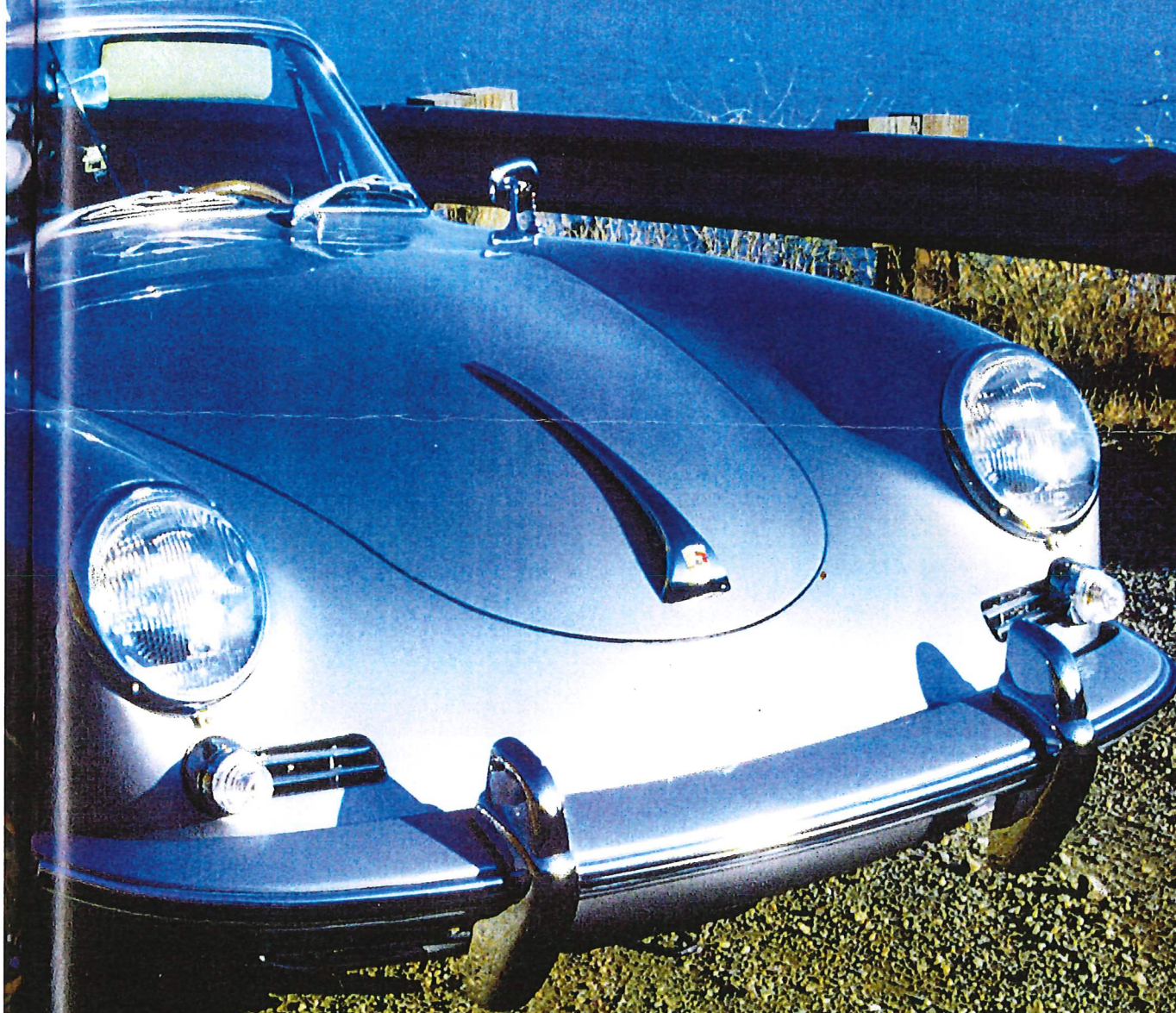


what lies beneath

A RARE BUT UNWANTED 356 "NOTCHBACK" COUPE UNDERGOES SURGERY
TO BECOME WHAT IT WAS ORIGINALLY—A 356 CABRIOLET
STORY AND PHOTOS BY ZACHARY MAYNE



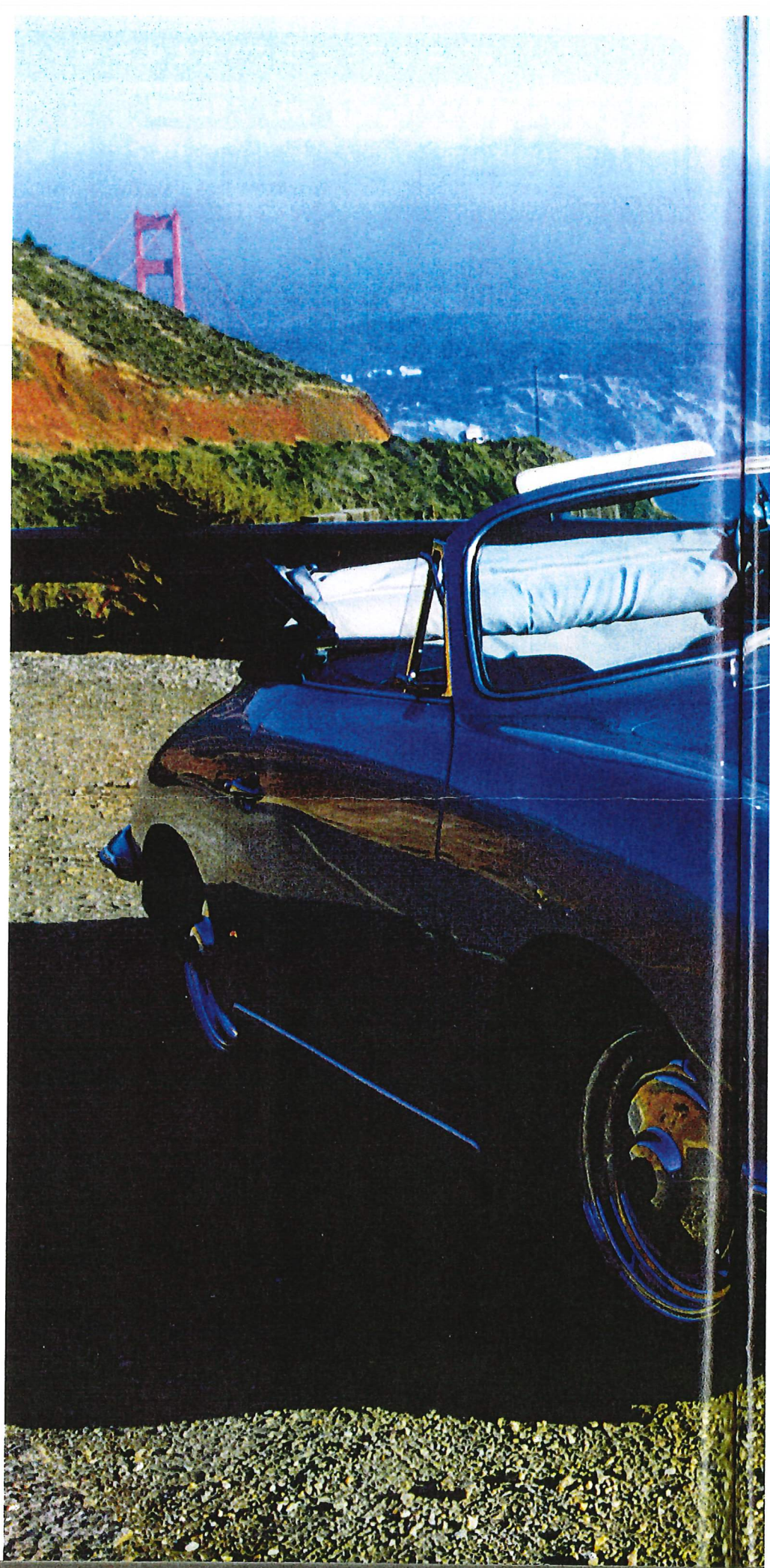
Parked near the sweeping Golden Gate Bridge, with its silver paint glinting in the late afternoon sun, William Ziegler's 1962 356 cabriolet is, well, picture perfect. Even in late-day light, which shows the slightest imperfections in any car's bodywork, this 356's paint is flawless. So is the metalwork hiding under its topcoat. No ripples or even the slightest waviness can be found.

The fact this is an undeniably beautiful 356 cabriolet is made all the more impressive because, strictly speaking, it isn't. At one point, it was a 356B T6 Karmann coupe. And most purists would note that it still is. The also-known-as for this 356 is "Notchback," a nickname these Karmann-built coupes earned for their distinctive styling. Their welded-on hardtops yielded an aesthetic not dissimilar to a standard cabriolet with a removable hardtop in place. The Notchback was introduced in 1961 as an addition to the 356 line, which included the standard coupe, cabriolet, and Roadster. The fact that the Notchback bore a striking similarity to a cabriolet wearing a hardtop is no surprise; each of them actually began life as a Cabriolet.

Whether or not Porsche was having a hard time selling cabriolets at one point is hard to say. But *something* convinced Porsche to convert some of its Karmann cabriolets into these fixed-roof coupes. In 1961, 1,048 Notchbacks were built, and another 699 T6 models were manufactured in 1962 — the second and final year of the model's production run. Today, the Notchback coupes are something of a contentious subject among 356 enthusiasts. Some find the design to be a good-looking derivative of the more common fastback 356 coupes. Fans tend to find added cachet in the fact that there weren't very many Notchbacks made during the two-year production run.

"The Notchbacks are pretty cool looking, and some people really covet them," says Max Handley, who at one point owned the Notchback in these photos, long before it was converted to a drop-top. On the other hand, some 356 enthusiasts feel the Notchback's lines are less attractive than the more traditional 356 coupe's. As with many things in life, it's down to a matter of personal preference. But the market has spoken: Notchbacks are quite a bit less valuable than the 356 cabriolets upon which they are based.

So the thought of converting a "less desirable" Notchback into a very desirable cabriolet makes some sense. And Vlado Skibola — a longtime Porsche restorer from Northern California — saw another reason when he came across





this car, chassis #200869. Painted in a shade similar to French Blue, the little 356 was far from pristine. But it was complete, making it a prime restoration candidate. The car needed a full restoration, but he could handle that end of the job. In late 2000, Skibola purchased the Notchback from Handley.

"I took a close look at it and discovered it needed far more work than Max had thought," says Skibola. "So I made him an offer." A deal was struck and, once Skibola had the Notchback back at his San Rafael bodyshop, Vlado's Collision Repair, he decided to undertake the rather unorthodox task of converting the reluctant coupe back into an open-air cabriolet.

"I knew Notchbacks weren't really worth anything, and that Cabriolets are worth quite a bit more," says Skibola. "I was sitting around the shop one day with this old man, Leo Titone, who did metalworking for me. I told him I wanted to convert it back to a cabriolet. He told me I was out of my mind!" Despite his employee's protestations, Skibola pressed ahead with his vision of letting the sunshine back into the interior of the vintage Porsche. Around the same time, longtime customer Bill Ziegler stopped by the shop.

"Vlado was working on my 1964 356 coupe, and then I saw the Notchback sitting there in the corner," recalls Ziegler. He enquired about the car. When Skibola told Ziegler he planned on converting it back to a cabriolet, Ziegler asked if he

could purchase the car and pay Skibola to restore it. Says Ziegler: "I had been after him for almost 20 years to tell me when he had a good cabriolet, because I really wanted to own one. He restored my 1963 Super 90 in 1980, but it wasn't a ground-up job. It was marvelous, but he was working on a cabriolet when I visited him to see the work on mine, and I wanted the cabrio because it belonged to an old lady who never drove it. But some relative grabbed it. I told him the next available cab was mine, but he never found one until this one — which I saw immediately was a totally solid car."

Since Ziegler was a friend as well as an old customer, Skibola made a verbal agreement to sell him the Notchback and restore it for him. Three years later, Ziegler finally had his dream 356 cabriolet. But it wasn't exactly a seamless process to convert the car back to rag-top specification. Admits Skibola: "Every project has its challenges. And I thought it was going to be easier than it actually was."

Skibola credits much of the restoration to Titone, a 78-year-old metalworker who has worked with him for about five years: "He's been a 356 guy since right after World War II. That was before the era of Bondo, and he was a very accomplished metalworker and an incredible craftsman. Back then, if you couldn't do metal finishing, you didn't have a job. Working on newer cars is a lot easier. With these old cars, you literally have to

be a magician to do this kind of metalwork. The metal is really thin and it's easy to go right through it when you are working on it. You have to be very precise."

After the two men carefully stripped the car, their first task was to remove the steel top that had been welded on. The removal of the roof, attached as it was as an afterthought, was accomplished by melting the lead that filled in the weld, then cutting off the roof.

"As I melted the lead, I was trying to preserve the metal of the body and cut the welds," explains Skibola. "Most of the damage that had occurred to the body was from the welding on of the roof. They really welded it on there well to make sure no water got through." When the pair pulled the hardtop away from the body, there were still some remnants of the convertible frame where the hardtop had been attached. But, as you might imagine, a few critical components were not present.

"A couple of pieces were missing, including the wishbone for the folding top and the cage for the convertible top," recalls Skibola. What little remained of the frame for the rag top was removed and then acid dipped in preparation for refurbishment. Skibola fabricated the missing wishbone — which is attached to the top on the exterior — out of flat steel, using another cabriolet frame as a reference to get all of the dimensions exactly right. The cage that the top folds

into behind the seats was also fabricated by Skibola out of flat steel.

"I had a used cage, which was rotted and unusable, so I copied it to make a new one," explains Skibola. Once the frame was complete with all the proper components, Skibola enlisted Porsche interior specialists Autos International of Escondido, California to powdercoat the frame and fit a new top to it.

With the 356's chassis stripped to bare metal, work to straighten the bodywork without using "one ounce of Bondo" commenced. Skibola grins, then says, "Leo is a left-hander and I'm a right-hander, so we work really well together by working on opposite sides of the car. We have completely different politics though, which sometimes meant that, at the end of a day, we would be screaming at each other." The metal under the area where the factory hardtop had been welded on at Karmann — behind the passenger compartment — had some damage from the welding process, but Skibola says that it looked really good overall, and that all of the metal was original.

"The car had been hit at the front," he continues. "So we replaced part of the front nose panel with a panel that I had in the shop. At the time, I had a lot of 356 parts I had bought from another restorer who went out of business." The rest of the car's tub was also relatively straight, with only a few dents here and there. But it was rust-free with the exception of the bottoms of the doors — a common spot for rust on 356s.

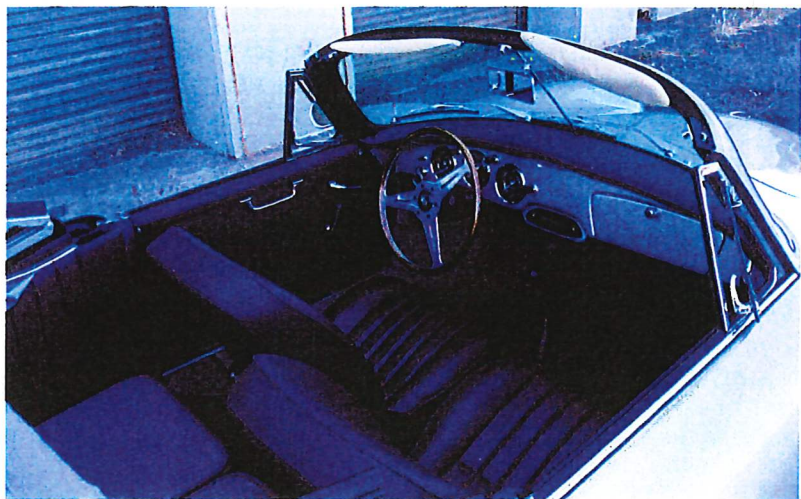
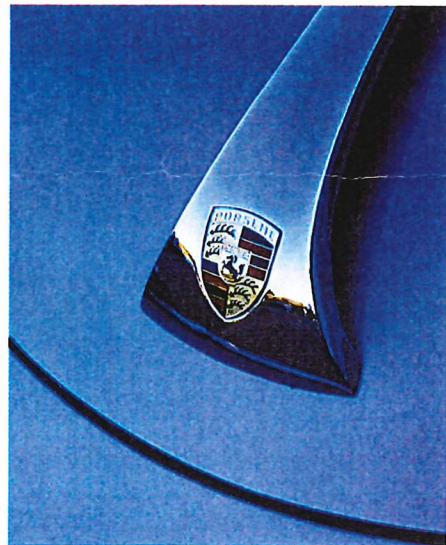
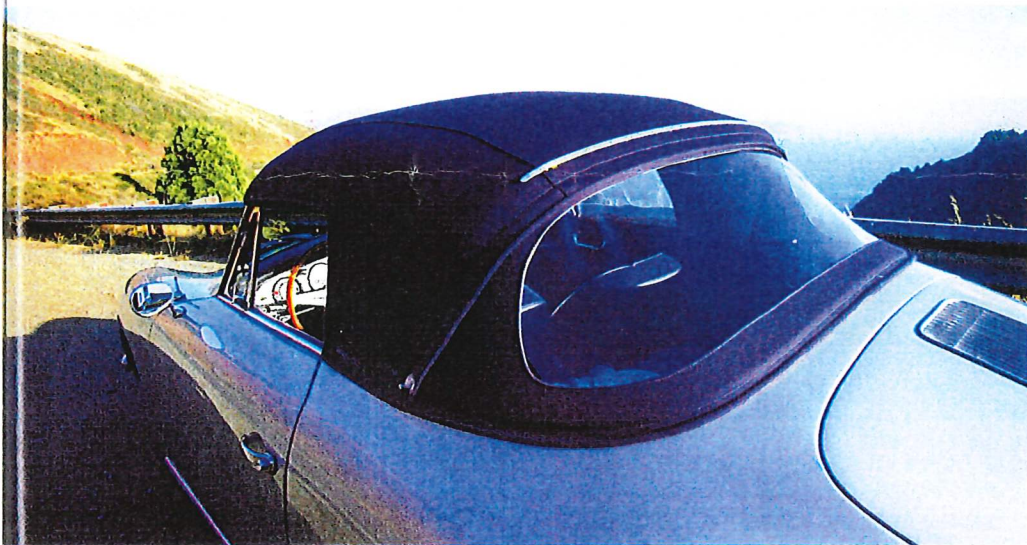
"The factory originally used a petroleum-based undercoating, which dries out over time and causes the bottoms of the doors to rust," notes Skibola. "We sectioned the doors and welded in new sheetmetal from Zim's and then finished it off with hammer welding."

Using a torch to heat and shrink the metal and then a hand-dolly, hammer, and file, the two men spent countless hours bringing the 356 back to as close to factory specs as possible. Concedes Skibola: "It is a very primitive way of working. Leo doesn't know how to use a TIG welder, so he works with a torch welder." Despite their antiquated metal-

working methods, the flawless results certainly speak for themselves.

Skibola had to decide what to do with the 356's existing windshield frame next, which wasn't in the best state due to the fact that a roof had been welded to its top edge. "When restoring a convertible, it's pretty standard practice to cut off the windshield frame about half-way down the posts and weld on a new top portion. I thought it would be easier than it actually was. Either way you do it — fixing the old frame or welding on a new one

All the joys of 356 cabriolet ownership without the costs? We dunno about that, considering the hours that went into this Notchback to bring its silvery flanks back to perfection. But, certainly, the experience of driving this "cabriolet" can't be too far from the real thing. Autos International helped with final fitting of a convertible top that had never been there, while the interior and trim details gleam. Current owner Bill Ziegler fell in love with the car because of how solid it was as a coupe. He's even happier with it as a cabrio...





— is going to be difficult." Skibola managed to locate a used windshield frame, though it needed work.

"It had been sitting outside for years and was badly pitted," says Skibola. "At first, I didn't think I was going to be able to save it, but I managed to make it work. These aren't stamped steel posts, but rather a rough frame that was then covered in lead and molded to form the frame, which is then painted." Once the lead and steel windshield frame was restored and welded on, Skibola had to fabricate the brass handles that attach to the top, and the brass hooks that attach to the top of the windshield frame to secure the top. "I got brass hooks and handles that were similar in shape from a cabinet shop. Then I used a sample from another 356 cabriolet and filed them down to match it."

With the body ready for paint, the newly topless 356 was rolled into the spraybooth. After being primed and block-sanded, then re-primed and block-sanded again, it was sprayed with Porsche Arctic Silver Metallic (paint code 92T) — a shade which is used on newer Carreras and Boxsters. Whatever car it might have been intended for, this shade of silver, which has a hint of gold to it, suits this reborn 356 perfectly.

As is often the case with full-blown

Ziegler drives his reborn 356 in the Marin Headlands regularly, thanks in part to the rebuilt four-cylinder engine. With a bump in displacement and a more aggressive 912 camshaft, the little four is that bit stronger. The front trunk is as clean as the rest of the car, and holds one of Weidman's rechromed and refinished steel wheels.

restorations, problems in other aspects of the project arose. Skibola had turned to Autos International to have the top covered and the interior reupholstered. Somewhere along the line, however, there was a mix-up on color choices. "The customer wanted a blue top and Autos International made a black top instead," recalls Skibola. Fortunately, the error was realized before the top was shipped. But more time was added to the project. "Once we got the frame and top, fitting it to the top of the windshield was extremely difficult since we didn't have any of the jigs that were used to fit them when they were made." Ultimately, the task of fitting the top to the windshield was accomplished, but it did involve sending the top back to Autos International for some final adjustments.

When Skibola began restoring this 356, it had been a "driver" and ran well enough. But, with the rest of the car

undergoing a comprehensive restoration, a full engine rebuild was in order. Billy McNair of European Performance in nearby Novato, California was enlisted to perform the rebuild. Unfortunately, shortly after Skibola brought him the 356's engine, McNair had to undergo the first of two back surgeries. In the end, Skibola decided to undertake the engine rebuild himself.

Once Skibola had brought all of the parts back to his shop, he had the original crankshaft turned down. Next, he installed 86-mm pistons in lieu of the original items. A 912 camshaft was also installed to bump up the horsepower. In order to keep the now more powerful engine as cool as possible, an aluminum oil cooler was also fitted.

"About the only thing that went right was the transmission, which was left untouched," remarks Skibola on the mechanical rebuild/restoration. A larger, 200-mm flywheel and a 200-mm clutch disc were installed to keep up with the uprated powerplant, while factory NOS (New Old Stock) parts were used at all four corners to rebuild the brakes. "The wheels, which were badly pitted, took over a year to get back," says Skibola, who sent them to Weidman's Wheels of Oroville for refinishing. On old 356s, a proper wheel restoration involves splitting the wheel sections in preparation for rechroming. Once they are refinished, the pieces can be welded back together. The tires are Pirelli P4000s, measuring 195/65R16 at all four corners, are quite a bit wider than factory specifications. After the car was restored, Ziegler also had it converted from its six-volt electrical system to a 12-volt setup.

In May of 2003, Ziegler finally picked up his newly restored 356 Notchback-turned-cabriolet. "He absolutely refused to take any shortcuts, and he also happens to love Porsches, as I do," says Ziegler of Skibola's effort. "I think he liked this car from the beginning, because he saw its potential. I have seen a lot of 356s in his shop that I asked him about, but he has never minced words about the true condition of the car. 99 percent of the time he would say, 'You don't want it.'"

Ziegler also drives a 996 Targa, but obviously has a soft spot for the simpler and more mechanically honest vehicles that came out of Stuttgart in the 1960s: "It's a different experience to drive a modern car and then go to one that is totally mechanical — with everything working perfectly. The little sounds and even the sputters of the carbs tell a different story." It's one we like, too. ■