

Vic Skirmants

The Truth

By Bruce Sweetman

Photos by Bruce Sweetman and 356 Enterprises

Vic Skirmants is direct. After I once rambled on about a carburetor rebuild issue, he asked, “What’s your question?” An engineer by training, he respects logical thinking. He’s way ahead of you when it comes to understanding the Porsche 356, and he doesn’t suffer fools.

Beneath the logic and straightforwardness, Skirmants has a warmth and generosity that comes out at the track. Whether he’s bench racing after a session or crawling under a competitor’s racecar to help sort out a problem, he’s all in.

Vic and Barbara Skirmants have built 356 Enterprises into a vital resource for owners of street and racing 356s. From full race engines to street and race transmissions, Skirmants has an unparalleled reputation for quality and quantity of work.

Success didn’t come overnight. To understand Skirmants’ dogged work ethic and strong moral compass, take a look at the many challenges

that he and his family overcame in coming to America. Vic Skirmants’ long, winding road started near the end of WWII in Latvia, a small Eastern European country disputed by Russia and Germany.

“My mother, one of six kids, was from the poorest part of Latvia, right up against the Russian border,” says Skirmants. “They’ve got their own dialect. I call it the hillbilly part of Latvia. She had to leave school at grade six to help out on the farm. Her sister died of leukemia during the war. She had four brothers and all served. Two died—one on the Latvian/German side and one on the Russian side,” he says.

“I was conceived in Latvia. My mother got out before the Russians came through, while my father stayed behind. We lived in German air raid shelters on and off for a couple months until the GI’s came through the area in March. We had documents saying my father died of wounds in October of 1944.” Vic was born Viktors Kaupusz on January 23, 1945, in Wiesbaden, Germany. The war ended in May.



“We lived in about half-a-dozen displaced-persons communities around West Germany until we were sponsored to come over here in 1950 by Mr. Skirmants, who she knew from the old neighborhood in Latvia,” says Vic. “Nobody came over here and went on welfare,” he notes. “Somebody had to verify that they were going to take care of you.” In May of 1950, Vic’s mother married her sponsor and Vic became a Skirmants.

Mr. and Mrs. Skirmants had a little grocery store in the Polish area of Chicago. “My mother spoke Latvian, of course. She had picked up some German when we were in Germany, and she had to learn some Polish and English when she came over here.” Vic picked up English in school, but he says, “She and I would talk mainly in Latvian with English words thrown in.”

In 1952, word came that Vic’s father was still alive. “It was a little awkward. But I guess they [mother and stepfather] were having their problems anyway,” says Vic. “I was a young kid. I didn’t know anything about it.” The Skirmantses eventually divorced in 1957. “So then it was just my mother and me,” he says.

Vic’s two surviving uncles were finally released from Russian prisoner of war camps in 1953, after Stalin died. “I have a brother and half-sister living over there,” he says. Vic’s father died in 1967. “I never met him. Had some letters back and forth way back when,” he says. “I haven’t gotten up the courage to re-read them yet. Maybe someday.”

The Berlin Wall came down in 1989, and Latvia got its independence in 1991. Vic and Barb Skirmants visited Latvia in 1999. “Eighteen of my closest relatives met us at the airport. They’re the ones that didn’t get out,” says Vic. “They took me to my father’s grave outside of Riga in this really beautiful place called Forest Park. It was pretty emotional.”

Youthful Inspiration

“I discovered cars when I was about fifteen,” Skirmants says. “Before that, I built model airplanes, tanks, ships, and stuff. Everybody was reading *Hot Rod* magazine. I thought, ‘God, this is boring.’ I ended up picking up a copy of *Sports Car Graphic* and inside was an article, ‘Stuttgart’s Silver Stormers,’ on the RSKs and RS-60s. I was like, ‘Ohhh!’ That was it,” he says. “I still have the original.”

After high school, Vic moved to Michigan to attend General Motors Institute, with his mother in tow. “Being her only son, she followed me,” he says. “We wound up in Pontiac, and then Detroit, where she married an older Latvian gentleman.”

Skirmants’ first car, which he had driven over from Chicago, was a ’57 MGA. One of his instructors at GMI had a ’58 Porsche 356 Normal for sale and Skirmants went to look at it. “I got in. Closed the door, *donk*. It was like slamming a bank vault,” he says. “I took off in first gear, and *zupp!* About the time I hit second gear, I thought, ‘I’m going to buy it.’” He did. “March 6th, 1963. Chassis number 103614. Engine number 69666. I was 18 years old,” he says.

After three years at GMI, Skirmants transferred to Wayne State and earned a degree in mechanical engineering. Then he went to work for the Army Tank Automotive Command in Warren, Michigan, doing engineering, logistics, and



Vic with his first 356 (circa 1964), set to go flag corners at Waterford Hills.

support. “Eventually, the main thing I had responsibility for was the M123 A1C 10-ton tractor. That’s what pulled the big trailer that hauled the M-60 tank,” he says.

The job in Warren provided Skirmants a steady income—he had a wife and two kids by then—but he was already spending his free time working on 356s and racing on weekends. It was just a matter of time before he would forge out on his own.

“My head boss in the department was a 356 fan. I helped him buy one,” says Skirmants. “Every two-week pay period you got six hours leave time. I’d take off in the middle of the afternoon—two, three hours vacation time—boom. Boss didn’t mind. Eventually I started taking leave without pay.”

“One Monday after a race at Waterford, I was welding a bracket together on the VW van that had started breaking on the way home Sunday night,” he recalls. “My immediate boss called me up and says they were doing some auditing. The auditors were asking, ‘Who is this part-time employee?’ And he added, ‘You’re going to have to come in more regularly.’”

“That Friday was the last day of a two-week pay period. So I thought about it—Friday’s my last day. Huh?” That’s when Skirmants decided to make a clean break. “I was working on these 356s—in the evenings, weekends. I just figured I had to try it,” he says. “Ah hell, they threw a party for me and everything!” he chuckles.



Vic takes a victory lap in his first Speedster at Waterford Hills, with first wife and friends (1970).

“When I left, it gave me the freedom to go off to races and not have to ask my boss for permission to leave on a Friday,” says Skirmants. “But things were tough. I had to take whatever came in. Someone needed a tune-up. ‘Okay, bring it on over.’ I’d do rust repair—all that kind of stuff. I didn’t charge much back then either,” he says. “I remember the first time I started charging ten dollars an hour. I said, ‘Man, this is great—there’s the number of hours; add a zero. I don’t have to multiply by eight, just add a zero! Cool!’”

“Once I went full-time there was never really...” he pauses. “Well, I could have gone back. I didn’t burn any bridges,” he says. “Why would I want to go back?”

Collective History

As Skirmants acquired more 356s, he became fascinated by their history. “Back then, nobody knew anything about these cars and very little about Porsche’s history in general,” he says. In 1971, responding to an ad in *Autoweek*, he bought a Gmünd coupe out of Colorado and flat-towed it back to Michigan behind his 1965 356SC. The next year he picked up

a Gmünd coupe from a guy in Chicago. “I drove it home with about two wheel cylinders still working,” he chuckles. Then he bought an America Roadster out of New York and another one from a Kentucky owner—all this in a little over four years.

Over time, Skirmants sold or traded these seminal Porsches to fund his growing business enterprises. “I sold an America Roadster to pay for a garage addition at the old place,” he says. “And I traded one of the Gmünds to a friend for an E Production-winning roadster—plus he gave me some cash on top of that.”

The first Gmünd coupe Skirmants bought, 356/2-055, was the last to go. “I sold that one to Miles Collier in 1986,” he says. In an example

356 Registry genesis: Skirmants submitted this letter to *Road & Track* in 1974 and started it all.

Vintage Porsche Register

I have compiled a Vintage Porsche Register for all 356 Porsches built in 1953 or before. There are no dues or obligations—this is just a listing of old Porsches and their owners. There are almost 90 cars listed to date. I would like to ask all those with an old Porsche of the above description to send me the chassis and engine numbers as well as any other information they would care to send. I will add them to the list and send them copies of the Register. Copies are available to everyone else for 16¢ in stamps to cover postage.

Someday I plan to expand the Register to include all 356 Porsches through 1955. Since this is a non-funded private endeavor, I have neither the time nor the money to do it at present.

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of, “what goes around, comes around,” he notes that he recently rebuilt that car’s engine and transmission for Collier.

Although Skirmants was racing heavily modified Porsches in the 1970s, he saw a need for a repository of correct information about the early cars, where enthusiasts could connect and correspond. In 1974, he wrote a letter that appeared in *Road & Track* asking owners of 1953 and earlier Porsches to send their chassis and engine numbers, and any other info, for a “Vintage Porsche Register.” Jerry Keyser, in Ohio, had a similar concept, and contacted Vic after seeing the *R&T* letter. Jerry’s vision was a little broader, encompassing all 356s, and his intention was to publish a newsletter. It was an idea whose time had come—almost a decade after the last 356s were built.

When that first issue of the *356 Registry* was mailed in late 1974, Skirmants was on board as a technical advisor. His words of wisdom on all mechanical aspects of the cars appeared regularly for the next three decades. He became one of the first trustees of the club and succeeded Bill Durland as its president in 1990.

It was a time of some turmoil in the *Registry*, owing to a sporadic publishing schedule for the magazine. During the next year, Skirmants’ no-nonsense approach to problem solving resulted in a drastic step: replacing Jerry Keyser as editor and publisher. In 1992, he hired Gordon Maltby to produce the magazine with a strict understanding that it would be mailed on time every two months.

At the same time, another significant change was made to the *356 Registry*. Roger Whitton, who had kept the membership rolls as a volunteer for several years, had relocated a few times and the process had become cumbersome. Vic’s wife Barbara took over membership. She streamlined its functions and tirelessly recruited new members—increasing overall membership by 40 percent during her 17-year tenure.

Moving in Michigan

From an older but comfortable home in Warren, Michigan, Skirmants’ daily commute was just a few feet, to a cinderblock garage in the back yard where four cars could fit, while an attic held parts for engines and transmissions. Vic’s inventory system consisted of a few index cards he kept in his shirt pocket, with codes indicating the location of any item. A skeptical visitor would be told, “Go ahead, ask me where any part is.” No matter what obscure mechanical piece was mentioned, a glance at Vic’s cards would produce an answer in seconds.

As his business grew and he took on more personal projects, like restoring a Dolphin sports racer, the busy street out front and the lack of space in back convinced the Skirmantses that country life would be better. In 2003, they moved 60 miles north. Their new rural home was on a pond where Barbara could watch migrating birds, and Vic had a much larger building for engines, transmissions, and his own race cars.



Vic’s 1300cc SCCA G Production coupe at Waterford in 1976.



Skirmants continually developed the G Prod car, here with disc brakes in 1980.



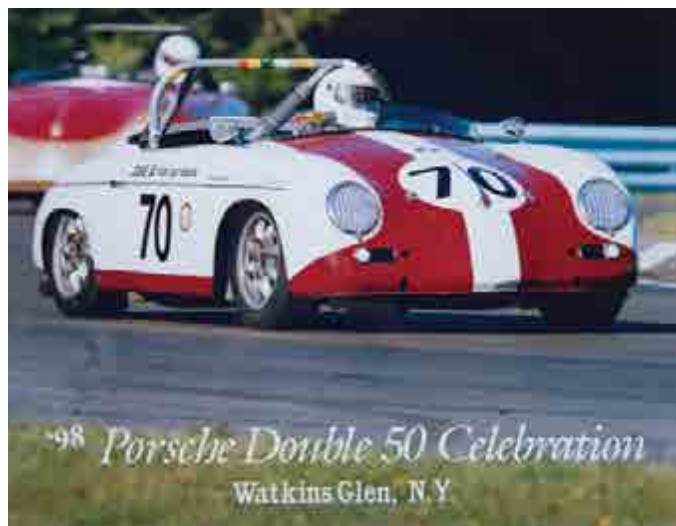
Skirmants powers toward Turn 6 at Road Atlanta at the 2018 Mitty.



Skirmants leads a pack of 356s down the Corkscrew at Rennsport VI.



Vic Skirmants celebrates the 1994 SCCA G Production Championship at the Runoffs with wife Barbara, son Erik, and the late Tom Youk.



Skirmants has attended all six Rennsports, plus the Porsche/Watkins Glen 50th.



Vic leads Tim Baker through Road Atlanta's Turn 12 during the 2014 Classic Motorsports Mitty.

For the past twenty years or so, Skirmants has been known as a top-tier vintage racer—running, and often winning on Midwest and East Coast circuits, with occasional forays to Texas or California for special events. But he is basically doing the same thing he did in SCCA racing before that: he's running a race-modified 356 for all it's worth.

"I started running SCCA Nationals in 1977. Everyone calls me an E Production Champion," says Skirmants. "I've been on the podium two or three times in E, but I won the G Production Championship at Mid-Ohio in 1994," he says, "and I took second-place the next two years. The E Production car was third in our final year at the Runoffs and I podiumed both cars in their last races."

"The difference between the Vintage and SCCA cars is basically tires and weight. The SCCA cars had fiberglass fenders and stuff like that," says Skirmants. "And we can't go crazy stiff with coil-overs in Vintage; we have to run the original Porsche torsion bars." He adds, "We're not supposed to hit each other [in Vintage], but we push 'em as hard as they'll go."

"The nice thing about Vintage is that every weekend is its own event. If you have car problems and you want to bust your butt to fix 'em, fine. If you don't feel like it, that's fine too," says Skirmants. "It's just a lot less stressful." And it gives Vic time to socialize and enjoy time with Barbara, his business partner and wife of 29 years.

In the 1970s and '80s, Barbara worked regularly as a flagger at SCCA races. "I was watching Vic in the paddock all the time," she says. "Back in those days there were about five different local Michigan guys

running E Production 356s, and he was working on all of them," she says. "All his cars finished. They didn't win all the time, but they finished. And that was impressive."

In 1988, a couple of months after Skirmants' first wife left him, Vic met Barbara at a Mid-Ohio vintage race where Barbara was working. "He was at the beer party on Friday night, passing out business cards and flyers to people who were running 356s," says Barbara. "I took him to Buck's, the little bar in downtown Lexington that was full of race car memorabilia." On Saturday, Vic drove 400 miles to Blackhawk Farms for

Skirmants celebrated his 800th start on September 10, 2016. He's notched almost 50 races since then.





Vic enjoys paddock time at Road Atlanta with Barbara, his wife and business partner of 29 years.



Skirmants' famous #70 roadster is parked nose-out, ready to roll.

an SCCA race. "The next weekend he was at my house in Columbus!" says Barbara. "And the rest is history."

"Barbara's a partner and she's a big factor in my business," says Vic.

"He's the production department and I'm all the service industries," says Barbara. "And I'm his biggest promoter."

Their business, 356 Enterprises, fills a vital role in supplying parts for 356 racers and street cars. New parts include proprietary racing gear sets, camber regulators, and heavy-duty valve cover gaskets. "We're the world supplier of gears for these cars," says Barbara.

"And a lot of it is good used parts, and of course, used transmission parts," says Vic. "There are guys all around the world who rebuild

transmissions and they need parts. I'm like, 'Here you go, this is what you need.' And, of course it's good. I don't keep the crap stuff on the shelf."

Skirmants knows his parts. He builds five or six race engines a year, and one or two street engines, "as favors for old friends, and even then, grudgingly," he says. As of mid-December 2018, Skirmants had built 724 engines and 876 transmissions.

As the cars have gotten more valuable, more high-mileage cars are getting transmission rebuilds. "If a guy's going to sell a car at a decent price level, he's pretty much got to guarantee that the transmission's good," says Skirmants. "I do twenty to thirty transmissions a year—street or race," he says. "I never turn down a transmission."



356 Enterprises keeps racers on track with new and used gears.



Skirmants prepares a camber regulator for shipment.



Engine and transmission cases are in good supply.



Strong, reliable race engines are a hallmark of Skirmants' career.

Delivering the Truth

If he's not working in his shop in North Branch, or running every session at a vintage race weekend, you might find Skirmants checking out Porsches at one of the big auctions. "Just to look at the cars and the condition. Keep track of the market," he says. "See what the cars are really like." From reports, one might think, "Nice looking car—I wonder why it went so cheap? Then you see the car in the flesh and you think—how come it got so much?" he chuckles.

Skirmants describes checking out a privately-offered 356 for an enthusiastic, first-time buyer. "I looked underneath and there were some scab patches in the usual spots. It was not great but it was solid. I got to the back and saw where the rear-end cap was butt-welded on—the way it should be. Then I looked up ahead and saw this ugly-ass overlap. And I told him, 'That's not the way it should be. The back two feet of this car is from another car.'



Skirmants pays attention during the drivers meeting at Rennsport VI.

"The price wasn't bad, so I said, 'For your first one—okay. But someday you're going to have to sell it. Are you gonna stand there and lie to somebody, or are you going to point it all out and take your licks?'"

Bad news for the eager buyer? Perhaps. But sometimes you just want to know the truth. And if you think you already know the answer, maybe you shouldn't ask. Through a lifetime of scraped knuckles and hard-won victories there's one thing Vic Skirmants knows, and that's The Truth. 🏎️



Sveiks!—Latvian for, "Howdy"—is a familiar greeting to trailing competitors.



Skirmants led the 356 contingent all weekend at the 2018 Classic Motorsports Mitty.