

“PEAKING” IN THE REARVIEW MIRROR

By Ken Peak, RCC Historian



WOMEN IN CORVETTE HISTORY: PART 2¹

In March 2021 the National Corvette Museum 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 these four distinctive women; the previous Part 1 focused on Dollie Cole and Donna Mae Mims; this Part 2 discusses Betty Skelton and Elfi Arkus-Duntov.

Betty Skelton, 2001 Corvette Hall of Fame Inductee



Betty Skelton, frequently referred to as the “first lady of firsts,” worked side-by-side with some of the biggest names in Corvette and established unbelievable records of her own in racing, aviation, and automotive history. The first woman to

be inducted into the Corvette Hall of Fame, Betty was also the first woman in the world to drive racing cars to new records through the famous NASCAR measured mile on the sands of Daytona Beach. Skelton established records for Chevrolet behind the wheel of the Corvette, and appeared at major auto shows, as well as national ads and TV commercials. In all, she held four Feminine World Land Speed Records and set a transcontinental speed record.

Born in Pensacola, Florida in 1926, as a toddler Betty was fascinated by the airplanes that flew over her home at the nearby Naval Air Station, and even preferred model airplanes over dolls. At age eight she began reading books on aviation; whenever they could, the family spent time at the municipal airport, where pilots took her for rides on local flights.

Eventually a Navy ensign took a special interest in her and provided flight instruction, allowing her to solo in his airplane when she was 12 years old. Upon receiving her Civil Aviation Authority private pilot's license at age 16, she qualified for the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) program, whose participants ferried Air Force pilots and aircraft to their duty stations.

While still a teenager, Betty flew whenever she could. After high school she got a job with Eastern Airlines as a clerk, which allowed her to rent planes and fly during the day. At age 18, she received her commercial pilot's license and in 1945 (age 19) was certified as a flight instructor.

Betty was the U.S. Female Aerobatic Champion in 1948, 1949, and 1950. After her third championship, with no challenges remaining in aerobatics, she ceased that activity and in 1949 set the world light-plane altitude record of 25,763 feet in a Piper Cub. She also held the world speed record for piston-engine aircraft at 421.6 mph in a P-51 Mustang racing plane.

Betty eventually worked side-by-side with some of the biggest names associated with Corvette while establishing records of her own in racing and automotive history. In 1956, Harley Earl and Bill Mitchell designed a special Corvette for Betty. As the first female test driver in the auto industry (and the first woman to drive an Indy car), she set a land speed record in 1956 at 145 mph in that beefed-up Corvette. Having established records for Chevrolet behind the wheel of the Corvette, she appeared at major auto shows as well as in national ads and TV commercials.

In 1959, she was invited by NASA to become the first woman to undergo physical and psychological testing for the first seven astronauts and was directly involved with arranging for America's first astronauts to become Corvette Owners.



Serving as the first female technical narrator for GM at major shows, she attended and participated in many major races where Corvettes were in the spotlight. She was on the committee that originated the “Corvette News” (currently “Corvette Quarterly”) and was the publication’s editor for many years. Her list of accomplishments run the gamut from honors at many halls of fame and museums throughout the U.S. to being the recipient of record-breaking honors in world land speed, stock car endurance, and the stock car flying mile record. She was considered the Official Spokeswoman for Chevrolet.

The “Fastest Woman on Earth” died in Florida in August 2011 from cancer at age 85. She donated her biplane which she dubbed “Little Stinker” to the Smithsonian. Betty was inducted into the Corvette Hall of Fame in 2001.

Elfi Arkus-Duntov, 2022 Corvette Hall of Fame inductee



Elfriede “Elfi” Arkus-Duntov is considered the Godmother and First Lady of Corvette. With her blonde hair and sparkling blue eyes, Elfi helped personify the car in her own inimitable way.

Elfi met Zora as a teenager in Berlin, after ducking into a Berlin café to get out of the rain. Zora was inside with a few friends when their eyes first met, and they instantly fell in love. They married in February 1939 outside of Paris, where they enjoyed nightclubs, cabaret shows and summer days boating around nearby lakes. While in Paris, she got a job with the Follies Bergère while Zora partnered with a wealthy friend of his to race MGs. When the war broke out, Zora joined the French Air Force and was assigned to bombardier training in the city of Toulouse, in southwestern France; Elfi remained in their Paris apartment. As the German tanks began rolling down the streets of Paris, she grabbed everything she could, jumped into her MG roadster, and decided to get out of town. But without papers and very little money for gas or food, it would be a precarious journey, and she would need to trust in the kindness of strangers.

Avoiding traffic and checkpoints on the main highways, she drove the back roads. In a few days her MG broke down; soon she was frightened by a group of soldiers in the distance singing. They turned out to be a band of Scottish soldiers – who put her up in a peasant’s house and fixed up her MG; in four days’ time she reached Toulouse, where she was reunited with Zora. Together, they escaped from Nazi-occupied France, finding their way to a New York-bound ship in December 1940. Landing at Ellis Island, they blended in with the west side Russian-Jewish community. After the U.S. entered the war, they entered the war munitions business where they made a substantial amount of money and enjoyed a Penthouse view from their apartment.

After the war, Zora converted his war munitions business into a mechanical engineering firm and began manufacturing overhead valve cylinder heads for the Ford Flathead V8. After that business failed, Zora and Elfi split up for a time, Zora going to London to work for a sports car firm while she moved to Miami and joined the June Taylor Dancers, performing at the Copacabana. They eventually reunited in New York where Zora first laid eyes on a Corvette at the GM Motorama Show in January 1953.

Zora landed a job at GM so he could influence the future direction of Corvette (soon becoming Chief Engineer for the brand). Elfi remained at his side through it all: at car shows and special events at Pikes Peak, Daytona, Sebring, Nassau,

Indianapolis and Le Mans. For decades, the two personified the performance and the sexiness of the Corvette. They often entertained the likes of astronaut Alan Shepard, Betty Skelton (at that time the feminine face of Corvette), and others. Everyone who met her was immediately impressed with her grace and knowledge of “America’s Sports Car.” One of their proudest moments was in August 1994 when they were the guests of honor at the grand opening of the NCM.



Elfi in Zora’s 1955 “Experimental” Corvette, then offered for sale for \$3,500.

Elfi was also a painter, and Corvettes were often the subject of her work. She painted this piece of Zora, which is in the NCM’s Collection; the Corvette in the painting is also in the Museum’s collection.

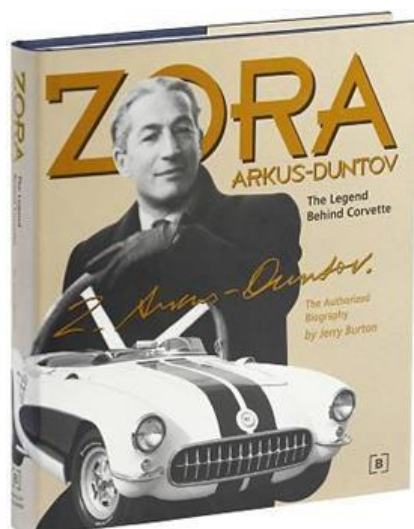


In 1965, Corvette introduced a new and exciting color – Silver Pearl. It was very well received by female Corvette enthusiasts as being sleek and elegant. Due to her love for and involvement with all things Corvette, a special women’s organization was named in her honor: Elfi’s Silver Pearl Sisterhood. This group of women shared a passion for Corvettes and uniting with other Corvette enthusiasts,

while also working to assist the mission of the NCM. Members pool their financial gifts and allocate the funds to a project or program at the Museum. Members have an equal voice on how the pooled funds are utilized annually. Any Corvette enthusiast, owner, or friend who wishes to connect to other female Corvette lovers and advance Museum priorities through philanthropic engagement and a collective voice may become a member. A YouTube video of Elfi's Silver Pearl Sisterhood and their charitable works may be seen by simply doing a Google search of that same name.



Zora died of complications from cancer at age 86 in April 1996; Elfi was instrumental in getting Zora's life story published in his official biography, *Zora Arkus-Duntov, the Legend Behind Corvette*. Elfi passed in October 2008 at age 93. Both died in Michigan and wished to be cremated; their ashes are interred in a special display at the NCM.



¹ Following are sources used for this article and Part 1 of this two-part series: banner photos of all women at the top of both articles as well as text materials were taken from Mariah Hughes, for the National Corvette Museum, “International Women’s Day: Honoring the Women in Corvette History,” March 8, 2023, <https://www.corvettemuseum.org/international-womens-day-honoring-the-women-in-corvette-history/>; Corvette Depot (Skelton photos); Corvette Mike (Zora and Elfi boat photo); *Houston Chronicle* (Cole ranch photo); GM Authority (Mims pink Corvette photo); Classic Motorsports (Mims Bugeye Austin-Healey photo); Autoblog (Mims and white Corvette racer photo); and Pinterest (Mims photo at rear of racecar). Information was also drawn from obituaries for each.