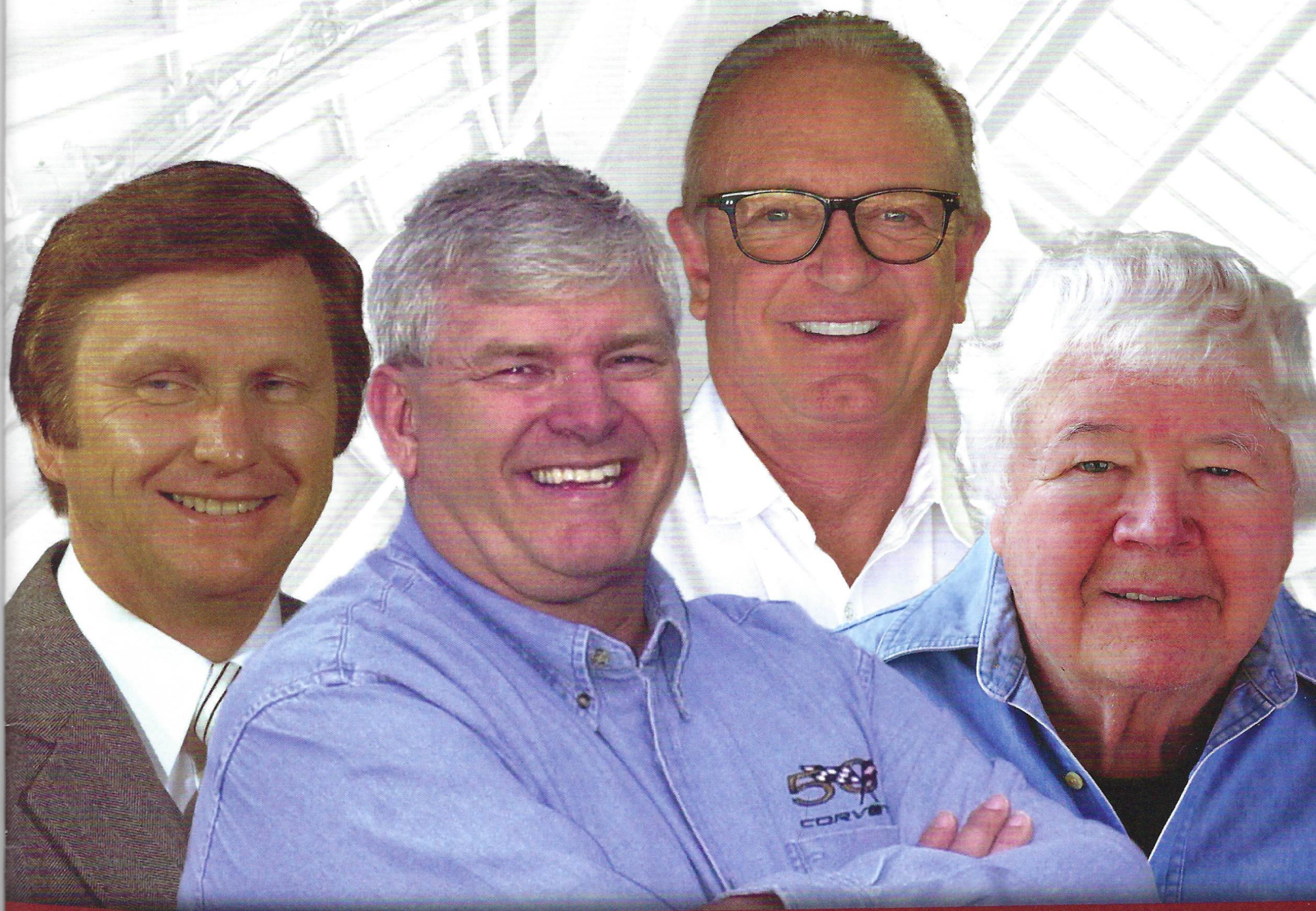


CORVETTE HALL OF FAME

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**AMERICA'S**  
**Sports Car**  
A PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL CORVETTE MUSEUM



# THE JAGUAR XK 120

## AND A SPARK OF PASSION FOR THE

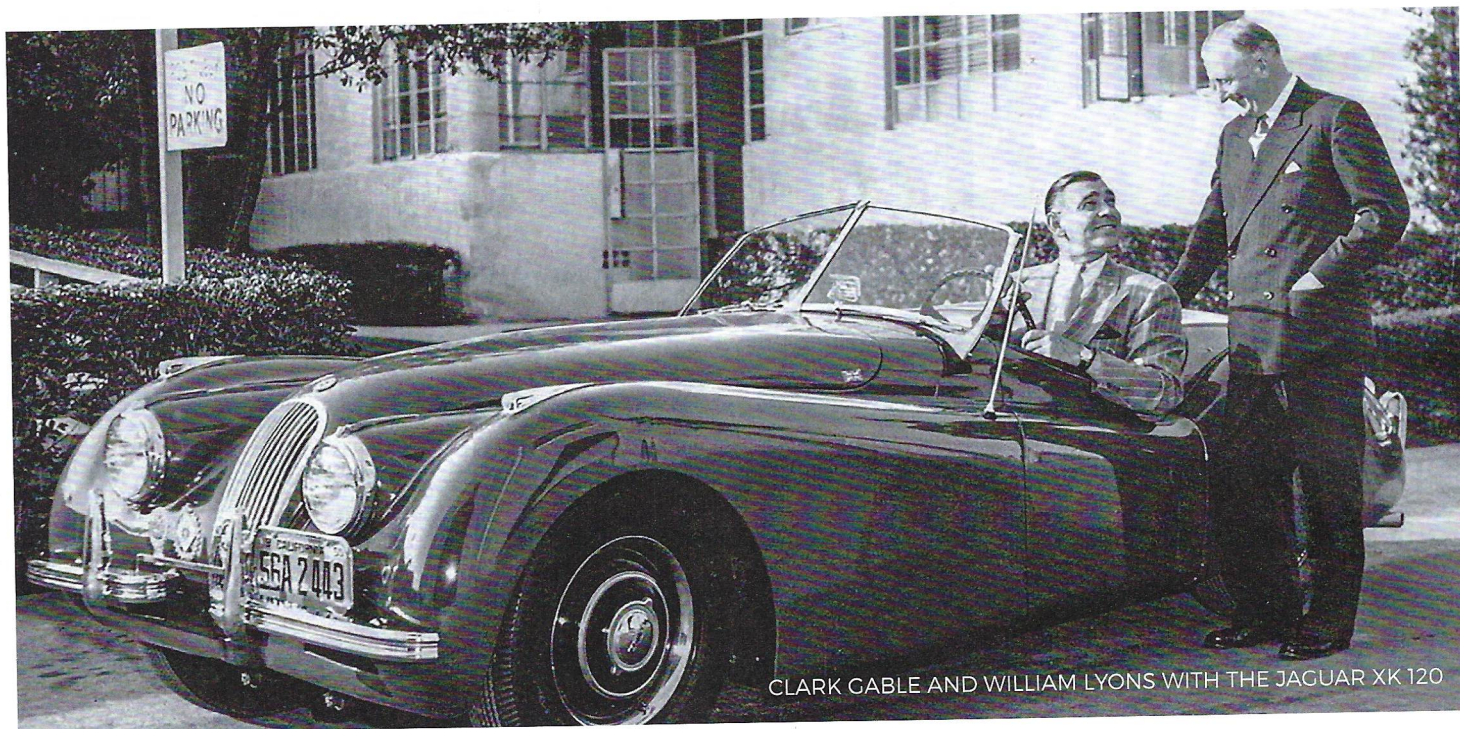
# CORVETTE

WORDS BRUCE TROXELL // PHOTOS AARON DREXLER & SUBMITTED



**J**aguar Cars Ltd stunned the automotive world in 1948 with the introduction of the XK 120 at the Earls Court Motor Show. It had an incredibly beautiful roadster body, an immensely strong chassis, and a sophisticated and powerful six-cylinder engine that would still be powering Jaguar cars into the 1980s. The XK 120 caught the eyes of car designers around the world, among which was the chief designer of the world's largest automobile company, General Motors' Harley Earl. Unbeknownst to the rest of the world, Earl was then in the formative stages of creating America's most successful sports car.





CLARK GABLE AND WILLIAM LYONS WITH THE JAGUAR XK 120

## THE JAGUAR XK 120

The sensational public reaction to the XK 120 persuaded Jaguar founder and Chairman William Lyons to put the car into immediate production in 1948. By the early 1950s, the XK 120 was available in three models: an open roadster, a drop-head coupe and a fixed-head coupe. The open roadster came with a lightweight canvas top and detachable side curtains, both of which could be removed and stowed behind the seats. The drop-head coupe had a padded, lined canvas top which folded onto the rear deck behind the seats when not in use. The drop-head coupe and fixed-head coupes had roll-up windows instead of removable side curtains.

Beginning with the 1950 model year, all XK 120s had pressed steel bodies with aluminum doors, bonnet, and boot lid. The open XK 120 used interior pull-cords to open the doors, which were accessible via a flap in the side curtains. Passion for the XK 120 spread far and wide. U.S. movie star Clark Gable was bitten by the passion bug when he first saw photos of the XK 120. Gable became the proud owner of the first production XK 120 in 1949.

The XK 120 wasn't just a car to look at. It was a serious sports car and made an impression in the budding sports car racing scenes throughout America. Powered by an inline six cylinder, double overhead cam engine producing 160 horsepower, the car could run with and beat many other racing sports cars of the day. Indeed, speed was part of the Jaguar's DNA—the car's name was based on its one hundred and twenty miles per hour top speed.

## HARLEY EARL'S CORVETTE INSPIRATION

Harley Earl is generally recognized as the father of the Corvette. Earl's incredible design talent is attested to by the many successful designs his GM teams created between 1927 when he joined General Motors and his retirement in 1958. Like many great artists, Harley Earl was acutely aware of the

world around him and his mind seemed to be always looking for something new that he could apply to his designs. Throughout his career, Earl regularly journeyed to Europe to attend major car shows in search of new ideas. His design ideas also came from listening to others, including family members and those outside the auto industry.

Where did Earl get his inspiration for the Corvette? The answer depends upon who you ask. Auto historian Mike Mueller believes that conversations with General Curtis LeMay, who oversaw air force bases that hosted sports car racing in the '50s, planted the seeds for the Corvette. Reportedly, LeMay told Earl that an American automaker should produce a car to compete against those that many World War II veterans brought home from Europe. Historians Michael Lamm and Dave Hollis believe that Earl's sons, Jim and Jerry, who were big racing fans, helped to convince their father to build a sports car suitable for racing. Author David Temple submits that a conversation sportsman/racer Briggs Cunningham had with Earl at a sports car race at Watkins Glen, New York in 1951 led to the Corvette. Reportedly, Cunningham chided Earl that while his Le Sabre concept car could lead the parade laps, it wasn't capable of participating in the real race. Others say that Earl brought home the idea from his European tours after seeing the new European models.

The truth is probably some combination of all of these suggestions. We know that Earl toured the European car shows on a regular basis and that he used sports car races at Watkins Glen, New York, and Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin, as places to visit with race fans and demonstrate the latest concept cars. At the races, Earl was impressed by the passion Jaguar and Ferrari owners had for their cars. It would not be surprising that Earl's active mind, combining what he observed at the race tracks with what he heard from others he respected led him to the conclusion that GM should have a sports car that would generate a similar passionate response from its owners.

## THE CORVETTE BECOMES A REALITY

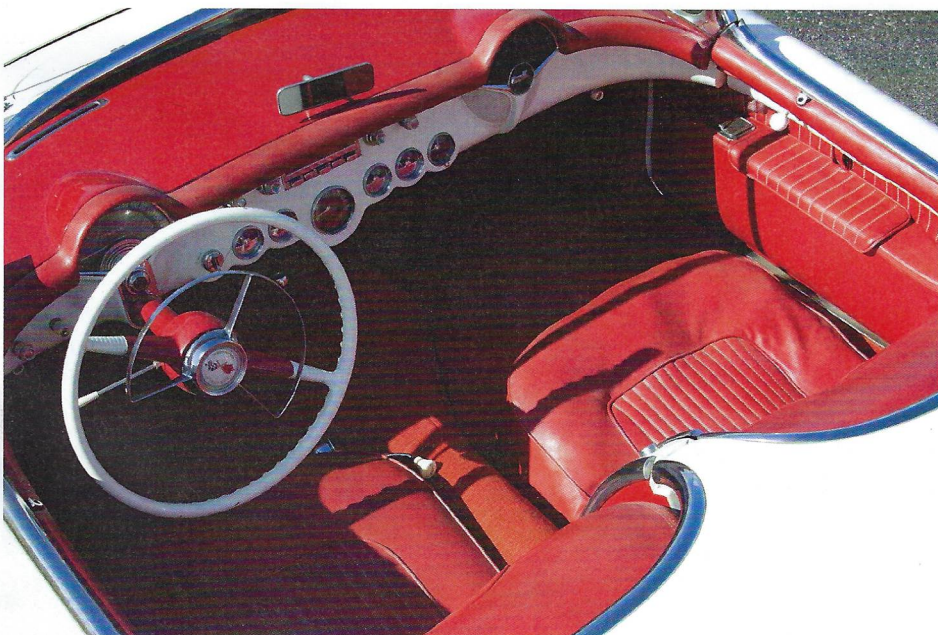
Upon Harley Earl's return to Detroit from the 1951 sports car races at Watkins Glen, he launched "Project Opel" in a small clandestine design studio that was closed to GM upper management. Earl chose young designer Bob McLean as the "Project Opel" stylist and for the project benchmark, Earl selected the Jaguar XK 120. As the project progressed, General Motors purchased at least one XK 120 to closely study its design and construction.

In his book, *The Cars of Harley Earl*, author David Temple describes Chevrolet chief engineer Ed Cole's first review of the completed full-scale plaster model of "Project Opel" in April, 1952: "Ed Cole is said to have 'literally jumped up and down' and gave it his full support." Cole thought it was just the car Chevrolet needed to give the brand a new image. Harley Earl must have been impressed that his team's design could stir the passions of an experienced designer and engineer like Ed Cole.

Ed Cole and Chevrolet general manager Thomas Keating liked the design so much that they wasted no time in showing the new car to GM president Harlow Curtice. Curtice, Keating and Cole approved the project as EX-122, a show car to be unveiled at the GM Motorama Exhibit at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City on January 17, 1953.

The public reception of the Corvette's debut was beyond GM's wildest dreams. On the Motorama Tour over four million people saw the Corvette and the response was so overwhelming GM put the car into production for the 1953 model year.

CORVETTE INTERIOR



JAGUAR XK 120 INTERIOR

## XK 120 INFLUENCE ON THE CORVETTE

Quick comparisons between the dimensions and the performances of the XK 120 and the 1953 Corvette reveal obvious similarities and reflect the influence of the earlier Jaguar on the design of the Corvette. But the XK 120's influence on the Corvette runs much deeper than mere appearance or performance.

The XK 120 was so far ahead of the field in looks, performance, and engineering, that it really had no competition. More than specific individual features of the car, it was the very existence of the advanced XK 120 that inspired Harley Earl and his team to create the Corvette. The XK 120 was all about passion, the passion it created in its viewers. Earl's XK 120-inspired design team imbued the Corvette with the same spark of passion. Thanks to the dedication of engineering and design teams over the Corvette's lifetime, today's Corvette continues to achieve perhaps the most important of Harley Earl's design objectives – that of inspiring passion among its owners.

## NCM SEEKS TO ADD XK 120 TO COLLECTION

The National Corvette Museum (NCM) is very interested in having a Jaguar XK 120 in their collection, or being able to borrow one for future displays. Should you have one in your stable and are interested in either donating the car to the Museum, or loaning the car to the Museum for public display in one of their exhibits, please contact NCM Director of Collections/Curator Derek Moore at [derek@corvettemuseum.org](mailto:derek@corvettemuseum.org) or 270-777-4516. Derek would love to hear from you.