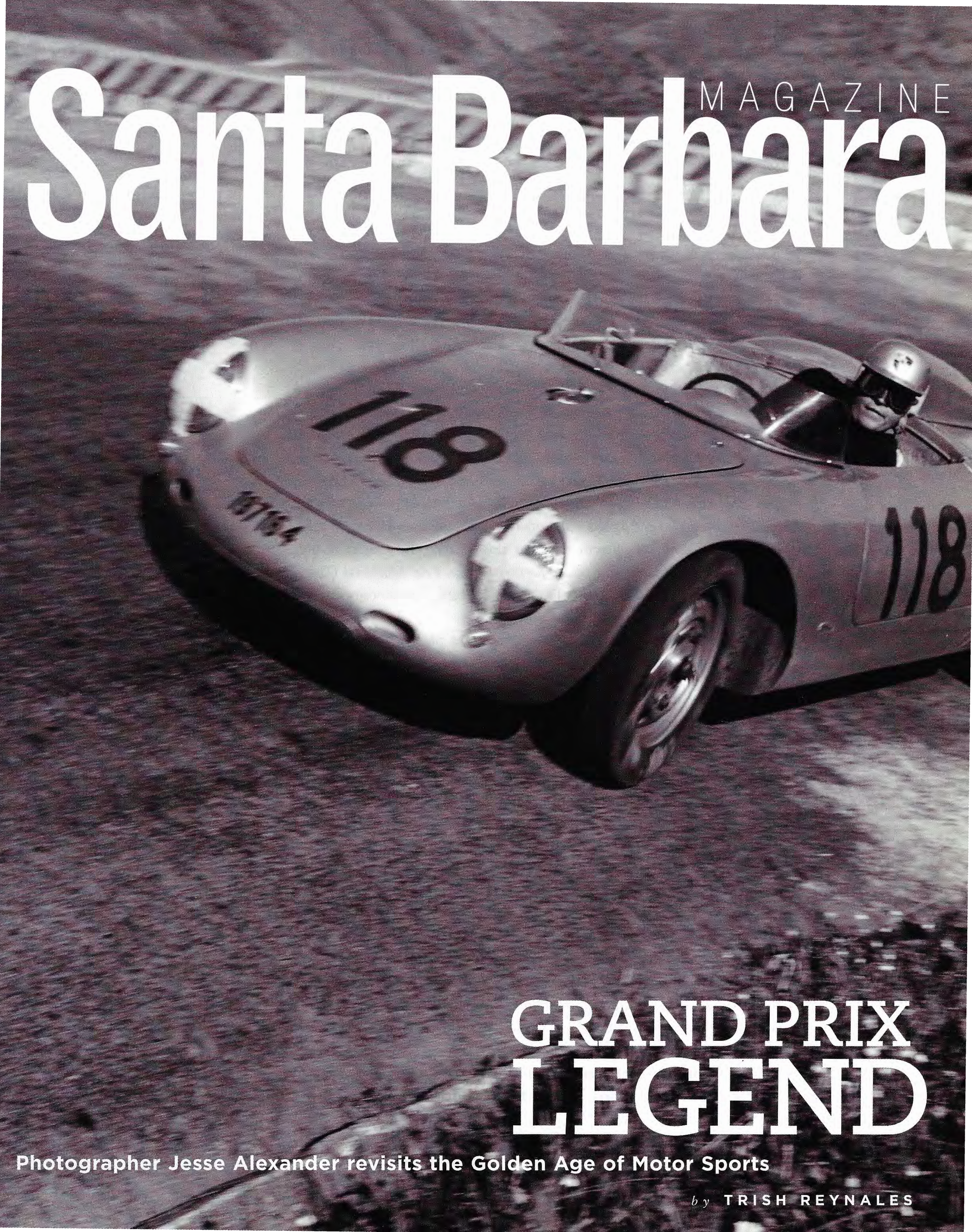




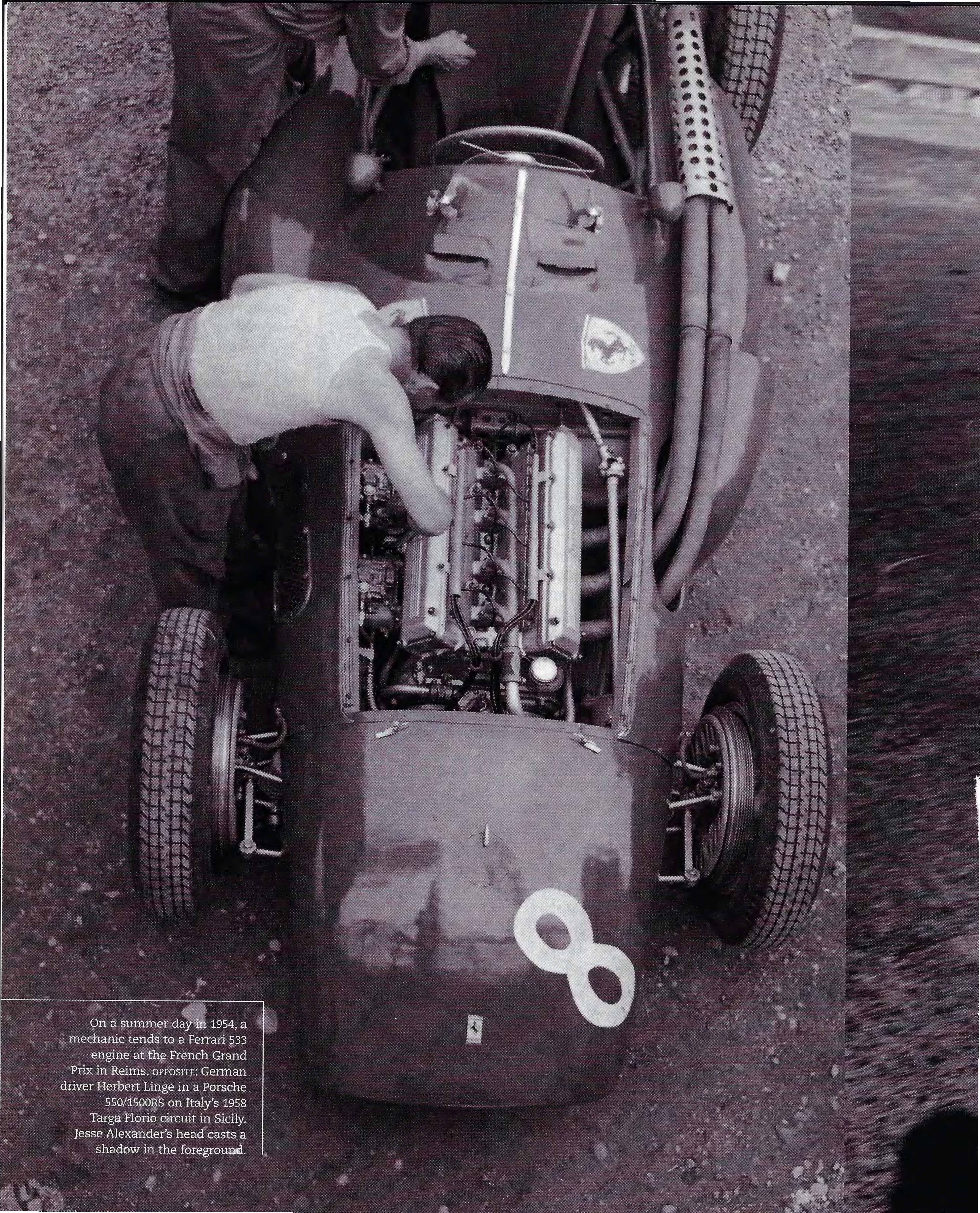
Santa Barbara

MAGAZINE

GRAND PRIX LEGEND

Photographer Jesse Alexander revisits the Golden Age of Motor Sports

by TRISH REYNALES



On a summer day in 1954, a mechanic tends to a Ferrari 533 engine at the French Grand Prix in Reims. OPPOSITE: German driver Herbert Linge in a Porsche 550/1500RS on Italy's 1958 Targa Florio circuit in Sicily. Jesse Alexander's head casts a shadow in the foreground.

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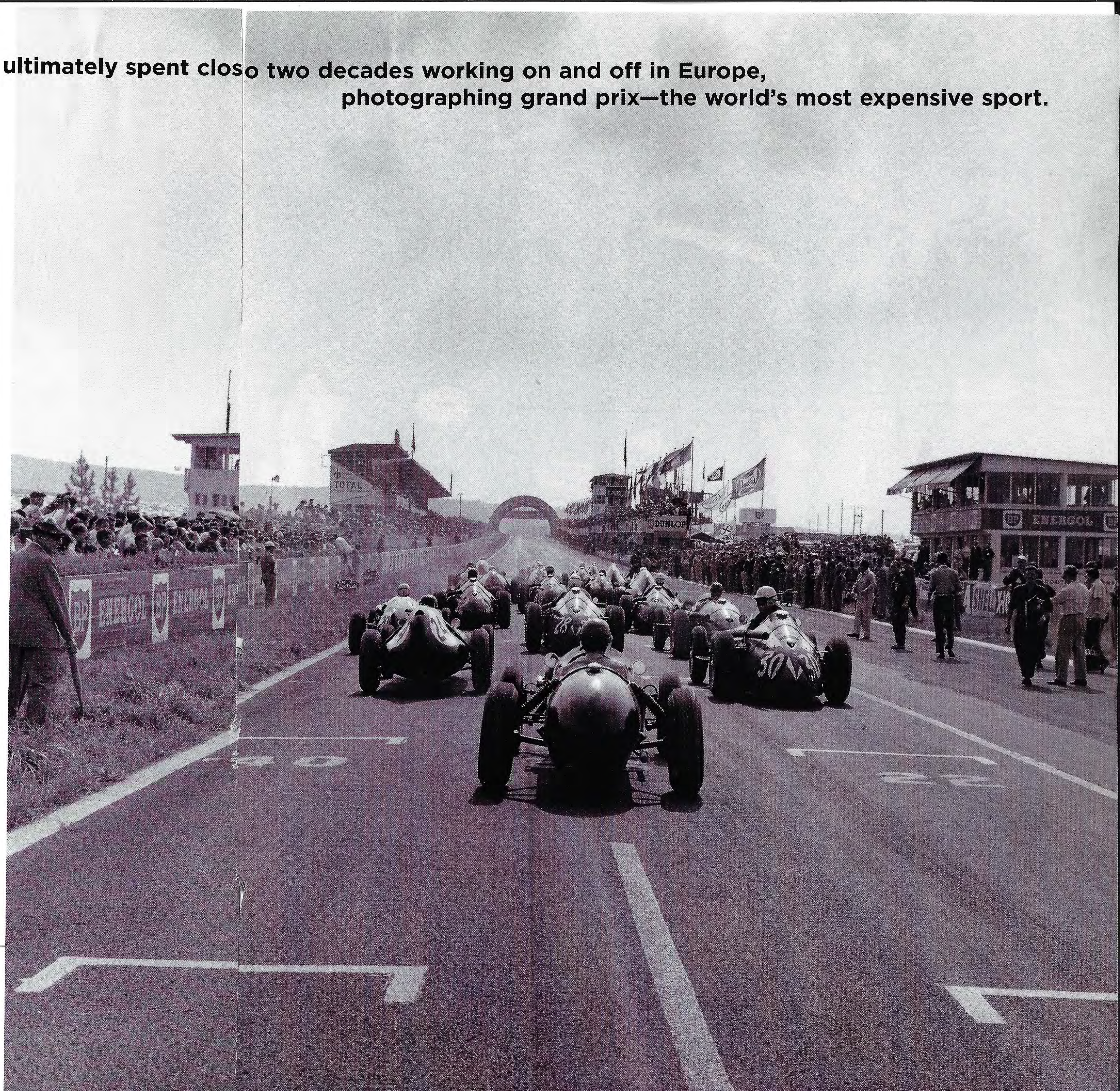
The scene is moody, gritty, haunting, beautiful...and rife with narrative: A 1956 Porsche 356—suitcase lashed to the luggage rack, European plates, tires and hubcaps matte with grime—has pulled up in front of a butcher shop in a small town in the Alpes-Maritimes. A tree casts its shadow on the butcher shop's filigreed balcony. The car has drawn the attention of a villager, who contemplates the vehicle, hands deep in his pockets. Another man has stopped in his tracks, head turned back to stare. Or is it the Porsche that's sizing up its audience? A rear bumper plate identifies the car as press corps....

"That's me—that's my car," Jesse Alexander, 78, says of the tableau, a moment that the world-renowned motor-sports photographer captured in 1956 while in Monaco to cover his second grand prix, the world championship Formula 1 race. Then in his 20s, living with his young family in Switzerland and driven by a fascination with his subject, the native Santa Barbaran ultimately spent close to two decades working on and off in Europe, photographing grand prix racing—then, as now, the world's most expensive sport. In the process, he chronicled the era known today as the Golden Age of Motor Sports and created an enduring career for himself. Alexander's work has graced *Newsweek*, *Car and Driver* (where he once served as European editor) and *Sports Illustrated*, as well as numerous gallery exhibitions, museums and private collections. It has also become the subject of nine books, including his two latest, this year's *Ferrari Grand Prix Moments* (David Bull), out in July, and *Porsche Moments* (2005, David Bull). The aforementioned shot opens the latter's chapter on Monte Carlo.

Working primarily in black-and-white, the self-taught photographer has shot battered race cars on country roads and ecstatic drivers in palace courtyards. Motor-sports and photography buffs laud the historic and the technical: American driver Phil Hill at Germany's Nürburgring track in 1958, careening past a photographer frozen in foreground. A grand prix race in France the same year, a battery of famed drivers from Hill and Argentina's Juan Fangio to England's Mike Hawthorn, shot from behind the starting grid. But among his indelibly artistic images: coltish schoolboys near Le Mans in 1952 crowding the doorway of a garage housing Porsches that seem to beg being taken for a spin. British driver Stirling Moss in shirtsleeves and a Maserati at Monza, Italy, in 1958, a St. Christopher—patron saint of safe travel—medal dangling from his neck. A turbaned Princess Grace and goateed Prince Rainer bestowing British driver Jackie Stewart with a trophy in Monaco in 1966.

And then there's Alexander's local claims to fame: It's this megatalent who photographs the beaming celebrity diners (comedian Carol Burnett, director/producer Ivan Reitman, philanthropist Lady Leslie Ridley-Tree...) for those Lucky's steak house ads that run on the back page of the *Montecito Journal*. Go into the Lucky's lounge, turn right, then make a left and you'll find half a dozen of his racing images on the walls of "Jesse's corner." (His Lucky's portraits ceremoniously line the route to the restrooms.) "It's fun to meet the people," he says of the shoot subjects. "I really enjoy the exchange."

Alexander captured this scene behind the starting line of the 1958 French Grand Prix in Reims, just before the flag fell. At the rear is Englishman Cliff Allison in a Lotus; near the front, American Phil Hill in a Maserati.

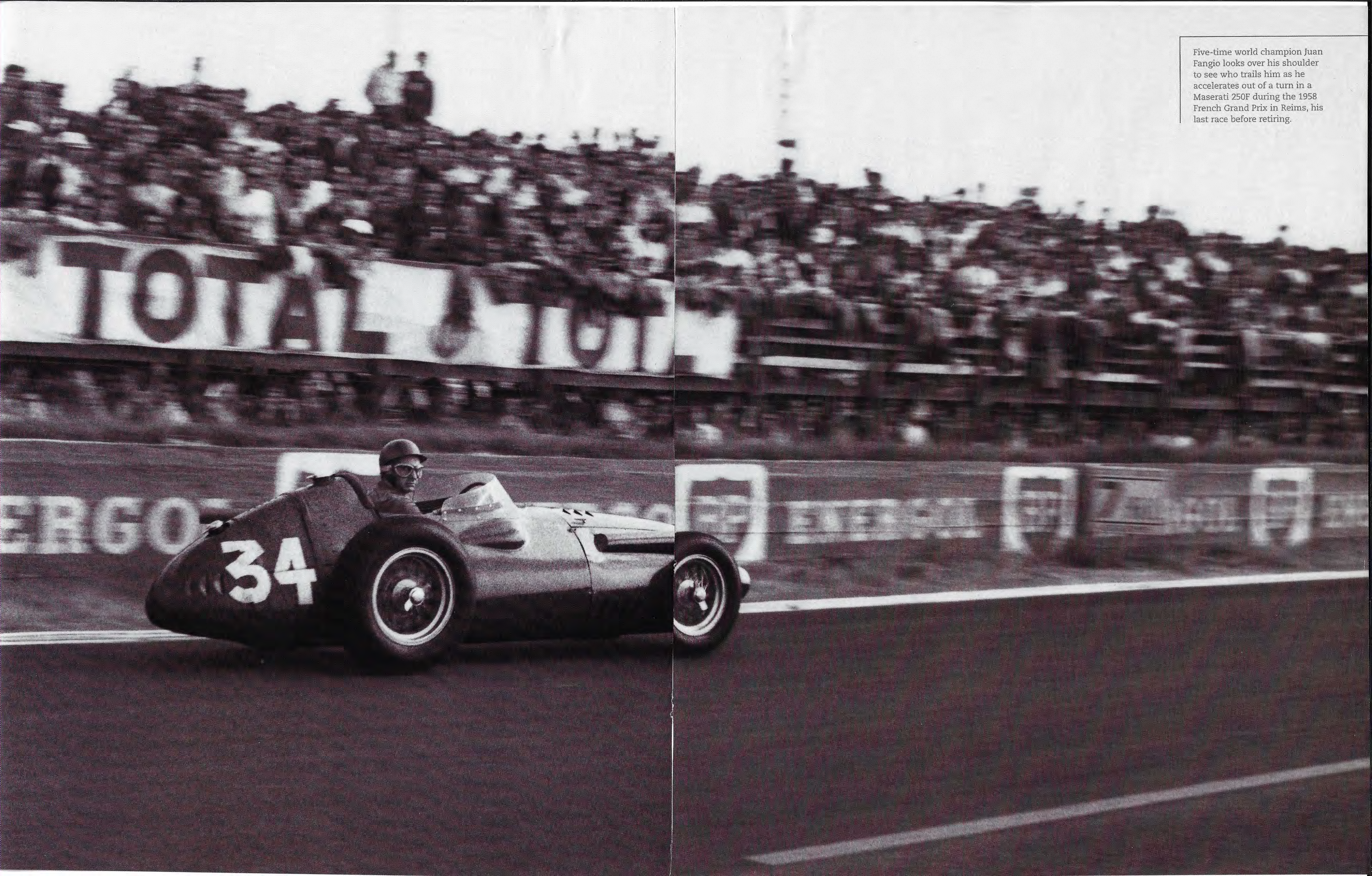




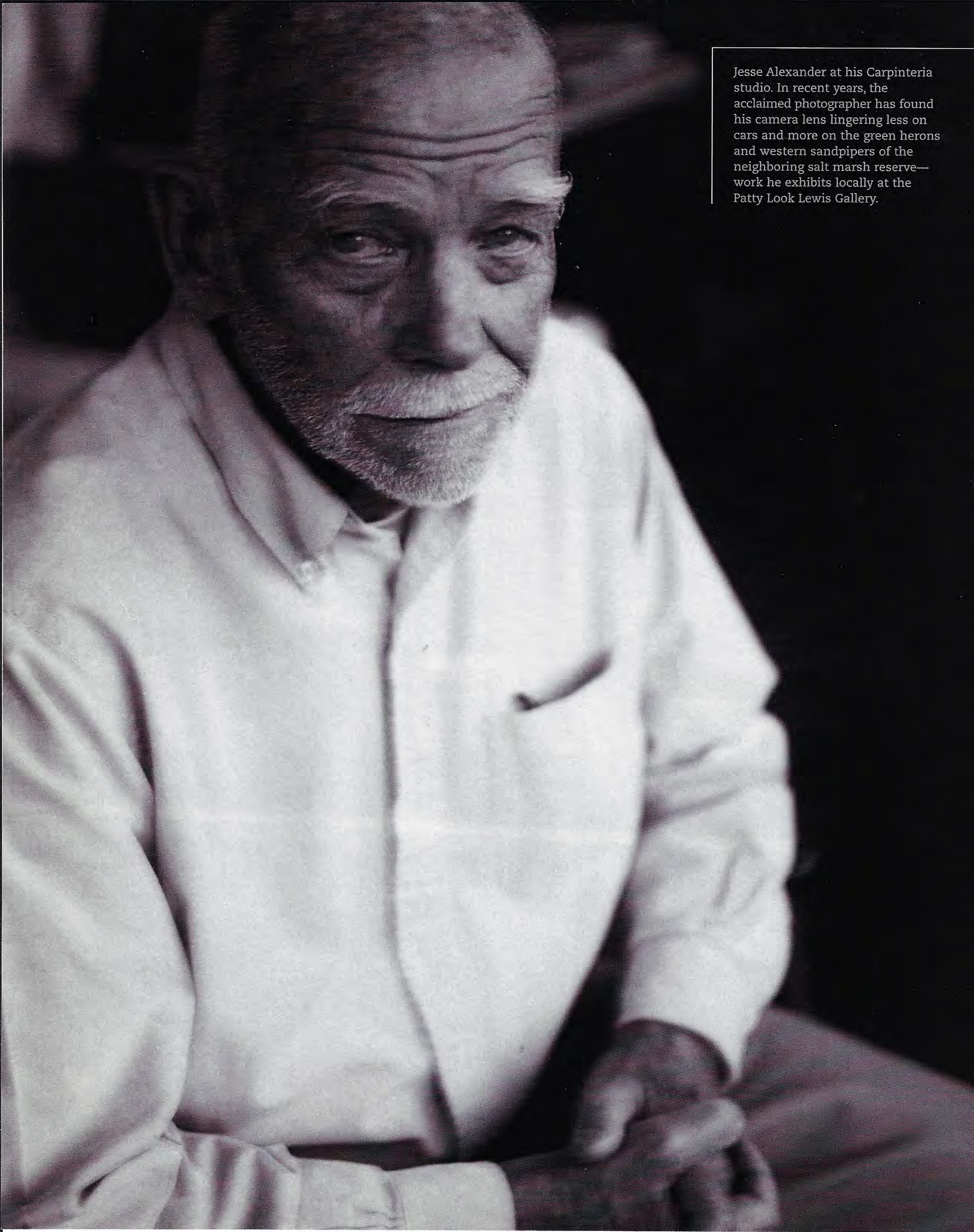
Englishman Mike Hawthorn slips into a Ferrari for the 1958 Italian Grand Prix in Monza. He retired after winning the Formula 1 championship that year, only to die in a highway accident in England just months later. **OPPOSITE:** Scotsman Jim Clark at the Belgian Grand Prix at Spa-Francorchamps in 1962, right after the 26-year-old won his first race. He went on to claim 25 grand prix victories.

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Five-time world champion Juan Fangio looks over his shoulder to see who trails him as he accelerates out of a turn in a Maserati 250F during the 1958 French Grand Prix in Reims, his last race before retiring.







Jesse Alexander at his Carpinteria studio. In recent years, the acclaimed photographer has found his camera lens lingering less on cars and more on the green herons and western sandpipers of the neighboring salt marsh reserve—work he exhibits locally at the Patty Look Lewis Gallery.

A

t home for the last 33 years at the Sand Point house in Carpinteria that he shares with his wife, Nancy, 70, and their bichon-poo, Neville, Alexander is today a spry figure in tennis shoes and the father of five grown children. None of them followed in dad's footsteps, though all seem to share his creativity, sense of adventure or interest in people. Eldest daughter, Rori, 55, is a Santa Barbara bankruptcy court clerk who rides a motorcycle; Heidi, 53, is a social worker in Scotland; Andrea, 51, teaches special ed in New York; Susan, 49, is a commercial artist in Truckee; and his youngest, Jesse Jr., 40, is a Sherman Oaks-based TV producer (*Lost*, *Heroes*). "They're all great kids," he says.

He seems at once surprised and amused by his life's course. "I was never really an ambitious person," he says. "But I'm incredibly lucky and fortunate." Add to that ultramodest and unassuming. While his photography is rich as documentary, in composition and tonality; it's Alexander's eye for the human experience that brings the work to life; that instinct for narrative has distinguished him among art dealers and collectors as the preeminent motorsports photographer in the United States. In New York, his gallery is Staley & Wise, known for its stable of fashion photographers past and present, from Richard Avedon to Firooz Zahedi. In Santa Monica, along with photojournalists including Steve McCurry and Sebastião Salgado, he's one of the *living* treasures represented by Peter Fetterman Gallery, which also handles archival works by such legends as Henri Cartier-Bresson and Edward Steichen. While Alexander shrugs it off, such company should please the boy who grew up in Santa Barbara in the 1940s poring over *Life* magazine, Steichen-edited issues of the photographer's bible, *U.S. Camera*, and New York street-life photographer Weegee's book *Naked City*; a Laguna Blanca student—whose heroes were in fact Weegee, Steichen and World War II chronicler and one-time *Life* staffer Eugene Smith.

The son of a homemaker and a World War I veteran with a fondness for Packards, Alexander seems to have meandered into his calling. "Photography was talking to me at that point," he says. "But I really didn't know what I wanted to do." After prep school on the East Coast, he earned a degree in political science from UC Santa Barbara, where it was car clubs and a love of sports cars that linked his childhood heroes with his future. He went to a few races and took a few snaps. His first cars were MGs, a crush that lasted until 1953, when, a year out of college, he fell for two Morgans followed by a Sunbeam Talbot. That year, on a whim, he drove down to Mexico in a '53 Willys to cover his first big race, the Carrera Panamericana in Chiapas. It proved a thrilling experience and a turning point. After that came a VW Microbus, the Porsche 356, a Porsche Super 90 coupe...races in France, Italy, Germany, Belgium...and ultimately his 20 years on the grand prix circuit.

As to what's next for the man who already garnered a prestigious Motor Press Guild Lifetime Achievement Award a decade ago, Alexander continues to enjoy exploring new approaches to his medium. In May, he returned to Italy to cover the Mille Miglia pre-1957 car rally. His photographs figure among those in "Made In Santa Barbara," a group show opening at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in July. He has the book on Ferraris coming out in August and an exhibition at the Rolex Monterey Historic Car Races the same month. Despite it all, he admits his pleasure in capturing what he calls "the human element" has actually transcended his interest in racing of late. Indeed, indicative of his recent racing work is a dazzlingly sweet shot of teenage girls—spectators gathered opposite the action at the last Mille Miglia—with not a car in sight.

So what else do people always want to know about Jesse Alexander? He still has a Rolleiflex though he favors a Leica M6 or a digital Canon. At present, he drives a 2004 Audi Allroad wagon. His alter-ego dream car is the Mercedes-Benz 300SL, the 1950s two-seater with gull-wing doors. And the fastest he ever went was 150 miles an hour in a Dodge Viper. "It was exhilarating," says Alexander, who—as is his wont—is quick to point out that his best pal, Phil Hill, the only American-born driver to date to win a Formula 1 race, was in the driver's seat. ■

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