



The New World: Ferry Porsche (left) and his son Ferdinand Alexander in 1958 with a 356 A Coupé in New York Harbor

## HISTORY

# AMERICAN WAY OF DRIVE

Some things never change: each new Porsche is planned with American regulations and tastes in mind. A fact that underlines the importance of Porsche's biggest export market.

There were very special models—and some that never made the journey across the Atlantic.

By Randy Leffingwell

Porsche's 60-year career in the United States started in a back-room meeting in France between two Austrians. In their small show booth at the Salon de l'Automobile, staged at the Grand Palais in Paris in early October 1950, Professor Ferdinand Porsche met his fellow countryman Maximilian E. Hoffman. Hoffman had made a name for himself importing several European auto makes to New York City, where he had established a successful dealership. Within a day or two, the two men struck a deal to send 15 cars a year to New York. Porsche shipped the first three right away. Hoffman quickly got a 356 to sportsman Briggs Cunningham, who accumulated enough racing victories to draw interest from spectators and envy from competitors.

Hoffman was not only effective as a salesman but perceptive as a market analyst. He sold 32 Porsches his first year but soon was moving that many out the doors every month. He wasn't a former amateur racer himself, but he understood their needs. He conceived a dual-purpose lightweight model specifically for U.S. competitors. The America Roadster sold for \$4,600 and had an aluminum body, cloth top, plastic side-curtain windows, and a gutted interior with two bucket seats. It weighed 1,580 pounds (compared to 1,700 for standard cabriolets), and its 70-hp, 1,488-cc engine made it a formidable vehicle on both American coasts.

Hoffman's West Coast distributor, another Austrian named Johnny von Neumann, raced the cars and steered sales to the growing community of television and movie celebrities who liked driving something distinctive. When Porsche introduced the 550 Spyder, actor/racer James Dean joined the coterie of California drivers who owned the cars or campaigned them for others. Racers in 550s won national championships over the next several years. Von Neumann and Hoffman together "invented" another California car so that, as von Neumann explained it years later, "guys could drive, with their arm on the window sill, and talk to the girls on the sidewalks." The \$3,000

Speedster first appeared in 1954, and during that first year Porsche shipped its entire output to U.S. buyers. Hollywood loved the Speedster; even years after they went out of production, actors such as Paul Newman played detectives who drove the cars as they fought the bad guys. Porsche exported its 1955 Continental coupe and cabriolet to the States until Ford Motor Company informed Porsche of Lincoln's plans to reintroduce its own model for 1956. In response, Porsche issued the 1956 356 European, and a few models reached American shores.

The precedent for delivering addictively enjoyable-to-drive cars was set, and U.S. enthusiasts were hooked: by 1955, 50 percent of sales went to the United States. Still not ubiquitous on the road, Porsche drivers flashed their lights at other owners when they met. Those meetings led, in the summer of 1955, to a dozen enthusiasts forming the Porsche Club of America at Blackie's Grill in Washington, D.C. A year later, PCA's first national convention brought 64 members together, who established their annual meeting as the Porsche Parade.

In the early 1960s, Porsche prepared a brand-new car while keeping consumer appetites sharp with potent Carrera II models and ever more sophisticated 356 B and C variations. When the new six-cylinder, 130-horsepower 911 and companion four-cylinder 912 arrived in late 1964, buyers were stunned and dealer order books filled. A more exciting 160-horsepower 911 S appeared as a 1966 model, and at the same time the striking Targa arrived with a removable top and rear window, and a built-in rollbar shrouded in brushed stainless steel. The line expanded in 1968 with a new T and L in coupe and Targa versions as America's first exhaust emissions regulations began dictating what people drove. That year Porsche also introduced its Sportomatic transmission, a semi-automatic gearbox targeted initially at U.S. drivers. Bosch fuel injection let Porsche shuffle the lineup for 1969, returning the S, adding an E, and dropping the L. The 912 disappeared at year-end. Two years later, to encourage



Show business: Max Hoffman's showroom in Manhattan



Rebel without a cause: Speedster fan James Dean



Part-time racer: Paul Newman at Le Mans in 1979



Hard, but heartfelt: Steve McQueen in the film *Le Mans*

customers to enjoy their cars fully, Porsche conducted its first-ever drivers school at a circuit on Long Island, New York.

Nothing tantalizes customers so much as something they cannot obtain. America's increasingly strict emissions and vehicle safety restrictions doomed the most desirable 1973 model to the category of forbidden fruit. Porsche created the lean, limited-production, 210-horsepower 911 Carrera RS 2.7 to meet racing qualifications. However, U.S. regulations kept these road cars from American roads. Competition RSR 2.8 models added to the longing for what could not be. Carrera models for America in 1974 and 1975 (filled with the other features of the 1973 models) delivered 175 horsepower from engines restricted by smog controls.

This inaugurated a pattern that continued for more than a decade while engineers labored to meet standards throughout the

world. It reached its apogee in the early 1980s, several years after Porsche introduced its highly desirable 930 911 Turbo models. For three model years after the launch in 1976, American buyers enjoyed access to the company's most powerful coupe. Then, for 1980, as the future of the 911 itself was in jeopardy, Weissach engineers halted efforts to meet any further U.S. specifications. In response, an underground "grey market" supply line emerged, formed by body shops that resold pre-owned European models "converted" to meet American regulations. When Porsche rescued the 911 from its planned demise, Weissach responded and for 1986 Americans could purchase Turbos. But as one model returned, another unreachable carrot dangled.

Conceived as the ultimate turbocharged 911, the all-wheel-drive 959 took longer to perfect than engineering chief Helmuth Bott had hoped. Near the end of development, new U.S. regulations took effect. Porsche's board repeated 1973 history, concluding that meeting new specifications would delay the car further, making it more expensive to American buyers. But the company learned that lesson well. Throughout the past 30 years, Porsche demonstrated that what was good for home markets could be terrific for American buyers. In the late 1970s Weissach had developed engines for Europe, 49 U.S. states, and for California, as well as Japan, Switzerland, and other nations struggling with air quality questions. A decade later, regulations became more rational and models proliferated. A new Speedster introduced in 1989 to commemorate the popular model from 35 years before sold nearly half its output, 823 out of 2,103 produced, to U.S. customers.

The arrival of the next-generation 964 brought a new growth spurt in models with U.S. sales in mind. The America Roadster, a 911 Carrera 2 Cabriolet in Turbo-look, appeared for 1992, and 250 cars were assembled in homage to the limited-production racer from 1952. A year later, the RS America appeared at a price the rest of the world envied.



**1952:** Home game for the 356 America Roadster



**1954:** Open end for the success of the 356 Speedster



**1989:** The Speedster edition is an icon in the 911 model range



**2006:** Built for PCA and painted in the club's true colors

**MUSEUM COMMEMORATES U.S. ANNIVERSARY**

A special (photo) exhibition at the Porsche Museum commemorates 60 years of Porsche in America. Until January 9, 2011, visitors can view the most interesting Porsche model series for the world's most important automobile market, including the prototype of the 356 Speedster, the rare 356 America Roadster, and the legendary 550 Spyder. Concurrently with the special exhibition, the museum is also publishing the book *Porsche in America*. This sixth work by the company-owned publishing house "Edition Porsche-Museum" has over 200 pages and is available in German and English for €14.90 in the Museum Shop.

**Business hours: Tuesday through Sunday from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.; [www.porsche.de/museum](http://www.porsche.de/museum)**

Through all this time, Porsche supported independent drivers racing its cars in America. This reached a crescendo in the early 1970s with the highly entertaining Canadian-American Challenge. Driver Mark Donohue, racing for Roger Penske's Sunoco team, won virtually every Can-Am start in 1,100-horsepower 917-30 open cars. After that, taking Can-Am turbocharging technology to the next step, Porsche's 934 and 935 racers racked up victories and championships in everything from regional events to major endurance races.

Porsche's proliferation of models over the past decades often has occurred in direct response to conditions in America. When the company considered discontinuing the 911, it was because then-chairman Ernst Fuhrmann feared U.S. legislation might regulate air-cooled, rear-engine cars out of existence. The water-cooled front-engine 924 and 928 and their heirs and successors followed as a result. When Porsche prepared to tantalize the world with its next great car, it unveiled the startling Boxster concept car at the Detroit Motor Show in 1993. To launch the car, Porsche flew 50 production Boxsters to Scottsdale, Arizona, for a lavish presentation party.

More recently, Porsche redefined the supercar category with its 205-mile-per-hour Carrera GT, sold to any American buyer with the prerequisite cash. Its racing cousin, the RS Spyder, won the American Le Mans Series championship in 2006 and 2007.

From the start, Porsche management listened to its large market across the Atlantic. Porsche Cars North America, which moved to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1998, collaborated with the Porsche Club of America to produce a special coupe in PCA Blue for 2005. And each new model is planned with American regulations and tastes in mind. Buyers across the country now wait impatiently for their limited-edition 2011 GTS and Speedster models. There is still an appetite. ●