



EARLY BIRD

History
of the Sauter roadster

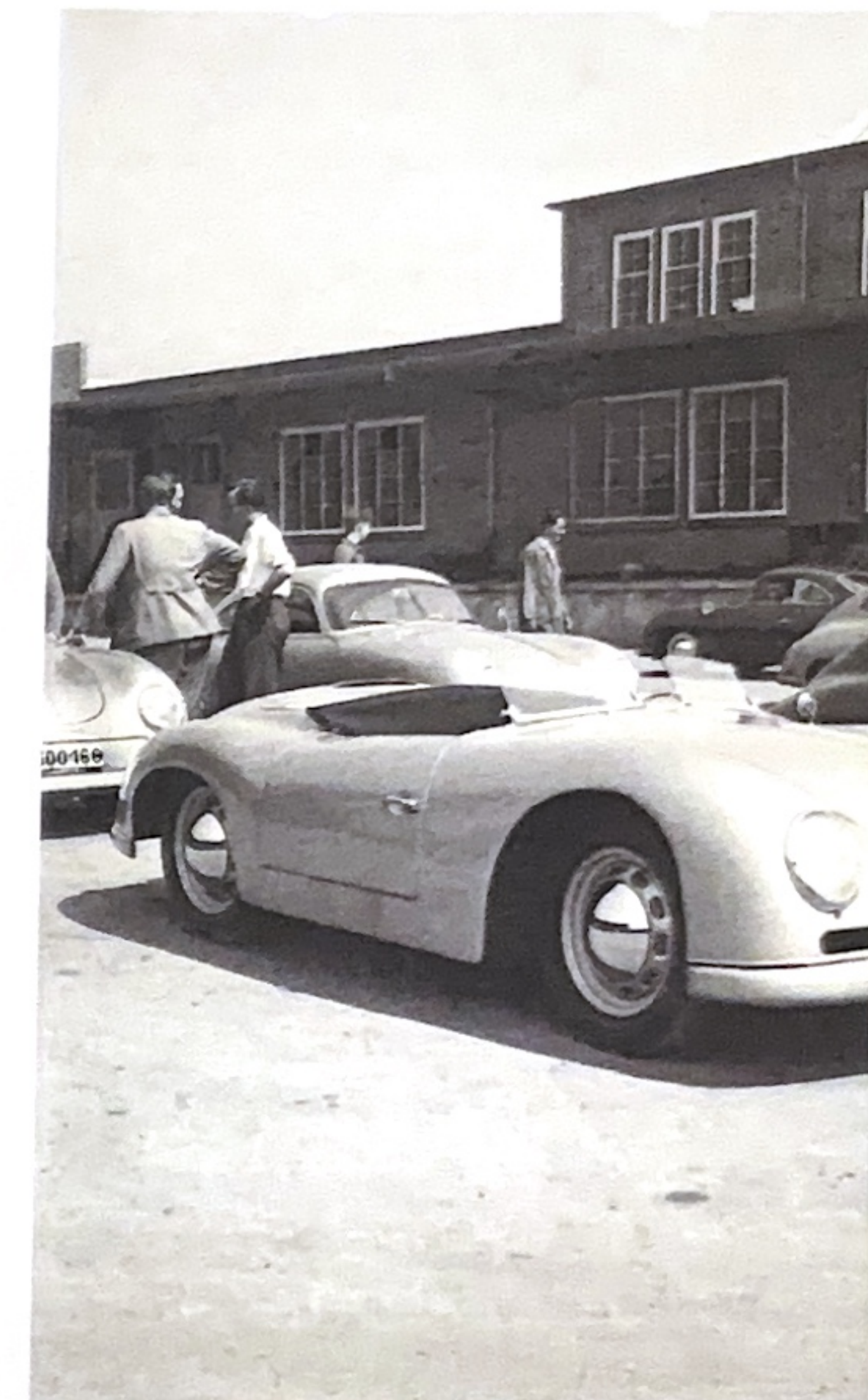
By Ray Knight



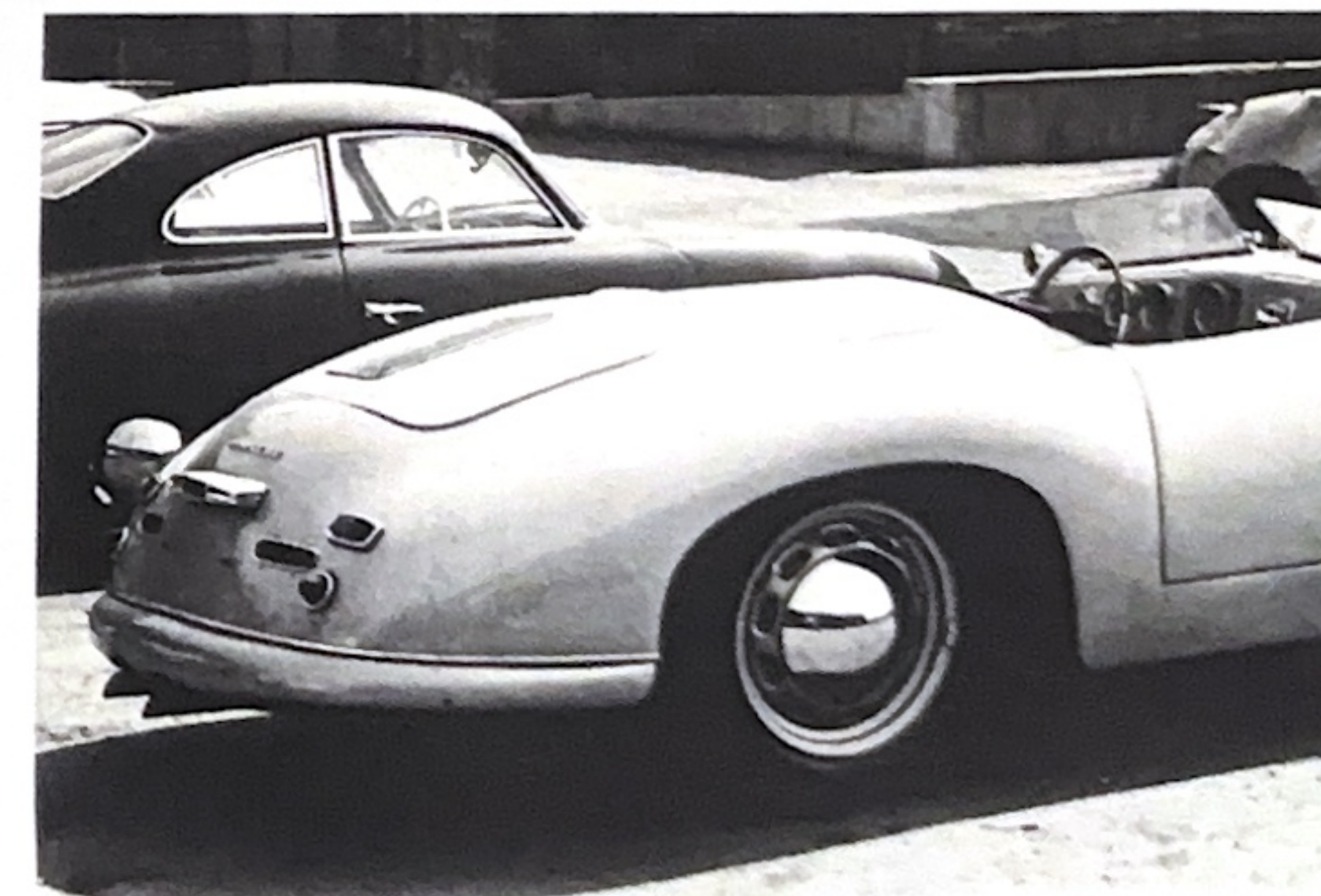
As enigmatic as Porsche's small series of 1952 America Roadsters has been to Porsche historians, an earlier roadster, the Sauter Porsche, has been more mysterious. This roadster with the rear-hinged, "suicide" doors was last featured in the pages of Christophorus number 26 (English) in 1960. This unique car recently surfaced in the United States and new information has helped clarify the evolution of early Porsche roadsters and the Speedster.

Even though the first Porsche was a roadster, practical considerations led Porsche to build its first series of cars as coupés. The desire to create a sporting, open two-seater was

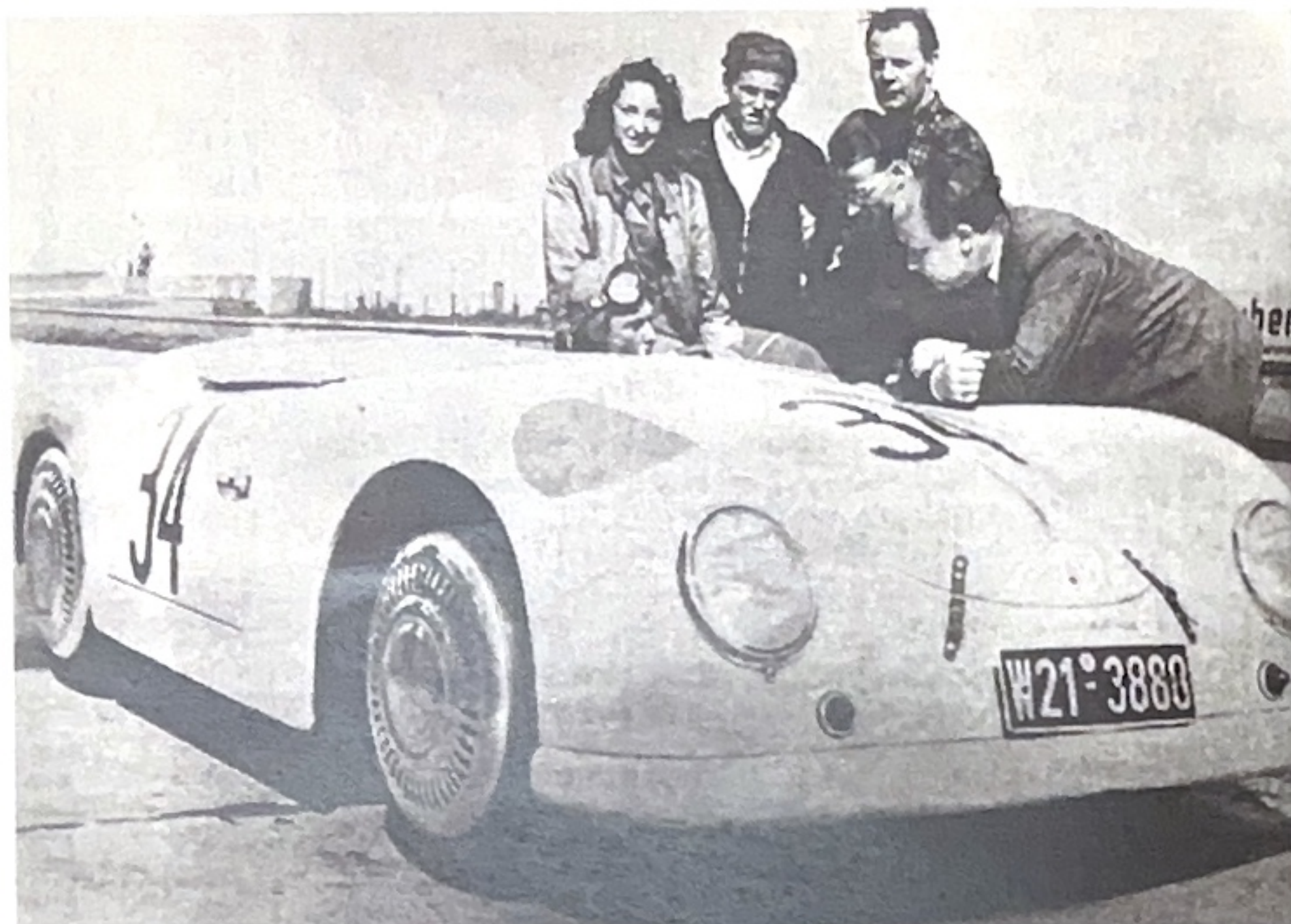
The handmade steel body was built of altered production pressings. It is lower than the standard body of that era and was assembled in Hans Klenk's workshops.



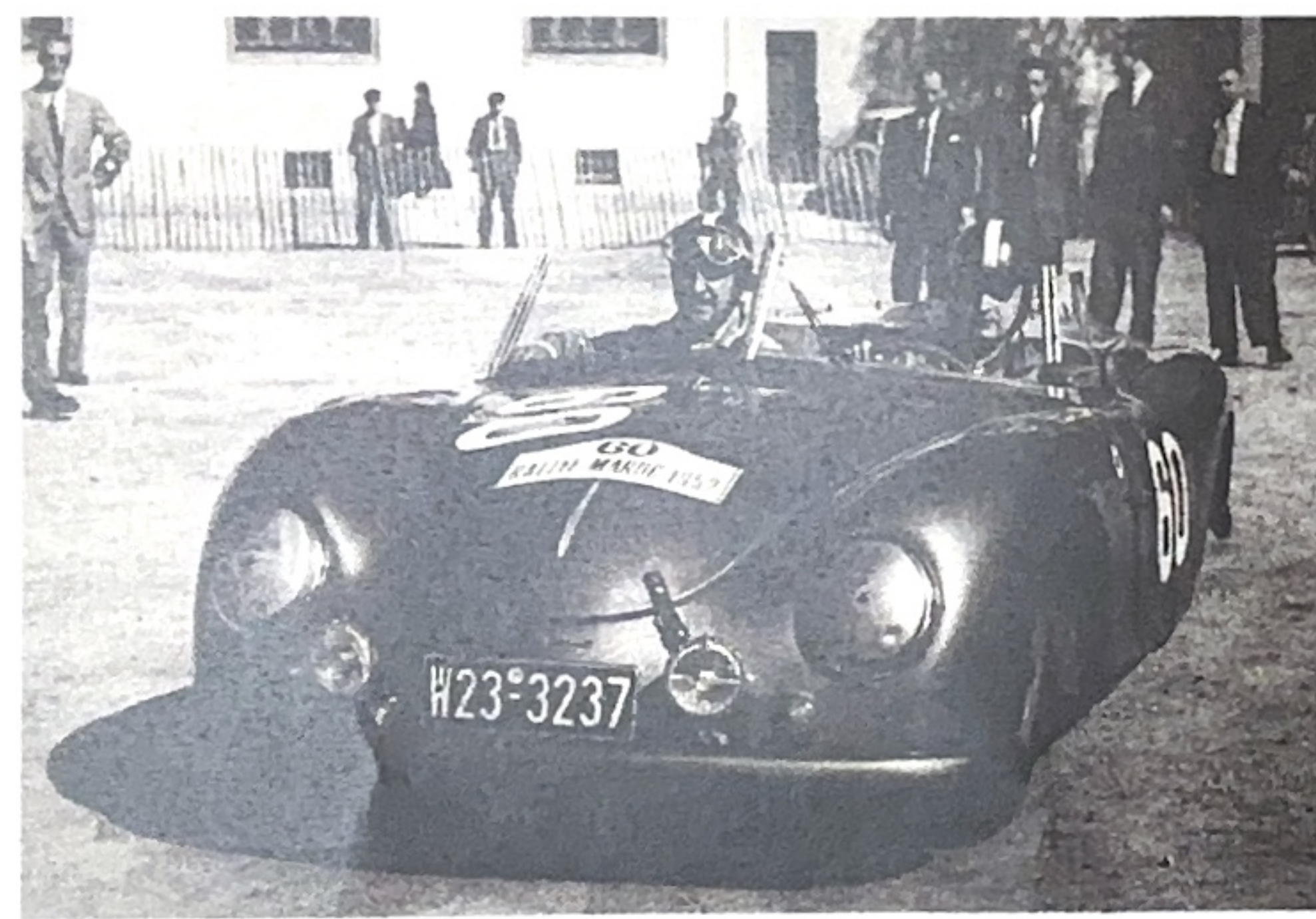
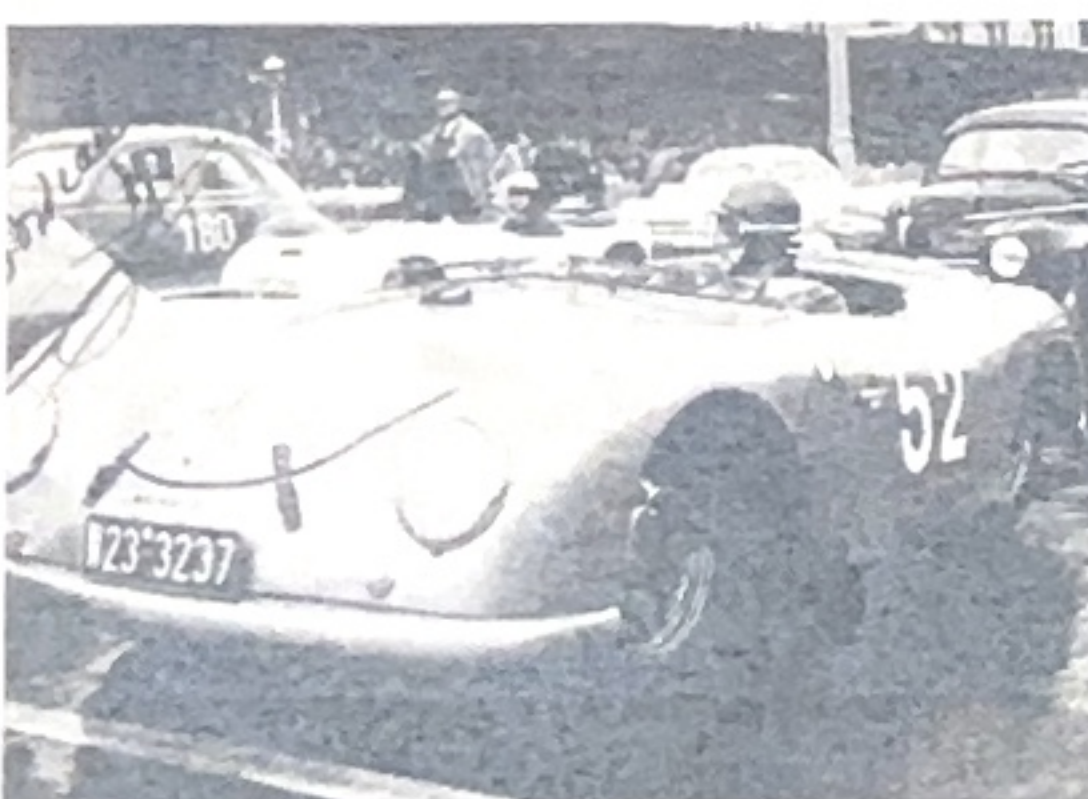
The Sauter Porsche from 1951, based on a Most important, visible changes: doors for the Sauter Porsche were hinged rear and a cover could be bolted over the



First test on Nürburgring in 1950: on hand were race driver and journalist Richard von Frankenberg and engineer Mantzel, designer of "sprung hubs," tested at the same time.

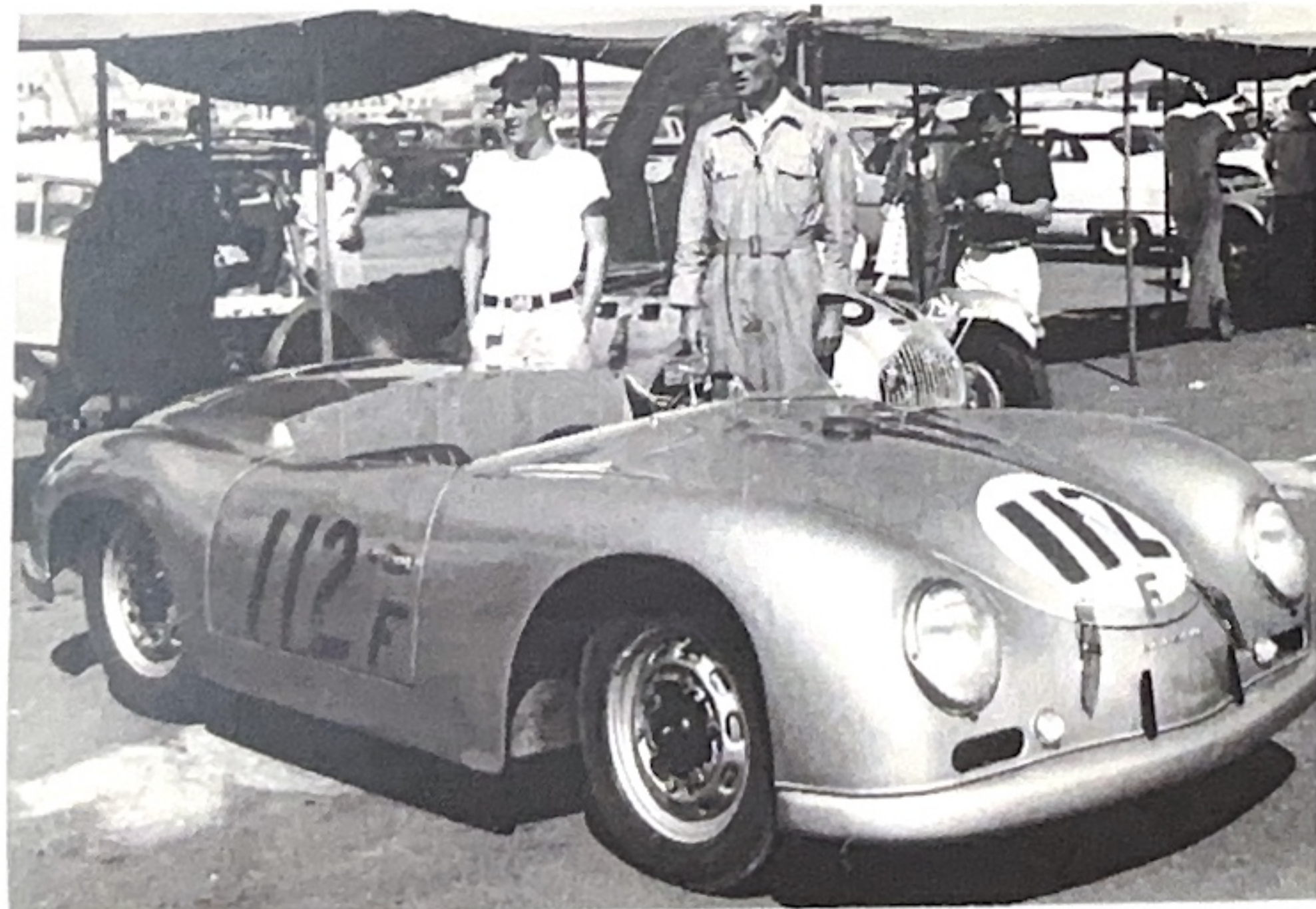


Frenchman François Picard, a friend of Heinrich Sauter, called the Spyder "le petite tank" and entered it many times during 1952. The photo below was taken at Bordeaux, where Picard won the 1500 class.



François Picard had the Sauter Porsche painted blue and also ran it in many rallies (center right).

Stan Mullin bought the Sauter Porsche in 1953 and had it painted silver-blue. He drove club races in California until the end of 1954. The photo shows Mullin and his son with the Sauter Porsche at Moffet Field, California, in 1954.



to wait until 1951. At that time Max Hoffman, the prominent New York importer who introduced many European cars to the United States, expressed displeasure with the aesthetics of the original 356. He favored a roadster with more classic, Jaguar-like lines. Hoffman and Porsche met in Paris in early October, 1950, to discuss US import plans and shortly after this meeting drawings (356.00.320), dated October 25, 1950, were completed by Komenda. The limited resources of the tiny Porsche company prevented immediate construction of this car.

Heinrich Sauter, a Stuttgart businessman, had been racing a steel 356 Coupé quite successfully and wanted a lighter, lower and faster open car. He bought Porsche chassis no 10359 and commissioned the fabrication of a body interpreted from Komenda's drawings, 356.00.320. The unusual aspects of the car were hand fabricated. These included doors, hinges, closing panels and rear deck cover. The work was done in Hans Klenk's shop in Böblingen, just outside Stuttgart. Klenk, later of Continental Tire, was to gain fame codriving the winning Mercedes 300 SL in the 1952 Carrera Panamericana. Sauter's car was completed within about six months and first appeared on the track in early spring, 1951. It featured a stock chassis and handmade, lowered steel body fabricated by modifying factory body stampings.

Just how closely does Sauter's car fit the drawings? It differs primarily by being lower, having the suicide doors and having the rear cockpit area closed by a bolt-in rear deck. The most striking similarity to the drawings is the wide back end of the body at the fender lines. This feature seems unique to those drawings and the Sauter car. Those unique doors were chosen by Sauter in hopes of easier egress at rally checkpoints. When inspected by Hoffman it apparently met his aesthetic requirements.

The roadster's first race was the Eifelrennen on the Nürburgring in Spring, 1951. It was listed as a VW Special with 1300 cc engine modified to 1500 by the owner. This was

quite impossible since the increase to 1500 was accomplished only by using the roller crankshaft. Today Sauter confirms that the car was fitted with a factory 1500 engine. This race was the first known competition use of the new Porsche 1500 engine.

Sauter recalls that he used a much hotter cam than the factory would have preferred. Porsche asked him to enter the car as a Volkswagen Special: perhaps because of uncertainty about the hotter cam, secrecy about the 1500 engine, secrecy about the new body style or all three. When Sauter had the second-fastest qualifying lap he was instructed to announce the car as a Porsche. He then proceeded to complete the first lap far in the lead, only to retire later with engine failure. Earlier it had been used for testing of some spring rubber, damped wheels designed by engineer Mantzell.



Stan Mullin (49) with the 1500 Sauter Porsche in Santa Barbara, 1953. Only technical problem was brake cooling.

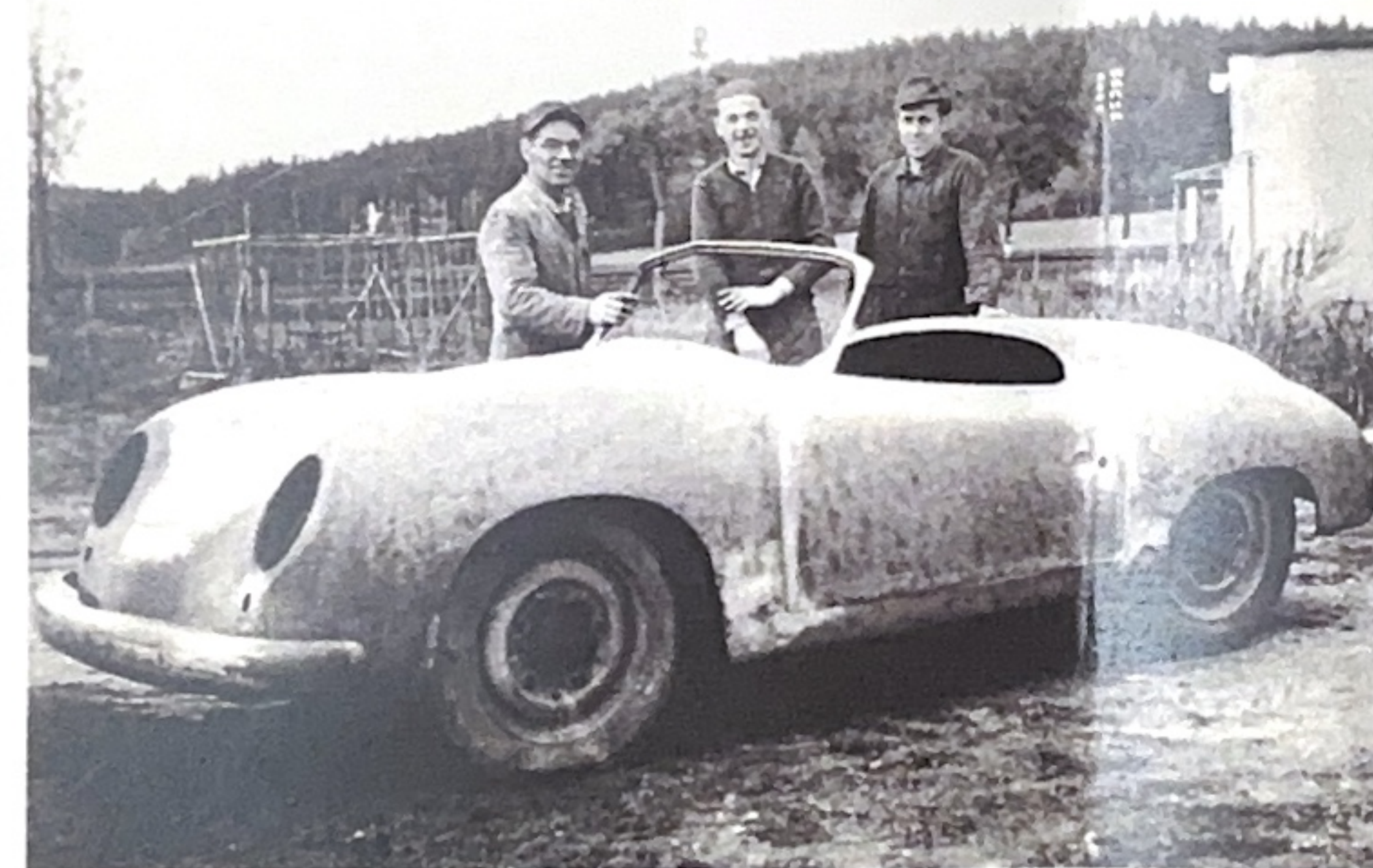


Sauter then raced the car in the Freiburg-Schauinsland hillclimb and the Liège-Rome-Liège Rallye with Roth. Though fast, the car retired with tire and brake line failure. In late 1951 the car was repurchased by the factory. Sauter continued racing, his career highlighted by his 1954 Mille Miglia GT class win with Richard von Frankenberg, in a 356 Coupé. Sauter reports he drove nearly the entire distance. He retired from racing in 1955 and now resides in the Bahamas.



Stuttgart businessman Heinrich Sauter had the car built in 1950. He raced it until 1955. Today he lives in the Bahamas. Our photo (left) was taken in 1986.

The roadster stood outside for nearly three decades and was in very poor condition when Ray Knight discovered it in 1982. He had the car completely restored.



In 1952 the car, now nicknamed "le petite tank," was raced extensively by François Picard of Nice, France. A local French hero and friend of Sauter, Picard had won the 1950 Tour de France with a faster engine which had been secretly switched from Sauter's coupé. By sacrificing his own chances of winning, Sauter avoided inflaming anti-German sentiment among racing fans and with that gesture, according to news reports, did much to bolster the Porsche reputation in France in those early postwar years.

Repainted French racing blue, the car ran many road races, rallies and hillclimbs, winning most. Its last European race was the French Grand Prix for sports cars in 1952, at Monaco, where the Roadster did not do well against the faster Italian two-liter cars. After that season the car was returned to Stuttgart, to sit in the corner at Works I, no longer of much use. François Picard continued racing for several years. He is said to have been killed racing a Ferrari some years later but this is unconfirmed. In early 1953 the car was purchased for Stan Mullin, an attorney and prominent figure in early sports car racing in California. Hushke von Hanstein described the little roadster as "last year's race car, a car now obsolete because of the Glöckler," and told the Americans of plans to build a

To return to 1952 and the America Roadster story. With Hoffman's apparent approval and probable insistence, plans for production of the aluminum roadsters were completed. Heuer-Glaser in Weiden was contacted to do the bodies, which were all fitted with Type 528, 1500 S engines. Quite fast for their class, they did very well in American club racing. America Roadsters figured in the early careers of many prominent American racers, notably Briggs Cunningham and John von Neumann. America

Roadsters continued to race with much success for several years, remaining competitive until they were superseded by the 550 Spyders.

Never catalogued, the America Roadsters were made for only a short time. There were several changes during the brief series, most notably the change from single to dual grills and some associated body contour changes, all in an attempt to help combat overheating problems. It appears about 16 were made and nine are known to remain.

Another evolutionary link roadster was made by Heuer-Glaser in their last days in Weiden. This car is shown in drawings, 540-00-202, of July 9, 1952. They depict the same lowered belt line characteristic of the Sauter and America Roadsters, but with a fixed, cabriolet windshield.

Presumably with the continuing encouragement of Hoffman, the roadster concept was quickly resurrected back in Stuttgart, in the form of the Speedster, with release in late 1954.

With this Speedster, Hoffman seems to have finally gotten what he wanted from a marketing point of view. Paradoxically, it did not fit his original styling demands. In summary, we can trace the evolution of early Porsche roadsters in a series of fitful steps, from the 1948 356 prototype, Number 1, to the drawings of October, 1950, through the Sauter roadster to the production America Roadsters, briefly through the Heuer-Glaser steel desperation car and eventually to the Speedster.



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