

# David Burroughs

Championing the appreciation of accurate restorations and well-preserved originals



By Mark J. McCourt  
Photography by Richard Lentiniello

The Survivor Collector Car Show, like Bloomington Gold, is designed as an education and research event as well as a show; improving the cars is a yearly goal.

**For more than 30 years now,** nothing less than the complete re-imagining of the way that collector cars are preserved, shown and judged has been the personal goal of David Burroughs. While his ideas—considered radical by some—have taken years to catch on, he can now look back on the old-car hobby's recent discovery of, and movement towards, appreciating the originality that he has been championing all along; the restorers of decades to come will be grateful for his legacy of research resources.

"As a little kid, I was fascinated with mechanical things: anything that went fast or flew. It all started when I was two or three years old, and I never lost that fascination," David explains. "Like many, as a kid in grade school, I built model airplanes and cars. I built models

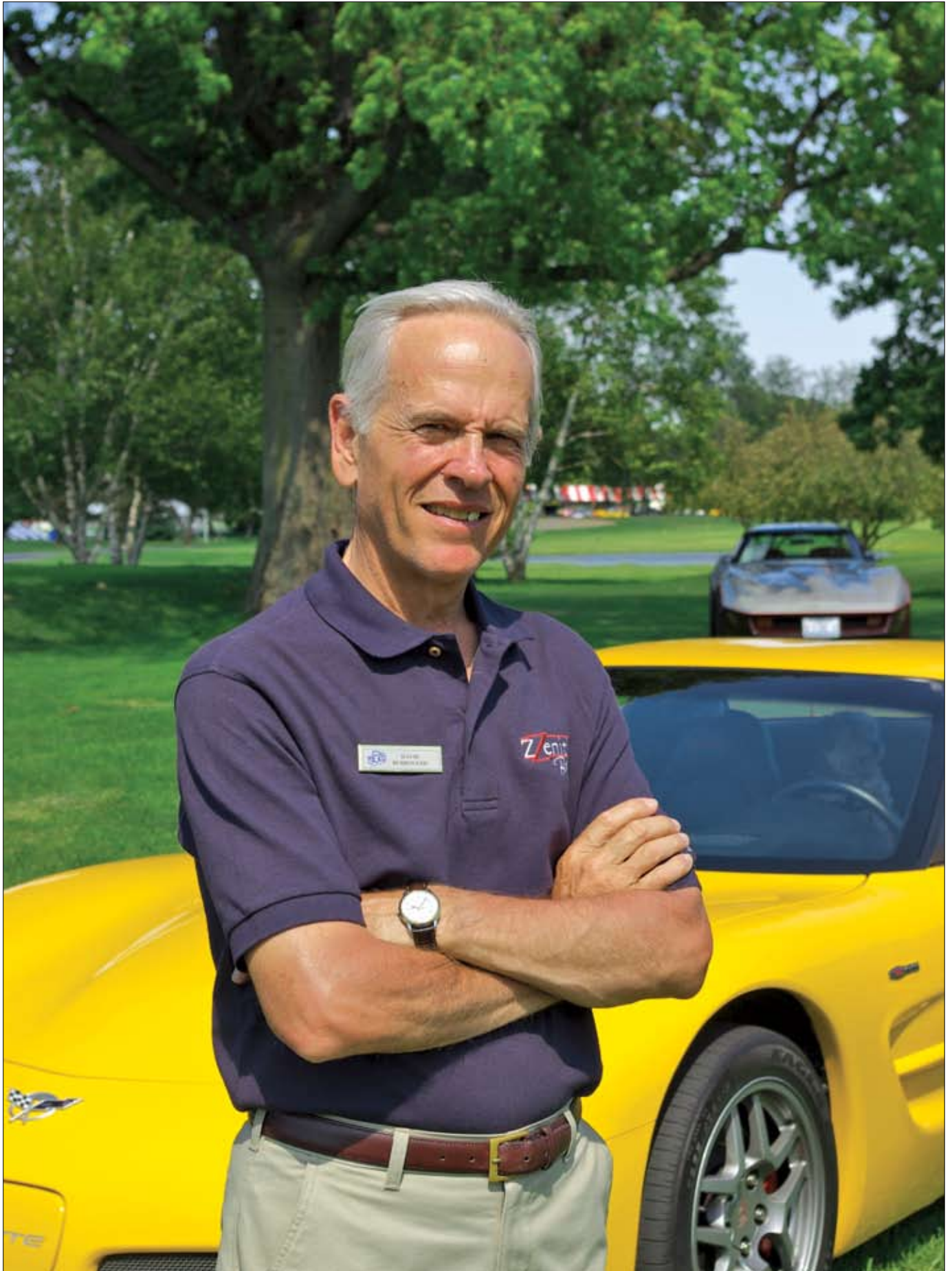
of 1958 and 1962 Corvettes when I was 10 or 11 years old, and the car that really caught my attention was the brand new 1961 Corvette that I saw in eighth grade; it was at nighttime, the light hit it perfectly, and it seemed to attract a lot of girls. At that age, I thought that was probably a pretty good deal—I may need one of those."

So David was destined to a life spent with the Corvettes he's most closely associated with, but this mechanical enthusiast has also spent a lifetime at altitude; he began flying at age 9. By age 20, he was a professional pilot and instructor, going on to become a four-time national aerobatic champion and eight-time national formation champion.

His background as a trained aviation mechanic, with all of the precision-oriented detail work this entails, and

his ties to the restoration center of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, were ideal matches to his interest in preserving the original features of Corvettes. "Thirty years ago, I applied many of the philosophies from the Smithsonian to aircraft and automobile restoration and preservation. I restored Corvettes until 1993, with my last one being the best, most accurate one of all. I have an appreciation for history and wanting to keep things so that we can record the way that they were," he says. "It's a good idea to raise people's awareness that they may want to go a little slower before they ruin something that might be historically important."

While he's always been sensitive to preserving historical items, whether airplanes or automobiles, a frustrating experience with his first Corvette—a





At age 12, David built a homemade go-kart; in typical form, it remains in good unrestored condition today.



Using a stencil to illustrate the locations, David accurately recreated the factory shim placement markings during his 1981 “demonstration” restoration of a 1965 Corvette.

1967 Sting Ray coupe—was the impetus behind all his work that followed. In the early 1970s, David showed this car at numerous shows, including the second-ever Bloomington Corvette Corral show. While the all-original car placed well, it was always outshined by over-restored examples.

“I kept asking people, ‘How do you win the Corvette Nationals?’ Nobody could give me an answer. The main thing seemed to be to make it really clean, with shiny paint,” he recalls. David took action in 1976, refinishing the body, exterior trim and engine compartment to concours quality.

“The silver paint had faded past where it should have been, so it couldn’t have been used as a model. Even though I did a way better than factory paint job

on the car, and I made the engine look a little better than it did from the factory, I left the chassis, the interior and everything else alone—I wanted to keep them authentic and original. Looking back, it was the best compromise,” he says. The results were top finishes at the three major Corvette concours competitions.

While he achieved his goal of winning, this left David with food for thought. “I won first place at one show, and in second place was a 6,000-mile untouched original 427. I thought, ‘That’s not right—I won, and I shouldn’t have. I restored this, put beautiful paint on it, and here’s this all-original black ‘66 model—that should do better than mine.’ I knew I could come up with a better idea; shiny paint should not take precedent over really, really well-pre-

served original paint.” And so, the idea behind Bloomington Gold’s “Certification” was cemented.

“Back in 1976, I saw that people were getting awards for cars that had shiny paint and shiny chrome and all generally looked the same. I enjoyed cars that were authentic and original, and that’s what the people that I knew liked, so we could go after a segment of the market that is not interested in shiny paint and chrome, but in preservation, or at least accurate restoration.

“My 40-year background in marketing has taught me that you can’t be all things to all people, but you can be some things to some people. I chose to go the direction that nobody else was going, which was to focus on authenticity and preservation. The National Corvette Certification Board and the first Bloomington Gold in 1978 grew from there, and once we became known for this, we came to dominate that market segment.”

David’s idea of Certification arose from a simple premise: Every car leaves its factory “Gold Certified,” and the challenge is to figure out how close to that it remains today. “If someone asks, ‘What are your standards for Bloomington Gold?’ the answer is real simple: Just make it look like it did when it left the factory—I mean, exactly. The closer you get, the closer you are to 100 percent. If you could buy a car and preserve it,



Shortly before being displayed at the 2009 edition of Bloomington Gold, the number 63 Corvette race car won the GT 1 class at the 24 Hours of Le Mans in France.

20 years later you could get the Gold Certificate; in fact, you can buy a new Corvette from the factory today and have it Certified. Politics have nothing to do with it: just as long as you can preserve it in, or restore it to, look like that state, it will get Certified."

The Survivor Certification that debuted in 1989 highlights Corvettes that are judged to be more than 50 percent original and unmodified, and still useful as references for others' restorations, in the four categories of exterior, interior, engine compartment and chassis. David and the Bloomington Gold organizers have taken this idea and run with it; "We figured that if people like this for Corvettes, why not branch out and do that for other brands as well? That's where the 'Survivor Collector Car' idea came from.

"Last year was the first Survivor Collector Car event, and there were no awards," David continues. "We made it open season—if you had an unrestored collector car over 20 years old, bring it. It was important to get people together so they could get the idea, and it also gave us the chance to bring potential judges together, and to evaluate them by watching them do some judging in the field. This year, we upped the stakes because we had a core group of 15 knowledgeable people.

"With this show, we don't specialize in Corvettes or any particular brand, but we specialize in unrestored cars, since nobody else 'owns' that market position. When you think of unrestored cars, we want you to think of us. If you want a trophy or you have a customized car, there are plenty of other places to go; we're not saying, 'Don't do that'—it's just not our specialty. Our specialty is those original vehicles that have no place else to go. That way this will perpetuate itself.

"There is no one winner, and our object is never to tell somebody that they lost; our objective is to tell somebody that they qualified on this and this, but their third area here is inconclusive—we can't tell if it is or isn't, so if they can bring us more research to show that it is, they can possibly work their way up," David says.

The Survivor Collector Car event includes three top awards: Limited Survivor, for 20-year-old or older vehicles with at least 50 percent preservation of original finishes in limited areas; Freeze Frame, for 30-year-old or older vehicles with at least 75 percent preservation of original finishes,



**Saturday's awards ceremony saw 158 owners accept their well-earned awards, including Kelly McClain, whose 1960 Corvette, in the very rare Cascade Green color, earned a Gold.**

and ZZenith, for 40-year-old or older vehicles with at least 90 percent of factory-original finishes.

"You can research yourself into a ZZenith, but you can't restore yourself into one; that's the whole point of preservation," David explains. "That's what gives a ZZenith so much value: It's pretty hard to have a car within 90 percent of how it came from the factory without being restored. When you say you've got a ZZenith award, whether it's on a Nash, a Buick, a Studebaker or a Ferrari that's 1970 or older, that's really saying something—a 40-plus-year-old car that's basically new-old-stock.

"We think it's extremely important to keep the quality level high, and after we do this for five or 10 years, we think it will have a significant impact on getting people to keep their vehicles authentic, and recognized as such."

David feels that the work that he and the Bloomington Gold board are doing will boost the hobby in numerous ways, the most obvious being the library of photographic restoration reference material that they are compiling through the documentation of Survivor automobiles. This documentation is also designed to cut down on falsified cars, or "clones" that unscrupulous sellers may attempt to pass off as correct. He also notes that original, unrestored cars are unique and individual in their age and level of preservation, which adds enjoyment for spectators.

"We think we're adding value to the collector car market for potential buyers to be educated. We plan to do more education with seminars to teach people how to recognize what they're looking at, and how to do conservation if you've got a Rolls-Royce, a Ferrari, a Jaguar, or whatever. Within three to five

years, we'll have in-depth preservation seminars, and unlike something that is specifically about a Mustang or a Mopar, we'll have educational programs that deal with preserving paint or rubber, so it will make no difference as to what car you apply it—our market will be much broader.

"We try to educate people—this is not a concours. It's not a car show, because 'car show' typically implies shiny paint, shiny chrome, trophies, best of show. It's a research event. And it's important, because in 20 years, the collector car community could have a huge body of knowledge, an information and photographic archive on all different automobiles. If we don't start it now, much of that may be lost. It's for the benefit of everybody." 🐞



**Gold Certification awards represent the highest recognition for Corvettes.**