



TWO FER

WISCONSIN 356ER SAYS, "WHY STOP AT ONE?"

By David Mathews

Photographs by Nick Berard

Car comparisons and model reviews have always been journalistic fodder. Enthusiasts love to read about which car is the fastest... the most nimble... or braked in the shortest distance. Which car is the most dependable... offers the longest warranty... has the best resale? Which one this? Which one that? Which one?

So when an opportunity arose to collect a completely unbiased, knowledgeable assessment by a completely unbiased, knowledgeable owner of two similar yet significantly different 356 siblings, who could resist?

Jim Stephenson is the owner of a Signal Red 1956 1600N Speedster, first year of the 356A, and a Silver Metallic 1959 1600S sunroof coupe, last year of the 356A. He's a member of the Wisconsin 356 Club, Porsche 356 Registry, and the Fox Valley Region of Porsche Club of America. Sharing garage space with his two tubs are a 2007 GT3 and a 1946 Hillegas Midget that saw hard action back in the day. The walls of his garage are adorned with old racing posters and vintage signage touting Road America. The speckled, epoxy-coated garage floor is spotless. Jim is a car guy. His wife, Lisa, is patient and understanding.

Jim began, "My first 356 was a 1964 SC that I fully restored and then sold to purchase a 1979 Turbo. The Turbo was a great car, silver with a red interior, but my heart remained with the 356, specifically a Speedster. So I began looking through those inch-thick *Hemmings Motor News* magazines and called anyone who had a Speedster to see if they'd be interested in trading for a Turbo.

"Finally, I found this car in Kansas City," Jim said. "I trailered the Turbo to Kansas City, gave the Speedster a good look, worked the trade, giving the owner \$5,000 or \$6,000 to boot, and brought

the Speedster back to Wisconsin. That was in 1994. The Speedster was an old California car. The floor was solid. It had been re-painted several times—green, dark red, and when I bought it, a brighter red, like Guards Red. It was what I'd call a 'driver.'"

Drive it he did, for about five years. Then, "... one late summer Sunday afternoon, I began thinking that the car deserved a full restoration," Jim said. "To most people the Speedster looked okay, but I'm the kind of guy who wants everything original. Little things about it bothered me, so I began taking it apart. At the time, I had garage space in Appleton, Wisconsin. Lisa thought I was nuts."

Jim removed every nut... every bolt. "This was a little before the digital camera era, so I used Kodak throwaway cameras to document everything that I took apart," Jim said. "I took the bare body to Dave Treichel, now owner of Zero to 60 Auto Refinishing in Sherwood, Wisconsin, who did the body finishing and painting. We wanted the car to look as original as possible, so we used Sikkens paint for the Signal Red exterior, and Wurth products on the underbelly. When the body was done, it came back to my garage for my reassembly."

Autos International recovered the Speedster's steel bucket shells and sent a carpet kit and the new boot to Jim. "I fitted and installed all that and re-did the dash," added Jim. "I did all the dirty work."

"I consulted with Pete Bartelli, one of the best 356 concours experts around, to determine what type of plating I needed to use on various components," Jim continued. "I used black zinc plating, cadmium plating, nickel plating... whatever was required. I spent hours glass-beading parts, wire-wheeling them, and then soaking them in WD-40 before sending them to be plated. I sourced and

Lots of hours in the garage and an understanding wife allowed Jim to return his two Porsches—bookends of the A series—to perfection.





The Speedster's mechanicals were refurbished through a team effort, with Jim doing most of the grunt work. A beautiful, ivory 400mm steering wheel perfectly complements the Speedster's Spartan interior.

checked the front and rear light bezels to make sure they had the proper Spezialfabrik für Autozubehör Gustav Rau G.m.b.H (SWF) identification. Finding parts was difficult. I used the Porsche 356 Registry, club members, swap meets, and of course, word of mouth. Everything on the car has the proper numbers and dates. The Speedster had Brazilian wheels on it when I bought it. I found one wheel here, two there—every wheel, including the spare, now is a Lemmerz with the proper date stamp. On some Speedster restorations today, the wheels are as shiny as the body.

From what I determined, the factory simply primed the wheels, then shot a simple coat of lacquer on them. Nothing fancy.

“David Duerr, owner of Maven Motors, did much of the work on the short block,” Jim said. Harry Bieker rebuilt the Solex 32PBIC carburetors. The late Mike Robbins reconditioned the Speedster's 519 ‘split case’ transmission.

Jim did the final assembly. From start to finish, the entire restoration took two years. In the restoration world, that's not long, considering that Jim, a weekend warrior, did much of the work



Although not original to the coupe, these Marchal fog lights contribute to its rally-style demeanor.

himself. But, as Jim pointed out, the Speedster was Porsche's ‘cheapo’ car. “There was not as much undercoating, and the convertible top doesn't have the inner lining like a cabriolet; it doesn't have many of the extras. It's funny that the Speedster turned out to be one of the most valuable Porsches.”

Since 2020, Jim has driven his Speedster roughly 10,000 miles. His annual jaunt to Elkhart Lake's Vintage Concours d'Elegance, an event in which Jim's Speedster is a perennial winner, is always on the docket.

Then there's Jim's '59 coupe. Jim began, “I acquired the coupe about 15 years ago. I just liked the look of the A coupe. It looked simple. And I knew of this one in Green Bay, owned by a friend. He had it in a building along with several Abarths. He was the kind of guy who took cars apart but didn't put them back together. He'd owned this particular car for about 20 years and had partially disassembled it with plans to restore it. It was prepped in a zinc primer. The floors had been replaced. We got to talking and he said he'd consider selling it to me. I thought it would be neat to make an outlaw out of this car, you know, give it a quickie paint job and put a hot motor in it. Anyway, we agreed on a price, and then he asked me if I noticed it was a sunroof car. I hadn't because the deck lid of a 914 rested on the roof. After I got home, I discovered that the engine, transmission, the body panels, everything on the car, was numbers-matching. The sunroof panel was also numbered. I thought, ‘Oh no, here we go again.’”

Though the sunroof coupe turned out to be too nice not to completely restore, Jim decided to add a few outlaw touches while returning the coupe to its former glory. Such touches, like the Pegasus decals and the fog lights, can be easily removed if originality became paramount. The car was properly refinished and painted by Paintwerks in West Bend, Wisconsin.

Intrigue punctuates the history of the coupe. The Kardex indicates it was delivered in Lisbon, Portugal. The car had no bumper overrides, confirmation that it was never destined for the United States. “Both Portuguese front and rear license plates were left in the car,” Jim said. “I developed a friendship with a gentleman in Portugal, who obtained a copy of the Portuguese registration confirming the initial titling.”

When Jim disassembled the car, he found lots of extra wiring, relays, and numerous holes beneath the front of the car and under



Portuguese plates, Portuguese registration, and the Kardex confirm this coupe was first delivered in Lisbon.



Discovering his Porsche was fitted with a factory sunroof was an added bonus. Pegasus decals and a bullet-style side mirror provide a sassy look.

the dash that would not have been necessary for a standard road car. Together with the 1960 Portuguese rally badge found in the car, Jim believes this coupe competed in rallies back in its heyday. He hasn't located records that confirm this, not yet. But Jim's friend is working on it.

The added fog lights are cool but were not part of the original package. "I went over to Motion Products, Inc. (MPI) in Neenah, Wisconsin," continued Jim. "For the most part, MPI does world-class Ferrari restorations—I mean top-notch work. I asked if they had any fog lights that would work on my coupe. From up in the rafters came a real nice set of original Marchal fog lights. They needed no restoration at all. I was shocked. Think I paid \$200 for the set."

As with the Speedster, Jim did virtually all the work himself, at least all the "dirty" work—disassembly, cleaning, scrubbing, parts sourcing, and reassembly. Details were just as important on the coupe as they were on the Speedster. "The wheels on the coupe are date-matched KPZ Kronprinz wheels. The tool kits and jacks are period original, although not original equipment on either the Speedster or the coupe. I sourced most of the tools, one at a time."

Before they married, Lisa and Jim attended a race in Florida where they encountered a '79 Turbo like Jim's old one. A friend mentioned to Lisa that Jim once had a Porsche like that but traded it for the Speedster. She looked at the Turbo, turned to Jim, and said, "Are you kidding me? You mean you traded a car like that for your mini-mousemobile?" Yes Lisa, some things simply defy logic.

Despite the Speedster's diminutive size, ride height, and girth-challenging bucket seats, with its 400mm steering wheel the car is easy to get into—with the top down, at least. The coupe's 420mm steering wheel and full-size seats present more of a challenge. Headroom in both cars is adequate, not ample. It's obvious to a Speedster driver/passenger that the car was purpose-built and bare bones in every way. No radio, cigarette lighter, no roll-up windows. The coupe offers a quaint European feel with period amenities. The Speedster's ignition key is to the right of the steering wheel, while the coupe's ignition key is on the left. The Speedster's speedometer is left of the multi-gauge unit, while the coupe's speedometer is on the right.

In warmish, dry weather, driving the Speedster is a gas. It's very light—about 1,675 pounds. Consequently, it feels quick, even with its 60-hp engine. The Speedster's steering box is basically the early Volkswagen unit. Together with BOGE shocks and Firestone 560-15 bias ply tires, the Speedster feels light and nimble.

The coupe has a ZF steering box that feels a little tighter. With Vredestein 165x15 radial tires, the coupe is softer and more comfortable. Additionally, the coupe's sound deadening and insulation provide a quieter ride. The Speedster has BBAB "airport" gears, meaning that its purpose in life was to be competitive on shorter



Rightfully proud of his Speedster and coupe restorations, Jim has another project on tap in the garage behind him: a 1946 Hillegas Midget.



race circuits. It is not set up for long-distance highway use. At speeds over 80 mph, the engine screams like a banshee. By contrast, the coupe's 716 transmission, rebuilt by Vic Skirmants, has taller gears, so highway cruising is effortless. Both cars have drum brakes, but the Speedster stops shorter because it weighs less.

Analysis? The Speedster is a sunny-day companion, a hoot to drive on the track or down a country back road. Driving a Speedster with gusto proves the adage, "It's way more fun to drive

a slow car fast, than a fast car slow." The coupe is more civilized. It is a perfect choice for spirited, everyday use.

The bottom line is that both 356As deliver that unique Porsche experience. Stephen F. Wilder (*Sports Cars Illustrated*) put it this way, "Porsches have always been delectable motor cars, and in [the 356A] they have reached a new peak. Those who feel Porsches are too expensive should give a careful looking over to realize the amount of value received." ³⁵⁶

EVOLUTION/REVOLUTION

Forward thinking and continuous improvement have hall-marked Porsche development since 1947, when the Type 356 was a mere twinkle in the eye of 38-year-old Ferry Porsche. Beyond its rudimentary and symbiotic relationship with Volkswagen, the Porsche sport car morphed from pre-production roadsters, Gmünd cabriolets and coupes, through Pre-A models, then A, B, and C variants. Each generation was better constructed, faster, and easier to drive than the one that came before.

In the opinion of many, the A model was considered the prettiest of the 356 lineage. Introduced in 1956, the T-1 A featured improvements over the Pre-A including, among other things, a larger-capacity 1.6-liter engine with a three-piece engine case, softer torsion bars, curved windshield, larger wheels and tires, a vinyl-padded top over its newly designed, three-cluster dashboard, and chrome bumper overriders for US-destined vehicles.

The T-2 updated its predecessor during the Fall of 1957. The T-2 featured Zenith carburetors replacing the Solex carburetors, modified and improved door strikers, teardrop rear taillights replacing beehive units, a modified cabriolet rear cowl to accept an optional hardtop, and exhaust outlets exiting through the rear bumper guards rather than beneath

them. More significant changes occurred in 1959, when the 716 transmission was fitted with Porsche-designed servo synchronizers, the Convertible D replacing the bare-bones Speedster, and an electrically-operated sunroof offered as an \$258.30 factory option to coupe buyers who yearned for more sunshine and fresh air. It was reported that roughly 5 percent of the coupes came so equipped.

The Porsche Speedster, produced from 1955 through 1958, epitomized the essence of the 356A. Built to tantalize the California white T-shirt crowd, Speedsters were stripped-down hotrods that looked cool with a removable windshield and the mere suggestion of a canvas convertible top. Speedsters didn't break, went like stink, and, at a starting price below \$3,000, were priced competitively with the Triumph, MG, and Austin-Healey. If it rained, well, grab an umbrella. Or, if you're Jim Stephenson, grab the keys to your coupe instead.

References: *Porsche: Excellence Was Expected, Volume 1*; www.porsche356registry.org; www.speedsters.com; www.pelicanparts.com; *Excellence Porsche Buyers Guide, 2022-2023*