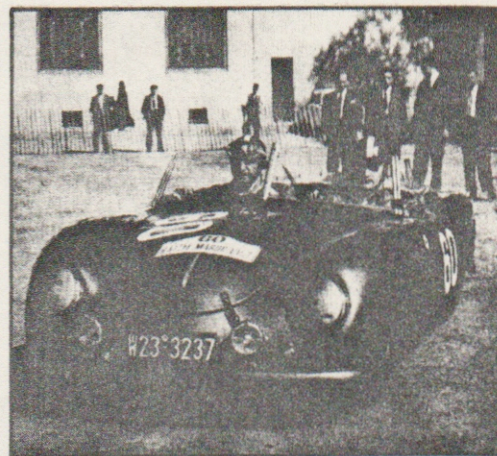


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THE SAGA OF THE ODD-DOOR PORSCHE

Transatlantic Automotive Sleuthing

BY WILLIAM H. CRABTREE



Some people buy cars and drive them, not knowing or caring about the past history of the car, or development of that car's model line. Then there are those who have to know everything about the car. This is the tale of one man who has spent over 10 years investigating the parentage of a very unusual Porsche. The extent of Mr. Crabtree's sleuthing, and the still partially unresolved question of the car's history, is indicative of the complex and shadowy Porsche lineage through the years.

Almost every car nut harbors a desire to own a rare, one-of-a-kind—preferably one of a make and model of which he had a prior interest. I have one of those rare models, but I didn't acquire it because I was looking for it.

The story begins around 1970. As manager of a foreign car salvage yard in east central Indiana, I would advertise in sports car magazines for wrecked, rundown, or inoperative foreign cars.

One day I received a response from a man in Mississippi, who had an old Porsche for sale. He sent photos and a description of the car and I agreed to buy it if he could deliver it to our yard.

The man, Dave Clark, brought the car and all the loose pieces to Indiana on the back of a pickup truck. It was in December, and while unloading the Porsche, a snow storm struck and Clark, who had never seen that much snow, was eager to get it over with and head south before he became marooned in Indiana for the winter.

While serving with the U.S. Army in Germany, I had seen Porsches on the roads of Europe, and had bought a 1957 coupe for myself, but I had never seen a Porsche like the one Clark delivered to me that cold day in December. The doors, often called "suicide doors," hinged at the rear and opened at the front. The body was all steel.

In the years that followed I tried to find out more about this strange Porsche because no one who came to see it could tell me anything about it. I wrote the factory in 1972 requesting information. The reply was cour-

teous, telling me that it was one of the first Porsches built, but they didn't address themselves to my main question, which was the reason for the front-opening doors.

Most customers at our salvage yard who showed any interest or knowledge of Porsches thought it to be a backyard "shadetree" modification. About 1975 I wrote the factory again, sending current photos of the car, and the answer came back that Porsche had never built a car with forward-opening doors.

Sometime around 1977, a man stopped by to pick up some parts and brought a magazine with him. We had discussed the Porsche when he had been here once before, and in the meantime he found a copy of *Autosport Review*, dated January 1952. In a story called "Porsche, Germany's Racing Jewel," one of the photos pictured my car sitting on a race track in Germany.

Armed with my new evidence, I again wrote the factory, sending copies of the article from *Autosport*. The reply was that this was a prototype which had been used in races. They further requested that I send them information on the I.D. tag to give them more information. After doing this, a letter from Porsche indicated that this car was one of 170 Cabriolets built in 1951, and that this particular car was delivered to a Porsche dealer in Kiel, West Germany, and from my photos it ap-

peared to them that someone had extensively modified the car.

No one who had examined the car to this point found evidence of any apparent body modification. The car appeared to have been built this way, but the letter from the factory didn't help my enthusiasm.

My next step was to send a photo of the car and a letter to VW & Porsche magazine, which was subsequently published in the April 1980 letters column. I received many phone calls about the car from that exposure, but the most help came from Mike Robins, in Indianapolis, who brought to my attention Karl Ludvigsen's book: *Porsche, Excellence Was Expected*. A photo of the Monaco Grand Prix (Sports Racing cars rather than single-seat GP cars were run at Monaco in 1952—Ed.) showed a Porsche that looked like mine called "Le Petit Tank." On page 93 of the book were three paragraphs about the odd-door (as I now called the car) Porsche.

It seems that Heinrich Sauter had the car built to go with the 1500cc engine which had just been introduced by the factory. It goes on to describe the front-opening doors, and Sauter's racing exploits. Ludvigsen says: "By that time replicas of the little tank were being built and sold by Porsche KG." The car was then sold to a Frenchman, Mr. F. Picard, who also raced the car. At this time, the factory took more interest in the Porsche, which was modified with cooling air

scoops under the headlights. My next goal was to find Heinrich Sauter. This proved to be no small task.

One other result of the photo in the *VW & Porsche* letters column was a call from a Mr. Clark, in Gulfport, Mississippi. He had seen a photo of "his old Porsche" in the magazine. He turned out to be the brother of the man I bought the car from. His brother had sold it at his request. I was to call him many times with questions, and the next section of this episode is called "The Mississippi Story."

In the mid 1960s Mr. Clark had lived near Greenville, in northern Mississippi. He had bought the Porsche from a friend, who had bought the car from a man who lived across the Mississippi river in Helena, Arkansas. I called the friend in Greenville and discovered it was not he, but one of his friends who sold the car to Clark.

From what I could gather, the Porsche had several owners about this time; the car was horse-traded around to different friends, Mr. Clark being the last. None of them was ever suc-

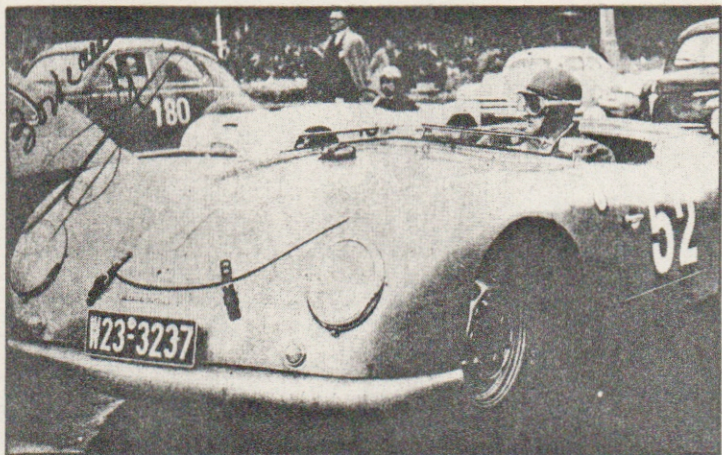
cessful in getting the car to be driveable. So Clark put the car in his backyard and it was forgotten until his brother called me and offered it for sale. But I did locate the man who had bought it from the man in Arkansas.

He said someone had told him about a residence in Helena, Arkansas that had a front yard full of old sports cars. He investigated, located the home, and after some persuasion, he was able to buy the Porsche. Unfortunately, he couldn't remember the man's name or address, but he could describe him, and the house. So I started looking for yet another owner of the odd-door Porsche.

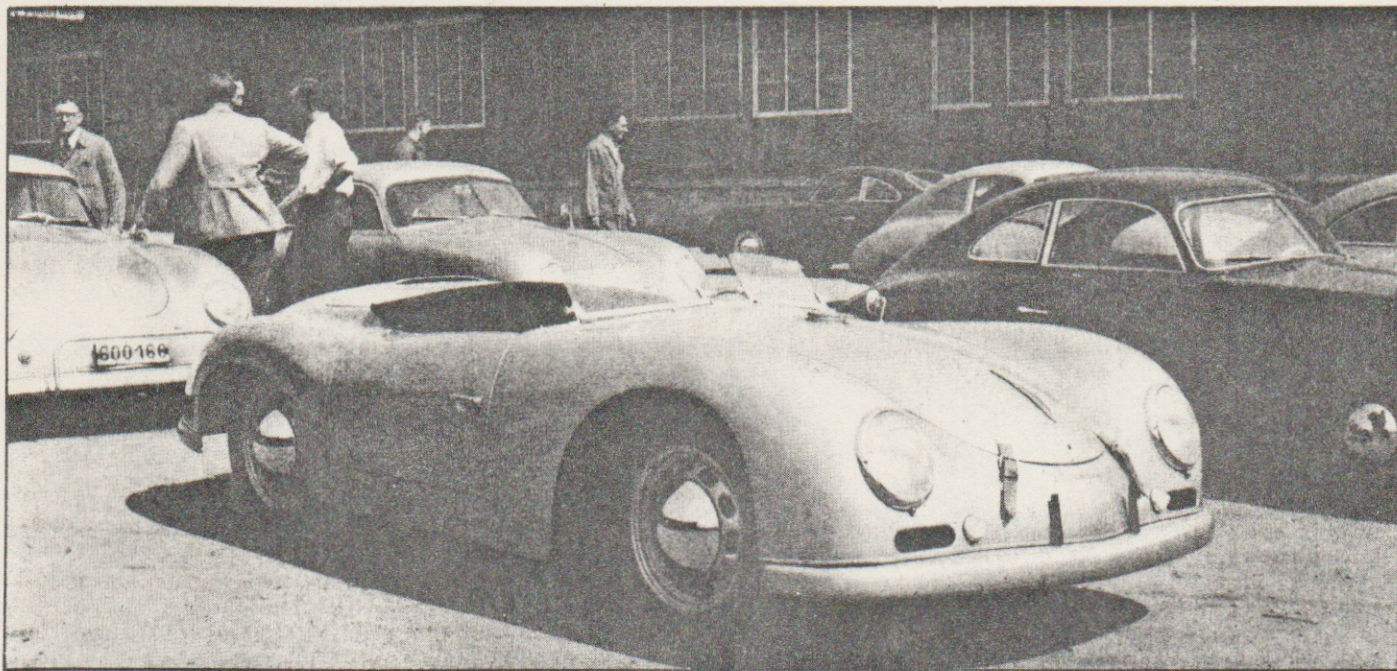
While this search was going on, I stumbled on another bit of information that leads to "The California Story."

Occasionally I look through my old *Road & Tracks* (I have a collection going back to 1952) and found a classified ad in the July, 1954 issue which read: "PORSCHE Competition Roadster. Factory modified. Excel. cond. throughout. New trailer, spares. Reas. J.S. Mullin" with a Los Angeles address and phone number. I thought I'd give it a try.

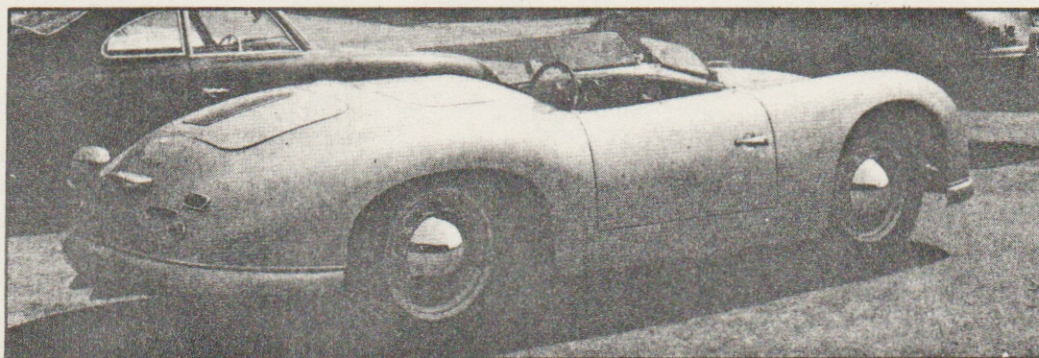
The number was not current, but by



The odd-door Porsche was campaigned by Francois Picard during the 1952 season at such venues as Monte Carlo, Bordeaux and the Moroccan rally in North Africa. Note that the cooling vents seen in later photos are not yet on the car.



The factory noticed the car, finally, and brought it back for a larger 1500cc engine in 1952. The cooling vents were added and the car was eventually sold to J.S. Mullin of Los Angeles in 1953.



calling the Los Angeles information operator I got the number for J.S. Mullin, Attorney (J.S. Mullin was the attorney for Lance Reventlow, and Reventlow Automobiles, Inc., and was active in California Sports Car Club and SCCA activities in the 1950s—Ed.).

I called the number. Mr. Mullin was away for the week, so I left my number. The next week Mr. Mullin called. He said he was the man who had run the ad, and couldn't remember if the car had front-opening doors or not, but would look at some of his old photos to see if it was the same car.

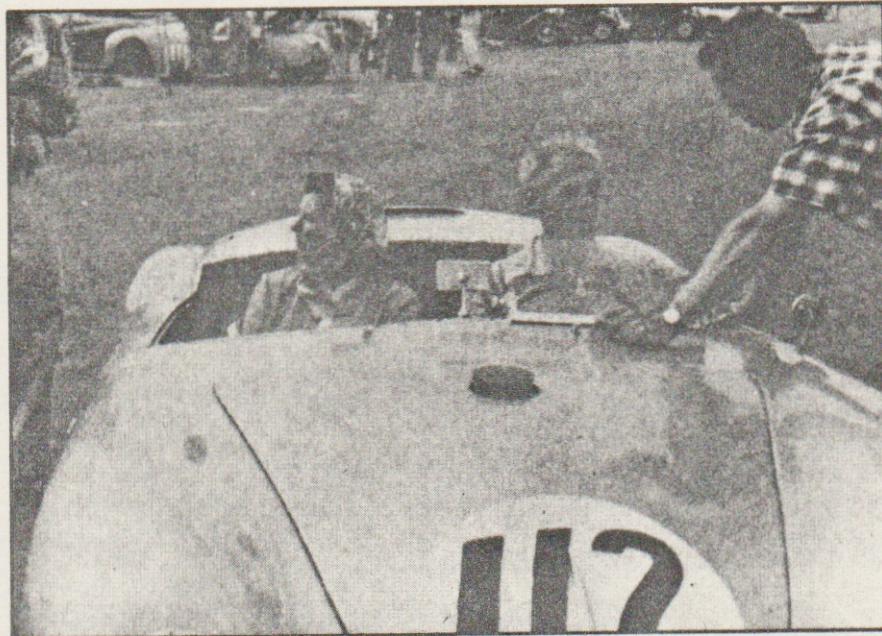
Mullin's friend Jack Armstrong was in Europe in the spring of 1953 and, while visiting the Porsche factory, saw this Porsche. After inquiring about the car, it was offered to him at a price. Armstrong called Mullin, who authorized the purchase. The car was subsequently raced by Mullin or Armstrong at six west coast races in 1953: Moffett Field, Santa Barbara, Long Beach (probably Terminal Island—Ed.), Reno, March Field, and at Pebble Beach in 1954.

In Bob Devlin's new book *Pebble Beach*, which is about the races and *concours d'elegance* held there from 1950 to 1956, there is a shot of Mr. Mullin in the Porsche odd-door roadster.

In my conversation with Mr. Mullin, he said he sold the car to a man in Tennessee. He couldn't remember his name or address, but did remember that he was a maker of Christmas Fruit Cakes. With this information I started the search for the man in Tennessee. Surprisingly, though, there is no Tennessee story. The next section is "The Arkansas story."

My thoughts were to try to find the Christmas Fruit Cake man in the Memphis area. Greenville, Mississippi and Helena, Arkansas are both near Memphis. I called the Memphis Sports Car Club and talked to one of the officers. He canvassed the members and could turn up no one who could remember the Porsche or its owner.

Helena, Arkansas was my next goal. I called the Helena newspaper and a man there suggested I call Mrs. Carolyn Cunningham. She was a member of the Historical Society, and theoretically should know a large number of the residents. I wrote Mrs.



Mr. and Mrs. Stan Mullin enjoying their odd-door Porsche sometime in 1953.

Cunningham, giving the general information I had concerning the man who had owned the car in Helena.

Mrs. Cunningham kindly responded with a helpful letter, suggesting I contact Mr. Shell Namour. I called him the same day, and he was indeed the previous owner of the odd-door Porsche. Mr. Namour and his uncle are world famous for their Christmas Fruit Cakes. In our conversation, Mr. Namour said that he had seen the 1954 ad in *Road & Track* and had bought the car over the phone from Mr. Mullin.

Mr. Namour said he had never raced the car, and used it for pleasure driving only, often on trips to New Orleans. The engine gave up in 1958, and he never repaired it. The Porsche remained in his yard until sold to the man in Greenville in the mid 1960s.

I now had, generally, the story of the car from its start at the factory (the 1953 sale to Mullin) through all the various owners up to the end of 1980. Now it was time to find Heinrich Sauter, if possible.

My feeling was that I had exhausted the information the factory could give me, so I wanted to find someone in Europe who might be able to help me find Sauter. The first step was to place an ad in the classified section of *Road & Track* because I knew it was widely read in Europe.

No European contacts developed,

but another one did. I received a letter from Bob Cox, who wrote that a friend of his, Tom Countryman, had visited Porsche while stationed in Germany with the U.S. Army in the early 1950s. Countryman had taken two photos of the odd-door Porsche, at the factory, because it was so unusual. After contacting Countryman, in Minneapolis, he sent me copies from his negatives of the two photos.

After the photo had appeared in *VW & Porsche*, a lot of people thought it was a Dannenhauer and Strauss, as these custom-bodied Porsches had front-opening doors. Others thought it was a Denzel, or an Enzmann. A call also turned up the information that the March, 1960 issue of *Christophorus* showed Sauter in the car on a race track in Germany.

Armed with these photos from Tom Countryman, which had several recognizable people in the background, and the information from *Excellence Was Expected*, I wrote the factory once more and asked who was Heinrich Sauter? And did they know anything about this particular Porsche? The answer, signed by Jurgen Barth, on November 13, 1980, said the car was delivered to F. Picard of Nice, France in May or June 1951. The engine number was 30244.

Not wanting to wear out my welcome at the factory, I tried another route by writing to a German auto magazine to see if they might give me a lead to find Sauter. The answer was courteous, but unhelpful. In the meantime, a book called *Great Marques-Porsche* mentioned the car and said it was designed by Porsche for Mr. Sauter.

Looking through the same issue of *VW & Porsche* that had run the picture of the Porsche, there was an article by Jerry Sloniger about Hans Klauser. The story said that Klauser had driven the first bodyless chassis from Gmund to Stuttgart, so I thought that if anybody knew Sauter, it had to be Klauser.

I called *VW & Porsche* magazine, telling them my problem, and asked for Sloniger's address so I could contact Klauser. The magazine's policy is to not give out addresses and phone numbers of contributors, but they said if I addressed a letter to Sloniger and sent it to *VW & Porsche*, they would see that Sloniger got it.

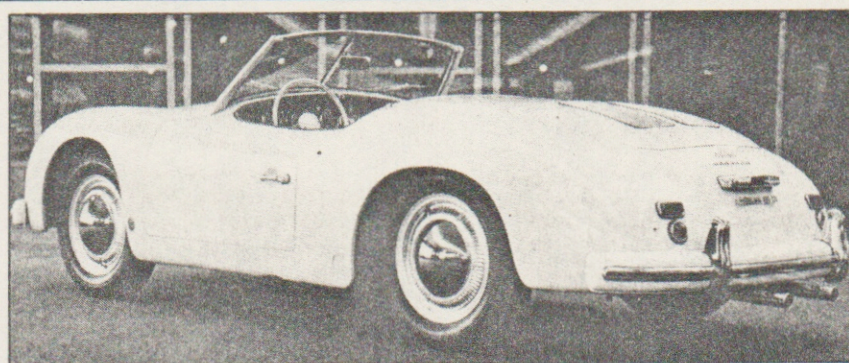
A few months later I received a letter from Jerry Sloniger indicating that he had talked to Klauser, who remembered Sauter well. Klauser recalled that Sauter and Picard were friends in the early 1950s, and came up with an address for Mr. Sauter, but he wasn't sure how current the address was. It was in the Bahamas. Klauser also turned up two additional photos of the car; one from a race at Bordeaux, and the other from the Moroccan Rally in North Africa—both

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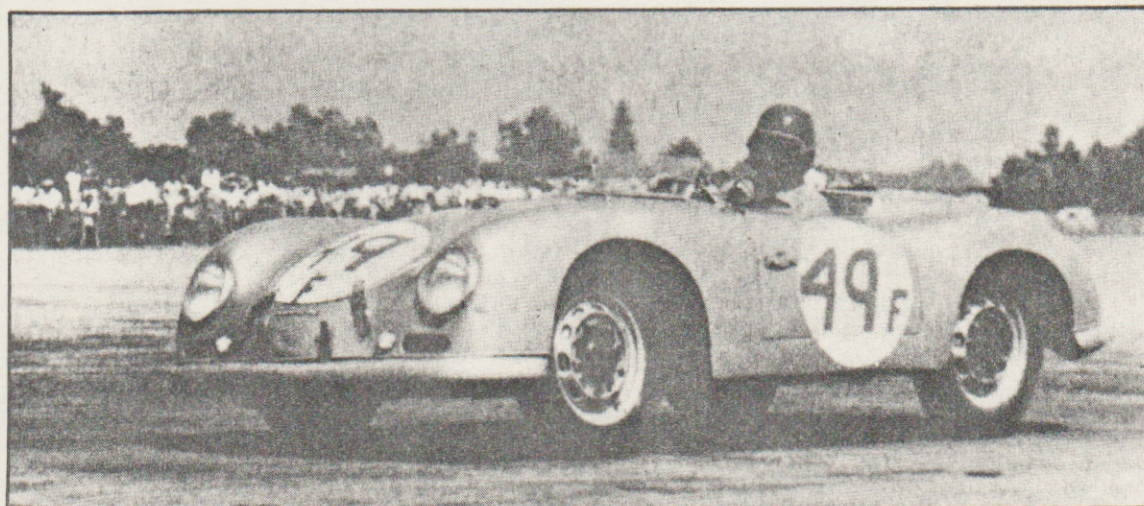
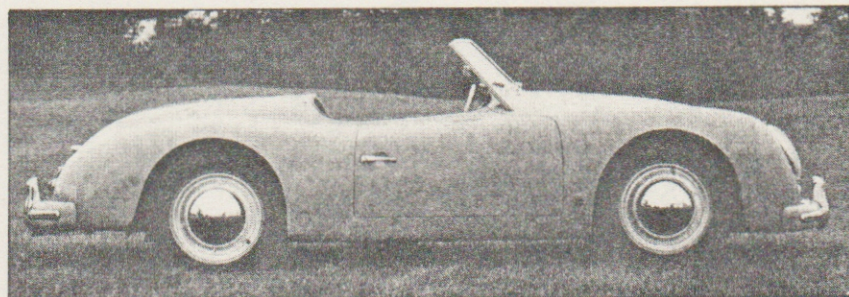
Jack Armstrong puts the Porsche through its paces in Reno in 1953. Note signs of age and body damage up front.



The odd-door Porsche as it rested in William Crabtree's backyard. It is now in the process of being restored.



The great debate: Is the Odd-door Porsche the forerunner of the America (Chuck Stoddard's car above, John Paterek's below). Some evidence would indicate yes, but the evidence is inconclusive. Leonard Turner photos.



now cost between \$9 to \$25, and I expect the cost of these to rise sharply over the next year. This is due to the fact that, at this writing, Solido may no longer be in business. The passing of this "giant" in the miniature car field, which has delighted collectors and children for over 50 years, probably merits an entire article by itself. The loss of Solido's future products will be sadly missed.

For you readers who are just starting to develop an interest in model car collecting, the demise of Solido brings up a good point, and although I hate to dwell on the subject of "money" in these uncertain times, it must be made: You can always make more money, but companies like Solido will not always be making more cars.

As with any collector's item, the supply and demand will always indicate the cost. Because of economic uncertainty, I have noticed that the asking prices of rare model cars have begun to stabilize and perhaps even drop slightly. For this reason, now is the time to start your collection! When I mention the cost of specific models, it should be noted that demographics play a large role in determining the price. Californians seem to be more willing to pay premium prices than residents of any other state.

Most of the really valuable metal Porsche models were made in Europe in the mid to late '50s and early '60s, so naturally Europe would be the best place to start looking for them. If time or money does not permit, you might do as I did and rekindle communication with a long lost cousin living in England. The surprises that may pop out of your mail box can be truly exciting! There are in the southern California area three or four antique toy shows, some of which are devoted exclusively to model cars, which I regularly attend. Besides finding some very rare models, I also have the opportunity to meet some wonderful people who have given me a wealth of information over the years. For this reason, I feel that shows such as these can be the most productive to building your collection as well as your knowledge about the subject. Most shows such as the aforementioned are usually advertised well in advance in newspapers or trade magazines.

If you should be lucky enough to come across an old die-cast model, it may have that "played with" look. After all, these were toys before they became collectable. Do not try to repaint or cover over paint chips. That old Marklin or Quiralu 356 is much more valuable with the chips on the original paint than it is repainted and new looking. An exception to this rule is re-painting one that has already been repainted the wrong color. If you must re-paint strive to keep the model as original in color as possible. If you buy an old model, ask for the original box; if you buy a new one, keep it! Boxes or packaging become almost as valuable as the model inside. If you are like me, after 17 years of collecting you'll have model car boxes occupying every available space in your house!

Whether you are just starting or have been collecting model Porsches for years, one of the most useful items you can acquire is a master list of models. Argus Publishers puts out a list of over 1600 miniature Porsche cars from 28 countries, and lists the manufacturer, country, scale and material. At \$4.75 plus tax and handling, this 36-page list is worth it. Write to Argus Books, P.O. Box 49659, Los Angeles, CA 90049.

One thing that really bothers me is when someone enters my home and immediately says, "Oh, I see you collect toy cars." Nothing could be further from the truth and I feel a distinction must be made from the onset between models and toys. What establishes a collector's model from a toy is quality and detail. A collector's model is accurately scaled with attention to detail whereas a toy may just resemble a car without attention to detail or accurate proportion. For me, building and collecting VW & Porsche in scale is an emotional involvement. Many of yesterday and today's models can be considered works of art and engineering. Just like coins or stamps, model car collecting can represent a sound financial investment, but as in the case of the re-issued Revell Speedster, speculation can be costly. To be on the safe side, collect VW, Porsche or any make of your choice because you love the marque and because collecting is fun! That's the most important reason. If it turns out to be profitable, so much the better!



ODD DOOR PORSCHE

in 1952 with Picard in the car.

I wrote to Mr. Sauter at his Bahamas address, and received a letter about a month later. He said that he had bought the chassis and running gear from Porsche and then he and Hans Klenk designed and built the car (Klenk had been co-driver with Karl Kling in the winning Mercedes-Benz 300 SL in the 1952 Carrera Panamericana, and subsequently became Director of Sports and Racing at the Continental Tire Company).

Sauter said the car was built with front-opening doors to facilitate quick exits during pit stops. This is the sequence of events as Sauter remembers them: He bought the chassis in 1951—month unknown—and after racing the car had the factory sell it for him. The buyer was Francois Picard. Sauter doesn't know how many times Picard campaigned the car, but we do know that he ran it at Monte Carlo, Bordeaux, and Morocco in 1952. It is Sauter's understanding that Picard was killed during a race about this time while driving a Ferrari. It is unknown how the Porsche got back to the factory, but Mullin bought the car from the factory in 1953.

It has been speculated that this odd-door Porsche was the forerunner of the 1952 Porsche America roadster, and in Sauter's letter to me, dated May, 1981, he says: "I am convinced, without a doubt, that this car became the prototype for the U.S. roadster." Ludvigsen's book indicates the same thing where he says: "By this time replicas of 'the little tank' were being built and sold by Porsche KG."

Also, in the book *The Great Marques, Porsche*, by Chris Harvey (published 1980 by Octopus Books, Ltd.) it says that U.S. importer Max Hoffman was of the opinion that Porsche should build a roadster along the lines of the British sports car of that day. And he used this opinion to persuade Porsche to build a similar car to export to America. As it happened, the Porsche model design office had already drawn up such a body for a young enthusiast named Heinrich Sauter.

Editor's note: Porsche enthusiasts violently disagree about this, and an excellent article by Porsche Panorama editor Betty Jo Turner, in the April 1981 issue, presents a strong argument that the America roadster had no predecessor, and feels that "... the probability is that the complete America Roadster design pre-dates Sauter's 'special.' She may well be right, although we don't know. Someday the true story may be complete, but for now there are excellent arguments on both sides of the fence. 