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CLOCKWORK ORANGE

THE PERFECT LONG-HOOD 911.

STORY BY **DAVE MATHEWS** PHOTOS BY **MICHAEL ALAN ROSS**



The part of this story that we know began something like this: “Hey, buddy. I saw that old Porsche parked out in front of your place. There’s one of ’em in a building I just bought down in Ranger.

Do you know anything about ’em? Have any interest?” A Texas rancher, plaid shirt open at the neck, the brim of a sweat-stained ball cap pulled tight over his eyes, had just climbed out of his Ford pickup and stood before Rich Lambert, hands jammed in his pockets.

“Yeah, I know a bit about ’em and maybe I’d be interested.

Any numbers on the back?”

“Yep. 9-1-1-S.”

“911S, you say?”

Why yes...I’d be interested.”

THIS 1968 911S has come a long way from that ramshackle building in Ranger, Texas to the concours field in Spokane, Washington. Like the restoration of a Gustav Becker clock, it required a little luck, a lot of patience, knowledgeable hands, and meticulous attention to detail to produce the Zuffenhausen-level concours car it is today. Technically, this Porsche is a near perfect example that looks great and runs, well, like clockwork.

But that’s only the clinical side of the ledger. The emotional side is sheer perfection as well, almost as if this Porsche was engineered to yank at the heartstrings of an early 911 fan in much the same way that the peaky 2.0-liter S engine exerts an irresistible tug over 5000 rpm. To wit: It’s a short-wheelbase car, it’s orange, it has houndstooth (Pepita) seats and classic Fuchs alloys, and it’s an S, which was the highest horsepower variant available that year. In short, this car checks

pretty much every box for an air-cooled 911 addict.

Back around the year 2000, though, it was just a tired sports car in a town where Ford and Chevy pickup trucks are the vehicles of choice—to most folks. But not to Rich. Having worked for Al Zim, a legend in Porsche parts and repair, Rich ran his own repair shop in Ft. Worth. He had a soft spot in his heart for Porsches. So did his friend, fellow Porsche enthusiast and co-conspirator Pat Sullivan. Just a few days later, Rich and Pat headed to Ranger pulling an empty trailer—you know, just in case.

Ranger, Texas is located off U.S. Highway 20 midway between Ft. Worth and Abilene. Ranger started life as Ranger Camp Valley, aptly named by a group of Texas Rangers who, in the 1870s with the help of locals, established a tent town, complete with a school, a few churches, and some stores. In 1917, the area’s first wildcat oil well came in, creating an oil boom that lasted for about

five years. Brick and mortar replaced canvas. A real town was born. Down in the bowels of one of those old buildings, a car dealership back in the day, the rancher showed Rich and Pat the car he had been talking about. The two men immediately recognized the silhouette—a sad, sorry-looking, short-wheelbase (SWB) 911.

“The car was covered with dust; the tires were flat but inflatable,” reported Pat. “Nearly all of the paint appeared original, but nasty. The outer perimeter of the car was rusted badly. The floor pans, however, were nearly perfect.” The interior was in remarkably good condition, with its black leatherette seats and Pepita cloth inserts a pleasant surprise considering the car’s grim exterior.

They noticed oddities about the car—the speedometer gauge registered kilometers, not miles. The odometer showed 58,000 kilometers (36,000 miles). Stuck to the left front fender was a U.S. Armed Services decal.

Was the original owner a serviceman who had purchased the car overseas and then shipped it back to the States? It was a mystery.

Rich purchased the Porsche from the rancher/real estate mogul on the spot, with cash and a handshake. “We inflated the tires and used the winch on my trailer to pull the car aboard,” said Pat. During the return trip to Ft. Worth, a second deal was struck. Because Rich had very little extra storage space and Pat owned a 4,000-square-foot building with room for the car, he bought the Porsche from Rich, sans engine.

Rich knew a customer in need of a replacement engine, and Pat had no immediate plan to restore the Porsche. The early 911 market had not yet entered the stratosphere, and to Pat, the car was just another rusty project to be tackled sometime in the future. Once back in Ft. Worth, the Porsche was rolled off the trailer and





pushed into a corner of Pat's warehouse, where it sat and collected more dust for the next ten years.

BY THE TIME 2010 rolled around, the value of air-cooled 911s, especially the devilish SWB variety, had risen to a level that could justify investing in a concours-level restoration. Pat engaged his friend and professional body and paint guy, David Swan, to do the heavy lifting. As Pat and David began the restoration in earnest, they noticed detail after detail that identified this 1968 911S as a unique "transition" car.

Fewer than 1,500 coupes were manufactured in 1968. The car differed from the earlier SWB 911S in subtle ways. It had 15x5.5-inch Fuchs wheels rather than the 15x4.5-inch alloys of earlier years or the 15x6-inch wheels that appeared in 1969. The style of the instrument gauges differed from previous models, as did the color of the lettering—white rather than the green found in earlier 911s and the 356 models. "Elephant hide" upholstery had replaced the "basket weave" vinyl found on the lower dash trim and door panels of the 1967 911S. The bumper and rocker panel trim differed from earlier models in that it was a little wider, and it had a Durant, fender-mounted rearview mirror that was slightly larger than

those mounted on the 356C and earlier 911/912 models.

Because of stringent Environmental Protection Agency mandates, there were no 1968 911S models offered to the U.S. market. Consequently, this car had no DOT body-side reflectors. It did have the lockable ignition switch that was standard in ROW models but wasn't part of the package for U.S.-spec cars.

The more Pat and David dug into their project, the deeper they had to go. Sometime in its past, the Porsche had incurred damage that could not simply be hammered out. The left rear inner fender was cut out and replaced by one from a donor car. The suspension pan was rusted and too far gone to repair; consequently, it and the battery mount were replaced. The brakes had seized tighter than, well, pretty tight. All the seals were shot.

THE TASK WAS MONUMENTAL. And there was that issue with the engine. There wasn't one. It was time for a little luck.

"I'd recently sold my 1971 911T race car for a price I couldn't refuse and was in the market for another car," said Pat. "While searching the Internet, I found on eBay a 914-6 offered in California." The 914-6 sported a 2.0-liter engine—transplanted from a 1968 911S! Its ID num-

ber, 4080624, was only 315 units away from the engine original to his project car. Pure happenstance or divine providence? Perhaps a bit of each. "I pulled that engine for safekeeping," said Pat, "and raced the car with another engine I already had."

With the engine on hand, the project could now be completed. At least, that was the plan—until the plan changed. Pat began liquidating his Texas holdings, pulled up stakes, and moved to Tennessee. Pat and David put the 911S together as best they could for the cross-country trip, and Pat took it with him. Priorities reshuffled, and the project languished. Then, in 2016, Pat reached out to Rich to see if he knew of anyone interested in buying his partially completed 911S project.

TOM TAFF, a lanky Texan with a casual drawl that belies the mind of an engineer and the skillset of a master craftsman, had owned Porsches for years. He'd raced them, wrecked them, fixed them, and restored them. Tom and Rich met some years earlier, when Tom brought his first Porsche, a Light Ivory 1964 356 SC sun-roof coupe, to Rich's shop for repairs.

"The car suddenly began to run rough and made unhealthy noises," Tom recalled. "I called Rich and he told

Opposite: A speedometer/odometer gauge that registers kilometers reflects this Porsche's European heritage. Above: Elephant-hide dash trim and white-lettered instrument gauges indicate this 1968 911S was a transition model.



Above: Attention paid to every detail makes for a Zuffenhausen-level champ. **Opposite:** Equally at home on the grass of a concours field or a gritty side street, this 911S makes quite a statement.



me to bring it over. I hauled it over there on my trailer." Rich asked him to start it up, and against his better judgment, Tom did. "Shut it off! Shut it off!" yelled Rich. The immediate diagnosis—a broken crank. Rich rebuilt that SC's engine and forged a friendship with Tom that endured for more than 20 years.

When Rich told Tom that a SWB 911S was available, Tom pulled the telephone receiver a little closer to his ear. After learning the car's history, what restoration work had been done, and what was left to do, he decided he had to have it.

The 911S was transported back to the Lone Star State. Except for the humped-up back end, it looked pretty good—from a distance. The wheels had been remounted in order to move it, but the brake lines weren't attached. It had the original cables. The paint was shiny. The gaps were okay.

"The glass was in and the seats were in, and it looked like a car, but..." Tom deemed it, at best, a 20-footer.

Nice if you didn't get too close. Tom, you see, is a perfectionist. Nice didn't cut it. He knew what needed to be done and was ready to get after it.

Although the car had been pasted together prior to arriving in Texas, it had to be completely disassembled and then reassembled to Tom's standards. The 2.0-liter engine, which Tom brought home in the back of his pickup truck, required a complete rehabilitation. In 1969, Porsche introduced the Bosch mechanical fuel injection system with a CDI electronic ignition for the model, but this 911S still used a carbureted fuel delivery and a points and condenser ignition. Those gummed-up Weber carburetors had to be rebuilt and Alodine coated. And the transmission needed a rebuild. And the wiring had to be replaced. And the brakes had to be renewed. And...the list went on.

TOM WAS USED to lists. Retired from American Airlines after 35 years, he had relied on his checklist and Quick

Reference Handbook (QRH) for every pre-flight check on every aircraft he piloted, from DC-3s to 777s. It was second nature, therefore, to obtain a Porsche shop manual and parts manual before tackling his end of the restoration.

"The manuals came in handy," related Tom. "Over the years, new parts, old parts, and aftermarket parts had all been used in the car. Plus, I had boxes full of parts that came with the car. When things didn't fit together correctly, I went back to the books."

For the next 12 months, Tom devoted most of his free time to the completion of the 911S. What might have been tedious and insignificant to others was critically important to him. "It is certainly not an undertaking for the faint-hearted," said Tom. "It requires attention to detail and commitment to completion."

For example, getting the brakes right took about 30 hours. That included rebuilding the pedal box and callipers and installing new brake lines. "It took great care



PHOTO COURTESY TOM TAFF

A sum of its parts? Yes—and then some. Documented, photographed, and categorized, parts went from cleaner to bead blaster to plater. Nothing was left to chance.

to remove the Ribe head 7mm fasteners from the rusty old calipers before they could be restored and reused.”

Tom left nothing to chance. “Basically, I just put the 911S on jack stands, took it all apart, and did every sub-assembly completely. After considerable note-taking, photos, and several drawings, all the hardware was removed and went into a pile. From there it went to the parts cleaner, the bead blaster, then the plater. When the parts came back shiny and new, the sorting of nuts, bolts, the odd gadgets, gizmos, and brackets began.”

Tom cleaned, bead blasted, and refinished the air cleaners, manifolds, shocks, and all suspension parts. The oil tank was flushed, cleaned, and painted. The oil cooler was flushed, cleaned, pressure-tested, and Alodine coated. The Blaupunkt radio was repaired, the carpet removed and reinstalled.

Then, after everything was reassembled, the sorting began and the bugs were worked out.

HOW DID IT RUN? Like clockwork. Just as you’d expect from a 160-hp, 2,300-pound, exquisitely tuned German hot rod. It was cool and dry on the morning we met Tom for the photo shoot. The streets were empty; traffic non-existent. The neighborhood, an eclectic hodgepodge of small machine shops, junkyards, and repurposed warehouses, had not yet come to life. Those few who walked past us sipped coffee from paper cups and carried sack lunches, lost in thoughts of the night before or the day ahead.

That is, until Tom twisted the key on his 911S. The flat six caught with a cough from those Weber carburetors and then cleared its throat. Oh, man, what music! Notching the gearshift into first, then blipping the pedal a time or two, Tom pulled away from the curb and roared down the street and out of sight. But not out of our hearing. The raspy, mechanical howl of that high-strung, air-cooled 2.0-liter rattled windows, reverberated off old brick, and turned heads. He returned to where he left us, flashing past without slowing, a blur of orange against a backdrop of grit, rust, and peeling paint.

The orange S made its debut at the 2017 PCA Parade Concours in Spokane, Washington. Patience and perseverance paid off. Tom Taff’s 1968 Tangerine 911S achieved Zuffenhausen status, scoring 295.2 points (out of a maximum 300) in the concours competition. The judges’ assessment was gratifying, but it was the reaction from the crowd, the sheer crush of attention that the car received, that cemented it as something truly special—a car with off-the-charts eyeball appeal that can make even the most single-minded transaxle car devotee stop in his or her tracks and gaze, to ponder a car that is both technical and emotional perfection. ●

FLAGSHIP DETROIT This 80-year-old DC-3 is still flying high



PHOTO COURTESY TOM TAFF

NOT ALL of Tom Taff’s flying takes place on the back roads outside Dallas. Once a pilot, always a pilot. Tom, together with a group of former American Airlines colleagues, created a nonprofit organization, the Flagship Detroit Foundation, to restore, preserve, maintain, and fly the oldest DC-3 aircraft (built in 1937) in the world. Discovered in a Virginia field in 2004, the aircraft, NC17334, had last been used as a mosquito sprayer. Over the next two years, the foundation repaired, reconditioned, or replaced most of the aircraft, including its 21 seats, a galley containing six thermoses and a pantry, and a lavatory with a skylight and a wooden toilet seat. Powered by twin Wright Cyclone engines, each producing 1,200 horsepower, the Flagship Detroit visits communities and air shows throughout the year, paying tribute to the early days of commercial aviation. —DM

Information, in part, courtesy of Airways magazine, August 2014