

# The Loss of a “New” Friend

By Lee Payne

June, 2011

“There’s Trouble!”

That’s the way Kirk would greet me every time I showed up at his shop.

There are others who can speak to the memory of Kirk Stowers in far more detail than I. Some did so in great style at his memorial service on June 2, 2011. His many friends throughout the years in PCA, 356 Registry, Florida Owners Group, SCCA, and other Porsche and automotive venues, have been fortunate to enjoy his wit and gear-head wisdom much longer.

I had been acquainted with Kirk through PCA for a long while, but really didn’t get to know him until I was inspired by one of the famous B-B-Q Bull Sessions at his shop in August 2008. Kathy and I have owned twelve Porsches over time, but just one 356 back in the 80s. Since I was still working full time back then, it was too hot to drive daily so I sold it and acquired another 911. I always regretted that move.

I had absolutely no intention of getting involved in 356 restorations when we walked into that B-B-Q. But Kirk’s enthusiasm for these little cars was infectious. By the time that event was over, I was hounding Kirk to help me find a restoration project to do with him – and I mean *with* him. He offered what many restoration shops do not, and that was participation in the process. He had no problem with me hanging around, cleaning parts, media blasting, disassembling parts for my car to prepare for chroming, powder coating, assembly or whatever was next on the agenda. He actually enjoyed it and that was why his shop was more a hobby than a business. He made no apologies for that, and if things moved too slowly for you, he would always offer to help you pack up your car and take it somewhere else.

Kirk found my 1959 356A Cabriolet at Gary Kempton’s in Tallahassee that November. I was out of town, and he negotiated and bought the car for us from Gary, and we ultimately took his trailer to pick it up. Kirk would help anyone interested in the cars like that, and have a great time doing it.

Because helping us restore our cars was a hobby for him and he encouraged people dropping by to chat, things did indeed move slowly. Kirk’s shop reminded one of the old-time barber shops where friends gathered to talk about current events. We talked cars – mostly 356 Porsches – and the latest racing news. That’s why not much work got done. Kirk would get there early in the morning and get started on his day’s project. Then I or some other Porsche nut would stop by either to work on a car or chat – or both. We would get a water from Kirk’s fridge, and sit around his desk. About 11:30 AM, someone would mention that it was lunchtime, and we would all pile into the largest car available and head over to Charlie & Jakes, or Nikki’s, or one of the other places the Stower’s 356 crowd frequented. After talking more about 356s at lunch, we would come back to the shop - some who just came for lunch would head off for an afternoon nap - and the rest of us would talk a little more, and then get back to our cars. No time and motion study needed here to see a productive hour issue.

Another thing that affected the productive hours in Kirk’s shop was his willingness to help anyone with a 356 problem or question. He took many phone calls each day, patiently describing a procedure or correct part for someone’s car. He also spent a lot of time explaining to those of us working on our cars in his shop the proper technique for this or that – or that there *wasn’t* a “proper” technique or perfect

part. He would say “Hans” didn’t always pull the same exact part off the shelf for installation in each car in a model. Many times his response to those who would ask what color was correct for their car, would be, “Whatever you want it to be!” If someone started getting upset about some aspect of their car, Kirk would always remind us that the whole idea was to have fun. It was all about the cars, and having fun messing with them.

As excited as he was about these cars of which he knew so much, he hadn’t had a running version of his own in years. That was because he was working on other people’s cars. Oh, he had two or three in pieces lying around that he never seemed to get to. And he had grand plans for them too. The Super 90 Coupe was the closest to completion. The engine was built, it was painted, and on the rotisserie with the sound deadening started. The interior was also done, and one lone seat still sits in the passenger side to this day. Then, just before he became ill, he sold it, to be finished at a later date.

Kirk solicited comments from anyone who came into the shop about what they thought of this color interior, or that carpet kit he was considering for one of his own project cars – always saying he really wanted our opinion, but told us not to get upset if he didn’t take it.

He had a hard time keeping on any particular task. Things got done, but in a haphazard manner. For example, he spent literally hundreds of hours on Dan Bird’s Outlaw because there was so much custom work to be done. But during the process as I was cleaning parts, media blasting etc., he would stop what he was doing and come over to say things like, “You don’t have to get it that clean, it’s going to be powder coated anyway”, or, “You want to make sure to get all of the rust off of that before we paint it”.

So now, what Kirk Stowers and I started, Buster Veneble and I are going to finish. As we travel down that arduous restoration path with all of the associated hiccups, pitfalls and sandtraps, I fully expect to hear a whisper now and then in the din of the compressors and grinding tools reminding me that, “The whole idea is to have fun”.

Thanks, Kirk.