

Pat and Clint de Witt

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Cover: In Mongolia during the Peking Paris Rally. Gerard Brown photo.
This page: In the Blue Ridge Mountains. Alex Dearborn photo.

Pat and Clint de Witt



Kat Hawke photo

By Sean Cridland

Photos by the author and from the de Witt collection.

One side of the roll bar shows that this coupe is a seasoned veteran at California tracks. The other side of the bar indicates that vintage racing is definitely not just a man's world.



If you've been in the pit lane at Mazda Raceway Laguna Seca for any of the vintage or historic events, you're familiar with the scene. The silver number 54 sits in its pre-grid spot, its driver steely-faced as he gathers concentration among the Jaguars, Allards and OSCAs. Its owner/team manager is pacing, making sure the driver is happy, talking with track officials and greeting friends - but always with one eye on the car. It would all seem so serious, if it weren't for the little Minnie Mouse figurine strapped to the roll-bar, just inside the right-rear quarter window, with a checkered-flag carrying Tinkerbell floating over her head.

If you don't already know, that's Clint (driver) and Pat de Witt and their immaculate 1955 Pre-A, Porsche 356 Continental Super 1500 getting ready to race for the umpteenth time. Unlike many of the newer Porsche aficionados who have recently discovered vintage racing - or maybe, more pointedly, many of those who have fled from it because of the escalating values of the cars - the de Witts have been racing the car since 1992 and have no plans to stop.

Theirs is a story that started in 1961, with Clint's first red 356B. He recounts that his emergence into the world was somewhat "unplanned." His parents were both in their 40s when he came along. While spending some time in school in Southern California, he'd had a teacher with a Speedster who would take the students for rides, if they were interested. Clint was, and after that he had Porsches on his brain forever.

Eventually, he landed at University of California Berkeley as an engineering student. One summer his parents wanted to tour Europe and because they were now getting on in years, they wanted young de Witt to drive them around. As you might imagine, a college-aged young man was not entirely thrilled at the prospect of touring around Europe with his 60-something parents for a couple of months. He did not warm to the idea until his mother sweetened the pot: they would buy him a sports car if he'd do it. Not too long after, they were taking factory delivery of Clint's first Porsche 356 Super coupe.



"I did the break-in miles in Stuttgart, by driving around the block near our hotel—about 200 times—before we headed off to Holland. My dad was quite tall, my mom somewhat rotund. Neither of them drove, so I was in the driver's seat, my mother in the passenger seat and my dad sprawled across the back seat. Of course we had luggage. Some of it was on the luggage rack and some of it was in the back seat with my father. We looked like a clown-car driving around Europe!"

Funny, endearing, and certainly inventive, Clint went back to Berkeley that fall among a VERY select group of people on campus driving a brand-new Porsche, a car that would seal his destiny. Young co-ed Pat McLeod was attending a party at the Chi Phi fraternity. As is the case for college kids, many of the cars parked on the street were beaters; the kind of cars parents buy for college kids because they know the kind of abuse they'll suffer. But in the midst of all those was a shiny red Porsche. Pat was no stranger to cars. In high school, she was driving an MG and was already familiar with the sports car world. The Porsche wasn't just a shiny bobble for a naïve young college girl; she knew something about it.

Upon entering the party, she demanded to know, "Who's the IDIOT who parked his Porsche in the middle of all that junk?" That pretty much got everyone's attention, especially the thick-glasses, pocket-protector-wearing engineering student who offered up a Porsche key to answer her. "Mine, want to go for a ride?" She did.

She remembers going up one of the twisty roads out of Berkeley, not entirely confident in Clint's ability to handle the rear-engined weight bias of the little car in a few sideways corners. She still wasn't convinced the car was his until he produced the registration. Apparently, that was enough. Soon after, the pair were attending races at nearby Laguna Seca and Sears Point as spectators. Clint began autocrossing, then racing the red coupe until it went away in the early 1960s when an over-enthusiastic Clint backed the car into something solid.

"Back then we all drove Michelin X tires. They were great in the dry, but not so much in the rain. It was raining and, well... We kind of thought something was wrong, so we traded it in on the recently debuted MGB. We heard later on that the buyer had the transmission drop out on his driveway the first day he had it!"

A parade of pumpkins

The MGB was also autocrossed and raced, and now, they were married, had daughter Catherine and, as they firmed up their lives, started looking for something more. The next Porsche in the family was the Super-Pumpkin, a 1962 Roadster that a friend found parked in the snow in Tahoe. It was built up to be an autocrossing car, with flared steel fenders and wider tires; 7" rims in front and 9" in back and was very competitive. Pat remembers at that time there were several people in the Northern California area competing heavily in autocross, including Bob Garretson.

"I think Bob and us are about the only ones left," she says. "Of course Bob went on to bigger things, but we've had a lot of fun too."

Eventually, Clint found a shop run by Frank Lettini who would sponsor him by working on the car, so he could go racing. He did his SCCA driver school and started out in a beyond-ugly Formula V. Unfortunately, its engine was only



running on three cylinders and the previous owner had cracked the frame. The fix was to braze the frame, locking the engine in the car. After only a few races - all of which de Witt started in the pit lane - the Vee went away and they found a second Roadster, a Super 90, from friend Harold Kerber that came with two engines. That became Pumpkin I (one) and was prominent in E Production circles, winning several races and a few regional championships. Both Pat and Clint remember those as especially good times.

Clint says "I got the pole for my first race with that car, but I didn't know that if you didn't make the pre-grid in

College student Clint de Witt and his 356B coupe back in the Bay Area after touring as chauffeur in Europe with his parents.



Super Pumpkin is seen on the grid awaiting an autocross run. The 1961 d'leteren Roadster is still in the family, and once won a PCA parade autocross.

Left: Clint and young Catherine in the Formula V during his short-lived career as a FV racer.

time, you start at the back. So I ended up starting at the tail end but made it all the way up to second before they red-flagged it for an accident. I didn't win my first race, but close.

"Next race, I threw a rod," he continues. "Put the second motor in and a few laps later the same thing happened because of some 'creative' mechanical work by the previous owner that starved the motor for oil. However, once we got proper motors we started doing well."

Eventually that car came to an ugly end when de Witt was passing for the lead at Sears Point and got turned around to face the entire field. Nearly everyone made it past him without incident. Nearly. The front end of Pumpkin I was badly crunched and after being stripped it went off to the junk yard. Pat still thinks about that car. "You would never do that anymore. Several years ago, I tried to find it, but no one could remember it and it hasn't been seen since."

About a year later, they found a third Roadster through a friend and made that into Pumpkin II with Lettini as co-owner. That was the first open 356 with a full roll-cage because at that time they'd just put in the Armco barriers and de Witt was afraid of landing upside down on the Armco. Eventually, Lettini retired and that car was sold. Last they'd heard of it, it was still racing on the East Coast.

In 1983, Pat—now an empty-nester with daughter Catherine off in college—decided to look for a job. She'd heard that Swepco Lubricants was looking for a rep and applied. She says, "I think I was an affirmative action hire. They needed a female. I'm not sure how long they thought I'd last at the time, but it's been more than thirty years now."

It was the peak of IMSA GTP racing, with Porsche racing the 962 against all kinds of other great cars from March, BMW, Corvette, Nissan, and Toyota. With nearly all the 962s using Swepco, she was right in the thick of it. If you think she's telling a story, just walk through the paddock area at Laguna Seca during Monterey Historics or Rennsport Reunion to see how many of the stars of that era greet her warmly and by name. It's astounding, to say the least.

Eventually, she and Clint moved on from the E-production racing and got into Showroom Stock, fielding a number of different cars over the years including a Dodge Colt, Chevy Vega, Mazda RX-3 SP, and a Peugeot. But their greatest Showroom Stock success was with BMWs. Pat de Witt took the BMW motorsports cup with a 320 three years in a row. Then came a 325is and 318is before Pat decided that Showroom Stock was getting a little too rough and bodywork expenses weren't worth the effort. To this day



Pumpkin I was actually the second orange Roadster, (after Super Pumpkin, which the de Witts still have) and it came to an ignominious end at Sears Point (below).



Left: Pumpkin II was the third orange Roadster and Clint had a full roll cage installed. The car carried the name of Frank Lettini's shop, Frank's Automotive in Sacramento, which is still in business servicing German cars.

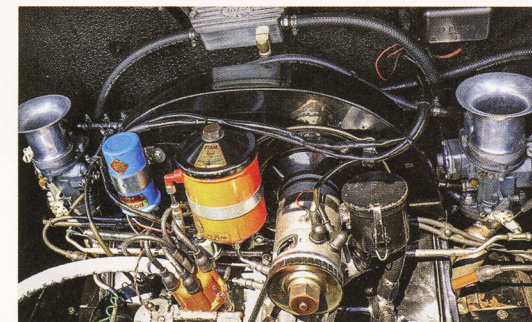
Daughter Catherine couldn't help but grow up involved in racing. She was named Miss Laguna Seca 1978.



Far left: Pat in 1983 with the car that won the BMW Motorsport Cup USA for three years during the early 1980s.

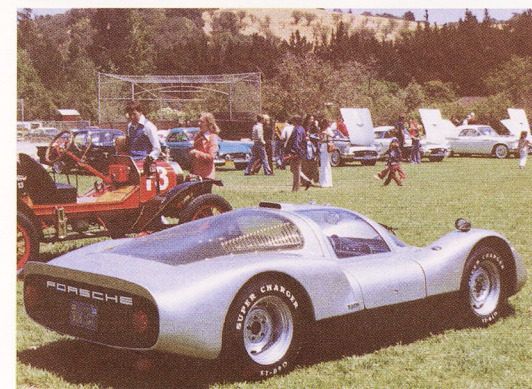


Pat and Clint at the 2000 Porsche Parade where they hosted the Historic Display (which included several Gmünd cars). The 1500 Super engine is built and tuned well enough to be competitive but not overly stressed. Clint regularly finishes well and rarely breaks.



Number 54 has been a regular at Laguna Seca, as familiar in the pits as any other car there, like Chuck Forge' Gmünd roadster - a regular for decades.

Right: Among the Porsches passing through their hands was a 906, which they autocrossed and enjoyed showing at car gatherings.



they are a family of divided loyalties with both their Continental Coupe and their very rare (about 200 built) BMW 1800 Ti/SA occupying their pit space. Says Pat, wryly, "I always have to be careful because I'll find myself in the Porsche lounge with a BMW hat on or in the BMW lounge with a Porsche shirt on..."

It was 1991 when they decided to go vintage racing. Pat looked through the *San Francisco Chronicle* classifieds and found a 1955 Porsche. She remembers asking Clint, "Do you think that qualifies as Vintage?" They called the owner and immediately drove up the coast to Eureka to look it over, deciding on the spot to buy the car. The owner knew it was a Continental, but it had none of the markings on it at the time, just the holes where the badges went.

"I knew it was," says Pat, "because it looked just like the car Denis Jenkinson used to drive to all the Formula 1 races of that period." It was yellow when the de Witts found it, but it had enough wear that you could see that it was red at one time, black at another time, blue another, and all the way underneath, it was silver. The seats had been coated with some kind of vinyl, then painted black with a little speck of red showing through.

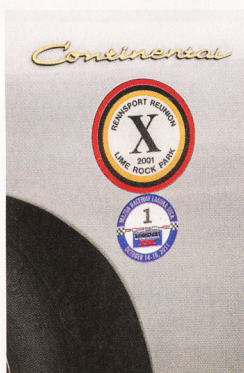
They surmised that the car had been raced, by the placings of the belt-mounts. Pat researched placings and photos for several years, but because the car had been painted so many different colors she could never confirm that assumption.

Not long after getting it home, they sent for the Porsche factory Kardex and began the process of stripping the car down. Sure enough, the Kardex reported the car as originally silver over a red interior. They restored it faithfully and added the roll-cage you see in the photos here. The car's been racing since 1992. In its first race at the Sonoma Historics, Steve Earle gave it the Silver Bowl award as his favorite of the weekend. Pat says, "I don't think he'd ever seen one race before..."

The car has won several awards and been a prominent player at several events. "We were asked by Brian Redman himself to attend the first Rennsport at Lime Rock in 2001," says Pat. "We weren't the oldest car present, but we were the oldest car racing!" To Pat and Clint's knowledge, it's the only Continental that's still on the track.

"We didn't take the car to Daytona for Rennsports II and III," says Pat "because we didn't think it was well suited for the banking and the surface. But it's been at Rennsport IV and V and all the other West Coast Vintage races." The silver car was also one of the featured attractions at the 2014 Monterey Porsche Parade Historic Display. Whenever it goes on track, Clint kiddingly tells people that he carries a poison pill to take in case anything should happen to the car. It would be better than facing Pat's ire. To that effect, he also has had several secret meetings in Lettini's "no women allowed" garage where they rolled out Pumpkin IV a few years ago. De Witt will race that from time to time when he tires of hearing Pat describe him as "her driver." Of course they're both joking. Or not...

Somewhere in the midst of all the racing, Clint received his law degree and became active in the SCCA Golden Gate chapter, where at first Pat and Clint worked as corner-workers, then Clint took on regional leadership and eventually went on to be vice-chairman under Carl



A decal from Rennsport Reunion I has been proudly displayed for 15 years.

Haas. He was also instrumental in procuring the land for Thunderhill Raceway. Though not as deeply involved now, he's still active as a driving instructor and in applying his legal expertise where needed. Pat continues to rep for Swepeco, regularly calling all her customers.

In the meantime, they've owned several other Porsches including a 1966 911, a 1967 911S (both say they wished they'd had a better idea of where the values of those would go...) a 906 that autocrossed but never raced, and a few other projects including a Devin.

And not too long ago they had a surprise visit at their pits from a gentleman from England who says he's been racing a red 356B Super coupe - the same car in which the thick-glassed engineering student took the boldly inquisitive college girl for her first ride in a Porsche. As we've seen before, the world, especially the Porsche world, really is a small, small place. 🚗

At "home" at Laguna Seca, Clint is familiar with the track and thoroughly enjoys driving there. The car has become a fixture at the Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion and is always ready to race thanks to its efficient team manager, Pat.

Pat has become something of a fixture on the racing scene herself, with deep connections to racers and teams in the vintage, amateur and professional racing worlds. She has been successful both behind the wheel and behind the scenes.

