The WHITLEY TRIFECTA

6S1108 CSX2521 6S074

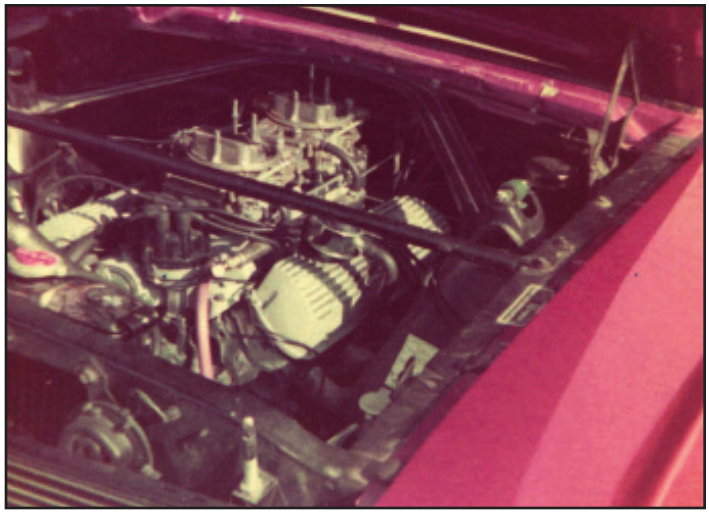
– Bill Whitley

I first became aware of Carroll Shelby's cars through various magazines like *Competition Press*, *Motor Trend* and *Car and Driver*. I saw a couple of 1965 GT350s in our area of central New York state and they looked and sounded tough. I decided to buy a 1966 Shelby GT350 at Reynolds Ford in Syracuse, New York. In July 1966, Reynolds had about a dozen GT350s for sale, including a blue one with white stripes and a red one with white stripes. I picked the red one but didn't like the ten-spoke wheels. They removed them and added a radio. The total cost, delivered to my house, was $4,400. I traded my 1966 Galaxie XL with 427/425 horsepower engine (with a 7000 rpm kit) plus $1,600 and became the proud owner of SFM6S1108.

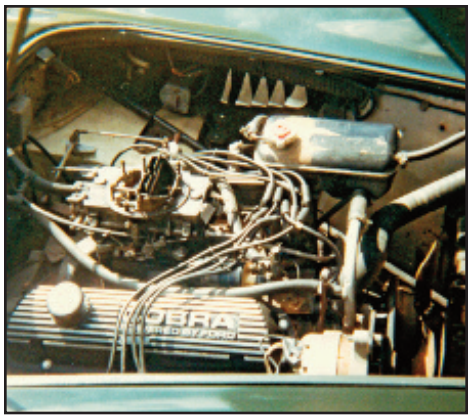
In the mid-1960s the Binghamton, New York area had a large contingent of high performance cars relative to the population. This was because of large companies like General Electric, IBM, Link and others that paid well. Corvettes were like fleas on a dog; they were all over the place. Pontiac GTOs, Road Runners, Chevelle SSs and Hemis were common street predators. My GT350 faced off with many of them over the years. I had my share of victories but I couldn't win them all. So, I started looking for a 289 Cobra to go after the rest of them. My wife, Jean, liked driving my GT350 and wanted one of her own. She found a white '66 GT350 with blue stripes that had been wrecked and repaired by a local body man who kept it for himself. In August of 1967 she bought the GT350. She was the car's third owner and it only had about 3,000 miles on it. She paid $3,000 for SFM6S074, an early 1966. Jean had acquired a reputation for showing her taillights to many of the faster musclecars in the area. Not many of these guys liked getting beat by a woman. We both smiled a lot.

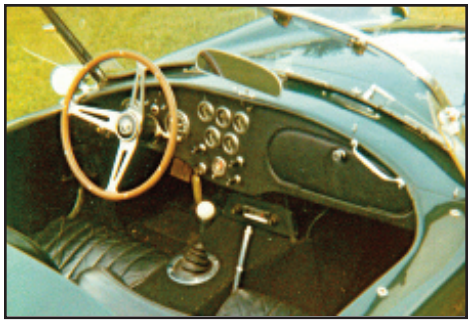
I found my 289 Cobra at Larsen Ford in White Plains, New York. After a phone call confirming it was available, we went to see it. It was about three hours away. They had replaced the battery, starter and speedometer. The Vineyard Green paint was rough, some chrome was missing and the side curtains were all scratched up. The engine was a stock 289/271 Hi-Po and was in need of a thorough cleaning. It had painted wire wheels. They said it had been on the show room floor for about two years. They were asking $4,500 for it as it sat. We dickered back and forth and finally agreed on a deal. They would repaint it, replace the missing chrome and get new side curtains for $4,500. They delivered the Cobra to me in September 1967. The car was CSX2521 and it only had about 200 miles on it. My auto insurance agent asked my wife what a Cobra was? She replied, "*Do you know what an MG looks like?*" She said that a Cobra was like an MG, only with a V8 engine. To offset the cost of the Cobra, I had to sell my 1962 Falcon drag race car with trailer. It was well worth it.

I called the parts manager at Reynolds Ford to see if I could get some sort of garage discount on parts. He said sure, no problem. They would even ship them to me if necessary. I had three Shelbys to maintain and keep in tune. We also had a 1966 Ford Galaxie LTD as a family car. It had a 390 big block with a four-speed transmission. Over the years I would normally order 100 spark plugs, a case of oil filters plus a quantity of points, condensers, rotors and caps. I found that buying in bulk got me a much better price and with all those cars, this was important. I was eventually able to get a garage discount at my local Ford dealer. One of the first things that I did when I got a car with a four-speed was to install a Hurst Compe-



We've gotten so used to seeing cars that are perfectly restored that when we see a picture taken back in the 1960s of a car that was a daily driver at the time, we're stunned to see something like whitewalls and Cragar Super Stock wheels. And if it took dual-quads to wax the Z-28s, GTOs, Road Runners and 327 Vettes, then so be it.





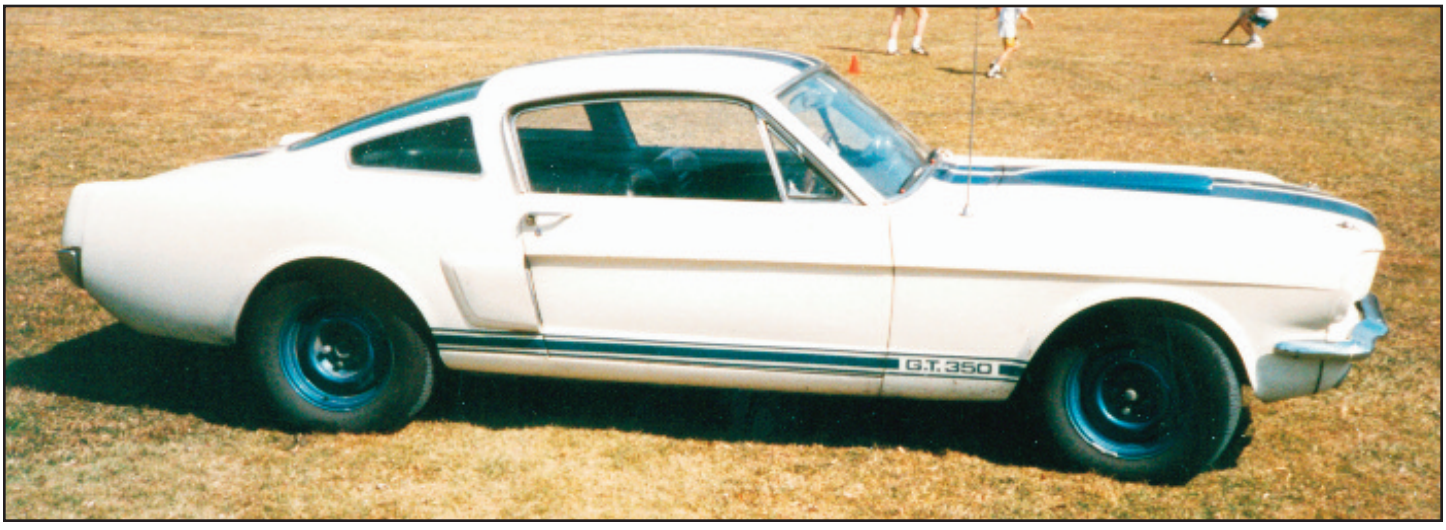
CSX2521 entered Bill Whitley's life in September of 1967 and stuck around for thirty-two years. This picture was taken not quite a year later. It had already gotten a set of chrome wire wheels and the requisite Hurst Competition Plus shifter.

tition Plus shifter. The Cobra got one of these right away.

I was driving my GT350 all year round because I didn't have another car to drive. This continued for about a dozen years before I was able to take it off the road in the winter. Finding winter storage for the other cars was a challenge. Jean's GT350 was stored at a friend's house during the winter months. He used the GT350 to hide his kids Christmas presents in. The Cobra was kept at my parents' house.

I had my share of problems with the Cobra in the first five years. The car was overheating at low speed and a bad radiator seemed to be the problem. I also replaced the water pump. I was unable to adjust the valves to the correct settings because it apparently had the wrong cam. And at one point the exhaust system fell off. I repaired it and installed new 427 Cobra mufflers and my own pipes (I still have the original pipes around somewhere). I was unable to remove the left rear wire wheel because it was frozen on the splined hub. In getting it off I ruined both the hub and the rim because I had to heat it to remove the wheel. The hub had to be replaced and I had a problem getting the right bearing seals. Then there were the exhaust manifolds that developed leaks and I had to hand-make gaskets to fix them.

I purchased four new chrome wire wheels from Shelby and was told that only a few sets of chrome wire wheels were left. The wheels were 70-spoke, not 72-spoke which were standard. About this time I also purchased a small-rear-window hardtop from Shelby American, along with side curtains for the hardtop, an aluminum high-rise intake manifold, a set of brake pads, two sets of emblems and a 715 cfm Holley. I updated the Cobra's engine to the standard 306 horsepower configuration.



Jean Whitley decided her husband was having too much fun with his cars and she needed one of her own. Enter 6S074. When they attended shows or conventions they often brought both cars. His and hers.

During the late sixties and into the early seventies, I made contact with several Cobra owners in our area. Their cars were CSX2280, CSX2357, CSX2437, CSX2466, CSX2521 and CSX3300. CSX2357 was one of the factory Dragonsnakes and this car was actively raced for more than four years in the Northeast. The first factory Dragonsnake ended up in Rochester, New York for many years.

Cobra information was pretty scarce in those days. When I heard about a couple of owner and enthusiast organizations, I joined them in order to discover more information sources. The Cobra Owners Club of America (COCOA) was the first one. This was an offshoot of the first Cobra owners group started by the factory back in the 1960s. I joined the Cobra Club as soon as I heard about, and then the Shelby Owners Association (SOA). Both of these groups proved to be very useful for Cobra information. The Shelby American Automobile Club (SAAC) came about as a result of a split from SOA in 1975. The Cobra Club merged with SAAC. I became a local Rep for SAAC very early on. I later asked SAAC to make Jean and I dual reps because people would call and ask for me. They would ask me a question that my wife knew the answer to and could have answered if she had been asked. Jean and I were the first husband/wife SAAC reps and for a long time she was one of a very few woman who owned and drove their own Shelby GT350.

During the mid-1970s I went to several informal Cobra Club get-togethers in northern New Jersey and northeastern Pennsylvania. It was mostly Cobra owners and their cars; usually about a dozen plus a few other interested individuals, some with Shelby Mustangs. I liked to go on these outings because it gave me a chance to drive the Cobra, and it was an excellent opportunity to meet other owners and talk about our cars. I first met Jon Valentine, from Dallas, Pennsylvania at one of these small events. Jon was the owner of CSX2296, and he would become my Shelby mechanic of choice. His expertise and skill allowed me to enjoy our GT350s and especially the Cobra. He kept our Shelbys well maintained. They were always safe and roadworthy. Jon became one of my most valued friends, and he still is today.

I felt that, as SAAC reps, it was our duty to support other local SAAC regions by attending their events. During our time as reps, Jean and I attended New York events in Port Jervis, Glens Falls, Rochester and Syracuse. There were also others over the years but those four stand out. Jean would drive her Shelby and I would drive the Cobra. We also attended many of the larger local car shows in our area, including Victor, Norwich, Homer, Moravia, and Elmira as well as Scranton and Dallas, Pennsylvania. The show in Victor, for example, was a huge sports car show with over 1,000 cars on the field for the day. We enjoyed participating in these events for over thirty years.

Our first SAAC convention was at Hershey in 1977. I recall that it was a really enjoyable time for everyone. There was a very large turnout of Cobras, and there were seminars on the various cars. Hershey was one of the best SAAC conventions of all time. Very few cars were trailered back then. They were still being taken out and exercised to keep them fit. SAAC was doing a good job of keeping the spirit of Shelby American alive and well, and the club would continue to do this right up to the present time.

In 1978 we bought a three bay garage on a residential lot in a nice neighborhood. We now had a place to store our three Shelbys plus an assortment of parts, sheet

Bill was responsible for giving a lot of enthusiasts their first ride in a real Cobra, and he made sure they remembered it forever. This photo was taken at SAAC-14 at Pocono International Raceway.

It's about 75 miles from Whitley's house to Watkins Glen, about the perfect distance for a Cobra drive. CSX2521 was no stranger to the track. The weather at the Glen is capable of changing in a heartbeat, so it's a good idea to bring some rain protection if you're driving an open car. Whitley packed a shower curtain in the trunk for just such occurrences.

metal, wheels and tires and tools, all in one place. I now had a place to work on our cars in relative comfort. About this time I became a Goodyear tire dealer in order to get tires at a discount.You had to buy a minimum of 12 tires, so it wasn't a major undertaking. Goodyear eventually eliminated the discount to small "dealers," but it worked for a little while. I also got a garage discount on Ford parts. With three cars, it was an expensive hobby.

The next SAAC convention we attended was SAAC-5 in Dearborn, Michigan in July of 1980. This was our first—and last—convention without bringing a car with us. It just wasn't the same experience. We attended SAAC-7 in 1982 and SAAC-10 in 1985, both in Great Gorge, New Jersey. They were really good conventions with open track at Pocono and outstanding car shows. The seminars on Shelbys and Cobras were proving to be better and better, as the club gathered more and more useful information and the people in the seminars were able to share it with everyone. SAAC-14 at Pocono International Raceway in 1989 was the first year that we attended a convention without Jean's GT350. Her left knee had been bothering her and her doctor advised her to stop driving manual shift cars, so she sold 6S074 to Jon Valentine in 1988. At the time of the sale, the only problem was the steering box. Thanks again to Jon for over twenty years of assistance, guidance and maintenance work on Jean's GT350.

In 1988 I started to attend the SVRA vintage races at Watkins Glen each September. I used this as an excuse to drive the Cobra back and forth to the track. The round trip was about 150 miles, door to door, and the drive made each of the three days of the event even better. This race soon grew to become one of the largest on the East Coast. About three hundred plus cars participated in the car show, with another three hundred plus cars racing on the track. It was a terrific event. I would occasionally drive my GT350 if weather was bad. Twenty some years later, I am still attending this event, but without the Cobra or GT350.

Between 1988 and 1990 I attended driving schools at Watkins Glen that were put on by SAAC's Rochester, New York region. Lauren Fix was my instructor and she was a good one. There were several real Cobras in attendance at these schools. My pal Jon Valentine (CSX2296) was also an instructor. My Cobra started to overheat again due to the lower octane pump gas. I had a custom radiator built to solve this problem. It was basically a 427 Cobra radiator modified to fit a 289 Cobra. I started running leaded racing gas in the both cars. Racing gas lowered the water and oil temperatures ten degrees. I was able to get two 55- gallon drums of leaded racing gas delivered to our garage for over ten years. I used a hand crank pump when I needed to fill the GT350 or the Cobra. I figured racing gas was better then serious engine problems. I still enjoyed attending many car shows and regional get-togethers with the Cobra or the GT350. Local cruise-ins seemed to be getting bigger and more popular every year. Currently, the Binghamton, New York Saturday cruise-in draws over 200 cars. Several smaller cruise-ins on weeknights usually bring twenty to thirty cars out.

SAAC-18 at Watkins Glen in 1993 was the last SAAC convention with my Cobra.

SAAC-25 at Lime Rock was a very big deal. It was the club's twenty-fifth anniversary and was one of the largest national conventions ever. By the track's estimate, about 10,000 people came through the gate for some portion of the four-day event.

Bragging stickers were available at the convention so owners could make others aware of their car's history.

The happiest passenger was Bill's granddaughter Emily. She knew it was going to be a fun day when grandpa showed up in his red car. The day that had to come eventually [*above, right*] was when Bill awaited the arrival of the new owner. When James Farley arrived to take possession [below, left] he demonstrated the typical exuberance of a new Cobra owner. CSX2521 gets loaded up onto the transporter and after thirty-two years, becomes a pleasant memory.

My daughter & son-in-law drove my Shelby GT350. It was his first time at a SAAC convention and he was very impressed. The weather was bloody hot. One of the highlights of the convention for me was seeing both a small block Daytona Coupe and the 427 Super Coupe parked together. Over the years I have seen five of the six original Daytona Coupes plus the Super Coupe. Also at the convention was the Costillo & Larsen 289 Cobra drag car which I remember seeing in action back in the mid-1960s. I was also one of a few to get a ride around the track with Carroll Shelby. He drove a number of cars that day and when my turn came he was behind the wheel of a Cobra replica. That was really an experience. He drove the car like he stole it, passing cars in the esses and, in general, having a grand old time.

During my thirty-plus years as a Cobra owner I have been asked a great many questions. People always ask what I paid for the car, and when I tell them $4,500, the usual response is that I should have bought several Cobras at that price. They don't realize that $4,500 was about half of my annual salary at the time. I maintained a car loan for over seven years. I would trade a car and they would refinance the loan. Some people would ask why the Cobra wasn't spotlessly clean. It usually had dead bugs, oil spots and road dust on it and the seats were well worn. My standard reply was that I was more interested in driving a safe, reliable car then I was in cleaning it all of the time. As the value of the Cobra went up, an increasing number of people asked why I continued to drive it. My answer was simple: I enjoyed driving it. And I did right up till the day I sold it.

The Cobra was a very interesting car to drive. I would lose the brakes in a heavy rain. Then I would either have to stop under some sort of shelter (usually an overpass) or continue driving with one foot on the brake pedal to keep the brake discs hot enough to evaporate the moisture. The Cobra was extremely noisy to drive. I had an original Cobra radio that worked fine when the car was parked but it was impossible to hear when the car was being driven. The heat in the driver's compartment could become intense down by the pedals. Ten years after selling my Cobra the hair on the outside of my right leg still has not grown back.

The Cobra was a true high performance car that was exceedingly fast on the street as well as the race track. I found that it would out-handle and out-power the vast majority of cars of its era. It was a lightweight—mine weighed 2,200 lbs with half a tank of gas. Three hundred horsepower under the hood and four-wheel disc brakes made life on the street very enjoyable. The only cars I had a problem with were Jaguar XKEs and Porsches, because they usually had a higher top speed due to their transmission and rear axle gearing. At stop lights I could embarrass them quite easily.

During the time I owned CSX2521 I put about 40,000 miles on it. In that time I managed to do everything I wanted to do with the car. I bought it to beat Corvettes and other street racers, and I did. I got to drive it to SAAC conventions where I could see other cars and talk to their owners. I participated in car shows and cruise-ins, and I had a really enjoyable time every mile I drove it. In thirty-plus years of driving, the Cobra never failed to get me home.

In 1998 I decided to put the Cobra up for sale. It was a difficult decision. My asking price was $150,000, which I thought was fair considering the market. All the spare parts I had accumulated over the years went with it. The car was purchased

by James Farley in 1999. The day the car was loaded onto a transporter marked the end of a wonderful part of my life. I felt proud to have owned and driven a 289 Cobra for so many years. Not many people get to say that they have owned an original Cobra, much less for so long. The year after I sold the Cobra the local cruise-in had six replica Cobras show up. When I drove mine I never saw a replica Cobra at one of these events. Maybe a real one was scaring the pretenders away.

Jean and I attended SAAC-25 at Lime Rock, Connecticut in July of 2000. It was to be our last convention and the best one ever. I drove my GT350, 6S1108, to and back from the convention. It was about four hours each way. The turnout of Cobras was excellent. Many were still being driven actively. The turnout of Shelbys was also fantastic. The racing was excellent and the car show was very good. My wife and I totally enjoyed the event. They were handing out small, round red and silver SAAC stickers at this event to commemorate special aspects of ownership. They proclaimed "Original Owner," "Original Engine," "Purchased for Less Than $5,000," "Driven to SAAC-25" and "Driven over 100K Miles." My 1966 GT350 qualified for the first four.

Several factors helped me to decide to finally sell my GT350. The car was in excellent mechanical shape; the engine and clutch were recently done and it hadn't seen very many miles since. The paint job, though not recent, had seen relatively few miles. I could have just parked the GT350 but I believe in driving my cars. I owned this car for more than thirty-five years and during that time put 58,000 miles on it. So, in 2001, I put it up for sale. The price was $45,000 and I was firm on that. James Clark was a marine who had just gotten promoted to Lt. Colonel. He purchased 6S1108 and drove it home to Virginia and when he got there he called me and told me it was the best drive he had in years. He thanked me for selling him the GT350. It was nice to know that it went to a good owner.

I was lucky to acquire a 1965 Mustang restomod about this time. I still wanted a hobby car. It only had 2,400 miles on it since being finished. It has a 5.0-liter engine with a five-speed, a 3.0 limited-slip rear end and front disc brakes from a 1976 V8 Maverick. It has been lowered and received upgraded shocks and springs. It also has an air conditioner. I am still doing cruise-ins, car shows and going to the vintage races, but my companion is now my granddaughter Emily.

These four pictures tell the Whitley story. It began with 6S1108 and a little street racing. The desire for pavement supremacy led to CSX2521. There weren't many cars faster in the central New York state area in the late 1960s. Bill's '66 GT350 led to "*I want one, too.*" 6S074 joined the family. Today the stable has shrunk to a restomod Mustang with... hey—there's something familiar with those wheels. Where have we seen those wheels before?