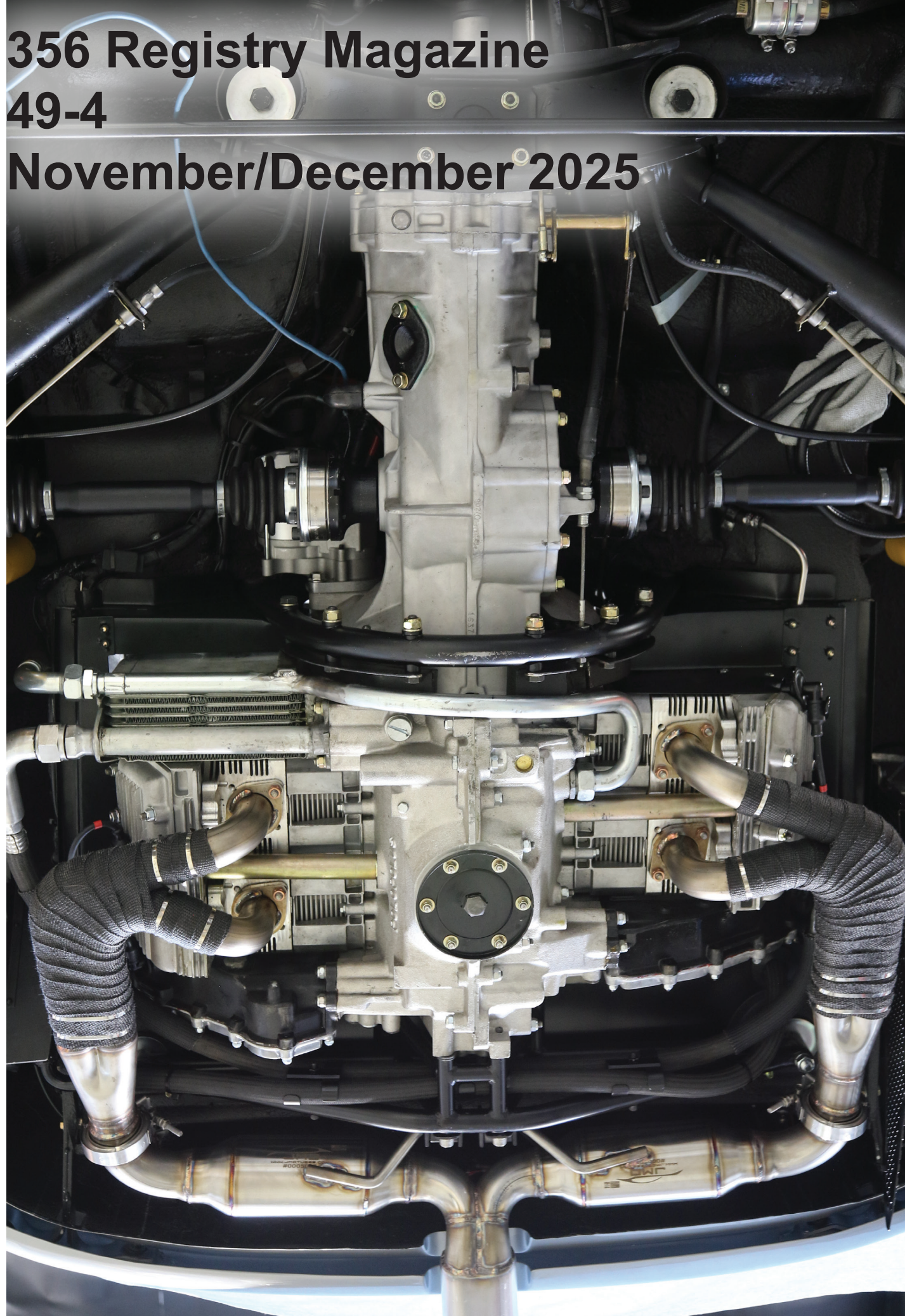


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PORSCHE 356 REGISTRY

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On the cover: Frank Hood, with passenger Steve Proctor, drove one of many 356s that climbed Pikes Peak and its famous hillclimb course during the Colorado Springs West Coast Holiday in September. Read the event report on page 54. Photo by Meg Jacobsen

On this page: David Witty photographed this cool pinstripping around the badge of a Porsche at Car Week in Monterey. More Car Week coverage on page 48.





RISEN FROM ASHES

THE RESILIENCE OF JOHN BENTON

By Sean Cridland

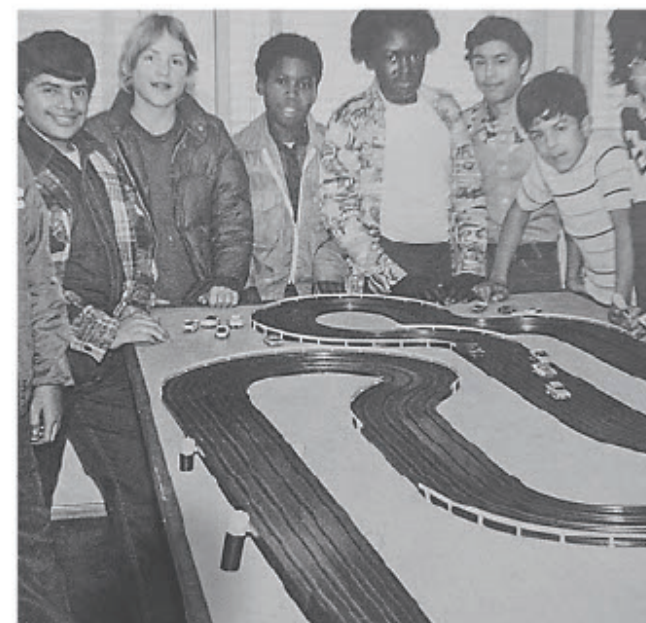
John Benton, of Anaheim's Benton Performance, came to California from East St. Louis with his mother in 1965. There they met his stepfather, who was part of the generation of—as he puts it—“the Arkies and Okies that made California possible,” with their willingness to work hard and long hours. During grade school Benton would be farmed out to whichever relative needed him for the day. “All the men in my life were in the trades: painters, electricians, plumbers, roofers, and so on,” Benton says. “I didn’t have fun summers like the other kids. I worked. Get up at four and get in the truck of whomever needed me. Come home at dusk.”

Above: John Benton at his shop, alongside a sign made by his sister for his 25th birthday.

But that time was also the magical period when SoCal was the epicenter of American car culture. He remembers going to the Ascot, Lyons, and Riverside racetracks to watch professionals, the street racing on Santa Fe, and cruising on Witter and Sunset boulevards. Sounding a little like Bruce Springsteen, he says, “Car culture was thick and was real.”

How He Got Started

Benton's early cars included a 1959 Alfa Romeo Giulietta Sprint and a Chevrolet Impala that he owned before he was old enough to drive them. The car that first taught him about air-cooled engines was a VW Squareback that he got from his grandmother, on the condition that he paint her house and pay her \$300. “Older me looks back and thinks what a piece of crap that



Young John, second from left, enjoying slot cars with his neighborhood friends.

car was,” Benton says. “But at the time, it was this incredible machine.”

Unfortunately, the car didn't run. “I put gasoline in the car and charged the battery, but it wouldn't start and smelled really bad from the old varnish mixed with the fuel,” Benton said. “So I rode my bicycle over to Tony's Auto Repair on Atlantic. I probably looked like I was 10 when I walked in with the carburetor in a paper bag.

“I met a big man named Adam Büchler, who had a deep voice and a thick German accent, who said, ‘Can I help you?’

“Instead of chasing me away, he invited me into his meticulously organized workshop,” Benton said. “With great patience, he walked me through every stage of disassembling, cleaning, and reassembling the piece. I did what he told me, and over the course of a couple days, he showed me how to match the surfaces, pull and replace pins, inspect threads, and clean everything. When we were done, he said, ‘This carburetor will work.’”

That, along with similar help rebuilding the distributor, gave Benton a life-long friendship and mentor, and it got the car running.

Self-emancipating at the age of 16, Benton worked a variety of jobs to pay the rent, including mucking manure at a dairy farm, working as a service electrician for an industrial machine company, and picking up shifts at a hardware store on weekends. He got his electrical contractor's license and a union card while he was still a teen, managed to finish high school, and continued taking classes in welding, metallurgy, mechanical drawing, hydraulics, and pneumatics. Nonetheless, he found time to hike the Sierras, go deep-sea fishing, scuba dive, and go hunting, all on his own.

Finding His Way to the World of Porsche

Benton's foray into the world of Porsches began shortly after high school. His cousin had a 1966



Benton and wife Brenda leave for their honeymoon, with a laugh, in the 912.

Sand Beige 912 and a 1969 Blood Orange 911S that he sometimes let John drive on date nights. But he had some lessons to learn before getting his own Porsche.

Benton had a really fast 1966 Karmann Ghia that was good in a straight line but didn't handle well. Eventually, he learned what good tires, brakes, and properly tuned dampers could do for the car's capabilities on twisty roads. He switched from Radial T/As to Semperit tires, replaced the OEM shocks with Konis, and upgraded to disc brakes all around. Not long after, he went looking for his first Porsche.



The original Benton home shop.

His wife-to-be, Brenda, spotted a 1968 912 with 81,000 miles that had been meticulously maintained. Benton bought it and drove that car every day as hard as he could until it started smoking. Determined to drive it on his honeymoon, he rebuilt the engine just in time for his wedding. He said “I do” to Brenda with grease still under his nails, then they drove north along the coast for a week, including stops for oil changes and valve adjustments. They still have the car and completely restored it in 2000.

Just for fun, in 1986 he joined the Porsche owner’s club. He drove his 912 fast enough on track days to run safely in the advanced drivers’ group. His fellow drivers started asking who was building his motors and setting up his suspensions. That work became a side gig—sort of a proto-Benton Performance—for the next 10 years.

The tipping point came in 2004, when a chance for advancement to the missile division at Curtiss-Wright Aviation fizzled and he quit on the spot. Instead of scolding him for losing a well-paying job with benefits, Brenda said, “Good. Just do the Porsche stuff. That’s where you’re happy.”

By 2006, he had his business license, bonding, and insurance.

Eventually his home business grew big enough that he needed a full shop with room for customers’ cars to be stored. His first shop was in La Habra. In 2013, he moved to his current location in Anaheim, all the time growing a strong and loyal clientele through word of mouth within the SoCal Porsche community.

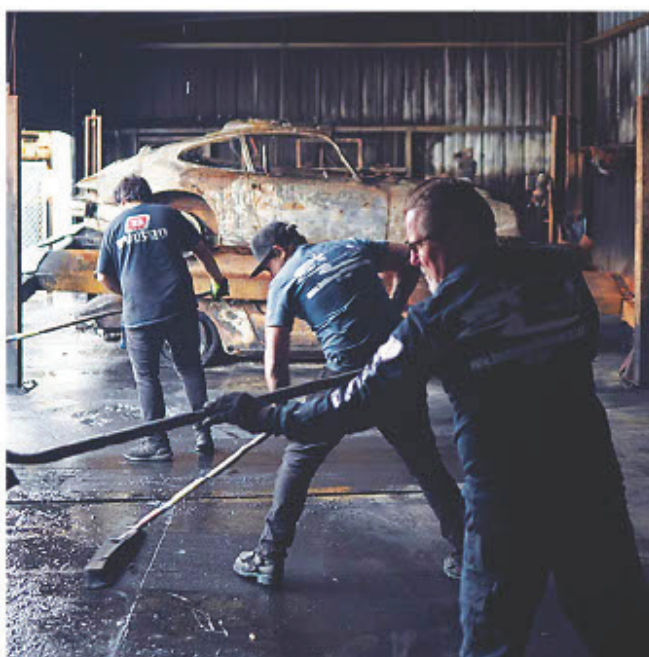
La Carrera

One day while perusing the racks at a video store, Benton noticed a documentary made by Pink Floyd drummer Nick Mason about his and guitarist David Gilmour’s 1990 participation in the modern version of La Carrera Panamericana. Benton recalls, “It was something I’d heard about, but I didn’t really know anything about it.” He wanted to do the famous road race through Mexico, but how? Serendipitously, the opportunity found its way to him not long after.

A fellow approached Benton at that year’s Queen Mary concours with a proposal to do the Carrera that same year, giving them only a few months prepare. Though he claimed to have a race-ready car, it turned out that his 1962 356B was in rough shape. It had a roll cage, but it was not built to any known spec. The car had no



Preparing the 356B for La Carrera.



Benton and crew cleaning up after the fire.

fire system, an ancient fuel cell, even older safety harnesses, and the engine needed a complete rebuild. Rather than suggesting they delay to another year, Benton went to work on the build.

Benton finished the car with little time to spare—they simply drove it around the block a few times and loaded it up. After a few teething problems in Mexico, things came together, and they won their class in their first try. Over the next few years, they did La Carrera half a dozen times and podiumed or won every time.

Dark Days

In 2019, Benton suffered one of the worst calamities any small business owner could encounter: fire. It was a very blustery Halloween night with high Santa Ana winds. At about midnight, Benton’s security cameras recorded the entire episode. A neighboring business’s truck spontaneously erupted in flame, igniting several



Benton Performance as it looks today.



A one-of-a-kind “Frankenstein” bent-window coupe build.

other trucks on the same lot, each of which exploded in succession. Within minutes flames jumped the fence into Benton Performance. John was sleeping with his phone off, and didn’t get the several messages sent by the police and fire departments until he awoke at 5:00 a.m. By the time he arrived on the scene his once vibrant business was but a smoldering pile of scorched metal and soot.

The 2,500-degree heat incinerated all Benton’s tools and several cars, including a 1967 race car chassis, an excellent-condition patina 356, a very fast 912, and a museum-quality 912E with just 23,000 miles, plus about two million dollars in parts. If that wasn’t bad enough, the following months were consumed by extended battles with his insurance companies, which initially offered pennies on the dollar. Things looked bleak for Benton Performance that Christmas. He remembers thinking, “I could lose *everything*!”

To save the business, he and his wife withdrew all their savings, liquidated their retirement accounts, refinanced their home, and benefited from a \$55,000 GoFundMe drive put together by friends and clients. He set a date for himself to reopen by March 1, 2020, and he and his employees commenced shoveling, salvaging, cleaning, and rebuilding. Amazingly, they beat his projection by three days. The reopening party drew about 500 people... but days later came the nationwide COVID quarantine. Once again, Benton’s character, persistence, and creativity were put to the test.

He bought five gallons of isopropyl alcohol and aloe Vera, mixed it up with some perfume, and gave 100 bottles to clients and friends.



He made masks that said, “Air Cooled,” and hats that said, “Make Air Cooled Great Again,” like his good friend Jeff Trask had a few years before—anything to make a few dollars. As he has said, “Between those two events, it was super humbling, and we did a lot of soul searching.” Eventually the business got back on an even keel



and clients returned, though the racks beside his building still hold a few burned-out cars that serve as a stark reminder of some very tough times.

His Specialties

Though he works on a variety of air-cooled Porsches, he specializes in 356s and 912s. Besides doing regular maintenance and repairs, when we visited his shop, the crew was working on a few specials. There was an off-road, special-use 1967 912 being prepared for a trans-continent trip across Africa. Close by was a 1955 bent-window coupe that made its post-restoration debut at the La Jolla Concours, where it won the people's choice for best European

car. Next to that was one of his "Frankenstein" cars, a 1956 A with almost every element customized: 901 drivetrain, 2.7-liter Polo motor, billet surrounds for the headlights and grilles, a 1952 Pre-A dash, a seven-speaker sound system good enough to be in a



A 1967 912 that was specially built to rally across Africa.



Sharing a thumbs-up moment with a fan.

brand-new Mercedes, an electric sunroof, and an interior made from hides of cattle raised in special pens so the hides wouldn't get scratched. Over on a spotless work bench was a twin-plug, 1.9-liter 616 motor, with a knife-edge crankshaft and lightweight rods, that was being built for a 1957 Speedster.

The Future

Walking through his shop, we noticed an equal mix of older and younger technicians. Thinking back to the people who helped him, he says, "It's my turn [to mentor]."

"I have a young man from Kenya who hit me up via Instagram. My son does most of our transmission work, is a good engine builder, and is very good at final assembly. One of my guys is the son of a guy who does fabrication for high-end street rods. We have some older, more experienced guys who help the young ones along. If someone comes to me with enough motivation, they have 30 days to show their worth. But they need to understand that I might be critical. It's not personal, just part of the learning process. I have a reputation to uphold."

How much longer will he go on? A young 60 years old, Benton has learned a lot of lessons, many the hard way. He's careful about setting expectations with customers and employees, builds and maintains some very special cars, and works to make sure that everyone keeps up their enthusiasm and energy. Of himself, he says, "With very few exceptions I've done everything I've wanted to do. I have had great friendships, and I have a wonderful wife and family. We'll keep doing this as long as we're all having fun." 358



Many years later, Benton stands proudly with the first Porsche he ever owned, his prized 912.