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Preserving America

About the only things that aren't original on this 410 SuperAmerica are the brake lines and floor mats.

STORY BY MARK BREWER. PHOTOS BY CLYDE GUYER



In 1957, American innovation ran rampant. Mom hermetically sealed left-overs in Tupperware, and color televisions began to spread across the country. Suburban commutes in colorful, powerful, smooth-riding Chryslers ended at big-city skyscrapers, where big computers streamlined big business.

Not to be outdone, Ferrari streamlined a road car for the rich, powering it with a massive 5-liter long-block V12 and calling it the 410 Superamerica. It was the biggest, fastest car money could buy.

Almost 50 years later, what may be the world's most original and well-preserved 410 SA is stabled at a rural Illinois farm. Out to pasture? Perhaps. Dead? Not hardly. With 18,350 miles on the clock, s/n 0715SA is just breaking in.

To appreciate the Superamerica's heritage, we must turn the clock back to an era of small displacement. During Ferrari's first two Grand Prix seasons, 1949 and 1950, Formula 1 cars

utilized 1.5-liter supercharged engines. But the rules also allowed for normally aspirated 4.5-liter powerplants, and Ferrari's Aurelio Lampredi, a technician working under chief engineer Gioachino Colombo, theorized that a larger, unblown engine could develop more power *and* use less fuel than the smaller, forced-induction units. Lampredi was soon installed as chief engineer, and Ferrari focused on making his engine a world-beater.

The Lampredi V12 was a variation on the Colombo design. Bore centers were expanded from 90 to 108mm to accommodate larger bores, lengthening the block by four inches. Cylinder barrels were screwed into the head, and the head and block were one unit bolted to the crankcase, resulting in maximum sealing for high compression. The main bearings received oil through a bolted-on pipe, as opposed to cast-in passages in the Colombo block.

In 1951, Lampredi-powered 375 F1s won half the championship Grands Prix, breaking

Alfa Romeo's stranglehold on the sport. But when Alfa dropped out of F1 for 1952, and the FIA decided to run the season to 2-liter Formula 2 rules, Ferrari was left with only two outlets for its big engine: sports-car racing and road cars.

Ferrari had put the Lampredi V12 on the street as early as possible, building around 22 340 Americas beginning in October 1950. Powered by a 4.1-liter engine, the car was intended for endless, smooth superhighways; the smaller, nimbler 250 GT, powered by a 3-liter Colombo engine, was designed for twisty European roads, and was thus called the "Europa." Ferrari wanted its big America coupes to capture some of the fabulous wealth in the New World, and recoup some of the investment in the Lampredi engine.

Six 342 Americas followed in 1952. To better meet the expectations of U.S. drivers, these cars received a four-speed synchronized transmission (in place of the 340's non-synchromesh five-speed), left-hand drive and upgraded interior appointments. In 1953,

Ferrari built a dozen 4.5-liter 375 Americas.

In the meantime, the Lampredi engine was racking up an impressive racing record. Competition versions of the 340 won the Mille Miglia in 1951 and '53, while 375s won the Mille Miglia, Le Mans and La Carrera Panamericana in '54.

The America became Super in 1955, with the introduction of the 410 Superamerica. Powered by a 4,962cc engine rated at 340 hp (40 horses more than the 375), the SA combined the longest-ever Ferrari chassis—the 2,800mm America unit—with Ferrari's largest-ever engine. The price tag may also have been Ferrari's largest: At \$16,800, compared to the 250 GT's \$12,800, the SA's price was in a class of its own.

The 410's suspension resembled the 250 GT's, with coils replacing the America's transverse leaf springs. The latter car's lever-type Houdaille shocks, four-speed gearbox with direct drive in fourth and three Weber 40 DCF carburetors were retained. Taller 16-inch wheels allowed for larger 11-inch drum



brakes, which slowed the 130+ mph SA with much less drama than the America.

In 1957, a Series 2 Superamerica, with a 2,600mm wheelbase, was introduced. A Series 3 model, still on the short-wheelbase chassis but with higher compression and 400 hp, followed. All told, around 35 Series 1, 2 and 3 410 SAs were built between 1956 and '59.

Aside from a handful of cars bodied by Boano, Ghia and Scaglietti, most of the 410s were clothed by Pinin Farina. These cars integrated styling cues from

several sources, including the many variations on the 250 GT as well as the 342 America built for King Leopold of Belgium. While they looked similar, each one was different, custom-made for its wealthy owner.

Some historical evidence suggests that our featured Superamerica—a Pininfarina-bodied 1957 Series 2 model—was originally

owned by a Mr. Morgan of Arizona. However, s/n 0715's second owner, Harry Woodnorth of Chicago, says he bought the SA in 1962 from Texas oil magnate H.L. Hunt, then the world's richest man.

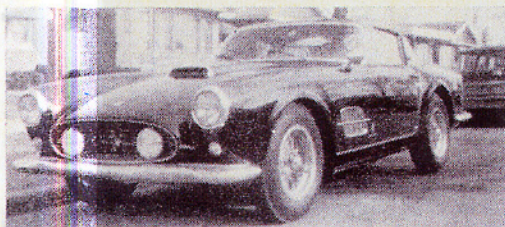
Woodnorth picked up the car in Juarez, Mexico to avoid sales taxes, then drove north to Chicago in one fell swoop, stopping only for gas, a short nap and a burning house,

where he awakened the residents before roaring off into the moonlight. S/n 0715 would change hands three more times before ending up with the LaPorte family in 1969.

Chris LaPorte, Sr. wanted an interesting car, so he teamed up with his son, Chris Jr., then 16, to find one. Chris Sr. found a Cord, but they decided to keep their options open for something just as interesting, but sportier and easier to drive.

In the end, Chris Jr., who now owns the car, found the Superamerica while bussing

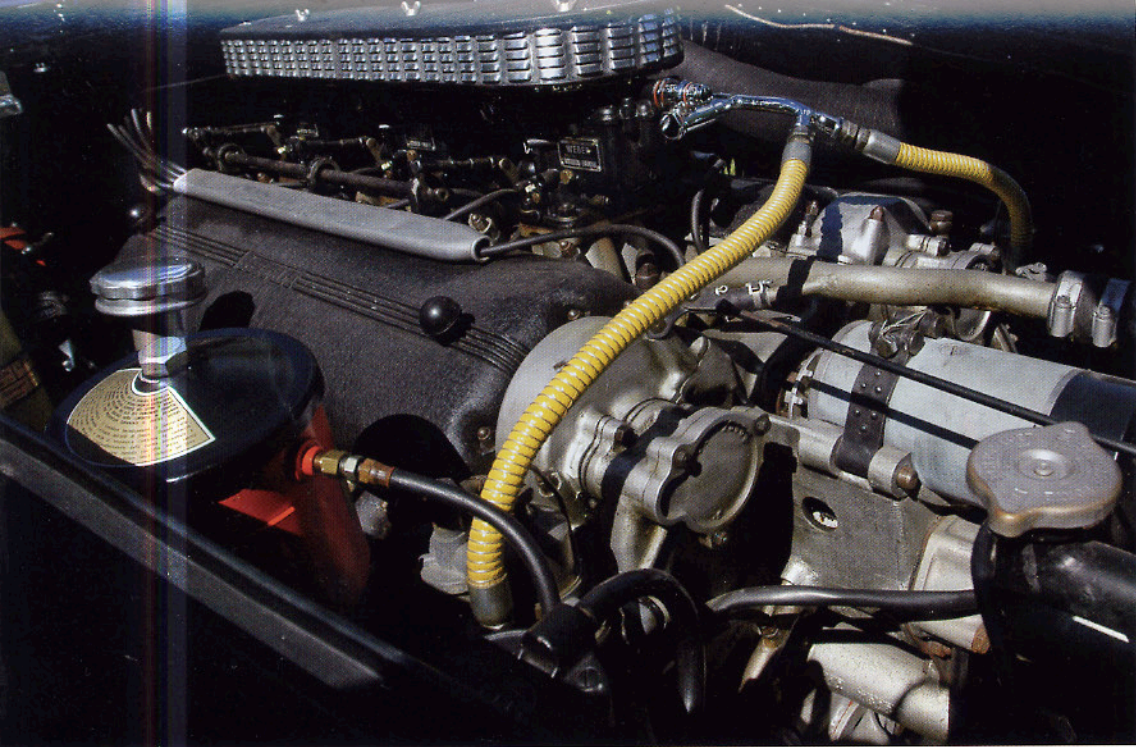
Top: Aside from the floor mats, this SA's interior is all-original. Below, l-r: 35+ year-old classified ad touts s/n 0715's condition; a young Chris LaPorte, Jr. (left) and friend Bill Rosen pose with the Ferrari; original paint is still shiny but shows some checking.



1957 FERRARI Superamerica coupe by Farina. 10,000 original miles. Cannot be distinguished from brand new. One of the most magnificently preserved specimens of any Ferrari in the world. \$6500. James DeBickero, 4301 W. 77th Pl., Chicago, Ill. 60652. (312) 735-6126.

1957 FERRARI Mondial race car. Opera cock-





tables at an Italian restaurant near Chicago. He heard of a patron with a Ferrari for sale, and followed up.

Because he shared the same last name as another restaurant patron, the notorious Southside Chicago mob boss Frankie Laporte, "I got more respect than your average busboy," says Chris Jr. Is he related? "I didn't let on that I wasn't!" The bottom line: Sell the Ferrari and nobody gets hurt. The car then had 14,000 miles on it. The price? \$6,500.

The LaPortes did nothing special to preserve s/n 0715, except to keep it clean in their heated garage and drive it

Above left: 5-liter Lampredi V12 delivers 340 horsepower and more than 310 lb-ft of torque. Above right: Original fuel and brake lines have been replaced for safety reasons. Below left: S/n 0715 resides in a heated, air-conditioned garage.

enough to prevent the atrophy of disuse—but not so much as to expose it to excessive wear. The teenage LaPorte had access to the Superamerica from the beginning; while most of us picked up our dates in the family sedan, he took the Ferrari.

In 1989, Chris Jr. moved the SA to his Illinois farm, where he built a three-car, heated and air-conditioned garage for his baby. A 1969 365 GT 2+2 sits in the second bay; the third is waiting for another classic.

First impressions are lasting, and this Ferrari makes a great one. The black paint shines in the prairie sun. It looks new, or restored, but close inspection reveals superficial checking on portions of the hood and left front quarter panel.

Slipping inside the car is almost surreal. The patina of the pumpkin-colored leather seats, headliner, shift boot and carpets gives away the car's age, but everything's clean and

barely worn. People should age this gracefully.

S/n 0715 is more original now than when Chris Sr. bought it 36 years ago. A previous owner had replaced the generator with an alternator. By chance, LaPorte saw it sitting on a bench at a local mechanic's shop—the same shop that had performed the swap in the first place. Another previous owner thought that the taillights' horizontal chrome bar made the car look like a Triumph, so he replaced the lights. LaPorte found original units in Europe.

The tool kit isn't original. The current owner knows who





has it, he just can't get it reunited with the car. A stabilizer bar had been added to help cure a persistent front-end shake, but LaPorte yanked it out and shimmed the tie-rod ends with stainless-steel washers. Problem solved.

After years in the family garage, part of the SA's left rear quarter had suffered scratches from bicycles, so LaPorte had part of the panel repainted. When the original Englebert tires had aged beyond their useful life, he commissioned replacements from Coker Tire. The original jute mats were worn beyond recognition, and after a long search, he found correct replacements.

More recently, one of the fuel lines began to leak, so LaPorte swapped two of the car's three lines for original-style replacements. The brake lines are also new, but for safety's sake, he discarded the originals—simple rubber hoses with screw-on couplers—in favor of industrial-strength items with appropriately modern couplers. These were fashioned by a local tractor-supply company.

Mechanically, the car has been good to LaPorte. No engine work has been required

outside of occasional tune-ups. The neoprene water-pump seal failed, so he replaced it with an off-the-shelf part for \$9. The 410's water pump is a simple impeller driven by the timing chain, so the seal is about the only thing that can fail. (The cost of replacing his 365's water pump was around \$900, and he did the work himself.) When the generator came loose, he fashioned a new bracket similar to the original.

S/n 0715 doesn't travel far from home for servicing. A local clutch shop, just down the street from the tractor supply, resurfaces the triple-plate clutch when needed. The same shop renews the brake shoes with what LaPorte calls "sticky clutch stuff." He changes the oil once a year, the brake fluid once every three years.

While s/n 0715 doesn't get driven much—only about 4,000 miles since 1969—its owner is not shy about taking it out.

LaPorte relies on the V12's endless torque to relieve him of extraneous shifting, driving mostly in third gear. The SA accelerates gracefully from 30 to 80 in third as we meander

the back roads, which are all marked at 40 mph. "Don't worry, I know all the cops," he says.

The Ferrari shifts effortlessly. The clutch is light, although it must go to the floor with each shift. The 410's traditional weak point is the differential, so LaPorte likes to shift at 4,500 rpm. "I don't want to push it," he says. "I gotta fix it if I break it."

With no power steering, s/n 0715 is ponderous and truck-like on twisty tarmac. But on a stretch of straight that gets us beyond 60 mph, the steering lightens and the ride smooths out, but retains its tight, Italian feel. Hitting a longer stretch at 80 mph, it's hard to judge the speed. LaPorte says that the ride at 120 mph is the same, "except everything goes by faster." He then comments that the brakes do an adequate job of slowing, if not actually stopping, the car.

The big Lampredi V12 sounds like a rock band—more Rolling Stones than Elvis. The variable-pitched engine note harmonizes well with the exhaust's tight bass line. The engine's chain drive adds mellifluous percussion effects,

turning a drive in the country into a jam session with Aurelio and Enzo.

LaPorte enjoys showing the car. It has won many awards, including Best in Show in the *Road & Track* Concours at Elkhart Lake in 1999, the Preservation Award at the 2000 Cavallino Classic, Best Italian Sports/Touring Car at the 2004 Greenwich Concours, the Chairman's Award (Bob Lutz's personal pick) at the 2003 Meadow Brook Concours and Preservation and Platinum Awards at the 2005 Ferrari Club of America National Meet.

History reveals that America has been very good to s/n 0715, as it has to Ferrari itself. In 1957, Chrysler was the king of the road in styling and engineering. Only motorsport cognoscenti and other car fanatics knew the Ferrari name. Today, Ferrari is a household word, synonymous with the fastest, the most beautiful and the best. And while LaPorte's 410 certainly wasn't the first Ferrari on U.S. soil, it's one of the most original testaments to a future where Ferrari would win the automotive hearts and minds of America. ●