

Company creates Corvette interiors

Shop caters to American dream machine

By MIKE SCANLON

Al Knoch's Interiors, Inc., is a temple to the cult of the Corvette.

You know about the Corvette — pointlessly powerful, needlessly nifty. An atavistic anachronism from the days when OPEC was just four capital letters strung together.

In two words — high profile — the closest limited production thing ever to the masculine American image.

So why are 70 percent of Al Knoch's employees women?

"They're more reliable," explains Knoch. Al Knoch's Interiors, Inc., could disappear forever from the face of the earth and a sigh would take care of it, for all but a select few. Twenty-eight of

the few are Knoch's employees, who get paid for snipping and molding and sewing the interiors.

And to the rest of the few it's a religious experience. They're Corvette owners. Knoch, himself, traded in a 1962 Corvette for the Dodge truck he now drives.

General Motors made 4,640 Corvettes in the first two years of production. It has barely reached 50,000 cars in the last couple of model years. That's a drop in the bucket seats for the world's largest automobile manufacturer, so GM doesn't bother manufacturing replacement parts for very long — a company spokesman says just three years, in fact, for most of them. Knoch's firm does.

IT MAKES THEM all, from 1953 on. Seats, head linings, door panels — you ask for it, you got it. From a \$900 vinyl job to maybe \$1,200 for leather. Tack on \$500 more if you want them all installed. Basic black is the big seller.

The company is unusual in more ways than the sex ratio of its employees. From a five-and-dime-sized factory in an industrial park off Venoy, Al Knoch covers the globe. Or anywhere you find Corvettes, whichever area is larger. Ninety percent of the factory's customers order by mail.

Which probably has something to do with the scene that greets the 10 percent who walk in. How many other plants do you know where visitors are intercepted by Betsy and Toto?

No receptionist, no secretary — in fact, no humans at all. Period. Just one very small dog with pink ribbon tied to its head and one very large dog with nails studding its collar. A sort of canine Starsky and Hutch, the small one giving your ankles the once over while the big one looks ready to take on the rest of you. They follow you as you try to weave your way between piles of red Corvette seat covers littering the lobby. Sudden moves seem downright suicidal.

Off to one side of the lobby is Knoch's office. It is adorned with antiques — a desk Warren Gamaliel Harding would have been proud to call his own, a pot-bellied stove with its chimneys hooked up to nothing.

Face facts, folks — the place is weird.

"I GOT INTO it for greed," Knoch, 37, explains pleasantly. "I started doing it at home in my garage for a

friend I was in a chemistry class at Wayne with."

That was 18 years ago, but "it's only been since we got in the mail order business that we got this big," said Knoch. That happened four years ago.

About half the buyers will do their own installing.

"A lot of guys who buy these Corvettes do it for love and they don't necessarily have the money to do it all at once. Usually, the engine comes first and the interior is the last thing they think of," said Knoch.

And most of them do not live in California, no matter what you might think. "California represents the new and, actually, this is the old. A lot of your restoration places are in the East and Midwest. They were always behind, anyway," said Knoch.

MOST BUYERS want original equipment, that is, interiors made of the same material in the same way and the same color as was first installed on the car.

"Diamonds and buttons and tucks, that was in the '50s. In the '60s and '70s, they ripped out all the rolls and pleats and diamonds and tucks and went back to original equipment," said Knoch.

Original equipment can mean peculiar distinctions — foam pads under the seat covers bearing the same waffle pattern as the original. Some of this is tough to get.

"All the vinyl, there's less vinyl in it now. The carpeting, there's less carpeting in it. We have to pay extra to have it done the way it should be done," said Knoch. Materials are cut according to original General Motors blueprints for most model years.

NANCY CLINE, a Westland resident

who has worked on the sewing machines since August, likes her job. However, she has never been inside a Corvette.

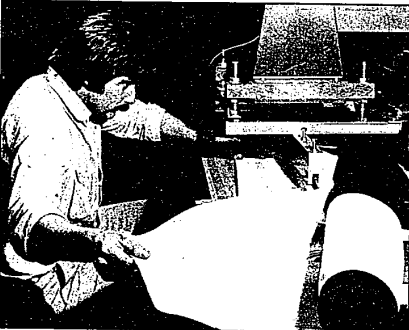
"Every seat is different from every other seat," she said as she stitched together the roof for a '68 'Vette. The average seat takes about two hours to complete, but Ms. Cline said the toughest one — a 1972 seat, which "has

more parts" — may take four hours.

"I like it. It's different. It's not like anything I've ever done before," said Diane Gray, emphasizing the obvious.

As she spoke, she was preparing to shoot an injection mold for a door lining.

Joanne Knoch takes care of the company books, and has for four of the five years since she married.



Al Knoch himself apparently takes a turn now and then in the back-shop. Maybe to get away from the dogs in the front shop.



Like 70 percent of the other 28 employees at Knoch's Interiors, Nancy Cline is — obviously — a woman. What she's doing here is sewing a convertible top for a Corvette, a car she works on every day — but she's never been inside one. (Photo by Art Emanuel)

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