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ENTERPRISE

Where to Buy Your Corvette All It Wants and Needs

By BARBARA MARSH

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

EFFINGHAM, Ill.—It's lunch time in this tiny farm town. Michael Yager cruises up the main drag in his vintage Corvette and parks. A teenager leans out of a passing car and yells, "What year is that?"

"'61," Mr. Yager says.

"Sw-e-e-e-t!"

Mr. Yager, 44 years old, often attracts such kindred spirits — and his business thrives on it. His mail-order company, Mid America Designs Inc., sells nothing but parts and accessories for all models of General Motors Corp.'s Corvette. He expects his company's sales will reach \$20 million in the fiscal year ending June 30, an 18% rise from last year. The catalog has a mailing list of more than 500,000 individuals.

Mid America has emerged as the most aggressive — and possibly the largest — of dozens of catalog companies serving Corvettes. These purveyors compete for an increasingly lucrative market with annual sales of about \$100 million, industry specialists say. GM's Chevrolet division has sold nearly 1 million of the two-seater sports cars since 1953. With about 20,000 new Corvettes being sold each year, the market continues to grow. The manufacturer's suggested retail price for a coupe starts at \$36,835.

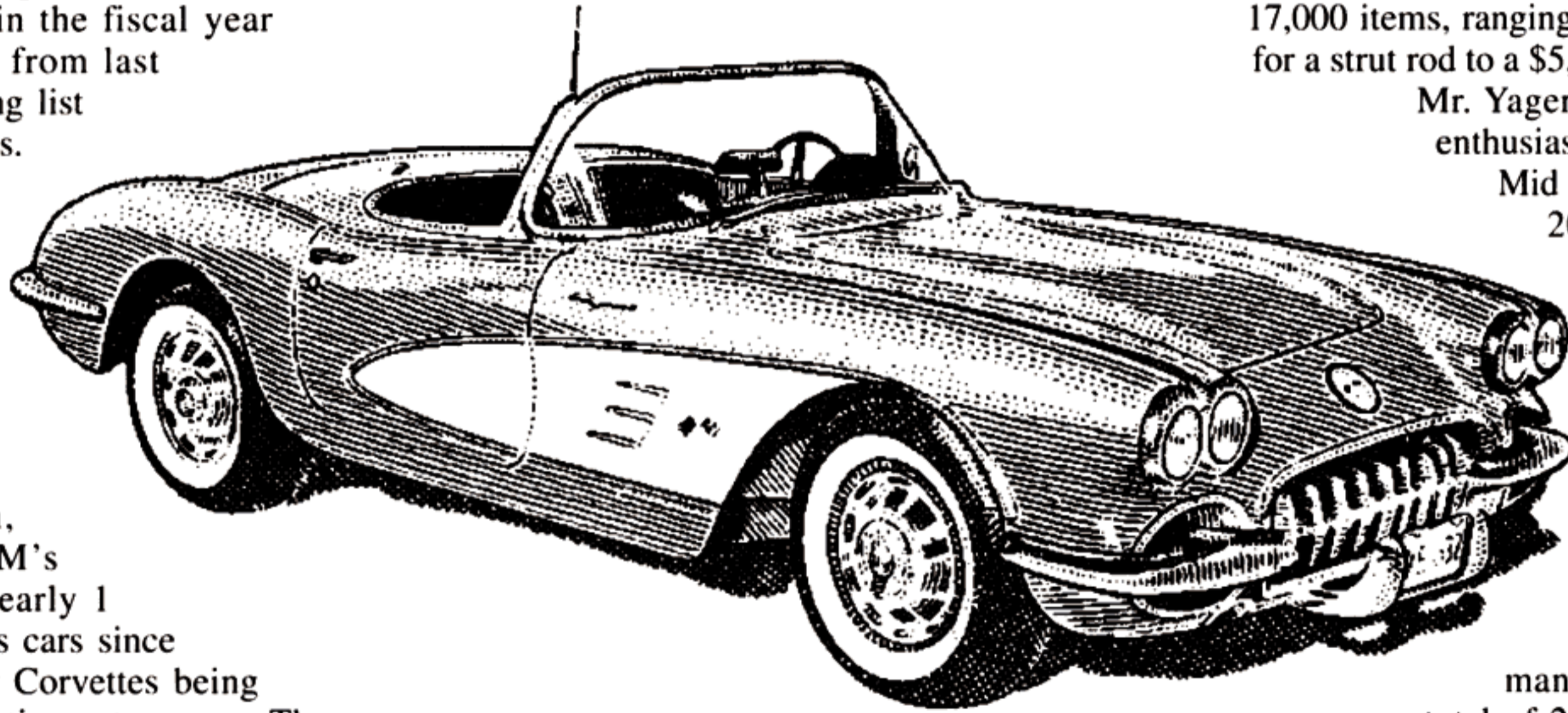
Many Corvette owners are aging baby boomers, like Mr. Yager himself, trying to recapture youth by buying the dream car they couldn't afford in high school. Some fans restore old models, others soup up late models. Owners race them, collect them and drive them to work. "They wash them, they wax them, they worship them," says Mr. Yager, who has a dozen himself.

Consider Helene Zasadny, 45, who recalls daydreaming during high-school study hall over a Corvette pictured in a magazine. She was thrilled

when a date let her drive his Corvette but stormed out of the car when he wanted favors in return.

Now the Lemont, Ill., resident and her husband own Corvettes from 1963, 1966 and 1985. Ms. Zasadny taught herself restoration on the older models, which she enters in local and national car shows; she even judges some events.

Ms. Zasadny says she and her husband have bought numerous parts from Mid America. "Mike Yager really put his finger on what the public wants," she says. "They've got the most variety, the biggest inventory of anybody out there."



A 1960 Corvette

Ms. Zasadny also was gratified when Mr. Yager sent her a congratulatory note when her 1963 model made a special collection of "survivor cars" at the annual Bloomington Gold Corvette show, in Springfield, Ill. He writes such notes whenever his customers' cars get in the limelight.

Mid America's largest rival, Eckler Industries Inc., a Titusville, Fla., mail-order company, says it recently

bought the rights to GM's original tooling for certain discontinued parts. To lure new customers, it just issued its first catalog of restoration parts targeted to Chevrolet dealers. Auto Accessories of America Inc., in Boalsburg, Pa., is courting dealers' business by promising to emblazon its parts catalog with the local dealer's name.

GM itself is testing its first consumer catalog of licensed items using Chevrolet trademarks, including Corvette apparel, posters and collectible miniatures.

But Mr. Yager is holding his own with an unusually broad array of products for Corvette owners and their cars. This year's summer catalog lists more than 17,000 items, ranging from a 50-cent suspension bolt for a strut rod to a \$5,000 body-repair kit.

Mr. Yager also brings his own Corvette enthusiasm to his company. He started Mid America as a part-time business 20 years ago to pay his way to national Corvette meets. He sold jackets, parts, owner's manuals and other items out of the trunk of a friend's Oldsmobile. In 1976, he quit his job as a tool-and-die maker to devote himself to Mid America.

His company exudes Corvette mania. The 65 employees own a total of 26 Corvettes. This includes the 14 owned by Mr. Yager's brother Kenneth, a restoration buff. On any given day, six or more of the cars are parked in front of the company headquarters on a 26-acre farm in Effingham. "You may smell the manure, but you can leave the keys in the car with the top down," Mr. Yager says of the firm's rural location.

The open spaces naturally encourage enjoying the sports car to the fullest. Mr. Yager's deputy, Steve Wiedman, says he sometimes accelerates up to 130 miles per hour — "It'll definitely straighten your hair out" — but says he has never been caught.

To build customer loyalty, Mr. Yager gives refunds even years after a purchase. If a customer wants to

Here's Where to Shop For Parts and Gifts For Your Corvette

exchange an item, he sends a new one immediately and trusts the customer to send back the original. And if a customer receives a defective item that is priced at \$25 or less, he tells the person to keep it and sends a free replacement.

The company also tries to satisfy special requests. For instance, Joseph Sredniawski, in Northport, N.Y., decided his 1991 model was "too quiet" and wanted it to run more like the "noisier, gutsier" muscle cars of the 1950s and 1960s. He ordered a \$420 exhaust system from Mid America, bolted it on his car and drove around with it for a day. Then he decided he wanted a "richer tone." The company let him swap the first system to buy another, priced at \$600. Pleased, Mr. Sredniawski ordered more than \$1,400 of high-performance parts from Mid America.

The result? He raised his engine's peak horsepower to 285 from 245 — and cut its racing time on a quarter-mile drag strip to 13.6 seconds from 14.1 seconds.

Mr. Yager constantly looks for ways to promote the Corvette hobby — something that builds goodwill with customers. He has donated \$130,000 to help build the National Corvette Museum, in Bowling Green, Ky., expected to open on Labor Day. This year, he invested \$2,000 to help sponsor a champion Corvette driver at a professional race in Lexington, Ohio.

But for all of his own enthusiasm, Mr. Yager still marvels at the passion of some other Corvette fans. George Swanson, a Hempfield Township, Pa., owner who died this spring at age 71, even chose to be buried in his 1984 Corvette. "The only problem," says Mr. Yager, "is we can't sell parts for the car."