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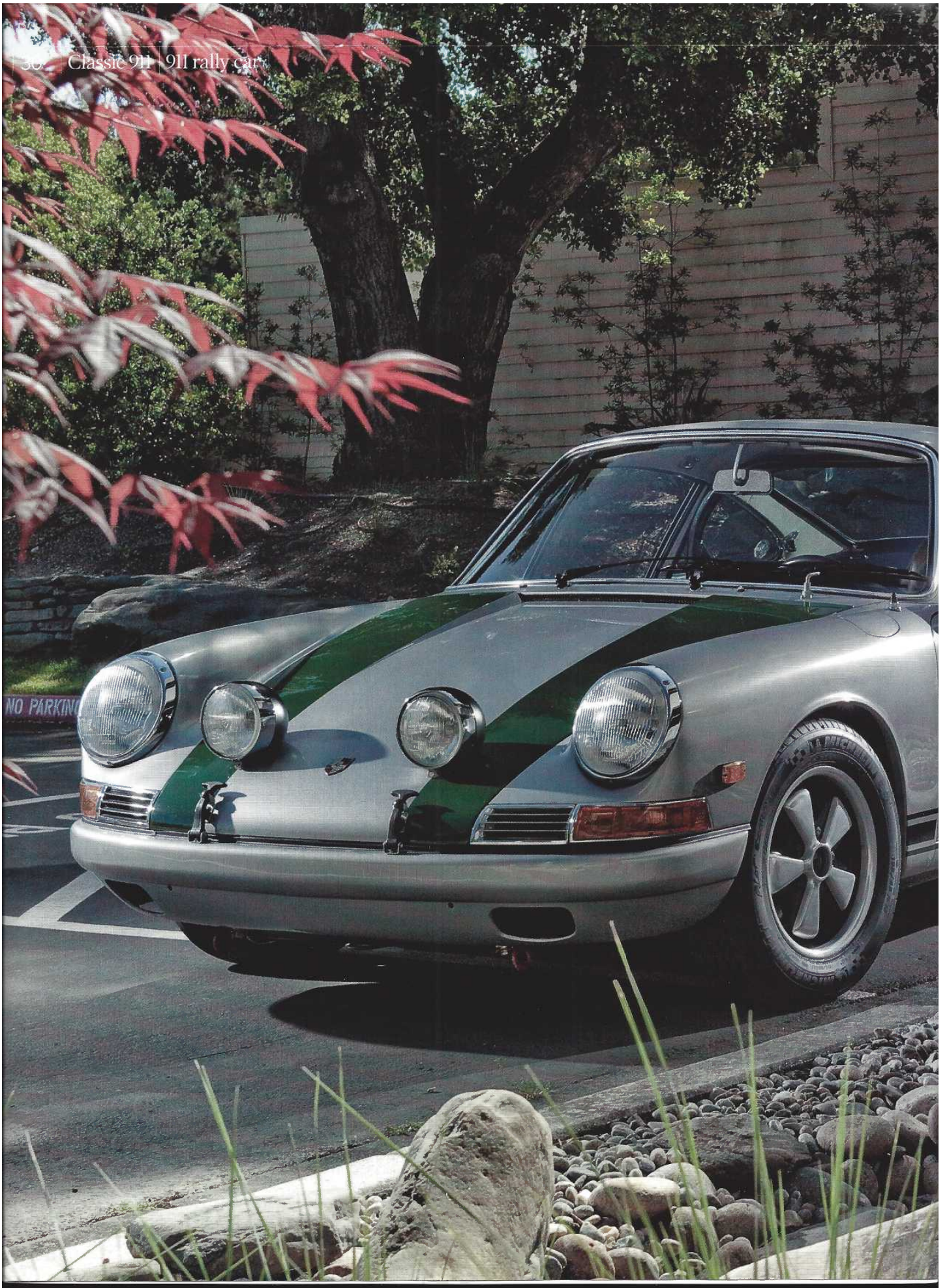


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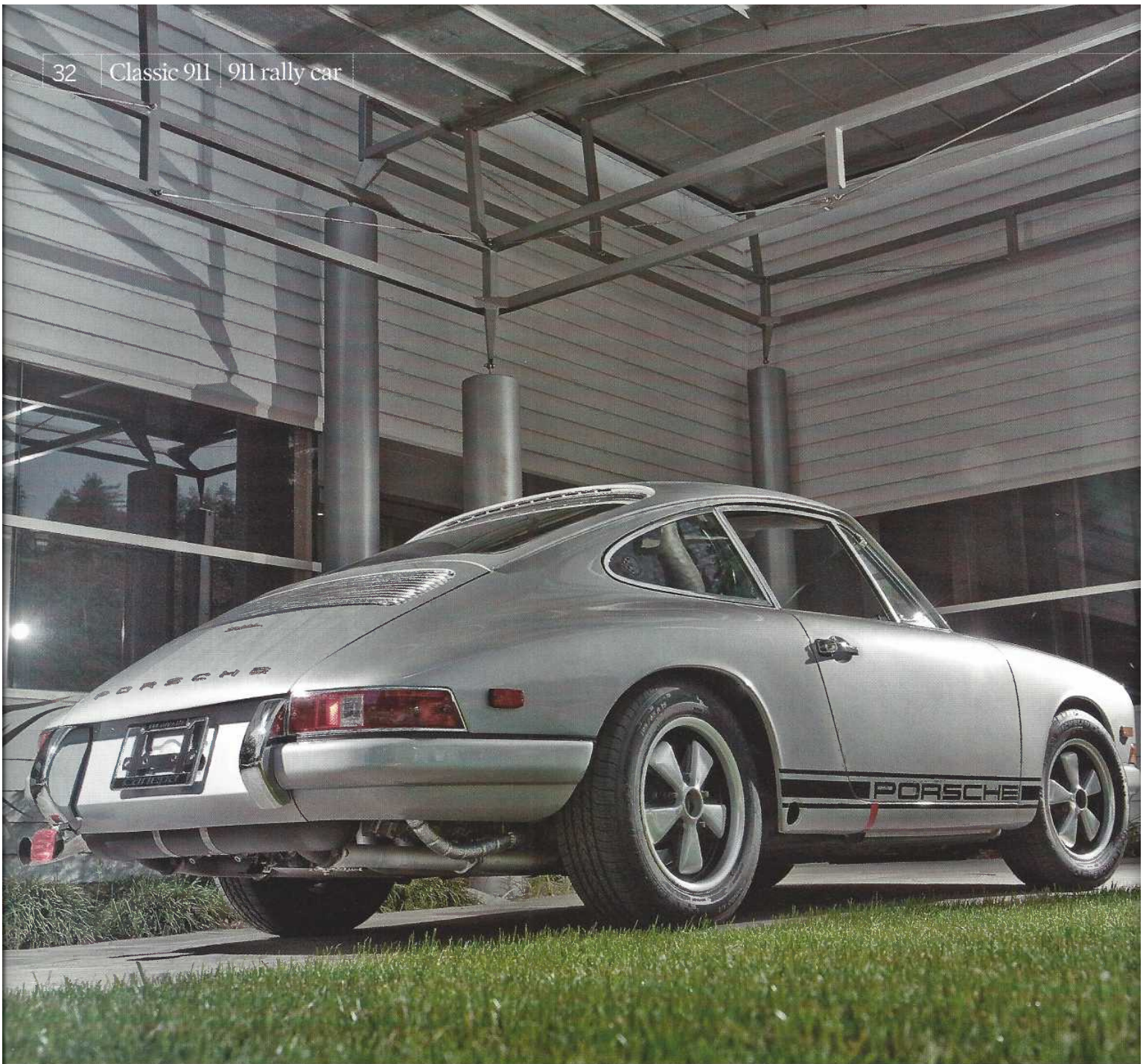


Aging gracefully

Written by **John Glynn** Photographed by **James Lipman**

In a world of wide-arched RS, RSR and ST 911s, the simple narrow-bodied short wheelbase cars are really where it's at. We drive a unique example in California





A full 85,000 kilometres from Earth, with no atmosphere or magnetic field to protect it, the Moon is exposed to anything and everything found shooting through space.

The Moon has two distinct landscapes; the ancient and heavily cratered Highlands, and the still cratered but more recent Maria. The surface is covered with regolith; dust and debris formed by the meteor impacts that have pounded this astral body for 4 billion years.

As if the meteor strikes weren't enough, the Moon is also under constant bombardment by the Solar Wind. This stream of charged particles, travelling at 450 kilometres a second, has various effects on Earth, including power line surges, radio interference and Aurora Borealis: the Northern Lights. Imagine what it does to the poor old Moon.

So I say again, consider the Moon, just for a moment. Picture its ghostly surface on a full and bright night. Feel the moonlight on your skin. Despite its pockmarked countenance, I defy anyone to claim that soft white ball is not absolutely beautiful. After 4 billion years of battering, the Moon has ultimate patina.

Patina is at the heart of classic cars; visible enjoyment preserved in the very fabric. Like staring at the Moon in the same way stone-age man must have done, or walking in the footsteps of Julius Caesar at Arles or Abraham Lincoln at his cottage in Washington, nothing beats the feeling of stepping back in history. Nothing beats sitting on the same leather as Nuvolari, or gripping the same steering wheel as Grace Kelly. Retrimmed examples are just not the same.

This 1968 911L looks slightly out of place in Bruce Canepa's spotless showroom. Among the

immaculate historic road and race cars, it cuts an unobtrusive shape and, despite a hefty price tag, is one of the cheapest machines on sale. From a few metres away, under these flattering showroom lights, the car looks restored. But up close and personal, the silver roof bears the sort of patina only found on original paint, and on the Moon.

In an age where everything is newer, faster, better, how many passers-by would look at this car with its patinated paint and think; 'interesting old Porsche' versus 'needs a paint job'? Do people really know what they are looking at?

Porsche collector Don Ahearn knew he was looking at something different, years before he actually bought the silver 911. As proprietor of Porsport.com, Don has owned a series of short wheelbase factory sports and rally-kitted cars, and he knew that this car was not your common or garden 911L.



Narrow-bodied 911s always look so neat and pure. This is no exception



The engine (above) has been rebuilt and tweaked to give decent power, while retaining its Seventies character



“It was regularly serviced at a friend’s Porsche workshop in Long Island, New York,” says Don. “It had that rollbar but had obviously never been raced, and the owner just drove it around a normal 911. I always felt there was something different about it, so when it came up for sale due to oil leaks and other repairs, I made an offer. If we hadn’t spotted the car and made an attempt to buy it, it could have dropped right off the radar and never been seen again.”

Don’s bid bought him another 911. Though well-used and in need of some attention, the car was in generally good condition. While work began on replacing a corroded front suspension pan, Don

started chasing down the history. What he found was very interesting.

Delivered at the factory in 1968, this 911L was ordered with some very nice sports purpose parts.

The certificate of authenticity lists US side marker reflectors, a limited-slip differential, engine compartment light with chrome lid, Blaupunkt radio with speaker and manual antenna, rollbar,

tool bin in rear seat area, tinted windscreen, side glass and rear window, halogen foglights (white) and skid plates for front suspension, engine and transmission. This car was made to go racing.

The 911L was manufactured for one year only. L stood for Lux and the car was kitted out with S

“It bears the sort of patina only found on original paint, and on the moon”

brakes and, for America, an emissions-friendly air pump-equipped engine developing 130bhp. Whatever changed once the L was delivered, the new owner decided not to race it. It was shipped back to the US and then sold to a friend; owner number two. Ahearn was owner number three.

By the time it got to Don, the car was missing some of its original parts. Along with the rusty front pan, the underside was untidy and the engine needed rebuilding. Luckily, it had landed in the right hands to bring it back up to scratch.

First to be found was the 100-litre fuel tank; a rare option back in the day and even rarer now in good condition. Don’s extensive network found him a NOS example; the project was off to a flying start. “The car’s name was Helga,” Don tells me. “Not many people know it but that’s what the original owner called it. I kinda fell for Helga, so she had nothing but the best.” He’s not kidding. ☺



Patina of age doesn't mean the car is neglected. Look closely and you'll see lots of beautiful period details, including Cibie lights and an astonishingly clean underside



While the engine went off for an overhaul, Don set about preparing the front compartment to receive the pricey new petrol tank. The results speak for themselves; this is one smooth under-bonnet space.

The blower sits in the smuggler's box; a very sweet touch. Don originally fitted a lightweight battery in a black battery box on the left-hand side, and ran all black cables to and fro. I remember seeing the finished pictures and the effect was stunning, making the front end look stripped out and lighter than ever. Some red cable has since found its way in, but the quality of Ahearn's work remains evident.

Inside, Don was confronted with an episode of DIY SOS. "I hadn't received the build confirmation back from Porsche, so I wasn't entirely sure what

this masonite box was on the firewall. It looked like something the owner had made, then tried to take off and given up on. Only when I studied it in detail did I realise it was factory; the famous tool bin."

A new front panel was fabricated to repair the tool bin, which was soon looking as good as new. The bin has since been copied in a few early hot rods, and a modern interpretation can be found in Singer Designs' just-launched 911. This sports-purpose part is a design icon.

The factory rollbar was in great original condition, so that stayed as was. "Not many people realise that the originals were painted gloss black,"

says Don. "You get these repro parts in satin, as people assume that's how they were finished. If you like it, that's fine, but it's not how the factory did it."

Elsewhere indoors, Don found some perfect

original seats; a Scheel 911R seat for the driver and a Recaro bucket for the passenger. Although the Canepa website pictures show Ahearn's seats in

place, I'm a little disappointed to find they've since been swapped for period-style reproductions. The replacements are nice enough, and the interior still smells fantastic, but the matching pair of new perches jars a little against the fun-worn finish found elsewhere.

"The original paint was just too good to mess with"



The engine build was ongoing and things were spicing up a bit. "Helga was screaming out for more power," remembers Don, "and that's what she got." Elgin 906 cams established a lively personality, with flowed heads and a pair of George's European Headers taking the gasses out to a Rallye exhaust. New pistons and cylinders, Carrillo rods and MSD ignition keep everything smooth.

On the outside, Marchal headlights were added, as well as NOS Cibie hood lights and a rear foglight. Don left the patina intact. "These cars were sold to go racing and rallying, so most of them got smashed, some were repaired and others were updated to the later look. Helga was built to race, but never actually went, and the original paint was just too good to mess with. We polished it up and left it at that." As the characterful paint is my

favourite thing about this car, I would say that was a good call.

Once Helga was back on the road, Don used it quite a bit before circumstances forced him to sell. "I did Rennsport 2 and Watkins Glen, but then I bought my orange Trans-Am car and was offered a rally-kitted 911S which the factory said they'd never made, so I had to have that. That took me up to 17 911s: Helga had to go."

The 911 went to good buddy Phil down in Florida, where it was used and enjoyed and had a few more touches added, like the Thommen aircraft clock in the original clock space. Some time later, Phil sold it back to Don, who sent it on to pastures new.

Today, it's in one of my favourite places; Canepa Design in Scotts Valley, California - Porsche racing driver Bruce Canepa's temple to great cars.

"It drives lots better than it looks," says a mechanic, as we push the car from the showroom to the workshop, past 934s and 917s and out into daylight for what I suspect is the first time in a while. The comment takes me back to wondering: do people actually see what they're looking at? I think it looks great, but then these boys are used to being around mega-buck machinery all day long.

Helga's taste in jewellery is exquisite; the soft sheen of the window frames and those spotless 6 and 7R Fuchs denote her as a master of Bauhaus understatement. The cluttered sidewall markings of the modern Michelin rubber are a little distracting, but it's a small price to pay for increased grip and corner speed.

After shooting some static pictures on the terrace, it's time to drive. A quick jumpstart brings Helga ↻

Buying one of these new
with rally options fitted
meant that you fully
intended to drive it like
you stole it.



Thanks...

...to Don Ahearn: www.porsport.com,
Bruce Canepa: www.canepa.com

to life and we head straight for the hills, and the Redwood Forest.

Having driven countless cars in my 25 years in the motor trade, I can think of no more elegant driver's car than a light, airy 911, with plenty of zing from that eager engine.

Small flat spots in the tyres make me a little sad; Helga is not being loved. The new seats are surprisingly comfortable; the headrest hits you just right. This is a car you could do some touring in, although I might cap one pipe on the silencer for long-distance runs.

The classic Prototipo is a joy to play with, and the gearbox couldn't be sweeter. With 2,000 miles

on the clock since Don's sympathetic update, it's like a new old car; crisp and fresh underneath, with memories of the history to date up top.

Although Helga is not to be confused with the factory rally cars built around the same time, this 911L with some interesting rally options is a rare bird, thanks to the original owner's intent. Buying one of these new with rally options fitted meant that you fully intended to drive it like you stole it.

Given that starting point, how many similar cars have survived? Considering that number, when a nice condition 911S is being advertised for \$90,000 or more, what's a low-owner, nicely restored sports purpose car worth? How many more are out there?

Originality is worth a fair-sized premium, especially when it's originality in good condition. This 911L might not be all original, but the bits that matter are, while the updates are done to a high standard, and the various bolt-in changes are easily reversed, if required.

In a world of 911 ST, RS and RSR replicas, narrow-bodied 911 hot rods are in fairly short supply, and factory hot rods like this one are in single digits. As the new, improved Porsche returns to its sports car roots, and cars like the 918 bring sports car-only kudos back to the brand, what sort of prices might early sports-purpose-optioned factory cars begin to command? Gentlemen, place your bets. **911**