

A Lone 356 on the 2007 California Melee

Randy Nonnenberg runs the Northern California low-rent rally in the only tub entered.



I bought my 356A because of the images in my head. I was never alive when they were being produced and sold, so they were always old cars to me. All the pictures that had inspired my purchase were of the early factory cars in road races and rallies. If they were on tracks there were no fences or curbing, so it seemed like they could have been on just about any local mountain road. These pictures didn't make me want to buy a car that I could show on a lawn, and I knew I could never afford to restore one to perfection anyway. They didn't make me want to receive judged points or even have all the oil leaks stopped up. They made me want to drive the car, and hope somebody would snap a picture that they couldn't quite center or focus just right, just like those grainy old photographs I grew up on.

Luckily I happen to be living in San Francisco, which has a refreshing underground vintage car and motorcycle scene. Their interests line-up with the car I had built; definitely more into patina than perfection, and

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definitely more focused on the experience than the exclusivity. The crowning achievement of these locals is a yearly Autumn rally called the California Melee, which half tips its hat and half thumbs its nose at the high-dollar California Mille.

The Melee thrives on the enjoyment of driving and an appreciation for rarely-traveled back roads. The pre-1976 rule is in place to keep things interesting and maintain a sense of nostalgia and adventure. It finds the best driver's roads in Northern California, and the ones that are most likely to be open and usable.

I was happy to see three other 356s in the foggy parking lot at the start. Okay, I thought. Maybe this wasn't such a hare-brained idea after all.

The 356 drivers quickly mentioned that they were just here to check out the start . . . and they had no intention of covering the almost 850-mile route. Uh-oh. There were a good number of early 911s, Alfas, vintage BMWs, and British roadsters, all in various states of restoration or non-restoration. Though all the other 356 owners disappeared, the variety of cars and owners was really the best part. It somehow encouraged an environment of competitiveness and camaraderie at the same time. "Were we just dusted by a Sunbeam Tiger? Well, at least we can run down that Volvo P1800!"

The roads along the way filled three long days with everything from farmland straight-aways to gravel mountain passes and fresh winding blacktop. The two nights were spent at low-buck motels which offered courtyard parking for late-night reveling and repairs. If the dusty dirt sections didn't scare away the fancy crowd, the accommodations definitely did. (Amazingly there was one Alfa Giulietta which had just run the California Mille the past spring. Kudos to him for versatility.)

By Day 3 we had completed the loop with a couple of new rock chips and worn out race tires. I learned a ton about the car and how sport and reliability intertwine when you are on

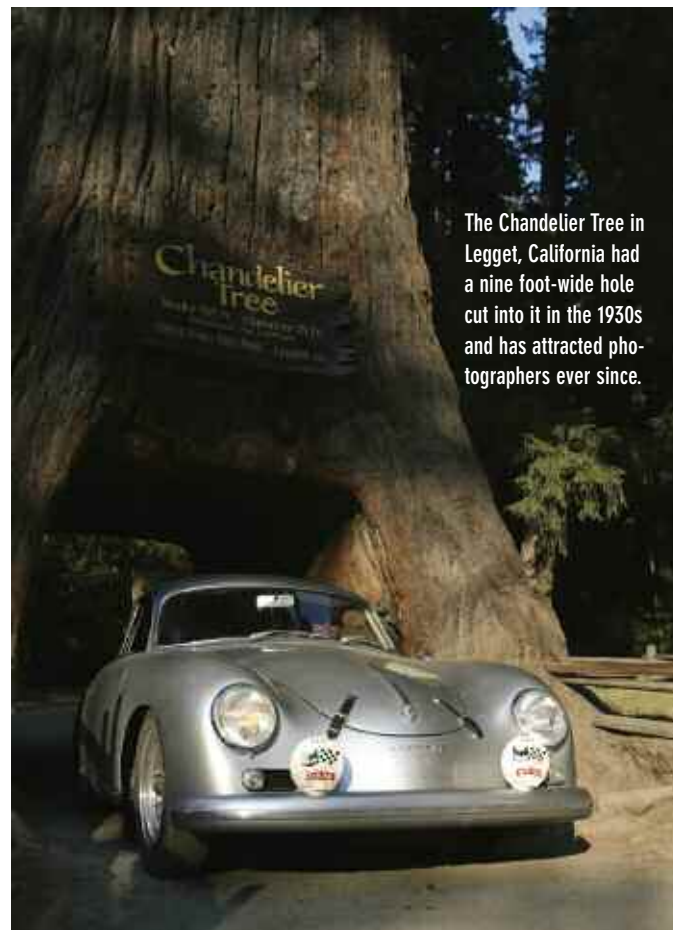


the best road you have ever imagined but you're 250 miles from your bed for the night. Somehow the sound of a smooth running 1600 is even sweeter when you've put yourself in that place.

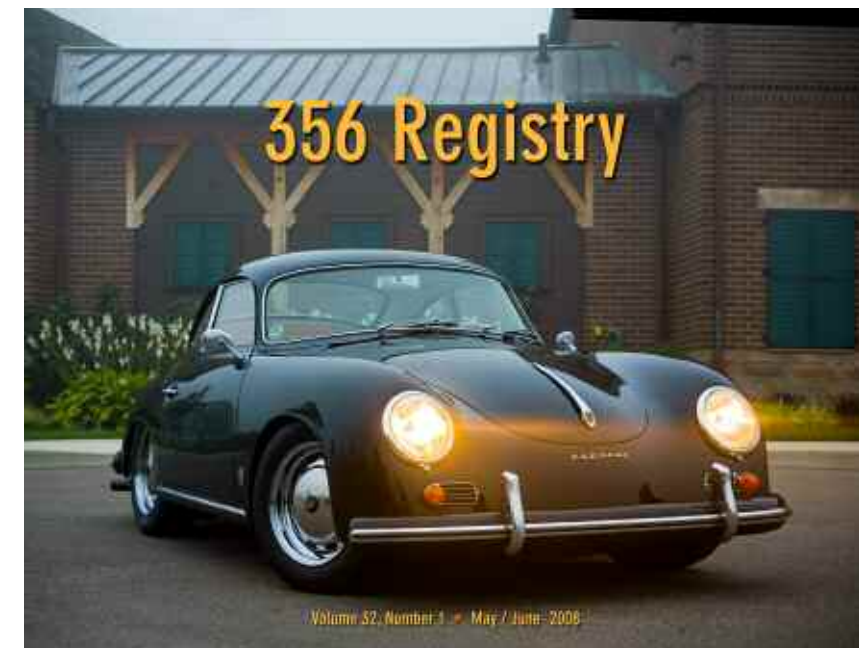
Opposite and above: Roads of all kinds were traveled, and scenery ran the full gamut from mountain ridges to ocean vistas. Right: Overnight accommodations were not fancy but participants made the most of the time for relaxing, partying and preparing their sometimes broken mounts for the next day's journey. This year's event will be September 6, 7, 8. For information visit the web site, www.CaliforniaMelee.com



Craig Howell photo



The Chandelier Tree in Legget, California had a nine foot-wide hole cut into it in the 1930s and has attracted photographers ever since.



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