

# **A PCA LEGACY**

**by Sean Cridland**

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# PORSCHE PANORAMA

OCTOBER 2012



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### Cover

*Bewitched—Boxster Spyder and harvest moon for All Hallows Eve. Photo by Leonard Turner.*

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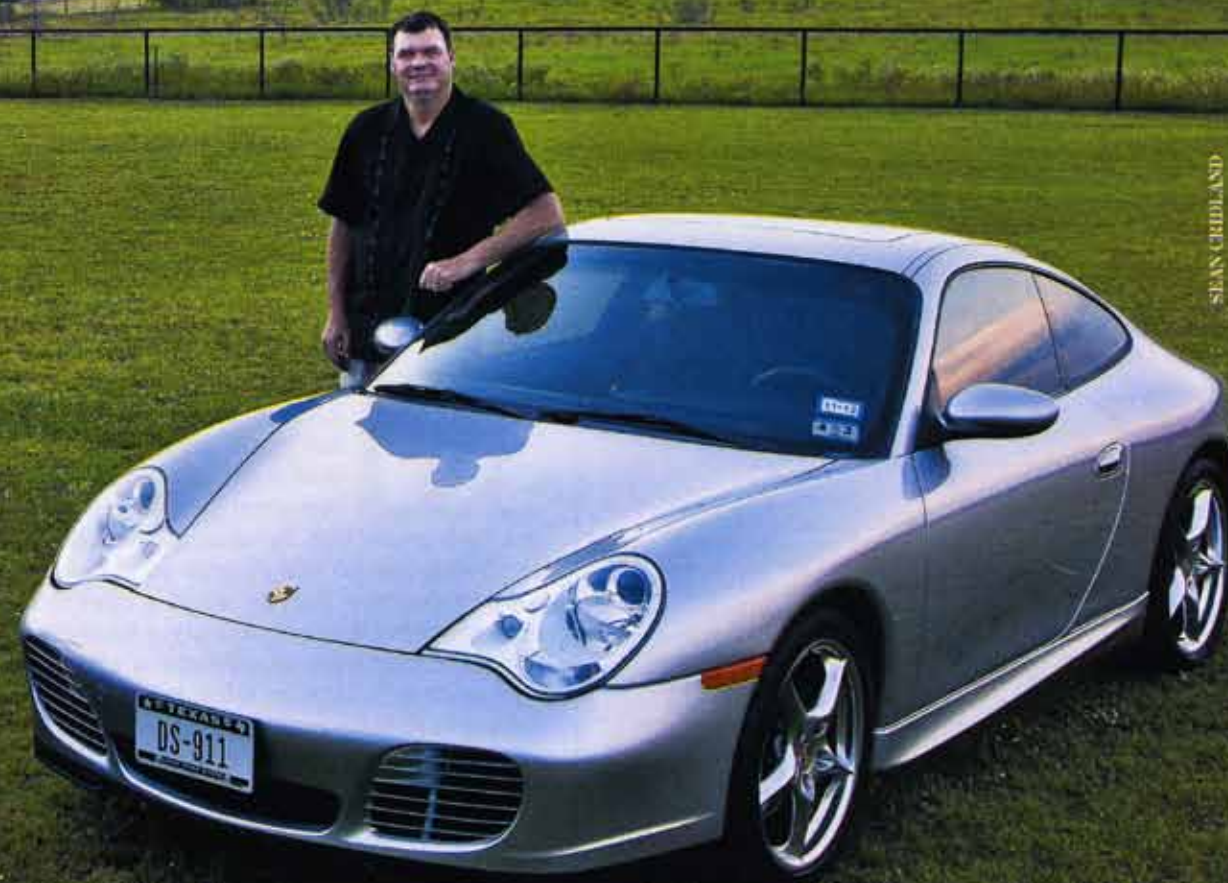
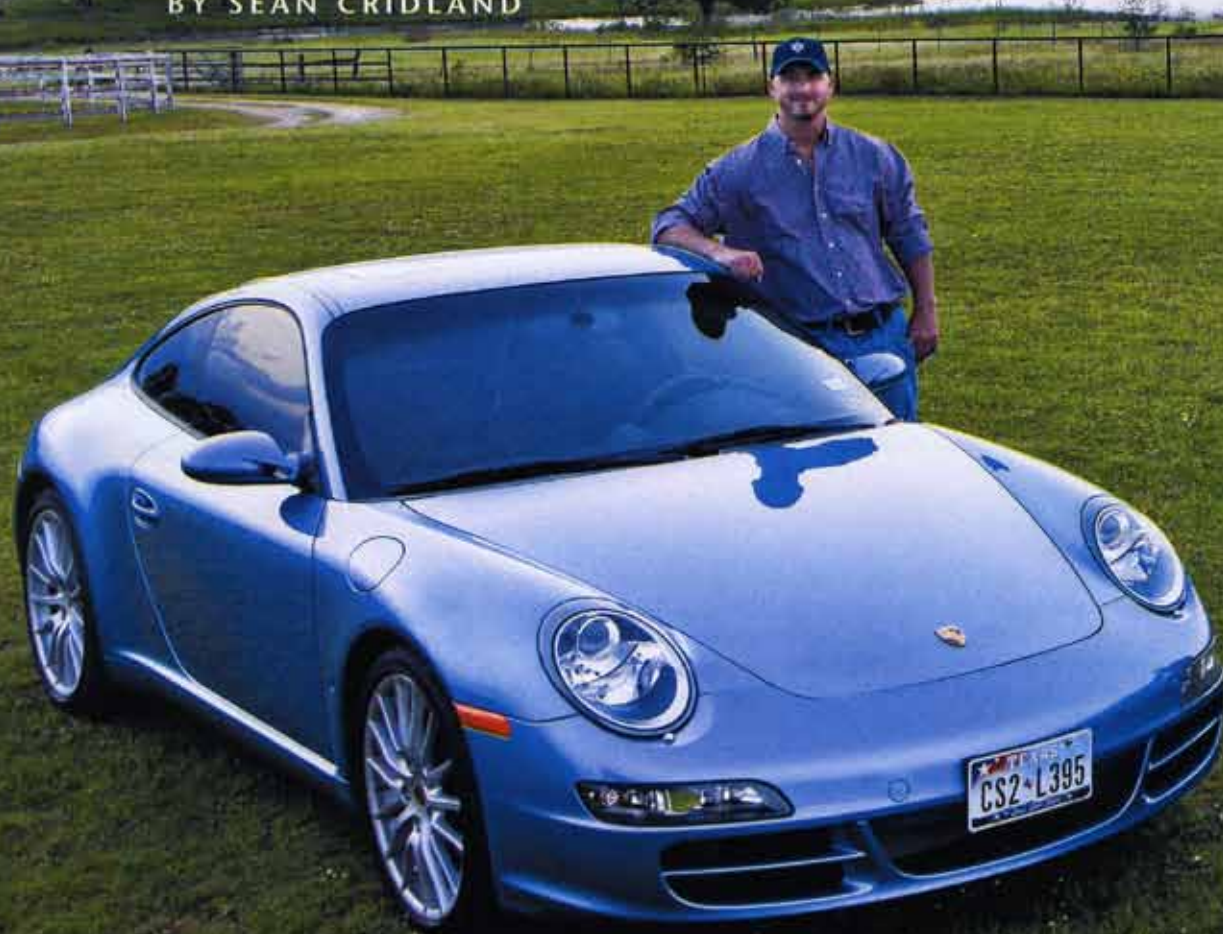


*A once mysterious uncle, who privately lived a life so many of us carry only in our dreams, brings two brothers into the Porsche world*

# A PCA LEGACY

BY SEAN CRIDLAND

*Matt Smithey and his Club Coupe and brother Don with the 40th Anniversary Edition 911 are the beneficiaries of the Porsche life lived by their uncle, Roadrunner Region founder Don Janssen (insert).*



SEAN CRIDLAND



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Janssen enjoyed driving the roads and  
byways of Europe in his Speedster.



JANSSEN ARCHIVE

**M**att and Darryl Smitley, recently of Longhorn Region, never thought too much about Porsches other than they were beautiful, powerful, renowned for their good handling... and their uncle, Don Janssen, lived his life with the cars as his passion and Porsche people as his family. As they describe Don, he would always send cards at Christmas time, occasionally a handwritten letter describing a recent adventure, and even show up from time to time for a few hours to visit, always driving a Porsche and always dressed impeccably: slacks, pressed shirt, tie and often a jacket. But the two brothers from Seguin, Texas, didn't know much else about their uncle, who lived in Albuquerque. Says Matt, "Uncle Don was always a very private man. He lived alone and the cars were his kids."

When I first joined Roadrunner Region in 2003, I didn't know anyone in New Mexico. I volunteered early on to be the newsletter editor and became curious about some of the other names that people ban-

died about. One name that came up more than once was that of Don Janssen, a man who seemed to have a presence with club veterans, but someone who didn't show up to many events. Eventually I worked up the nerve and called him, asking if I might visit.

I quickly found that Don was one of those people who live their entire lives with a singular passion: Porsches. Whether or not it meant sacrificing a "normal" life, his focus took him on a path to adventures that most of us could only dream about. Arriving at his house in south Albuquerque, it was apparent that the neighborhood had seen better days. Don lived in a small house with a single car garage and a carport. In the carport was parked a 2004 40th Anniversary 911. In the small garage which also hosted all of his gardening tools was parked a 2006 Club Coupe. There were no other cars in the yard of this 83-year-old. Those were his drivers.

I knocked on the door and out peered a man of small stature but large presence. His house was sparsely decorated: a small TV, some simple furniture, a dining



At the International Treffen at Meran, Italy, in 1957, Don Janssen receives a trophy from Ferry Porsche. He placed 13th out of more than 200 starters in the self-guided rally to the city in the South Tyrol.

room and kitchen table which were clean, but apparently rarely saw visitors, and lots and lots of books about cars. He had the entire set of PANORAMAS, from the beginning. And *Excellence*, from when it was originally called *Porsche* magazine. But most noticeable was the entire collection of *Automobile Quarterly*. I'd only seen a few editions of this "magazine" which comes fully leather-bound and with the subscriber's name embossed on the cover. Don had them all.

Our first visit was spent getting acquainted. He knew me because he read every issue of the Roadrunner newsletter from cover to cover and I had recently published a story about growing up with sports cars.

**Uncle Don was always  
a very private man.  
He lived alone and the  
cars were his kids.**

I knew him, I told him, only as the authority I should come visit and that he was one of the founders of Roadrunner Region in 1967. While it was apparent that he was a private man, it was also obvious that he enjoyed having a visitor who shared the same interests. He talked for several hours about his life with Porsches and his adventures in Europe. Some of those adventures were connected to rallies he competed in or races he'd attended, but some of them were just self-guided tours around the continent in his 356s, all of which





Among Janssen's memorabilia are badges for the 5th Parade in Aspen in 1960, the Porsche Treffen to Meran in 1957 and numerous European rallies.

were purchased directly from the factory. He spoke of Ferry Porsche and Huschke von Hanstein as if they were personal acquaintances—because they were.

Like so many Americans of his era, Don's first experience in Europe was from the perspective of a soldier. He was in the second wave to hit Normandy, so escaped the worst of the carnage. But only a few days later he was wounded in the infamous hedgerows, where he was shot in the knee and almost lost his leg. It earned him a trip home, more than a year in a hospital, and eventually a college degree in engineering from Shreiner University in Kerrville, Texas, just in time to get hired by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and go back to Europe for one of the best times in modern history. A time when hostilities had ended, people celebrated being alive with great verve, friendships amongst former enemies were being built, and anything seemed possible. He went back to Europe in early 1953 as a detail engineer for a dam in Austria, financed by the World Bank. Instead, he was diverted to work out of Kaiserslautern and Mainz for the next four years. Because Don's grandfather was an émigré from Germany to Texas during the Bismarck era, Don was comfortable with German language, food, and culture.

Having spent a good part of his youth driving giant De Sotos and Oldsmobiles, the lure of the sports car scene brought Don into the fold of Austins and MGs. But—as we all know—the infamous Lucas electronics were making a reputation of their own: driving anyone who could afford them to German cars. Porsches,



A compulsive collector of memorabilia, Janssen saved his copy of the program for the ill-fated 24 Hours of Le Mans in 1955, perhaps the greatest racing disaster of all time.

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
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 The PCA Club Coupe came as a self-congratulation for passing the eye exam for his driver's license when he was 81. 

His first Porsche came in August of 1955. PCA membership listings show Don as being a member from 12/1/1955. He was nominated (you *had* to be nominated back then) by Louis Hilton (not of the famous hoteliers, but of Maine timber concerns), one of the founding members of PCA. When I interviewed him in 2007, Don lamented that his only break in receiving PANORAMA over the years was in 1958 when he made the move back to the U.S. and his PANORAMAS during that period were lost in the transfer. Otherwise, he had them all.

His first Porsche almost didn't happen. He had a coupe on order, but didn't get along with his commanding officer and was getting ready to leave Germany when things were put right. The previous order cancelled, he ended up with a 1955 Speedster, right from the showroom floor. During his time in Europe, he drove four different Porsches, his last one a special-order red 1959 1600 Super cabriolet, with a hardtop and black leather interior. But that was just the beginning of his Porsche story. He had a total of 17 Porsches, including several other 356s, then a 912, a couple of early 911 coupes, then a 914 2.0, a 1974 Targa, two new cars in 1988 as part of a Treffen tour (a 911 coupe and a 1988 Club Sport coupe), then a 2003 Boxster, then the 2004 C4S, which got traded for the 40th Anniversary Coupe (his second favorite car). Finally the PCA Club Coupe came as a self-congratulation for passing the eye exam for his driver's license when he was 81.

Don was intricately involved in his passion for Porsche and for motor racing in general and had an engineer's thoroughness for keeping records of his travels. During my first interview with him he allowed me to look at his collection of scrapbooks. I was flabbergasted! Besides adventures of his driving his various Porsches all over Europe in the 1950s to all of the great races at Le Mans, Rouen, Reims, Spa,



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Monza, the Nürburgring, Mille Miglia and many of the great car shows in Geneva, Milan, and Paris, Don had meticulously kept all his race tickets, pit passes, race programs, photos and slides. He even bought the newspapers with the race stories and results the next day and pressed them. He had them all!

I knew his memorabilia needed to be scanned, if nothing else for the preservation of the history, but also because I wanted to do a story for the *Roadrunner Ramblings* about this curious man who so few people knew. He acceded and I went back twice more to be amazed by his collection of photos and the stories he recalled with great detail about each one. It was a rare experience that enriched my knowledge of motor racing history, but also one which taught me great things about the true passion for Porsche that our early PCA members bestowed upon us. Don realized early on that Porsches were not just about the cars, they brought with them an entire lifestyle of fun, style, elegance, and sophistication that could be shared with people all around the world.

Soon after he purchased the first of the 356s he was participating in rallies sponsored by the American Sports Car Club and by various European clubs as well. In an effort to promote safety, the American post-war government officials in Europe tried to

require that any American who purchased a sports car be affiliated with one of the clubs. Though it didn't stick as policy, it did tend to promote strong social bonds with the sporty-car set. Among his European and American friends, that meant the usual invitations and admonitions to come to the next event, and the next...feeding not only his love for cars, but his second passion for photography. In fact, says Don, he never looked up any of his relatives in Germany until right before he left to come back to the States, since he was always off touring around Europe in his Porsches.

On one of his adventures, to Tours, he met a representative from the Automobile Club de l'Ouest (ACO) which organizes the 24 Hours of Le Mans. As a result, he was admitted to the club suite immediately above the pits during that famous and tragic race of 1955. During the third hour of the race, Mike Hawthorn unexpectedly slowed his Jaguar to pull into the pits causing the Austin-Healy of Lance Macklin to pull into the path of the Mercedes SLR driven by Pierre Levegh. Levegh's car launched over the Austin, ejecting its driver and breaking the car into flaming pieces of shrapnel which mowed through the crowd, killing more than 80 people in the worst tragedy in motorsports history. Were it not for a twist of fate governed by his curiosity, Don might have been one of the

unlucky. "I was standing right by the bridge where Levegh's engine landed. Just 15 minutes before, I decided I wanted to go down to the corner to see the air brakes on Fangio's car (Mercedes used a flip up rear panel to slow the car down in the corners and save the brakes). I was down there only a few minutes when it happened. The French Kodak labs confiscated all the film of that race to keep the shots of carnage from spreading around the world. I don't know how I managed to keep mine."

Regularly having access to the pit areas in those days was not nearly so difficult as it is now. Many of Don's photos are of the stars of his day: Moss, Fangio, Ascari, Hawthorne and more. As Don recounted, "You could actually talk to many of the drivers and many of the regular race-goers were friends on a first-name basis. I often spoke with Denis Jenkinson, who also drove a Porsche 356, and was the co-driver for Stirling Moss during the open-road races." The Mercedes pits were a little more secretive, commanded by the flamboyant Alfred Neubauer. He was large in size and persona, almost always in trenchcoat, fedora, and tie with two or three stopwatches around his neck. The Ferrari pits were the most secretive and intense, with Commendatore Enzo Ferrari constantly provoking intense rivalries amongst his drivers.

Since many of the circuits were mostly composed of public roads, Don would try to get to the races a day or two early or stay a day or two after the event so that he could take some laps in his own car. One of Don's most memorable times in Germany was in the Bad Neuenahr Rally in which one of the stages took place on the Nordschleife of the Nürburgring. The German club racing champion lapped him twice! But that didn't matter. The fun was in the driving of a car that was relatively quick and reliable and in being with people who lived life fully.

Don also loved his two Treffen tours. Don's experience was much different than the luxury tours people do today. The first one was in 1957 when the Treffen was actually a self-guided rally ending in Meran, Italy, where Hushke von Hanstein and Ferry Porsche greeted the finishers. Don placed 13th out of over 200 starters to earn a nice little cup personally presented from Dr. Porsche. The second Treffen he did was in 1988, through PCA, when he went to pick up one of his cars at the factory. Unfortunately, that one was cancelled as a group tour, but Don followed the itinerary himself, staying in many of the towns and hotels that today's versions of Treffen visit.

After my interview sessions with Don in 2007, I would see or hear of him only occasionally. He would show up at random for Roadrunner events, completely unannounced and without registering. Because he was one of our elder statesmen, we would always include him. One time he showed up for the club "dyno-day" contest. Everyone was surprised when this elegantly

dressed octogenarian showed up with the Club Coupe and walked away with the overall trophy for the day! The last time I saw Don was at the 2008 Escape to the Land of Enchantment final banquet, again in suit and tie and completely unannounced and un-entered. He knew that Vic Elford would be speaking. Though as chair I had turned away many people who wanted to do the banquet only, I couldn't turn away one of our founding members who carried so much passion and history in his soul. He was one of the stars of the evening. I knew he really enjoyed himself.

Eventually Don's heart condition caught up with him. In the winter of 2010, an attorney friend called to ask if I knew Don. Apparently the council for aging authorities had judged that he wasn't competent to care for himself and moved him into a state-run home. I tried to find out some of the details, but confidentiality laws ruled the day and I heard nothing at all for a year. Then I heard that Don had been moved to Texas by his family, but couldn't find any information on him. Eventually, PCA Historian and Longhorn Region member RJ Wilmoth wrote to tell me that his local mechanic was working on one of the "Sally cars," a reference to the blue Club Coupe named Sally in the original *Cars* movie. Since there were only 50 of them, it piqued his curiosity. A little digging connected RJ to Matt Smitley. Matt informed RJ that Don was his uncle and that he had passed away just a few short months before.

Though it was sad to hear of Don's passing, I was relieved that he had spent his last days with his family. I got in touch with Matt and Darryl shortly after to send them copies of the story I had done on his uncle for the *Roadrunner Ramblings*. It turned out that Don had told Matt and Darryl many of the same stories he had told me and that he had been honored to have been featured in my article, which was very touching for me. Back then I had considered reworking the story to submit to PANORAMA, but life had taken me in other directions and it never happened.

Now, I only wish I had done it while Don was still alive. I know how much it would have meant to him. Nonetheless, Matt and Darryl were both highly appreciative that I had written about their uncle. I spent some time on the phone with each for this story and it was remarkable to me how much they relished learning about their uncle and how really amazed they were when they started to pour through his Porsche memorabilia and the scrapbooks of his travels in Europe in the 1950s. They'd always known he was a Porsche enthusiast - had never seen him drive anything other than a Porsche - but had never realized the extent of his travels, his connections in the origins of the Porsche world, and his love of the PCA community, which remained his closest and best friends all the way through his life, right to the end. They were really surprised to learn that Don had bequeathed to



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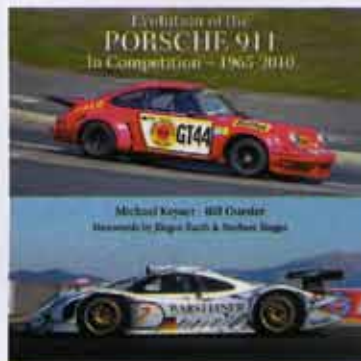
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## Evolution of the PORSCHE 911 In Competition - 1965-2010

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each of them one of the Porsches. Matt now has the Club Coupe and Darryl has the 40th Anniversary 911. After hearing and reading the stories and looking through all his memorabilia, they decided they couldn't possibly sell the cars. They are family heirlooms. Also, they've kept the collection of Don's books, magazines, and souvenirs together as tributes to their once mysterious uncle who privately lived a life so many of us carry only in our dreams.

Shortly after his passing in February of 2011, Matt and Darryl brought Don back to Albuquerque for a service attended by a small group of friends and neighbors and then took him to be interred in the Santa Fe National Cemetery with full military honors. Matt and Darryl followed the hearse all the way from Texas to Santa Fe in Don's 40th Anniversary 911, bringing Don's story to a close, but also starting two new stories all their own. Though they have yet to attend an event, they have both joined Longhorn Region and are looking forward to carrying forth the legacy of their uncle and meeting more of the people who carry the passion for Porsche. Matt and Darryl, welcome to PCA. May your lives be as full and rich as your uncle Don's and may you have many great adventures to come. ☺

