

# **Prototyp: Sauter Porsche Roadster**

**Story by Sean Cridland**

**Photos by Michael Alan Ross**

**Published in Porsche Panorama, April 2015**







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PORSCHE PANORAMA (ISSN 10147-3565) is published monthly by the Porsche Club of America, Inc., 9689 Gerwing Lane, Suite 4C/D, Columbia, MD 21046. Periodicals postage paid at Columbia, MD, and additional offices. PCA membership dues are \$46.00 for one year, \$90.00 for two years or \$132.00 for three years. Dues include \$12.00 per year for an annual subscription to Porsche Panorama. Postmaster: Send address change to Porsche Panorama, PCA Executive Office, PO Box 6400, Columbia, MD 21045. Copyright ©2015 by the Porsche Club of America, Inc., all rights reserved. www.pca.org



# Prototyp.

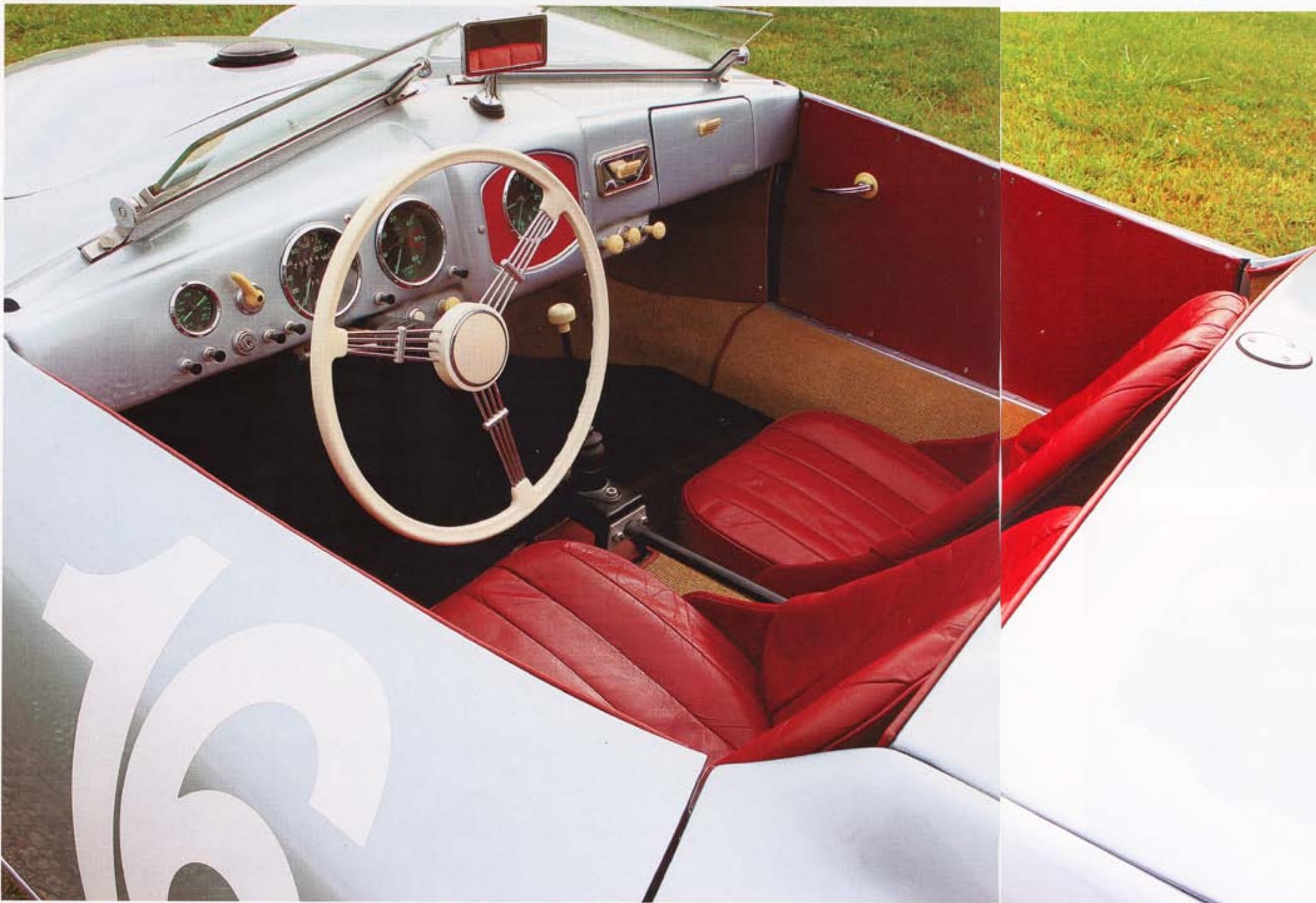
SAUTER  
PORSCHE  
ROADSTER

BEFORE THE GLÖCKLERS, THE AMERICA ROADSTER, THE SPEEDSTER, AND THE SPYDER CAME THE SAUTER, A PORSCHE THAT WOULD CHANGE PORSCHE.

STORY BY **SEAN CRIDLAND** PHOTOS BY **MICHAEL ALAN ROSS & PORSCHE ARCHIVES**







Looking back, the chronological connection between the 1951 Sauter Porsche and the development of the 1952-1953 America Roadster is clear. That wasn't the case in 1982, when PCA member Ray Knight found the car in Crabtree's Junkyard in New Castle, Indiana. ♦ He had heard about the car for years before he investigated, but the descriptions only suggested that it was a rare Porsche. The unusual roadster had been largely forgotten, being discounted by some cognoscenti as a one-off VW special. Knight felt otherwise, but would have to battle to make his case. ♦ Though not by any stretch of the imagination a 356 expert, he brought a healthy dose of enthusiasm, a willingness for adventure, and attention to detail. He was open to learning from others, and was backed by a team of old and new friends who helped him reconstruct both the car and its history. They would bring back what rust and the sands of time had obscured.

**NEGOTIATIONS TO BUY** the car were challenging—but not for the usual reasons of haggling over money. Crabtree, says Knight, was a character whose demeanor was true to his name. Though the junkyard owner couldn't say much about the car, he had a salvage operator's keen interest in helping to establish value.

Crabtree knew the Porsche had been owned by a family of riverboat operators out of Mississippi who parlayed their wealth into a fortune by selling fruitcakes during World War II—great gifts for servicemen because they were easy to ship and didn't spoil. The car's first Ameri-

can owner was a Californian, sports car enthusiast Stan Mullin.

Once a deal was reached, Crabtree provided enough information for Knight to begin his investigation into the car's origins. He appealed to PCA's Chuck Stoddard and Betty Jo Turner for research assistance. They, in turn, went to Jürgen Barth at Porsche AG.

In time, Knight would interview Heinrich Sauter, Hans Klenk, Coby Whitmore, John Fitch, Stan Mullin, and a long list of others who helped him establish the Sauter roadster's place in Porsche history. It would be a fascinating journey.





**IN 1950, PORSCHE** was forging a relationship with New York-based importer Max Hoffman, who, working from his showroom in Manhattan, almost single-handedly built America's interest in postwar European sports cars. Hoffman, a big believer in Porsche, knew that innovation and performance were necessary but felt that styling was imperative when it came to selling sports cars.

In Hoffman's eyes, the Porsche 356 was cute and performed well, but he wanted a car that would dominate the sports-car market. Almost from his first meeting with the Porsche family at the Paris Salon in 1950, Hoffman pushed for a Porsche roadster along the lines of the dramatic Jaguar XK120. In retrospect, one could say that Hoffman didn't know what he had in the now-classic form of the 356, but that's an entirely different story. Today, we know Hoffman was the force behind a small series of aluminum Porsche roadsters—plus one more in steel—known as America Roadsters.

It is here where Heinrich Sauter comes in. Sauter was a wealthy young industrialist and heir to Hahn + Kolb, a tooling manufacturer with ties to the Porsche family. Like many former fighter pilots, he became a gentleman racer in the postwar years. He raced a few different cars, including a Spohn Veritas, before trying a Porsche 356 with a 1300-cc engine. He liked the car but found it heavy and underpowered.

The obvious solution was a lighter car with more power and an ability to cut through the air more efficiently. Removing the top from a coupe or strengthening a cabriolet was a common approach, but—with cooperation from Porsche—Sauter and Hans Klenk Karosserie took a more radical approach.

Hans Klenk was no mere tinkerer. In the 1940s and 1950s, he worked near the center of the German automotive world. As a sometimes Mercedes factory driver, he found victory in 1952 at the Carrera Panamericana. He was also building BMW-powered

Veritas-based race cars for sports car and Formula 2 competition. Klenk's fabrication shop had a team of highly skilled craftspeople who consulted with the Porsche design team.

**APPARENTLY, SAUTER'S NEEDS** and Hoffman's desires coincided. Where Hoffman thought the lines of the 356 were ordinary and out of touch with design trends, Sauter wanted something lighter and more powerful.

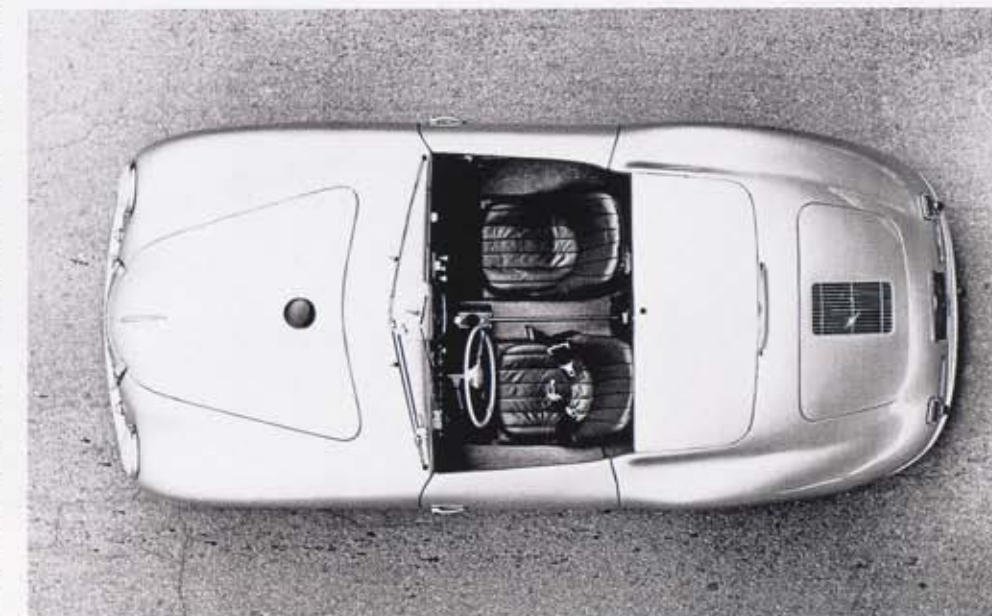
For Porsche, a sports car company in its infancy, a wealthy buyer willing to spend money on the development of a race-ready roadster

Sauter clearly remembered Klenk working closely with the Porsche factory during the car's build.

Further research done by Knight, Stoddard, Turner, Barth, and others indicated his work occurred at the same time the Porsche design team created drawing number 356.00.320 for the original "America Roadster." While some aspects of the Sauter Porsche are a near match for the factory's drawing, the Sauter roadster is far lower in profile, as if its bodywork has been flattened.

Looking at the Sauter Porsche now and in period photos, you can

From nose to tail, the Sauter displays elegant simplicity. Below, a top-down view shows the Sauter's lines are a near match with Porsche's first drawings for the America Roadster.



was a win-win proposition. Viewing the resulting Sauter as 1993's Boxster Concept to the production 1997-2004 986 is a stretch too far, but Sauter's car certainly benefited Porsche. It predated the 356 America Roadster, 356 Speedster, and 550 Spyder, and likely influenced them.

Though Sauter himself claimed to have no personal preferences for the 1950s-chic roadster look, Klenk's consultations with the factory had a strong influence. Sauter bought 1951 Porsche chassis #10359 from the 1300-cc series of 356 cabriolets as a basis for the project. Though Klenk's memory had faded by the time that Knight interviewed him in the 1980s,

see that it is unique and distinct in several ways. It's an open car with no provision for a top. It has a bolt-in rear tonneau cover, and its very low racing-type windshield was only present to satisfy regulations.

These features are common to many race-prepped roadsters and Speedsters, but the Sauter looks very different to Porsches of the period once you stand back a little. Park the Sauter next to a Cabriolet from the period, and the differences are obvious. While its nose shares the headlight profile and curves so common to Porsches of the period, the car's proportions are different. Viewed from the side, part of the



vertical profile is clearly missing. Through the mid-section, one immediately notices the lower door tops, similar to other roadsters of the day but not as radical as, say, a Triumph TR2's. Still, the Sauter is a definite departure from Erwin Komenda's taller, teardrop-shaped 356.

From the rear, the Sauter Porsche clearly differs from a 356—even if its single engine-cooling grille and gently curved rump reveal Porsche roots.

Farther forward, its rear fender lines are distinctly non-Porsche—they're more like something you'd find on a Jaguar or an Austin-Healey. Reach for the door handle and you'll *know* you're dealing with something special. The Sauter has suicide doors, ordered by its owner for ease of entry and exit at rally checkpoints.

The Sauter's overall effect suggests someone dropped a brick on one of the later, taller, and more curvaceous

America Roadsters, and that's about right. Period photos of small-bore racers in the 1950s indicate Porsche and its competitors were looking for any aerodynamic improvement, including a lower profile.

Power was a consideration, too. Porsche's most powerful production car during the early development of Sauter's roadster was the 1951 356 1300, a car that weighed around 1,800 pounds and claimed 44 horse-

power. In those days, racers begged for tiny weight savings while engineers scrambled for proportionally large but numerically small increases in power and torque.

Then as now, racing was racing, and *any* increase in power—no matter how small—would translate into an advantage in speed. The performance advantage of a smaller, lighter 356 would have been clear. The topless, steel-bodied Sauter weighed



Left: Ray Knight in the Sauter at the 1998 Monterey Historics. The car is unmistakably Porsche—but has a lower, more aggressive stance.



about 1,340 pounds, with some estimates putting it at 1,325. With a Type 527 engine worth 55 hp, the Sauter offered an extra twelve horses over a 356 1300 and weighed some 460-475 pounds less. The math is simple.

**WHEN KNIGHT BOUGHT THE CAR,** he knew he had something special. The real question was whether it was a Porsche, a VW-Porsche hybrid, or a Porsche special like the Glöckler Porsches of the 1950s.

Of course, there are those in the Porsche community who can argue over topics like this endlessly—and even seem to enjoy doing so. For them, and everyone else, the factory has always had a simple answer: It's a Porsche if Porsche says it is. Too easy? Consider the following.

Knight's discussions with Sauter and Klenk indicated they had worked closely with the Porsche factory design team during the car's build. The car has undeniable similarities to Porsche's earliest drawings for the



America Roadster. It also wore Porsche badging in all known public appearances and was entered as a Porsche from its first event forward.

One argument naysayers had for not calling it a Porsche was based on an oft-repeated story in which the Sauter's original engine was referred to as a "souped-up VW with a hot cam—until the car proved fast enough to qualify second." Knight's research indicated otherwise.

The car was not only entered as a Porsche from the beginning, it was entered as a Porsche-powered car. So how did the "souped-up VW" story come about? Research suggests the flat four used in the Sauter was the first running prototype of the Type 527 used in competition. Porsche engineers were not yet ready to call the engine in the Sauter a Type 527 because, officially, it didn't exist. Their reasoning was understand-

able, as the engine failed while Sauter was leading his first race in the car. Whether the failure was due to Sauter's enthusiasm or the state of the engine's development, it wasn't the best publicity for a new engine. Knight says that Sauter remembered quite well a frosty few weeks in his relations with the factory.

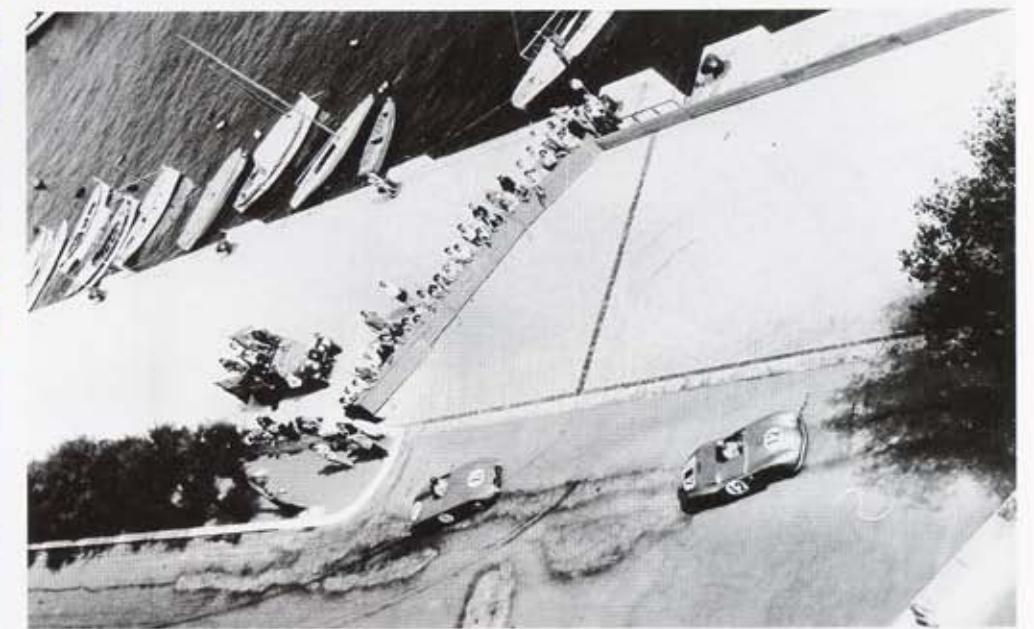
At the end of the 1951 racing season, Porsche purchased 10359 from Sauter. An internet search reveals

little subsequent racing activity for Heinrich Sauter until he paired with Richard von Frankenberg in a 356 Super for a class victory at the 1954 Mille Miglia. Porsche Archive photos show Sauter and von Frankenberg getting a hero's welcome at the factory alongside Hans Herrmann and Herbert Linge, who won the Sport 1500 category in a 550 Spyder.

In 1955, Sauter raced a Mercedes-Benz 300SL in the Mille Miglia that



Left: Through-hood fuel filler feeds a tank that dominates the luggage bay. Below: The Sauter roadster (#12) at Monaco in 1952, racing thru the chicane.



made driver Stirling Moss a legend. It appears that Heinrich Sauter raced only once more, at the 1956 Nürburgring 1000K in a 356 Carrera, paired with Rolf-Friedrich Götze. He then retired to concentrate on his business pursuits and his family.

**THE SAUTER ROADSTER** was campaigned in 1952 by François Picard, who won races at Montlhéry, Agadir, Val de Cuech, Bordeaux, Marrakesh, and Hyères. Apparently, the car was competitive against the 2.0-liter Ferrari 166MMs, which has led many to believe Picard raced with the Type 528 1500-cc Super engine. There is no proof—only a guess that Porsche would have wanted him to run the most current technology. Whatever the case, Picard's results suggest the car was either well sorted, Picard

was an exemplary driver, or that it had a significant power boost. Or it might have been all three.

New developments for the 1952 season that can be documented included openings in the front end just above the bumper and below the headlamps for brake cooling, along with a small scoop above the engine. Was the scoop meant to help with engine cooling, or to increase airflow to a more powerful engine? *Excellence Was Expected* author Karl Ludvigsen indicates the opening was for cooling, but its placement may suggest increased airflow to the twin Solex carburetors.

The car is shown throughout the 1952 season in various configurations. Changes include rally lights, varied windshield setups, and protective headlight covers as would





have been appropriate for varying regulations, roads, and weather conditions. The car is also seen in different colors that year. It was Picard who had it painted a silvery blue—the color Knight would choose to paint the car when he restored it.

After his success in the Sauter, Picard would continue to race. He's best known for his exploits in Ferraris, with podium finishes in many of the great sports-car races of the 1950s. He made one foray into Formula 1 at the 1958 Morocco Grand Prix, where his Rob Walker Cooper-

club racing. Factory records show chassis 10359 was equipped with a regular Type 527 engine by then.

A deal was struck, and the Sauter came across the Atlantic. Mullin and Armstrong raced the car with middling success throughout the 1953 season, visiting tracks like Riverside, Moffett Field, Reno, Santa Barbara, Long Beach, Bakersfield, and March Field. Mullin raced the car only once in 1954, at Pebble Beach, before spinning out and retiring.

By then, Mullin had realized his talent as a driver was mediocre. He

up to and even into the 1970s and 1980s. Once they were no longer competitive—or new regulations made them obsolete—many were cannibalized, destroyed, or simply left to rot. In time, the vintage racing movement prompted interest in the preservation and restoration of old race cars, but not in time to prevent the Sauter's darker years.

As Porsche's Speedsters and Spys became legends in the hands of celebrity owners and drivers—people such as James Dean, Steve McQueen, Dan Gurney, and Ken Miles,

PHOTO: RAY KNIGHT COLLECTION



Never heard of skiing? The Sauter Roadster has, having been used for the popular winter sport in Zell am See, Austria. While horses, dogs, and cars have been used to tow skiers, this looks funner.

Climax collided with Olivier Gendebien's Ferrari 246. The incident left Picard with injuries serious enough to end his racing career.

**AFTER THE 1952 SEASON**, the Sauter roadster was returned to the Porsche factory. There it sat until it was discovered by Jack Armstrong, an American who was in Europe to scout cars for his friend and client, California attorney Stan Mullin.

The unusual Porsche was sitting in the assembly hall at Werks 1, among several 356s, when Armstrong saw it. He thought it was interesting, and that it could be a good car for

also noticed that the America Roadsters—with their lighter aluminum bodywork and 1500 Super engines—were considerably faster.

As with so many toys, the Sauter Porsche suffered the fate of being shiny until something newer came along. Between 1954 and 1981, it suffered a long, steady decline. Its principal detractor was the humid weather of the South and Midwest. A lack of proper storage didn't help. At some point in its post-racing life, the car endured a fire that destroyed much of its interior and trim.

How could such a car fall so far? This was the fate of many race cars

to name but a few—many in the car community tended to forget about the more obscure roadsters and specials that predated them. The Sauter, in the wrong place or wrong hands, could have easily disappeared into the darker corners of Porsche history—and nearly did.

With some irony, Porsche's later sports racers now magnify the significance of Knight's rescue from the Crabtree junkyard. If the Sauter Porsche and America Roadster set new standards of Porsche performance in 1951 and 1952, what led to this concept's demise? Several answers present themselves. Some suggest Erwin





**Above:** Sauter's unique "suicide doors" tell you this is no ordinary Porsche. **Below:** The Sauter sits among 356 coupes at Zuffenhausen.

Komenda didn't want to see Porsche 356s with design ideas borrowed from other marques. Money may have had more to do with it, however.

As a one-off, the Sauter Porsche was an expensive proposition. The small run of aluminum-bodied America Roadsters were little better. Body maker Heuer-Glaser was already in financial trouble and lost money on each America Roadster body it built, this despite the fact that the car re-

tailed for some \$4,600 in the U.S. The 17th and final car, with its body rendered in steel, might have proven less expensive to produce in time, but the 1954 Speedster was a smarter solution. As a regular 356 with a lower windshield and simplified top, it was a far easier route to a less expensive, lighter Porsche. At \$2,995, it was the bargain Porsche that Hoffman had asked for—and a smash hit.

Then there was the 550 of 1953, Porsche's first true race car. Sauter's car and the swoopy and successful Porsche-powered specials of Otto Glöckler featured design concepts that could be clearly seen in the mid-engined 550. The all-aluminum 550

was considerably more sophisticated, however, and designed to accept a new, four-cam engine that would let its tiny frame beat up on larger, supposedly faster cars on track.

In other words, time moves on. In the end, the Sauter Porsche is fortunate Ray Knight found it. We are, too. Armed with period photos and information from the Porsche factory, he and his friends, some of whom were skilled automotive engineers and machinists, restored this important piece of Porsche history. One has to wonder what might have happened to the car had Knight not found it—and managed to satisfy a keen and crabby salvage operator. ☉



## Resources

- *Porsche Panorama*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, *Magnificent Obsession: Restoring the Sauter Roadster*; p 4-14
- *Porsche Panorama*, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, *The Sauter Roadster: Understood at Last*; p 15-37
- *Excellence Was Expected: The Origin of the Species*. Karl Ludvigsen, Second Edition, 2003; p 73-75
- Interviews with Betty Jo Turner, Leonard Turner, Dr. Ray Knight, and Rev. Ronald Roland
- [www.racingsportscars.com](http://www.racingsportscars.com)