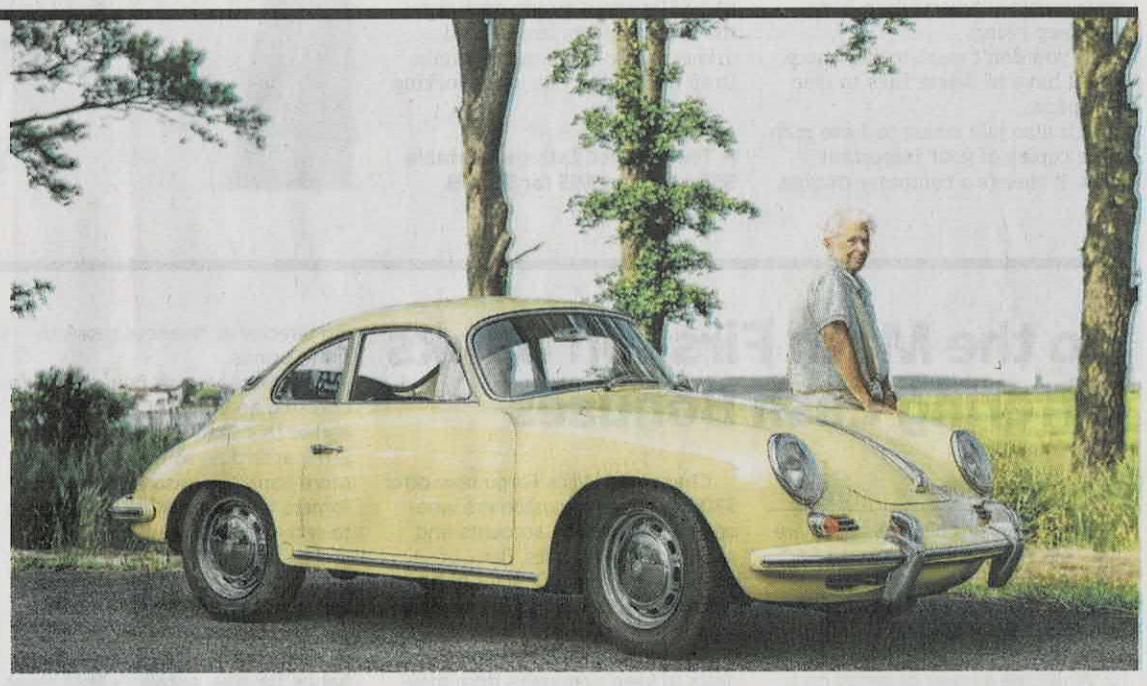
MY RIDE | BY A.J. BAIME

'Rust Bucket' Took Decades to Restore



Bill S. Romano, 87, a retired information technology management consultant who lives in Ocean Pines, Md., on his 1964 Porsche 356, as told to A.J. Baime.

About two weeks ago, my son, Bill, and I got in my Porsche 356 and cranked it up. We drove the car around Ocean Parkway, jumped on Route 589, filled the tank with gas, and drove it home. It was incredible. The car was registered and insured. It had been in pieces for decades. This restoration—much of which I taught myself how to do—had taken nearly 40 years and now we were on the road.

The story goes back to when I was in college at Cornell. I had the opportunity to own a 1958 Porsche 356, which I bought in 1960 and which lasted one year due to all the salt they used on the highways. The car rusted out quickly. I spent two years in the Army stationed in Germany. My brother was there at the same time, and he was racing a Porsche around 1962 and 1963. I used to tag along, and I visited the Porsche factory in Stuttgart a few times.

In the late 1980s, I was working with a consulting firm in California, and during the two years I was there, I bought a 1964 Porsche 356 for about $4,000. The 356 is a significant car because it was the first-ever model sold under the Porsche brand name. Ferdinand Porsche is known for designing the Volkswagen in Germany before the war. After the war, Porsche began with the 356 model, with the same basic layout as the Volkswagen Beetle, with the air-cooled engine hanging off the back.

Mine was a rust bucket. The day I bought it, on Oct. 31, 1987, the previous owner gave me duct tape to put on the windshield because the car leaked. My wife and I drove that car to Yosemite twice, up to Oregon, and numerous times along the Big Sur highway. When the job in California finished, I shipped the car back to where we were living in Connecticut.

To make a long story short, I pulled the engine out to tear down and rebuild. But when I got the engine out, I could see all the things that needed fixing. And so it began. Over nearly four decades, I had help from different Porsche experts. I taught myself how to weld, and turned my garage into a working shop. In 1998, I retired and moved to Maryland, and the car came with me on a truck. At this point it was still in boxes, packages, quite an assortment.

I built a rotisserie in my garage, because at my age, I didn't have the ability to do some of the welding unless I could turn the car. It was quite a big contraption. I found a guy named Ed Butler, a Porsche body restoration expert just starting out on his own. He took the car on a trailer to his shop in Pennsylvania, and I traveled up there once or twice a week, for weeks, watching him rebuild the car's body. He is a master.

When I got the body back, I still had to put all the parts back into it. That took a full two years. I had so many bruises on my arms, you wouldn't believe it.

You can imagine how special it felt, just a couple weeks ago, to have my son, Bill, with me driving this Porsche for the first time since the 1980s. Since then, I've had my wife and my daughters in the 356, which is painted its original color: Champagne Yellow.

I had often worried that I would never finish this car. Now, all those years of work and all the money spent feel so worth it.

▲ Bill S. Romano and his classic 1964 Porsche 356.

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