

The Chevy II And Nova

By Rick Feibusch

Introduced amidst a throng of other compacts and often eclipsed by its Chevrolet siblings, the little Chevy II was one of those cars that always did its job well and is remembered fondly by the people who drove them.

There are many unsung heroes of the daily road and highway wars. Most are "people's cars," functional transportation modules that got dad to work on time, the kids to school and mom to the market and back day after day. Many became lost in the cobwebbed corners of the mind because they weren't the big, flashy and sporty cars that we lusted after, but instead were the interim and practical ones that we were forced to drive until we could afford to "move up" to something a bit more impressive.

Some, like the Model T Ford, VW beetle and Morris Minor, have been revered and honored over the years, but that had more to do with the fact that millions of each were produced over long periods of time with very little change and all were quirky enough to have a distinct "personality." Millions of less prolific and unconventional marques have gone to the crusher with nary a tear.

The Chevy II, introduced in late 1961, was one of the last compacts to be released after the great American compact rush of the late '50s and early '60s. The switch to compacts had been a reaction to a major financial crisis and automotive recession in the late '50s that induced many thrifty and practical Americans to purchase foreign made "baby cars".

Though many of the imports proved to be a tad small and underpowered for mainstream America, they did give some perspective to the notion that one needed a twenty-foot-long, two ton, 300 horse, V8 powered, land yacht to run to the supermarket or over to Granny's house.

Chevrolet's initial offering in late 1959, was the revolutionary, rear-engined Corvair. Though considered the "sportiest" of the American little guys, it was a bit smaller and a lot lower than Ford's Falcon and Comet, or the offerings from Chrysler and AMC. The seating position was low with legs extended, more like a Corvette than an Impala.



Because of its rear engine placement and swing axle rear suspension, the Corvair had unusual handling characteristics. While this would ultimately be a major factor in the car's demise, the 'Vair was great fun to drive and was well received by "the youth market." Unfortunately, all that the youngsters loved in the car, sent older buyers and family folks to the competition in droves. To remedy this, Chevrolet started developing its own Ford Falcon-like front engine "little big car".

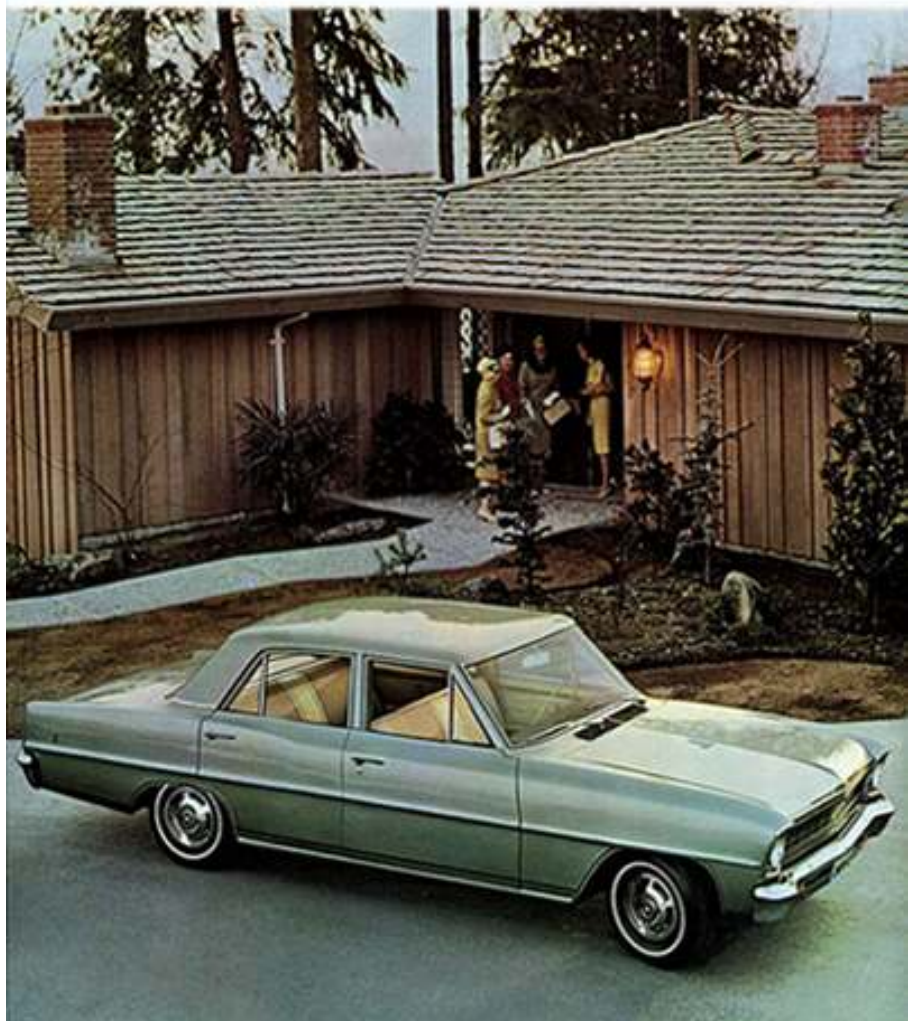
A brand new 194 cube six cylinder engine project had been underway at Chevy to replace the old "Stovebolt" 235 cu. in. unit that had started life in the late '20s. Along with the new six, engineering was working on a four cylinder derivative, made by removing the six's front two cylinders, to use as the base engine in the new compact and for industrial power applications.

The new six was marginally smaller and lighter, but was just as powerful and had plenty of room for future increases in displacement. Introduced on the '62 Chevy II, it replaced the old Stovebolt and became the standard powerplant on all Chevrolet passenger cars in 1963.

The Chevy II unibody/chassis was all new as well. Based more on the configuration found under the Falcon or the Nash Ramblers of the early '50s rather than any previous Chevrolet, the unitized design featured long front springs and shocks that reached from the A-arms to a tower mount by the top of each fender and leaf springs at the rear. Novel was the use of a bolt-in front "subframe" and a single leaf on each rear spring.

The body was a trim, reduced-dimension version of the big Chevys with a tall top, upright seating, and plenty of head and leg room. It was available as a two and four-door sedan, and a wagon in four series (states of trim). A sporty two-door hardtop and convertible were soon added to the top line series and were available with a Super Sport trim option. Models included the baseline 100, the midrange 200 and 300 and the top line Nova 400. The 200 series was dropped soon after introduction. Over 326,000 were sold in this first model year and the Chevy II proved to be right on the intended market as it sold this well without cutting into Corvair sales.

While the '63 models were, other than hubcaps and trim, unchanged. Chevrolet reduced series and model choices for 1964 to avoid market conflicts with the all-new Chevelle line.



The mid-series 300 was dropped, as was the cute little ragtop and the Super Sport package. The good news was the availability of the powerful 283 V8. This option, combined with a three or four-speed stick, would turn "granny's ride" into a drag strip stormer. Even though, Chevy II sales slumped, probably due to competition from the bigger and more impressive Chevelle.

Sales continued to drop in 1965, this time due to in-house competition from a very sporty restyled & re-engineered Corvair as well as the Chevelle and the new Mustang from Ford. This was despite an effort to bring the Nova up to higher levels in the performance category. Two 327 cube engines of 250 and 300 H.P. and a reintroduction of the SS. Today these versions are rare, fun and FAST!

A handsome cosmetic restyling that brought sales up in 1966, couldn't hold off the 33% drop in sales for 1967 brought on by the introduction of the Camaro, GM's answer to the Mustang.

An all new car was released for 1968, the new compact Chevy had grown in size and looked like a scaled down version of its bigger brothers. It used the same subframe and components as the Camaro and rode, steered and handled far superior to the car it replaced.

An uprated 230 cube six, introduced in 1966 was the base power, though the little four could still be ordered. The standard V8 was a new 307 cube base line unit to replace the venerable 283, and 327s were available to 275 H.P. A big-block 396 cube monster mill became available for real serious performance buffs. WOW!

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A new Rally package was added to the line. This performance package included a 350 V8, bucket seats, stripes and could not be ordered with a four-on-the-floor. Why? These were the days of the insurance industry anti-performance campaigns and a 4-speed was the option that would flag a street-racer-rate. This was the first "Dodge" built by GM - an insurance dodge!

1973 and '74 were transition years for the Nova. Since there was no station wagon available in this price range, and engineering one was financially out of the question, a new liftback model with a fold-down rear seat was fashioned out of the 2-door sedan.

And then there were the big bumpers. Due to new federal safety regulations the front and rear bumpers grew to alarming proportions and the grills and back panels were reworked to integrate them. At the time, they made the cars look a bit fat, but after getting used to seeing all cars with big bumpers, they don't look half bad. The new eggcrate grill and four light rear panel looked sharp. While the '73s had heavy brackets, the '74s had shock-mounted bumpers.

Another interesting turn of events was Nova based compacts were added to the Olds, Buick, and Pontiac lines. Called the Omega, Apollo and Ventura II, these cars had unique front sheet metal, dashboards and taillights. While the Buicks all seemed to have Buick 350 engines, the Omega and Ventura II versions could be found with Chevy power under the hood. While some were available as lower line models, most were equivalent to the fanciest of the Chevy Novas.

The final Nova was part of a GM engineering project that produced the Nova, Olds Omega, Buick Apollo, and Pontiac Ventura. It also was the basis of the first series of the Cadillac Seville. These cars, built between 1975 and late 1979, all looked quite the same and were available as two and four-door sedans and liftbacks. While they could be ordered with a number of different V8s, these were smogged-down and converter equipped.

A 350 powered Nova SS was available in '75 and '76, though it was a shadow of its former self and a "Rally" stripe & trim replaced any semblance of performance in 1977.



In the end, all that was left was the name, and that was used for a short time on the Toyota Corolla clone (now called Geo Prisma) built in Fremont, CA. Over the years, the Nova changed its face and personality a number of times and could be optioned-out to be anything from a baseline government spec fleet use econobox or a truck-like 4-door wagon, to a nastier-than-nasty muscle car.

Any way you look at it, the ubiquitous little Novas went about their work offering the combination of reasonable size, easy maneuverability, economical operation, and world famous Chevrolet reliability. What more could one ask for?



A vintage advertisement for the 1975 Chevrolet Nova LN. The main image shows a dark blue Nova LN sedan parked on a green lawn. In the background, a bride and groom in white wedding attire stand under a large, leafy tree. The headline at the top right reads "NOVA'S ALWAYS BEEN GOOD. NOW IT'S BEAUTIFUL. INTRODUCING THE 1975 NOVA LN." Below the headline are three columns of text describing the car's features. At the bottom left, there is a small copyright notice: "Copyright 1974 General Motors. All rights reserved. Chevrolet and Nova are trademarks of General Motors." At the bottom right, it says "Chevrolet is a GM brand."

**NOVA'S ALWAYS BEEN GOOD.
NOW IT'S BEAUTIFUL.
INTRODUCING THE 1975 NOVA LN.**

Just like you might expect a computer to be reliable, our latest new addition to the Nova lineup is the best we've ever offered.

The 1975 Nova LN brings you new styling, new colors, new features, new ideas, new available options. The gold standard.

It's not just a car, it's a lifestyle. It's a beautiful blend of new Nova into the past and let's get people.

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