

In the late summer of 1958 Frank started talking about returning to Europe for an extended holiday. His job had become stale to him, and with little prospect of advancement in the company – he was told by his boss prior to his marriage that he would do better by marrying a Canadian or an American girl (remember, this was during the dark days of McCarthyism in the United States) – he started to get itchy feet. At one point his employer earnestly handed him a pamphlet entitled *How to be an American*.

Many lengthy, back-and-forth discussions late into the night resulted in Frank and Paula deciding to take a three-month leave of absence, and in October of 1958, the Reisners boarded a ship bound for Bremerhaven, Germany.

The plan was to buy a used Porsche – Frank considered the rear-

engine sports cars to be the finest example of automobile engineering anywhere in the world – and go on a ‘nuts and bolts’ tour of Europe’s leading automobile factories. Paula’s father still had many connections in the European automotive industry, so, armed with letters of introduction from the former JAWA general manager and former Fédération Internationale de L’Automobile (FIA) member, the Reisners planned to visit numerous factories – including Porsche, Mercedes, Alpine, Gordini, Panhard, FIAT, VW, Renault, Peugeot, DKW and DAF.

As the couple slipped out of Montreal harbour and east into the wide St. Lawrence River with thoughts of a footloose three months in the warmer south European climes, little could they know they were setting sail for a holiday that would forever change their lives; they would not return to live in Canada for some twenty-odd years.



Frank and Paula aboard the MS Europa leaving Montreal for a European vacation that would last 18 years.

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A WILD RIDE WITH A MAN NAMED JACK



The young Reisner family rang in the year 1965 with a touch of uncertainty, with the Apollo project now morphed into supplying the ex-Apollo to the Texas company which completed them with mechanical parts and marketed them as the Vetta Ventura.

However, after riding the ups and downs of not one, but two car building projects in the past five years, Frank, just a month-and-a-half from turning 33, and Paula, just a few days into her 30s, had both become accustomed to the vagaries and uncertainties of small-scale car production.

Paula recalls that, at the time, a number of large, Turin-based automakers had expressed an interest in hiring Frank to oversee an assortment of production facilities; his talents obvious from the successful production and marketing of the IMP and the Apollo. That neither car managed to crack the 100-units-made mark was of little concern; in both cases, events beyond Frank's control undid the entire enterprise – a disconnected supply line in the case of the IMP, and a finite money supply in the case of the Apollo.

Little did they know it at the time, but this frustrating trend of being undone by things out of their immediate control would mark the Reisners' remaining decade in their cherished home of Italy. Frank was tempted to go and work for someone else at times during this period, but his character and strong sense of independence, fuelled by his family's long history of self-reliance in Gyula, kept him faithful to his dream to own and operate his own firm.

Though the Apollo project was at worst dead, and at best stalled,

The Apollo 2+2 at San Remo, Italy. Though the Apollo project had run its course by the time the 2+2 was completed, it would provide the inspiration and foundation for Frank Reisner's next sports car, the Griffith.





An Italia convertible strikes a pose at a classic car show. (Courtesy Richard Owen)

February 23, 1968, the first Italias equipped with a 302 Ford V8 were delivered to Motor Sport Inc. for sale in Canada. Despite being a larger block, the 302 engine had less power than the 289 due to new emission regulations that stole horsepower from the V8.

Genser Forman was also holding up its end of the deal, producing slick color brochures singing the Italia GFX's praises under the tag lines: "The Best of Two Continents," and "American Heart ... Italian Body."

With a listed price of \$6450 for either the coupe or the convertible, the Italia was well-positioned to appeal to those who wanted the look and feel of a European exotic, but without the associated costs, both initial and maintenance.

By March of 1968, Intermeccanica had shipped and sold more than 40 Torinos-Italias to the United States, and the Reisners were settling into what Paula remembered as "a calm period." Compared to the constant state of uncertainty around the Omega and Griffith projects – fuelled as they were by American dreamers – the first year production run of the Italia was indeed smooth sailing.

That's not to say they'd seen the last of Americans looking to build their dream car, and in March of 1968, two such characters walked into Intermeccanica's shop. Only unlike previous dreamers who had turned into nightmares for Intermeccanica, Joe Vos and his partner Charlie Schwendler would end up becoming good friends to both Frank and



Italia convertible in red. (Courtesy Dan Eastwood)

INTERMECCANICA - THE STORY OF THE PRANCING BULL

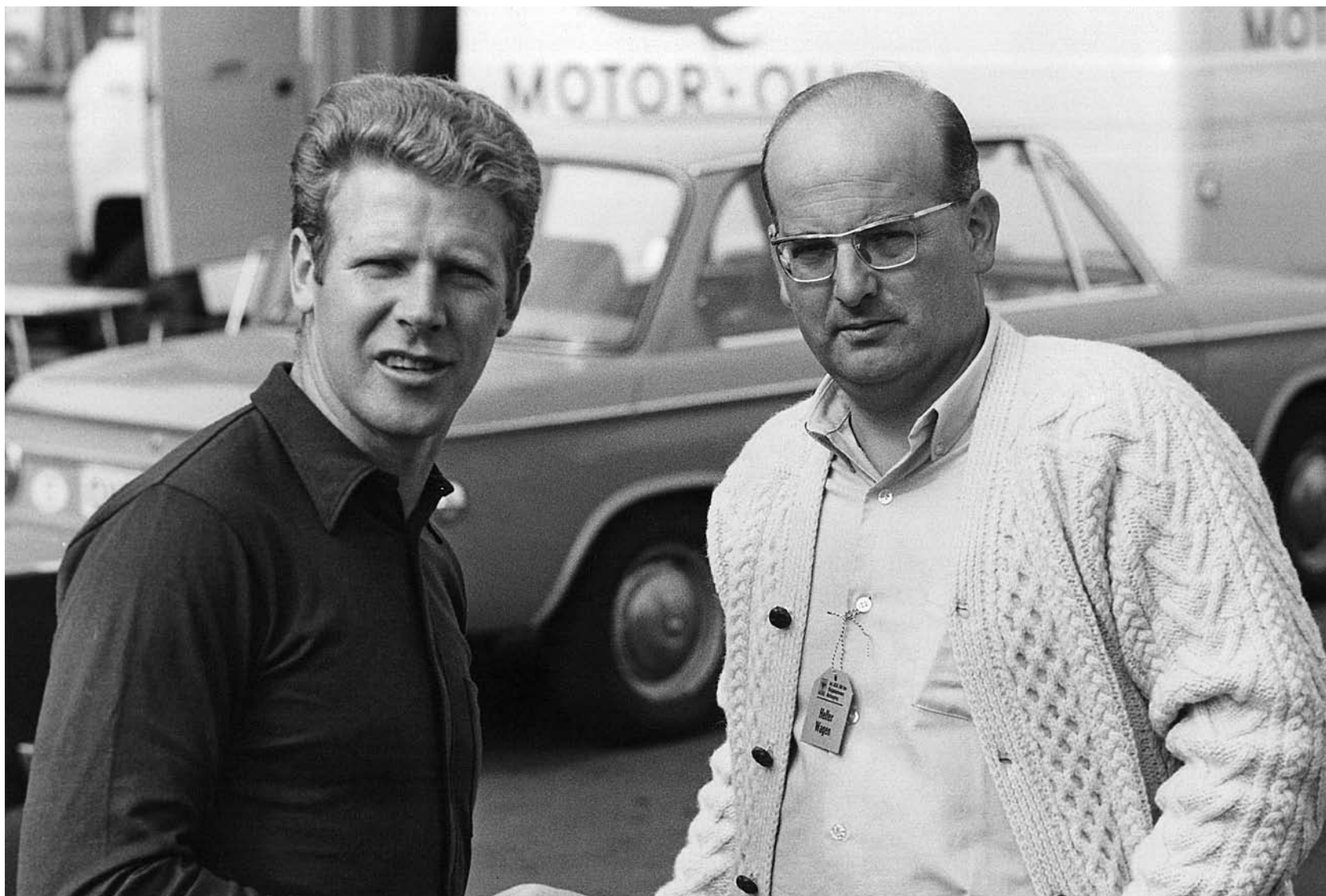
Frank had agreed to have the car ready for the 1971 Geneva Motor Show in March, giving everyone involved five months from the formal agreement to bring the idea to full-throttled life. Actually sooner, as Frank also agreed to give a running car to Opel engineers for testing prior to the show.

“Lutz invited Frank up to the GM factory in Russelsheim, Germany to get the Diplomat mechanical parts,” Paula recalled. “But when he got up there the manager wouldn’t let him into the factory.” Unable to convince the GM manager that he was in search of an engine, ball joints and suspension parts, and not on a mission of industrial espionage, a compromise was struck. Frank would tell the man what he needed and how many, and the man would get his workers to put them on a flatbed

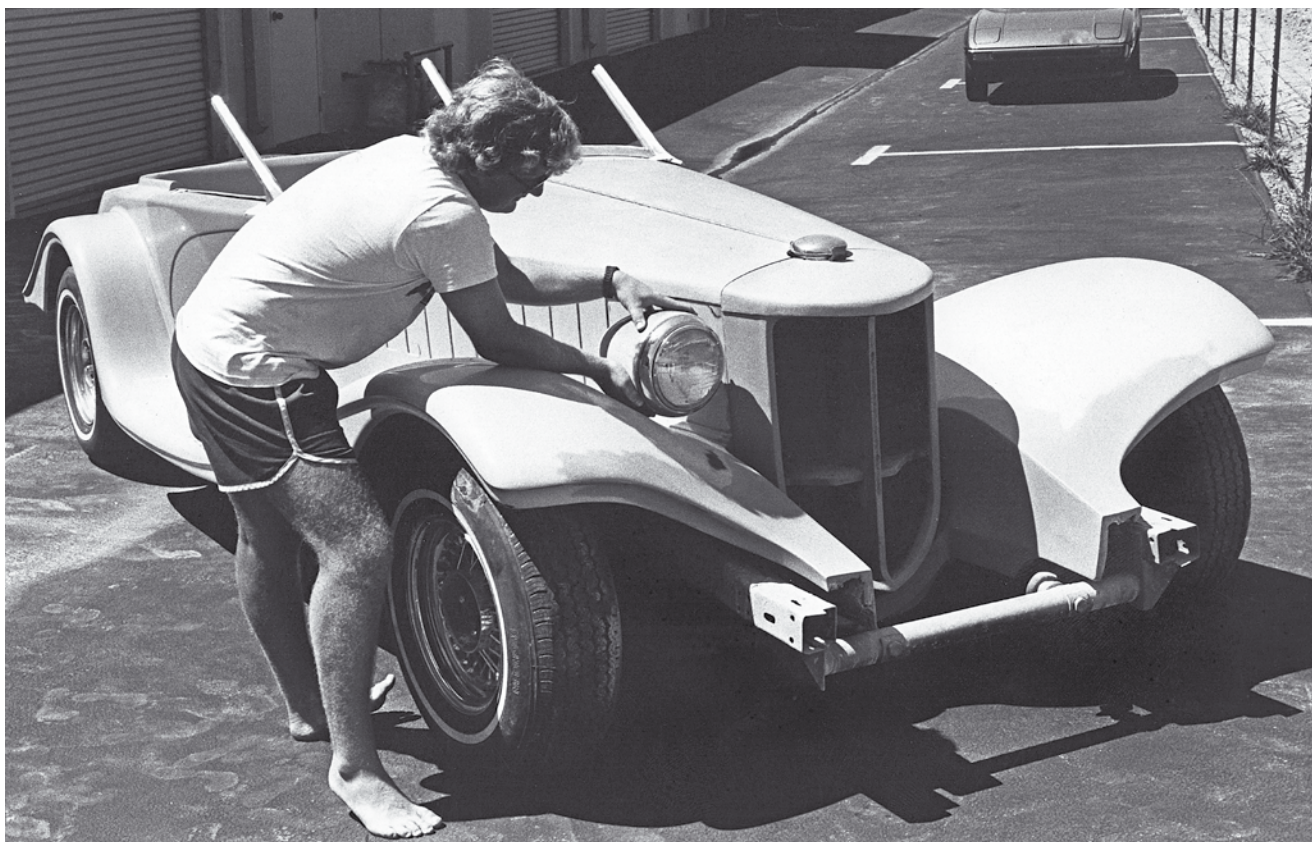
18-wheeler that would be driven out of the factory and into an empty warehouse. “So Frank jumped up on the flatbed and said, ‘Okay, I need this, this, this, this ...’” Paula remembered “And then two weeks later all the parts arrived in Turin.”

Meanwhile, Scaglione was busy at work designing a body for the car, which Frank had already determined would be shorter than the Diplomat.

Franco Scaglione was 64 when he put his pencil to paper to begin work on what would be, despite the fact he would live until the age of 81, the last car he would ever design. So it was entirely appropriate the Florentine designer would come up with a name for the car. “He was a prisoner of war in India, captured right at the beginning of the war in



Frank and Erich Bitter (left) at a European race track in 1970.



Henry Reisner fits a headlamp to the Lexington prototype in Laguna Beach, CA in 1979.

The Checker Marathon had been built by the Checker Motors Company of Kalamazoo, Michigan since 1961 and was produced in both four-door sedan and four-door station wagon configurations, and the rare eight-door Aero Cab. It was mostly used by taxi companies, but a few were sold to private owners. As the Checker chassis did not have a front cross member – at this time common to all other North American-built cars – it was ideal for a neoclassic configuration, which required a deep front-grille arrangement. Frank suggested it as the base for the neoclassic, noting that its long wheelbase would also add to the car's presence.

Frank's opinion of the 'retro' style hadn't changed much since Intermecanica's production of the Squire SS back in Italy in 1974, but as was the case then too, any job looked like a good job in such uncertain economic times. He did give Henry's suggestion about a dune buggy some careful consideration, but the feeling around Southern California by the end of the 1970s was that the dune buggy craze was, if not dead, pretty lifeless. That didn't stop young Henry who set about building his own.

So l'ingegnere dusted off his notebooks and set about drawing up the plans for a fibreglass neoclassic code-named 'the Lexington'. The job was commissioned by Peter Jacobi, an old friend of Frank's from

Turin who bumped into Frank and Paula when the Reisners displayed the Indra 2+2 at the LA Auto Show in 1977.

As Paula recalled, "Jacobi really thought a Clenet-like car would be a hot seller. So he talked with Frank about it and they agreed to do it."

Frank headed out in search of a Checker Marathon, and after picking through a couple of LA-area junkyards came across one that, while not in running order, would perfectly suit his needs. "We had to build it right onto an existing chassis, so as not to run into certification problems ... the real design aspect was making a body that would fit on the Checker Marathon chassis," explained Paula, adding that with Scaglione no longer in l'ingegnere's company, "Frank needed some help with the sketch designs."

Enter Ron Jones, a friend of Dana Barton's, who in turn was a wealthy friend of the Reisners. "Jones had this little, old one-bedroom LA apartment that was just filled with car parts," Paula recalled, "But he and Frank sat down to work and they came up with all the drawings for the Lexington." Tony Baumgartner, still a friend of the Reisners, saw the completed drawings and fell in love with the car.

"I took the Lexington drawings with me to the 1980 *Automotive News World Congress* in Detroit where I was making a Speedster presentation," Baumgartner recalled, "and I included the Lexington in