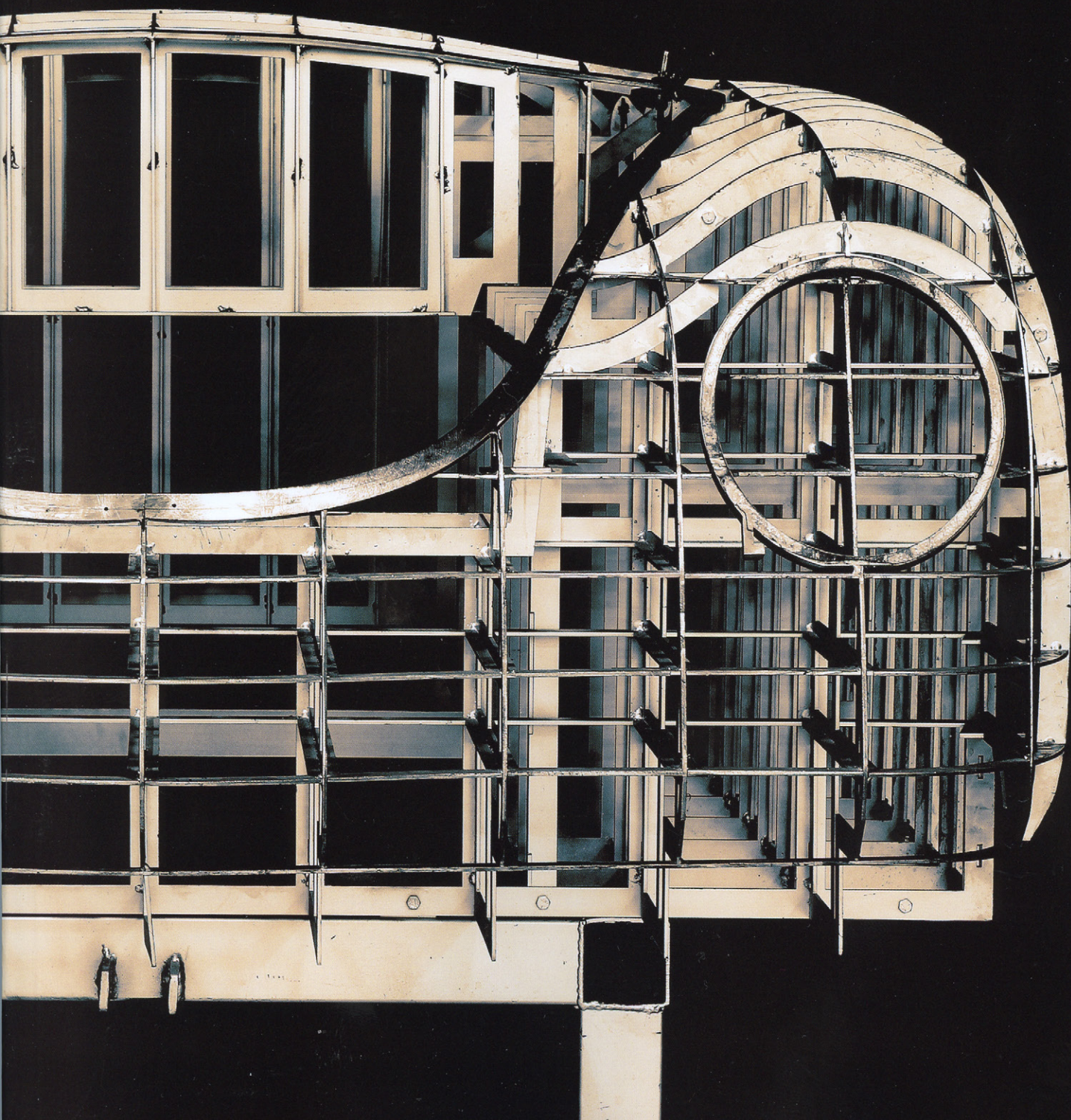


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Photo by Michael Alan Ross

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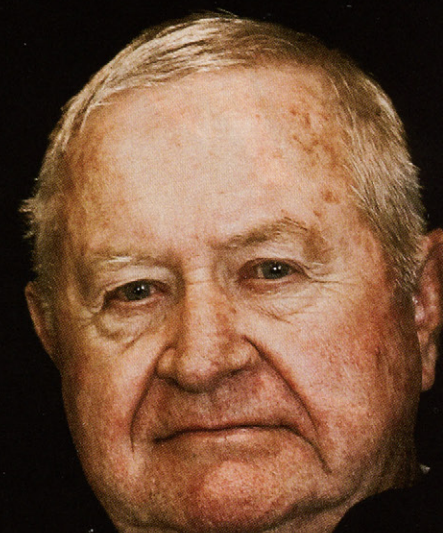
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MetalMaster

FOR 50 YEARS, RALPH "MUTT" BRAWLEY SHAPED SOME OF THE WORLD'S FINEST PORSCHES. THEN HE HELPED SHAPE THE FUTURE OF HIS CRAFT.

STORY BY **SEAN CRIDLAND** PHOTOS BY **MICHAEL ALAN ROSS**



CAROLINA COACH CRAFTERS



You can learn a lot about a man by looking at his tools.

From worn-to-a-polish hammers to well-cared-for presses and immaculate band saws, truths emerge. This is a man who has an eye for detail and a respect for shape and form. As you look around his shop, you notice the 356 and early 911 body bucks. ♦ Ralph “Mutt” Brawley’s deliberate speech reveals more—a deep understanding of the simple forms, complex curves, and timeless shapes of design master Erwin Komenda and those at Porsche who followed him. Survey Brawley’s work history, in the shape of trophies or his list of clients, and you know you’re speaking with someone who has lived a fuller, more colorful life than his modest Carolina country-boy demeanor lets on. ♦ “There’s nothing Ralph can’t do,” says PCA Manhattan Trophy winner Weldon Scrogam. In fact, the more you learn about Brawley, the more it seems there is little he hasn’t done.

AS A KID, BRAWLEY WAS always interested in cars, though if you wanted to talk about performance in those days you were usually describing the “liquor cars” driven by local bootleggers. His introduction to Porsches was fortuitous.

After he finished high school, Brawley’s uncle invited him to visit Colorado for the summer. He found young Brawley a job as an apprentice at Ed Kyle’s foreign-car body shop in Colorado Springs. Three-time Pikes Peak hill-climb winner Bob Donner Jr. was a customer, and he regularly brought in his RS60 and RSK for racing-related repairs.

One RSK, says Brawley, was bent badly enough that only three of its wheels touched the ground. Kyle’s shop regularly reshaped the racing Porsches’ soft aluminum fenders to eliminate protrusions caused by rocks thrown up by the knobby tires Donner ran for traction on the gravel road that wound its way up the mountain. The solution: Coat the inside of the fenders with fiberglass.

In that shop, Brawley learned one of his first lessons about bodywork—and humility. Kyle challenged the brash kid to fix an old Buick that had been rolled. Brawley didn’t really have the experience to do it properly but dove into the project anyway. He put boards and a jack into the car and started pushing the roof up. He pulled on the body here and there with block and tackle. After a lot of pounding, he thought it was ready for presentation.

After the whole shop stopped to watch, Kyle said, “Put a windshield in it.” Brawley leaned the windshield against the frame and...it fell right through. The opening was about an inch too big.

“That ended my smartness right there,” says Brawley.

BRAWLEY WAS A QUICK STUDY, and he was ambitious. His life was interrupted by a stint in the army, after which he eventually moved back to Mooresville, North Carolina, started his professional life, got married,

and settled down. There weren’t a lot of Porsches in the area back then, so he worked for a few years at Terry Plymouth in Charlotte, practicing his metalworking skills and saving all his money.

In 1968, Brawley started his own business in a building of his own design. He called it Coach Craft. Gradually, he started taking in more Porsche work and became a specialist. To satisfy his need for parts, he started a Porsche salvage business that would eventually become one of the largest Porsche used-parts operations on the East Coast.

Always looking for a better way, Brawley pioneered business-model efficiency in automotive salvage. Rather than picking parts off cars parked out in the elements, Brawley had his team disassemble his recent purchases, after which they would catalog, inventory, and store the parts on organized shelves and in drawers. It was much easier for his repair and restoration business to have everything in house, and easier to capitalize on sales to other shops.

With a wry smile you see on so many enthusiasts from that era, Brawley recounts how he gave away several reasonably good 356s one day—because they were in the way. A 550 was just an old race car, not worth much to anybody. Back then, nobody really thought they’d ever be worth a lot of money.

Brawley assembled a shop full of metalworking tools, such as English wheels, Yoder power hammers, a Pettingell, and more. More importantly, he learned how to use every one of them with great skill and efficiency. Brawley’s pride was such that he insisted on returning cars in better-than-factory form. Several of his customers and competitors were dumbfounded by his perfectionism and his finished products.

“I worked next door and didn’t know about Brawley or Coach Craft until I watched damaged Porsches going in and beautiful cars coming out,” says David Miller, who apprenticed with Brawley many years ago.

“Coach Craft was not what I thought of as a ‘body shop.’”

Putting 911s, 914s, 924s, and 928s back on the road kept Brawley busy—to the point that quite a bit of time passed before he gave the concours-level vintage restoration business serious consideration.

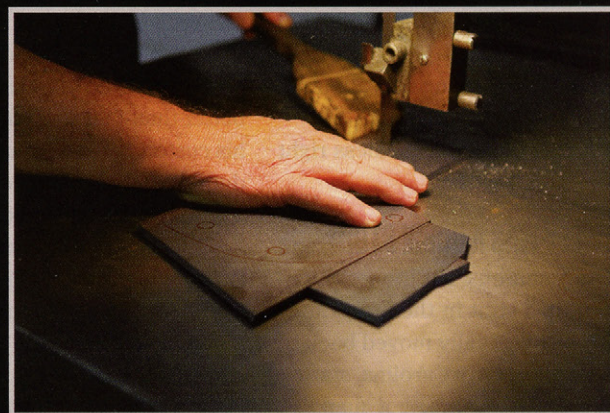
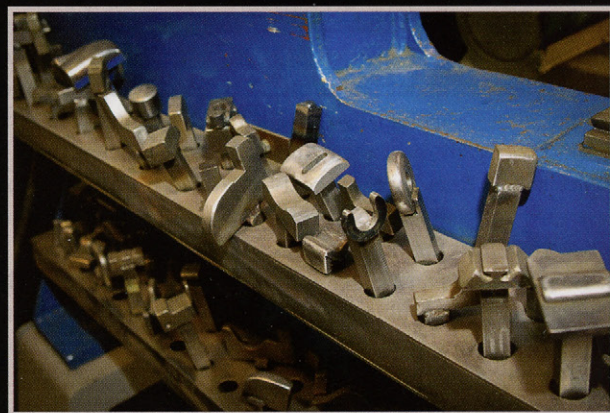
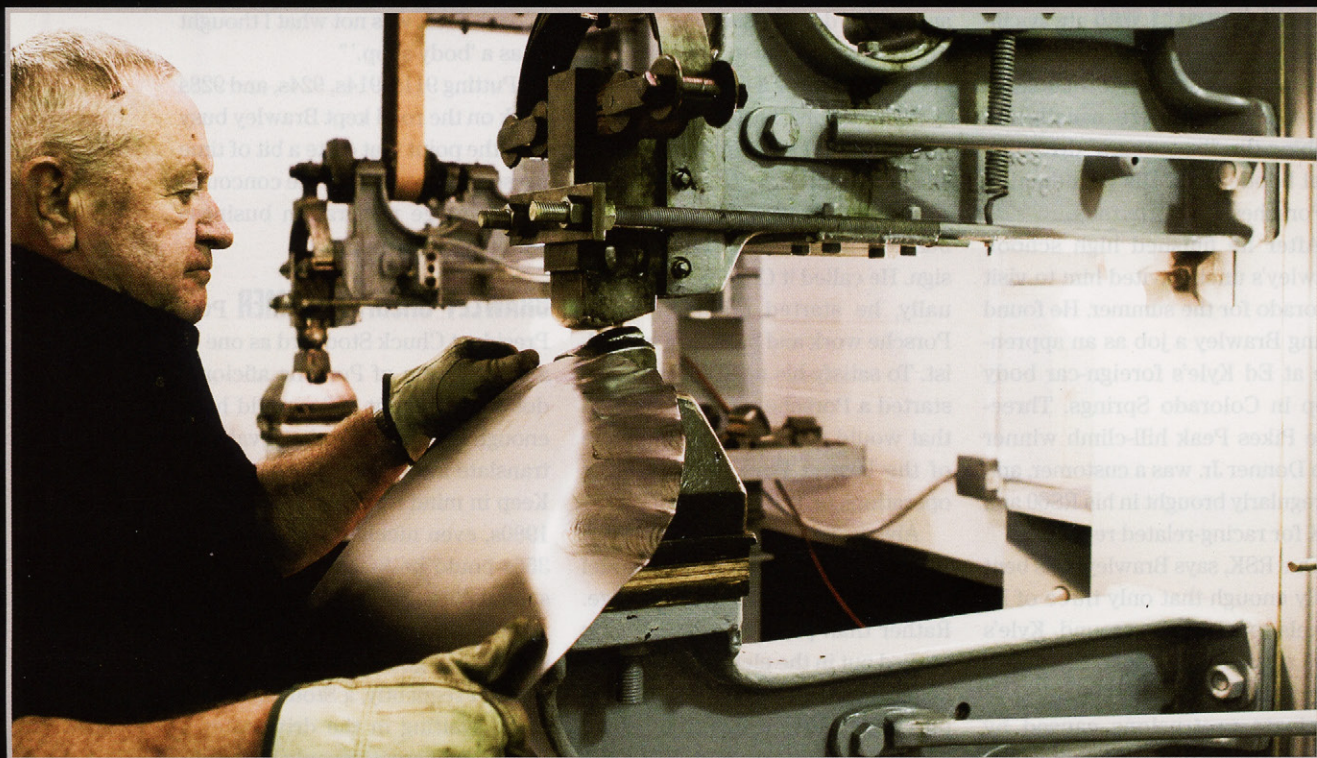
BRAWLEY CREDITS FORMER PCA President Chuck Stoddard as one of a small group of Porsche aficionados who thought 356s would have enough historic or aesthetic value to translate into good business sense. Keep in mind that, in the 1970s and 1980s, even nicely maintained rare 356s could be had for a few thousand dollars.

Brawley knew that if he had something good, Stoddard would buy it. Frequently, a Stoddard truck stood waiting in the drive after a phone conversation only the night before, there to pick up whatever good find Brawley had come upon. The two met through the parts trade and speak of each other with terse, almost gruff, affection and respect.

Brawley remembers times when Stoddard would come by Coach Craft on the way to Florida in his GM motorhome. Even if all the machinery was running, Brawley knew who was outside because Stoddard had installed a locomotive air horn big enough that it required its own compressor—and he loved using it. For his part, Stoddard recalls Brawley as “the finest metal man in the business, with a real eye for Porsche shape and form, and as honest as the day is long.”

Brawley enjoyed his time in the salvage business but eventually sold out. Says Brawley: “We bought a lot of cars; we parted out a lot of cars. We sold a lot of cars for people to rebuild, and we sold a lot of bodies for people to make race cars out of. And we brokered cars for other people and sold cars ourselves.”

By the mid-1980s, he found that drug-trade money laundering was affecting inventory value. The launderers didn’t care if they were mak-



ing money on cars and parts as long as the source of the cash could be hidden. It was time for honest men to move on.

NEVER ONE TO STAY IDLE for long, Brawley continued with restoration work, gaining acclaim as his client list grew. Cars were being shipped to his shop from around the country, and even Europe.

His work helped Charles Hunter and Weldon Scrogam win PCA's most prestigious concours award—the Manhattan Trophy—four times in a row (1992-1995). They were the only Parade participants to win it more than twice before the award was discontinued. The Hunter and Scrogam cars included the last 356 Carrera Speedster, a Burgundy 356 Carrera Cabriolet that had spent much of its life on Guam, a 550 Spyder, and a brand-new 1989 Speedster. Concours enthusiasts talk about the cars' level of preparation and presentation to this day.

The 1989 Speedster came fresh from the factory, but Brawley completely disassembled it. He found several pieces that were unacceptable for concours competition and either fixed or replaced them before reassembly and final Parade Concours prep. The 911 was detailed inside and out, with not a smear of grease, an errant hair, or a foreign crumb. That was the level of preparation it took to win—and retire—the Manhattan Trophy.

Other notable Porsches Brawley worked on include the only steel-bodied 356 America Roadster and a 916 that he did for former PCA President Regan Rowe. But, as Phyllis Scrogam says, "He reached a point where he wanted to be a craftsman and he didn't want to deal with [the politics and pageantry]. But there's no way you can put a price on what he does. He's just an artist. You had to have [customers] who understood what it took and the time it took."

Brawley had them. But, even with a long waiting list of clients, in 1997 Brawley felt it was time to close his

"You've gotta be able to see shapes and how they flow. If you don't have any artistic ability, you're wasting your time. There's no use even trying it."

shop and take on a new kind of project. Because of his lifelong experience with metalwork, Brawley was asked by Team Penske to build a Nascar prototype of the Ford Taurus. He altered the car's rounded body panels to provide more stability and downforce, and the car eventually influenced the shape of the second-generation street Taurus.

Not long after, Brawley received a call with a job offer from Rick Hendrick, the owner of Hendrick Motorsports. "Brawley is the most phenomenal metal shaper and car builder I've ever met," says Hendrick. "I've seen him do everything from making an aluminum Cobra fender by hand to a custom metal baseball bat, complete with all the little dimples in it. His attention to detail is unparalleled. His ability to work from scratch to create one-of-a-kind pieces or perfect duplicates is just amazing."

Hendrick's reasons for hiring Brawley were far more practical, however. Up to that point, the Hendrick bodywork department employed a team of people using English wheels to make body parts for the team's race cars, one at a time. It

was a tremendously time-consuming process for a team running multiple cars at every race. Brawley brought his knowledge and experience with power hammers to help speed the process.

"What they could do in a day with an English wheel, we could do in less than an hour," says Brawley. But, as Hendrick's operation grew, they were looking for something even faster to keep all of the cars in new bodywork.

With Brawley's guidance, Hendrick Motorsports became the first Nascar team with its own bodywork stamping mill. Rather than following the automakers' process of lead alloy molds, foundry work, and an expensive stamping process, Brawley wanted to innovate. He helped to develop a process using composite plastics that allowed the race team to re-die if rules or aerodynamic tests required a body shape change between races.

TYPICAL OF BRAWLEY, his work to initiate body-part stamping for Hendrick allowed him time for ever more interesting one-off projects. He did a lot of custom work on Hendrick's yacht, including chromed engines, tables, lights, and cabinets. "People were blown away when they saw the work," says Hendrick. "The boat manufacturer started trying to duplicate it. They'd charge half a million dollars and couldn't do it half as well as Brawley did."

Gradually, as Brawley approached his seventies, Hendrick encouraged him to start working from his home shop. Then, a couple of years ago, Brawley decided it was time to sell his shop tools and retire so he and his wife could build a little boat, move to North Carolina's coast, and sip wine on the porch each evening.

Naturally, his plans took another detour when Carolina Coach Crafters' Tim Lingerfelt made him an offer on his shop tools. He'd buy the whole set, if Brawley would spend a couple of years training a group of young metalworkers to use them

Opposite: Brawley shapes a 356 front hood, using the power hammer with ruthless efficiency. His collection of dies, hammers, and mallets reveals a lifelong obsession for meticulously crafting perfectly complex curves and undulating shapes from flat sheets of steel and aluminum.



properly, to keep the Brawley tradition alive. And so his retirement was delayed as he spent time training several apprentices on his machines and with his tools.

BRAWLEY ENJOYED TEACHING “old timey” things to young guys because it made good metal men out of them. Even so, he says, “Power hammers do the work for you, but it still takes the heart of an artist. You’ve gotta be able to see shapes and how they flow. If you don’t have any artistic ability, you’re wasting your time. There’s no use even trying it.”

He’s seen a lot of guys give it a try and can tell in a couple of weeks if they’re worth keeping around. Some can pound on a piece of sheet metal all day long and have nothing to show for it. He was pleased with the young men apprenticing with him, and hopes they’ll stay with it.

Throughout Brawley’s career, he always looked at new ideas and technologies to solve old problems. Shortly before he retired for good, he worked with Lingerfelt’s crew to create a brand-new, computer-generated body buck for Speedsters.

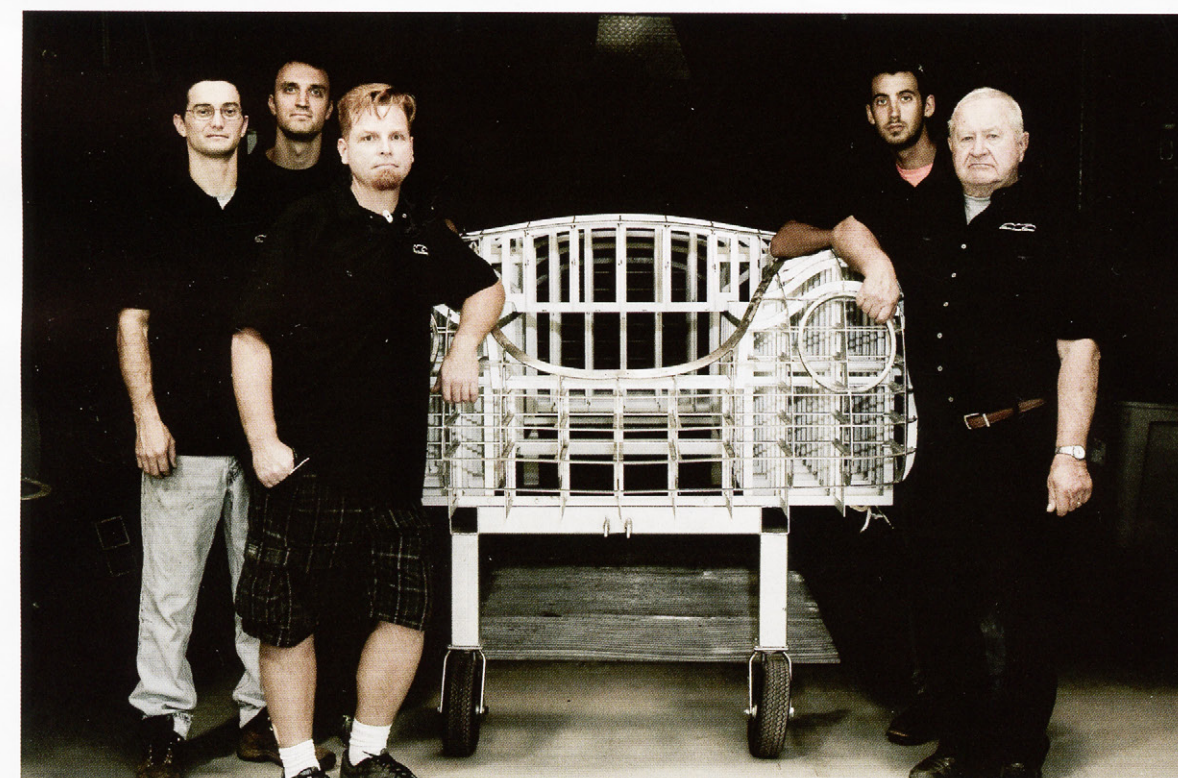
Working from a 1957 Speedster he knew was dead-on perfect, he and his crew removed the bumpers, lights, and trim before placing hundreds of laser-reflective “dots” all over the car. Once the car was scanned, a three-dimensional digital model was composed. From the scan, the program analyzed and projected the necessary lengths for each piece of steel to create the buck, including a map for each numbered piece’s location. The model even provides an assembly map. Metalworkers then conform their crafted body pieces to the buck so when they make a part for a Speedster, it’s dead accurate.

It’s the epitome of a craft that’s as old as Bronze Age artists making armor with heat, hammer, and touch. Who knows how many 356s and early 911s will be reborn because of this new take on old technology—the fusion of craft and computer, of sensuous gaze and laser-perfect conformity. We know it marks the changing of generations, but Brawley’s never been one to sit still or do something just because “that’s the way that it’s always been done.”

Once the buck was done, Brawley worked on an all-aluminum Speedster for Lingerfelt. The floorpan is a standard steel 356, but the rest of the body is aluminum.

LOOKING BACK, BRAWLEY chuckles a bit about giving away those in-the-way 356s back in the 1970s. Like many of his generation, he’s even more amazed that the market value of the cars has risen to the point where it’s worth it to restore a car with paper-thin, oxidized metal. Still, he loved the challenge. Each curve, each seam, each panel offered a puzzle to be solved, an opportunity to learn a new trick, a chance for expressing a passion.

As Brawley turned over his tools to his apprentices and headed for life at the seashore, he was not the least bit nostalgic. “I never was much into taking photos,” he says. “People would ask, ‘How can you put that much work into those cars and just let them drive away?’” Brawley reflects for a moment, then speaks with certainty. “I had so much time and care into each one, I was glad to see them go.”



Opposite: Tim Lingerfelt has created a proper home for Brawley’s huge selection of body-shaping tools at the former Racers Group Nascar headquarters. The apprentices learn their trade using both traditional wood bucks and the latest in computer-aided jigs. Left: Brawley and his team of young apprentices shortly before his retirement.