

Nick Prevas Poses The Question: 'Pilot' Car Or 'Prototype', Which Is It?

Excerpted from an email

by Frank Clavelli, Car Guy

Nick recently discussed this topic with a friend and fellow hobbyist, Frank Clavelli. Frank provided the following explanation which is shared for our interest and reference.

Frank stated a pilot car is a very early production vehicle that helps the manufacturer to refine and tune the production procedures. These cars may exhibit some unique features that get abandoned or changed once they develop a better way to 'skin the cat.' However, they are actual vehicles with a VIN so they can be sold and registered.

'R&D' vehicles are often referred to as 'test mules', prototypes or 'concept vehicles.' They do not carry a VIN but rather have a serial number that indicates it's a developmental prototype. Occasionally, prototype and concept cars are sold but they can't be legally registered for street use. The manufacturer may keep one in a collection or donate one to a museum. Often, these units end up in crash studies or torture tests, or are just plain crushed.

A prototype example is on display in the Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Only forty-three 1983 Corvettes were manufactured before the 1983 model was discontinued. Whatever happened to the other forty-two units is unknown; possibly they were destroyed. For a long time it was General Motors policy, when it came time to destroy a concept car, that a GM executive had to be present and sign off on the project.

The Chrysler Turbine car of 1963 was developed over a long period of time. Fifty plus units were produced. Chrysler 'loaned' fifty of the turbine cars to customers in all fifty states (one each), with the stipulation that the car had to be returned after one year. The turbine car bodies were manufactured in Italy. Chrysler Corporation did not pay import duty to the U.S. Government. However, at the end of the testing period the cars had to be destroyed or else the duty tax had to be paid. Of the fifty-five cars that were made, most were destroyed but as many as nine of them still exist; only three or four are still operational. Comedian and vehicle enthusiast, Jay Leno has one in his vast collection. —

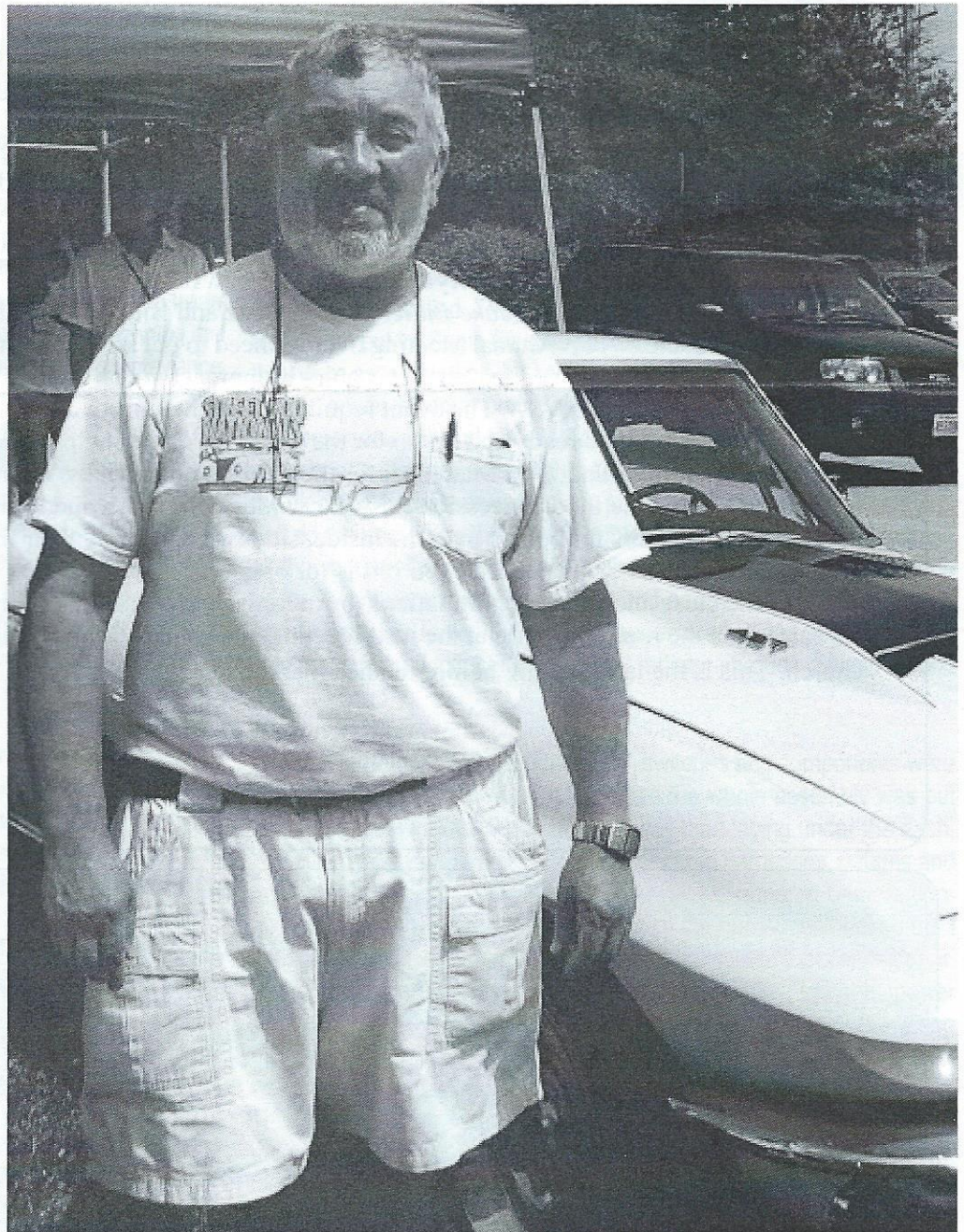
Factory drag race cars like the old Ford lightweights and Thunderbolts, the Z11 Impalas, the 'Swiss Cheese Super Duty Pontiacs, the altered wheelbase Hemi

Dodges/ Plymouths and even the new Stock and Super Stock cars: Cobra Jet Mustangs, COPO (Central Office Production Order) Camaros, Hemi Challengers, all carry serial numbers but no VIN; therefore, they are not street legal. Frank adds: "As Dennis Miller is fond of saying: 'that's just my opinion, I may be wrong.'"

Frank Clavelli was crew chief, from 1971-2000, for a variety of dragsters that were Chevy to HEMI powered, burned gasoline to nitro methane and used carburetors to Whipple 'screw' superchargers. Over the course of those years he, along with his

very talented drivers and crews, won multiple NHRA Division championships and races, was nationally ranked in the 'top ten' and set elapsed time performance records at various tracks and events including the prestigious U.S. Nationals held in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Frank is a resident of Howard County. His vehicle collection includes a 1937 Ford street rod, a 1967, 427 Corvette coupe, a 1969 Cobra Jet Mustang, and a 1963 1/2 Ford Galaxy powered by a rare, NASCAR inspired, Ford 427 SOHC (single overhead cam).



Frank Clavelli with his 1967 Corvette at the St. Louis Church picnic and car display, last summer in Clarksville, Maryland.