

“PEAKING” IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR

By Ken Peak, RCC Historian



WOMEN IN CORVETTE HISTORY: PART 1

In March 2021 the National Corvette Museum (NCM) celebrated International Women’s Day by honoring four women who made unique contributions to Corvette’s history and have been inducted into its Corvette Hall of Fame.

This two-part series describes the lives and contributions of those distinctive women; this Part 1 focuses on Dollie Cole and Donna Mae Mims; Part 2 discusses Betty Skelton and Elfi Arkus-Duntov.

Dollie Cole, 2019 Corvette Hall of Fame Inductee



Dollie was born on May 13, 1930, in Fort Worth, Texas. Her parents divorced when she was just six weeks old, which led to her spending her childhood living with various relatives. While attending college, she focused her studies on providing therapy for people with mental disabilities.

Dollie married Edward Cole in 1964 and they were a perfect match in every way. Believing that intelligence is the most attractive feature a man could have, she

often said that Ed Cole was the most attractive man she had ever met. They both enjoyed hunting, and she also delighted in flying airplanes and driving fast cars.

Dollie was proud that Ed was the engineer and father of GM's Small Block V8 engine—the same engine that would power the Corvette. Over 100 million of them have been produced in the decades since. Dollie admired him for his work ethic as well. She joked that when they were married they should have been pronounced “man and wife and briefcase.”

After Ed became President of General Motors, many car enthusiasts in the nation would come to know Dollie simply as Ed's wife; however, she wasn't content to be compartmentalized in that manner or let that define her. Known to be colorful, motivated, and outspoken, she lived life to the fullest. Her resume included accredited test driver and pilot, Senior Editor for a publishing company, author, television host, and even a model in Dr. Pepper ads. She could labor in a barn (she and Ed lived on a working ranch) all day and that evening step into a lavish elite social situation. She was engaging and comfortable with anyone she met regardless of their station in life, whether an underprivileged child, elevator operator, top race car driver, powerful business icon, or even the President of the United States. But she also knew celebrities and could raise funds for charities; guests at her themed parties included Carol Burnett, John Glenn, Barbara Walters, Phyllis Diller, Barbara Stanwyck, Jim Nabors, Ruth Buzzi and Andy Griffith. But her guest list was also inclusive - sales clerks and other acquaintances were always invited to her shindigs.

Cole also loved giving things away. She sent truckloads of goods to the survivors of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the Labor Day fires in Bastrop. She had a special sentiment for those who were defenseless—mainly children and animals. Her goal in life was to use her resources, abilities, time, and energy to help people rather than look for ways to be entertained.



During Ed's time as President of GM, he certainly had his work cut out for him. The auto industry, and the Chevrolet Corvair in particular, were under attack by consumer groups (and Ralph Nader in particular; the 1960-1963 models of the Corvair were listed – and are still listed - as one of the top ten most unsafe cars ever produced). When things got especially ugly, Dollie got involved. She called in to The Phil Donahue Show as it was airing live and interviewing a guest who was criticizing the auto industry. Donohue put Dollie on live and she quickly defended the industry. Donahue was so impressed with her that he moved his show to Detroit for a week and had Dollie on as a guest. He later hosted a debate between Nader and Ed Cole that many feel Ed won. Dollie later spoke often at women's organizations about having a voice, making a difference, getting involved and not being passive. Her way of approaching life was obviously the opposite of a typical corporate executive's wife. To her, silence was *not* golden.

Ed retired from GM in 1974, and tragically died when an airplane he was piloting crashed in Michigan during a storm in May 1977; he was 67. This left Dollie alone to protect his legacy, care for their children, and remain involved. One of her projects was the Pegasus School in her hometown of Lockhart, Texas for youths who had been removed from their homes by the state because of parents with drug or legal problems. Dollie gave the school land and solicited enough money from friends to build buildings and get a magnet school started. There were 90 boys at the school, so she'd go to auctions and buy 90 of everything—pairs of shoes, pairs of boots, pairs of jeans, and so on.

Dollie also served on several boards, such as PBS, Project HOPE (World Health Organization), The Smithsonian National Air & Space Museum, National Captioning Institute for the Hearing Impaired, National Academy of Sciences Presidents' Circle, and the 100 Club of Central Texas, a charitable organization established to support the families of officers killed in the line of duty.

She also served on the board of the newly formed NCM and became a cheerleader for the Corvette. She knew that the car was a big part of Ed's legacy, and when the Museum was struggling she had a key role in turning it from what it was to what it is today. Executive Director Wendell Strode agreed:

“I met Dollie in 1997, just after being hired at the Museum. This was a critical time for us. The Museum was in default on its loan to the banks, and foreclosure appeared to be imminent. We needed change, and Dollie was the board member for this new era. As her leadership skills became obvious to

everyone, she was elected to serve as Chairman of the Board. Her favorite reminder to all of us was to ‘check your egos at the door.’ She was there fighting for what needed to be done. She was a leader in deed as well as word. She attended many shows and club meetings to speak on behalf of the Museum. She hosted fundraiser events at her ranch to benefit the Museum. And on more than one occasion, Dollie wrote a check to the Museum so that we could be involved in some activity that would make us more visible locally and nationally. Dollie was instrumental in turning the Museum around and helping to lay the foundation for the success we enjoy today.”

Dollie passed away on August 24, 2014, leaving behind three sons and a daughter. In 2019 Dollie was inducted into the Corvette Hall of Fame, joining Ed - a 1998 Corvette Hall of Fame inductee.



Dollie and Ed Cole’s 1,100 acre/15,200 sq. ft. ranch near Lockhart, Texas, which also served as a movie set. It appraised for \$6 million in 2016.



Donna Mae Mims, 2016 Corvette Hall of Fame Inductee



Donna grew up in Dormont, Pennsylvania, and in the late-1950s worked as executive secretary at Yenko Chevrolet in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania. [Operating from 1949-1982, the Yenko dealership is best known for selling customized sports cars during the late 1960s, essentially putting big block engines and drivetrains into Camaros and Chevelles; today Yenkos are some of the most collectible vehicles, sometimes selling for more than \$600,000.] Donna’s duties included helping other racers specify parts and even find sponsors, and at one point her “company car” was a 1969 L88 Stingray (extremely powerful and rare, only 116 produced, often worth over a half million dollars). Donna also freelanced as a writer for several car magazines, including Competition Press, Corvette News, SCCA’s (Sports Car Club of America) Sports Car, and Sports Car Graphic magazines, among others.

After Donna and her husband Mike purchased a 1957 fuel-injected Corvette off a dealer’s lot, they developed an interest in automobile racing. The Yenko dealership had a division involved in automobile racing, and in 1960 Donna began racing cars with friends from the dealership. She quickly became one of the top amateur race car drivers in the country, winning her first race in 1960 in her Corvette at the Cumberland (Maryland) National.

She soon became a regular participant in Cumberland, and in 1963 won the SCCA (Sports Car Club of America) national racing championship in a pink 1959 Austin-Healey Bugeye Sprite. In the 20-year history of the SCCA to that point, she was the first woman to win a national racing championship.



Donna's 1959 "Bugeye" Sprite

Donna quickly became known as the "Pink Lady" because most of her racing automobiles were painted pink. In addition to her pink Austin-Healey, she drove a pink Corvette, Corvair, Triumph TR3, and MGB. She would later say she'd liked pink ever since she was a little girl. Of course, while she loved her first Corvette, she was not fond of its white color. Her husband refused to let her paint it pink, so she painted 'Think Pink' on its side. She also sported pink coveralls, a pink crash helmet, and pink wig when racing. In her championship driving year, she was part of the Yenko/Chevrolet race team that dominated A/Production and B/Production SCCA racing with Corvettes, all while driving her little pink, bug-eyed Sprite.

After retiring from racing in 1974, Donna stayed busy as a worker in Race Control at three Ohio racecourses and remained active in events of the Steel Cities SCCA Region, Corvette Club of Western Pennsylvania, Three Rivers Corvette Club (which she founded), Steeltown Corvette Club, and the Tri-Rivers Car Club Council.

Donna passed away in October 2009 at the age of 82. Per her wishes, her body was displayed in her pink 1979 Corvette during visitation at the funeral home, and more than 40 Corvettes participated in the funeral procession. She was inducted into the Corvette Hall of Fame in 2016.

