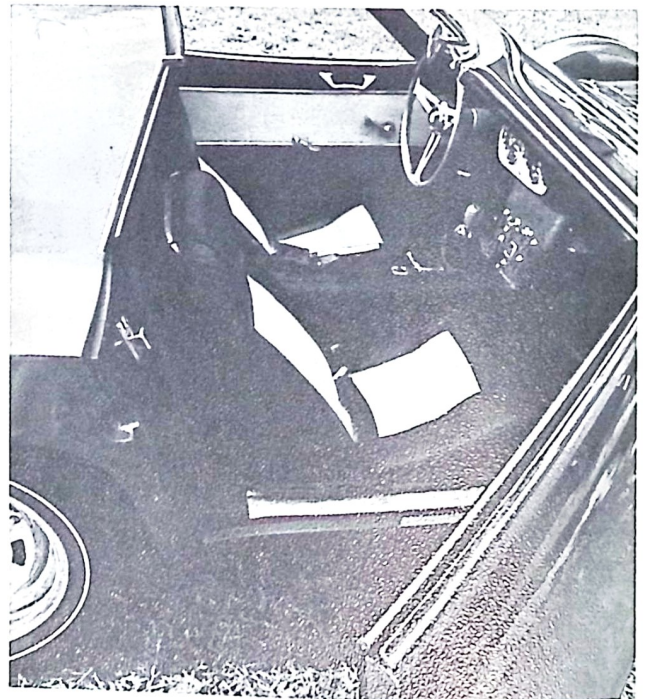
Girling disc brakes at the front, and stock 9.5-in. Corvair drums at the rear.

Fact: There is also a Phoenix II, which will have stock Corvair carburetion and stock Corvair drum brakes all round. It will have 160 hp, as in the Fitch Sprint, and it will sell for \$8300.

Fact: The Phoenix is built by Frank Reisner's increasingly well-known Intermeccanica organization in Italy. The body-chassis unit is all steel, and the wing-like shroud behind the cockpit is a functional roll bar. The chassis of the prototype is a modified and much-stiffened Corvair platform, but production Phoenixes will feature a Fitch-conceived, Reisner-engineered chassis all their own. All suspension is stock Corvair, except for a set of Koni adjustable shock absorbers.

Fact: The driver's seat of each Phoenix will be positioned according to the dimensions and preference of its primary driver. Both seats are vinyl-upholstered with woven inserts which direct a flow of fresh air to the occupants' backs and posteriors in hot weather (cold weather too, if you're a masochist or an Eskimo).

Fact: Due to the fact that the rear tires are one size larger than the fronts (185-14 compared to 175-14), the car carries two spares, one in each size. That's part of the reason behind the two side-mount humps in the front fenders, but Fitch and Whitmore make no bones



FITCH PHOENIX

(continued from page 60)

about the fact that the humps were more a styling innovation than a functional requirement.

Enough facts! It's subjective time again! All that information is probably keen stuff, but it doesn't tell us much about driving the car, right?

The Phoenix I drove was a dark sort of tobacco brown color, and it looked very mean and sleek. I'm not keen about the wood-and-aluminum luggage rack they've stuck on the engine compartment lid, but realities must be faced, and the car is short on inside storage space. The bodywork is wild. It doesn't look like anything you're used to, but you know instantly that it's *something!*

One's first look at the interior is very impressive. Everything is padded and upholstered in matte-black vinyl—the cowl, the instrument panel, the tunnel, everything. This tasteful use of padding, coupled with the Italian-faced instruments and switches, gives one a definite feeling of Ferrari-class quality. Rich! Virile! Republican!

I got settled in the driver's seat and fiddled with the controls for a moment—flicking the switch that lowers the rear window in the process. A moment later when I twisted the key to start the beastie, we got a blast of noise through the open window fit to bust an eardrum. John quickly hit the button and got the window up again, and something approximating a normal level of conversation was possible once more. It's a little noisy, you might say. Not Hollywood-muffler-get-arrested noisy, but sit-in-the-cockpit - and - feel - the - wax - deposits-build-up-in-your-ears noisy.

There's nothing mysterious about driving the Phoenix. Just drive it like a Corvair where the controls are concerned, and like a Porsche where the limit of adhesion and cornering power are concerned. For the time being, all Phoenixes are coming through with stock Corvair ratios in their four-speed boxes, and their wide spacing hurts performance a little, but not badly.

John Fitch points you off down a little-bitty asphalt road, and you change down to third and stick your boot in it. Flat in third, shift to fourth at 5500, around the first curve flat in fourth. Some sand gets you loose for a millisecond, but the Goodyear radials bite again and, OH BOY, here we go! One little bend right after another. Even though they're fairly tight and moderately blind you feel like a dummy every

time you hit the brakes and shift down. What the car wants you to do is keep your big foot hard down in fourth and just scrub off any excess speed with a little twitch of the wheel and a few feet of slide. Oh boy, glorious. Oh boy, fun.

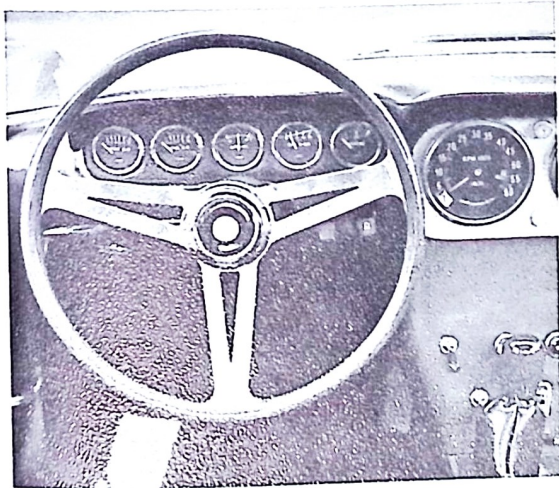
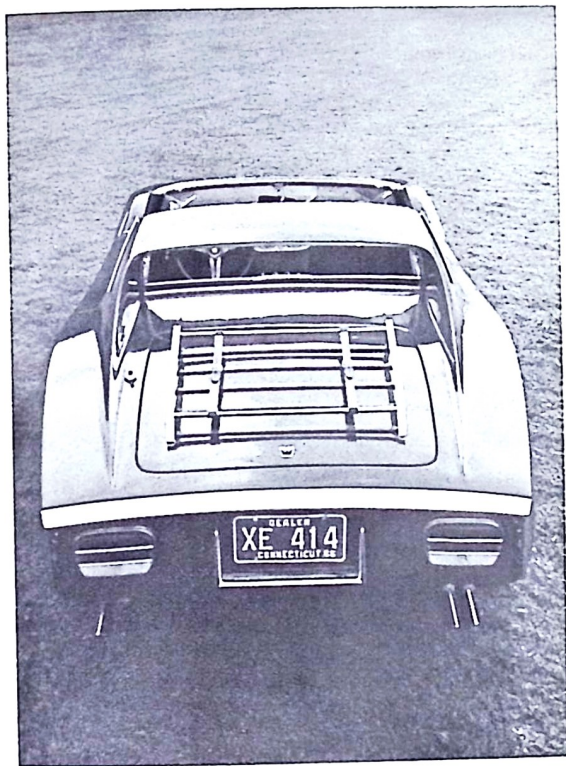
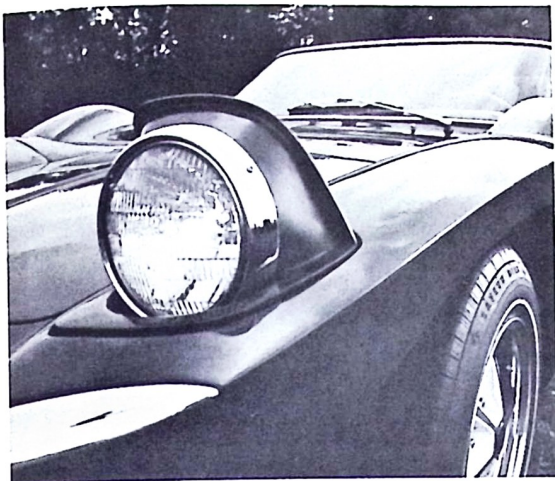
You come off a downhill right at about 85 and John says "there's a big bump down at the bottom of this hill," so you lift your foot. "No, no," he yells, "stay on it!" So you get on the throttle again, and leap over this grandmother of all bumps at about 65. "Too bad," Fitch says, "you weren't going fast enough." All the car did at that speed was fly through the air a little way, then land on all four wheels with a comfortable thump. Straight as a die. Crazy!

Driven this way, the Phoenix is absolutely above reproach. It does all the right things. The brakes are first class and the acceleration and handling are right up there with the best European GT cars. Its steer characteristic, under these somewhat unscientific conditions, was neutral throughout most of the performance range, but oversteer could be induced by twitching the wheel and stabbing at either brake or throttle. The Phoenix is all right.

So that's the Phoenix, sports fans. If you try to make it fit in any of the usual automotive categories you're going to run into trouble, because it's *different*. It costs as much as a Mercedes 220SE coupe, with performance much like a Pontiac GTO, but it just can't be compared with either one. The Phoenix has a lot of traditional sports car trappings, but it sure as hell isn't an Alfa 1750 replica or an Excalibur SS either. It enjoys the benefits of American production line parts but it's much more European than American in its execution.

Between Abercrombie & Fitch and a handful of enthusiastic Chevy dealers, John Fitch figures he can easily sell all of the first batch of 500 cars that will soon be coming across the sea from Frank Reisner at Intermeccanica. I'm inclined to agree with him. This car isn't for the old dyed-in-the-wool purists who expect it to conform to some rigid set of automotive rules.

The Phoenix is *different*. And the men who lay down their \$8700 for them will be different too. It's a good thing. It's high time we got some new blood in this movement. Cars and people. *Smith, if you change one word of this, I'll kill you.*—David E. Davis, Jr.



FROM THE DRIVER'S SEAT

Falls Village, Automotive Capital Of Connecticut: Putting out a car magazine is a seven day a week business. If you're not in the office on Saturday or Sunday writing desperately to save yourself from the wrath and overtime charges of the printer, you're off in the hinterlands somewhere attending a race or testing an automobile. Sometimes it's a drag. Most of the time it's a pretty good thing to do. Once in a while, it's just about the greatest occupation a man can turn his hand to. Doing the Phoenix thing that appears on page 57 of this issue fell into the latter category.

If every test trip was as pleasant as the visit to Fitch Phoenix-Land, I'd happily devote every remaining minute of my life to the pastime. The weather was beautiful. Indian Summer was near enough to be felt, if not seen. The Connecticut countryside looked like the pictures they put on wholesome hardware store calendars. And the hundred miles from home to the Phoenix works was a hundred minutes of pure, distilled automotive enthusiasm. Driving the Phoenix prototype around on the classic country roads of north-eastern Connecticut was better still. And sitting around a big, old-fashioned dining room table, digesting a memorable lunch and talking to John Fitch and Coby Whitmore for a couple of hours had the restorative effect of a two-week vacation.

John's way of life, and his background, seem to have had an important bearing on his approach to the car business. His house is a couple of hundred years old, and it's all full of warmth and reassurance. Truth! When you park your car in front of his barn and walk through the side door into that cozy L-shaped kitchen, you know everything's going to be all right. Fundamental values! *Nobody* could walk around on those pine-plank floors and sit in those big old chairs with a fire in the fireplace and still think about cars in the same terms as some poor drudge in an office on the fourth floor of a factory in beautiful downtown Hamtramck, Michigan. Hamtramck? Never.

Fitch has no intention of doing business on those terms. Peace and quiet are more important to him than all the blonde mahogany furniture and chrome-and-plexiglass ashtrays and frosted glass partitions in all the executive offices in Detroit. He will not join the ranks of the wheeler-dealers whom Tom Wolfe

once described as "short-armed fat-ties hustling nut-ball fads to the proles." There is no coffee-table-made-out-of-a-1949-Ford-windshield or Muzak in Falls Village, Connecticut . . . just a cluttered little shop full of automotive odds and ends, a handful of good guys bolting cars together, and a surrounding network of nice winding roads to drive them on. It ain't The American Road, but it ain't bad.

So John Fitch builds cars that he likes to drive. And if John Fitch likes to drive a car, it must be a pretty good car indeed. That's important—all this bucolic peace and quiet and country-squire detachment that you feel in John's native habitat can



make you forget who he is. And who he is, is the crazy-brave young fighter pilot who flew P-51s in World War II and got captured by the Germans because he flew his airplane way too close to a train that he happened to be blowing up at the time. Who he is, is one of the pioneer road-racers in the United States, driver of the Fitch-Whitmore Jaguar Special, better known as the Fitch-Bitch. Who he is, is the first American driver to land an important assignment as a member of a European factory racing team—the Mercedes-Benz factory racing team, the greatest. But the only evidence of any of this that I noticed in his house was a Mercedes-Benz poster on the wall of the guest bathroom telling the world that Stirling Moss

won the 1955 Mille Miglia, driving a 300-SLR, while John Fitch was fifth overall and first in the GT category driving a 300-SL coupe. A yellow poster just like the ones we always used to see in the Mercedes-Benz showrooms.

Can you *imagine*? One is apt to see some pretty fascinating stuff on bathroom walls, but the Mercedes-Benz poster at John Fitch's house really tore me up. I thought about that moment in May of 1955 when some anonymous layout man in Stuttgart got the word to go ahead with the Mille Miglia poster—"Okay, Klaus, we just got the results from Italy. Moss and Jenkinson won. Yeah, man, Moss and Jenkinson. Then Fangio was second in another one of our cars. That's right, Fangio. A Ferrari was third and a Maserati was fourth. Yep. But you wanna hear something wild, Klaus? You won't believe this, baby, but the American, Fitch, was *fifth* in a regular 300-SL GT coupe. No kidding. Fifth! He was less than an hour-and-a-half slower than Moss for the thousand miles—driving by himself. Is that wild? And listen, Klaus, the advertising department says to use a lot of yellow. That's right, kid, bright yellow."

Old Klaus did that bright yellow poster, and they shipped them all over the world, and we all knew that Mercedes-Benz had taken the Mille Miglia like Clay took Liston.

What the poster couldn't tell the world was what it was like to drive a thousand miles in less than 700 minutes in a 300-SL gullwing, all by yourself, with darkness and sheer drops and stone walls and screaming peasants and the need to excel all around you.

Either John or his wife, Elizabeth, had the good sense to snaffle one of the bright yellow posters before they came home from Europe, and now it's neatly framed and hung on the wall you stand and stare at when you're in the downstairs guest bathroom. How many good men gave their lives trying to get their names on a yellow piece of paper like that one? How many tried for years, and never made it?

So don't be surprised if you take a ride in a Fitch Sprint or a Phoenix and you discover that it's a very nice car to drive. After all, John Fitch has had a lot of time to think about cars like that. Eleven hours and twenty-nine minutes that I know of for sure.

—David E. Davis, Jr.