

# Henley's 1955 Handyman Wagon

BY ROXIE MURPHY  
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BELLE—Mark Henley always wanted to restore a 1955 Chevrolet Handyman Wagon. He took the first steps toward his dream in 2013 when he purchased a running and driving Wagon in rough condition from a man in Jefferson City.

"I've owned the car for nearly 10 years," Henley said. "I owned a Corvet before that. I sold the Corvet and told my wife I wanted a 1955 two-door Chevrolet Wagon. I put that in Google and the first car that popped up was kind of what I was lookin' for. Not done. It was rough. It was driveable, it did run and drive but it was rough."

The sale ad for the car included an area code phone number that Henley wasn't familiar with, but he took a chance and called the seller.

"(The seller) gave me the information and I said 'how far away is it located?' He said, 'well, do you know where Jefferson City is?' I said 'I sure do, I'll be there in 45 minutes to look at it,'" Henley said. "On the drive home, I could see the ground—the road—through the floorboards."

For the next three or four years, Henley worked on the car himself, asking fellow car enthusiasts for assistance as he went.

"I did most of the work myself except the fine-tuning on the bodywork and Bernie Cobb who used to have a shop in Belle and is now in Linn, he finished it up and painted it," Henley said. "It did have a good engine in it and I drove it for probably two or three years before I updated it to a 5.3L LS fuel-injected engine which had a little work to it, kinda hopped it up a little bit,

*'See that old man  
right there? That  
old car will run.'*

and installed an overdrive transmission."

The engine swap also had better fuel mileage. The car came with a newer 305 crate motor. Henley said it wasn't the original engine for the car, so he didn't have any qualms about the changeover.

Jimmy Brandon of Bland worked on the engine for the car.

"He's a retired mechanic teacher from Linn State and he has helped me a lot on it," Henley said. "Jimmy built it, and I was there, watchin' and handin' him tools."

The changes made the car better road-worthy.

"It was more drivable on the highway," he said.

When the new high-performance engine was installed, the car still had its original rear-end suspension. Henley said it didn't last.

"There was too much horsepower going to the rear end and it went out," Henley said. "So I purchased the Ford 9-inch to put in."

Henley said last winter he upgraded the front suspension. The car drove so much smoother that he decided to upgrade the rear suspension this fall to a Ford 9-inch rear end. Lot's of classic car enthusiasts make the change to the Ford 9-inch rear-end update because the design benefits the vehicle's performance. The larger diameter ring gears create a longer distance between the centerline of the ring gear and the pinion gear. The setup allows the car to hold more power, and change gears faster. The product also has a wider range of gear ratios and an easier setup.

He plans to complete the upgrade between car shows.

"I've got all the stuff to do it with, I just haven't got started on it yet," he said. "When I picked it up it had been rattle canned flat black with flames on the hood. My wife said, 'Oh, my gosh.'"

Henley had the Wagon painted two-toned turquoise and dark blue.

"The top changes colors depending on the light," he said. "It goes between a real dark blue and a purple depending on the lights. The bottom half is actually turquoise, a 1957 color. The 1955 had more green color was more green."

The top of the two-toned vehicle was

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MARK HENLEY of Belle cruises Belle City Park on Monday in his 1955 Chevrolet Handyman Wagon. Henley purchased the car from a man in Jefferson City. When he brought it home it was rattle can black with orange flames on the hood.

PHOTO BY ROXIE MURPHY

# Family memories live on through 1965 Corvair

BY COLIN WILLARD  
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VIENNA — The Weidinger family operated a Chevrolet dealership in Vienna for 60 years. During that time, there was one car that was never for sale.

Vienna residents of a certain age may remember Lucille Weidinger's white 1965 Chevrolet Corvair convertible. She often drove it to church or the grocery store. It rarely made trips outside of the county.

The Corvair line of cars was Chevrolet's response to a market shift toward compact cars in the late 1950s. The car got its name by combining the names of two other popular Chevrolet models: the Corvette and the Bel-Air. During the Corvair's production life from 1960 to 1969, Chevrolet produced about 1.8 million units.

One thing sets the Corvair apart in the history of American vehicles. It is the only American-designed, mass-produced passenger car to feature a rear-mounted and air-cooled engine. For that reason, many in the automobile industry saw the Corvair as a direct response to the Volkswagen Beetle.

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a color Henley randomly picked out of a paint book.

"I think it was a Ford pickup color," Henley said. "When I took it to Bernie (Cobb) he said 'That's not gonna look right.' I said, 'well, I own the car and that's the way I want it.' I saw these two colors together on a truck and I love the colors. When it was done it come down looking really well."

He once typed 1955 two-door wagons into Pinterest and the third car that pulled up was the same colors as his.

As interiors went, fellow car enthusiast Dwayne Black reupholsters.

"A friend of mine who used to live in Rolla done interiors," he said. "He moved to Arkansas and said he wasn't doing it anymore."

Henley asked his friend to do one more and took the Wagon to Arkansas to be redone. His friend is back in business.

"The interior is two-toned beige with a darker brown insert in the seats," Henley said. "The seats are out of a Camaro in the front. The back seat is original. Dwayne talked me into the colors, I actually wanted darker inserts. He told me this would look better, and that's what he does for a living, so I let him do that."

Henley said the only thing he'd change is the light beige carpet that matches the seats.

"Every time you step in there you can see your footprint," he said. "That's probably the only thing I would have changed."

Henley built the car to allow it to be a daily driver if he wanted. He upgraded the stereo system and even gave it a back up camera.

The Handyman is very similar in design to a Nomad.

"A Nomad was a fancier car at that time," Henley said. "But we drive it places and take it to car shows. We travel with it quite a bit. We go to car shows in St. Louis and Springfield, Columbia. We don't just do the local ones, we try to do a couple of



the longer ones during the year so we like it to be drivable."

He said the front suspension change made such a big difference, he is hoping the rear-end change will result in an even better drive.

The Henleys were originally excited to go from a two-seater classic car to a five-seater so they could take their grandkids along. However, he said two of the older grandkids are too old and the youngest is too young yet. He thinks the boy may go when he gets older.

"I think the back seat has only been used one time," he said. "Ryan (Scott) and his girlfriend was in Rolla at a car show and his car wouldn't start. They road in the back seat and they road home with me that night. As far as I'm thinking, they are the only ones that I've been in the back seat of the car."

"When I first wanted to do this, my wife didn't seem too interested, but when we didn't have a car to go, she missed all the new friends we'd made at the car show," he said. "She hurried me up."

Henley said a funny story about the car was it originally wasn't going to have air

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Joe Weidinger, the second-oldest of Lucille's four sons, said his mother liked the car because of its unique lightweight design. It had studded snow tires to give the car better traction, especially in the winter.

All four of the Weidinger boys -- Mark, Joe, Don and Larry -- learned to drive by taking the Corvaire out on less-traveled roads.

"We all cut our teeth on it, so it's very sentimental to us," Joe said. "It was a survivor because we were a bunch of boys learning how to drive, but it always managed to make it back home. As soon as we were old enough to get our own cars, that's what we did."

Lucille died in August 1975 at only 48 years old, shortly after celebrating her 25th wedding anniversary with her husband Leonard. She developed a rare autoimmune disease called scleroderma. The condition causes the hardening and tightening of the skin, which can lead to complications in blood vessels, internal organs and the digestive tract. Nearly 50 years later, there is still no cure for the condition though treatments can slow the progression and improve the quality of life for patients.

Leonard was in the car business for 70 years. He began by operating a filling station when he was 24 years old. In 1960, he bought the dealership in Vienna and had a hand in it until it closed its doors when he was 94 years old.

"Dad always focused on giving the customer good service with their transportation needs," Joe said. "Mark and Larry continued his beliefs without exception."

After Lucille's death, Leonard decided that he would keep the car in the family as a memory of her.

"It's really the only vehicle he ever thought to keep," Joe said. "This was never for sale because it was my mother's car, and we're sentimental people."

Leonard died last year at the age of 96. The car still resides in the home where he spent the last 28 years of his life.

In 1994, Leonard had to make the move following a fire at his home. During a storm, lightning struck the house and set it ablaze. The Corvaire was sitting in the home's drive-in basement at the time.

"The whole roof was on fire," Joe said about the home. "The firemen were there and everybody was trying to put the fire out. We were really concerned about that car. We opened the basement garage door and made sure the car got pushed outside so it didn't burn up with the house. That was one of the few things we got out of the house before it burnt down."

Despite the near-loss in the fire, Lucille's Corvaire has persisted as a staple in the community for nearly 60 years. During that time, the Weidinger family kept everything original, including the customizable hubcaps that came with the car. At 58 years old and just under 30,000 miles on the odometer, Lucille's Corvaire averages just over 500 miles per year. Most of the use was early in the car's lifespan. The most recent oil change was in June 2010, and the car had only traveled 300 miles since then. It has appeared in many fair parades and the weddings of both family and friends.

"It's just one of those survivor cars," Joe said.

See more photos on page 16.

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**THE CHEVROLET** Corvair is distinct in the history of automobiles as the only American-designed and mass-produced car with a rear-mounted and self-cooled engine (above, left). Lucille Weidinger's 1965 Corvair has become a family heirloom. It makes frequent appearances at family weddings. Several of Lucille's 12 grandchildren are pictured in the Corvair (above, right). Nov. 15 would have been Lucille's 97th birthday.



**MARK HENLEY** of Belle restored the 1955 Chevrolet Handyman Wagon (above) mostly on his own, minus the bodywork, interior finishes and the engine rebuild. Henley said he didn't like the 1955 original color of the car and chose 1957 turquoise for the bottom and dark blue for the top half. The Wagon's previous paint work (below) was a more fiery design.



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conditioning.  
 "She said, 'It's gonna be air-conditioned, right?' and I said, 'no probably not.' She said, 'why not?' I told her it would be another \$1,500 to \$2,000 and she came in with \$1,500 and said, 'I want air conditioning.'"  
 Henley said the car shows are fun and the car had trophies everywhere from winning various shows, but ultimately the events are a way for him and his wife to socialize and meet people with similar interests.  
 "I go to make friends and meet people," he said. "We went to a car show at a KC Radio station, then a few weeks later in St. Louis. We got there and I didn't see one guy I knew. That's unusual, we usually see a few people. I did see one guy that I recognized, but we were standing there and this guy walks up and says, 'I want to ask you somethin', like three days ago, I saw a car just like yours at the Lake of the Ozarks.' I said, 'no, you didn't see one just like it. You seen it.'"  
 Henley said one of his favorite stories was when they went to the Lake of the Ozarks for a show and were stopped at a red light. A young man in a fancy car pulled up next to him and wanted to drag race. They raced to the next red light.  
 "I've never spoke to the guy," Henley said. "The next thing I know, he comes walkin' by and I recognized the guy. He said to his friend, 'see that old man right there? That old car will run.'"

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