

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Movie Star

On a 1955 autumn afternoon, a young amateur sports car racer named James Dean, a mere movie and television actor but only an hour or so away from becoming an icon, hurtled out of Hollywood and sped 200 miles north to a sports car meet on an airfield outside Salinas, just east of Monterey, where a year earlier he'd given a remarkable performance in "East of Eden".

"Rebel Without a Cause" and "Giant", Dean's other two big pictures, were yet to be released, but the actor had just finished filming a tongue-in-cheek advertisement promoting highway safety, marked by his ad-libbing the soon-to-be ironic line, "The life you save may be mine."

James Dean failed to heed his own warning. At approximately 5:45 p.m. he was instantly killed when he and another young motorist named Donald Turnupseed collided on the empty highway at the tip of the crossroads of state Routes 46 and 41 near Paso Robles.

Just days afterward, "Rebel Without a Cause" was in theaters and following the 1956 premier of "Giant", a picture which Dean ran away with, a James Dean mystique and mysticism started up, and quickly it rose to a frenzy. Much morbid fascination also centered around the automobile Dean was killed in, a low-slung Porsche Spyder 550, painted Teutonic silver, with 800 miles on its odometer.

Photographed immediately afterward by one of the great Magnum lensmen, Sandord Roth, his study showed the Porsche swollen grotesquely, looking like a ruptured balloon which had exploded from the inside – very strange. Then the artist Gillian painted it, abstract and disturbing. And finally some rip-off promoters took the wreck firmly in hand.

Remarketed as "James Dean's Last Sports Car" – 50 cents bought you the opportunity to sit in it – the rip-of promoters launched the Porsche on a hysterical national tour which degenerated into a deafening publicity stunt: "This accident could have been avoided!"

Freak accidents began befalling anybody remotely connected with the Porsche. It fell off its display mounts and broke the hip of a teenager. A transporter that was hauling it crashed and killed the chauffeur.

A little later, Doctor Troy McHenry, a wealthy surgeon and racing dilettante, crashed fatally at the Los Angeles County Fairgrounds in Pomona, and it transpired that pieces of his Porsche's rear suspension had been salvaged from Dean's wreck.

The final enigma was still to come. Early in 1960, Dean's clobbered Porsche – now radically re-invented and hyped as tainted, malevolent, hexed, hoo-dood, voo-dooe, cursed -- was placed inside a locked container and shipped by rail from Florida to California. Somewhere on the journey it disappeared, never to be seen again.

Twenty-six years elapsed. And then, from Germany, came word of one last casualty, Rolf Weutherich, Dean's mechanic, whom the Porsche factory had shipped over to keep an eye on the actor, was riding with Dean when the big collision with the hapless Turnupseed occurred.

Somehow he'd survived, as had Turnupseed, but with serious injuries; returning home to Germany maimed, possibly deranged, Weutherich spent the rest of his life in and out of mental clinics until getting killed, in 1961, in yet another road accident.

Nobody ever confirmed or debunked the intriguing rumor that the mechanic, and not Dean, had been the Porsche's driver. Whomever was at the wheel that fatal afternoon had been going really fast -- the California Highway Patrol already had ticketed the Spyder once earlier that morning-- so most probably Dean and not Weutherich was on the pedal; the actor was a scofflaw speeder whose adventures up and down Mulholland Drive were well known.

Mulholland Drive, climbing and falling through the canyons and serpentine switchbacks that separate Hollywood from the San Fernando Valley, was central to Dean's icon standing. Dean saw to that himself. In his first organized race at Palm Springs in March of 1955 he burst off the fourth row and in eleven corners and one 2.3-mile lap was leading; ultimately he waxed 19 other drivers and won. His terse explanation, delivered in typically evasive, mumbling dialogue: "Gee ... I can't believe it...all I've been doing is racing around Mulholland Drive." And the

next day, in another race, he finished third to a pair of Morris Garage hot rods. One of them got disqualified, so he became runner-up.

At Bakersfield he placed third overall and first in his engine displacement class. His sports car was an innocuous 1488cc Speedster Porsche – not the 550 Spyder, which came later – and at Santa Barbara on the Memorial Day weekend Dean succeeded in blowing up its engine while scrambling from eighteenth to fourth in five laps.

Summer races were coming up at Hansen Dam and Torrey Pines; Dean, needing a fresh set of wheels, he placed an order with the local Lotus distributor for a tall-fined Mark 10.

But he missed Hansen Dam and Torrey Pines sports car races because he was down in Texas, busy wrapping-up “Giant”. When Dean got back to Hollywood the Lotus had yet to arrive, so he paid \$7,000 and took delivery of the Spyder instead.

Next he embarked for Mulholland Drive, still his favorite testing track, and racked up 800 hard miles of practicing. Soon afterward, he and Weurtherich set out for Salinas, never imagining that destiny was waiting for them at the Paso Robles crossroads.

The sports car set of Los Angeles, insular and cliquy, was skeptical of James Dean. His mannered, prerace ritual of dropping his head, shaking it vigorously, then pawing the ground with his shoes seemed as twitchy and self-conscious as his acting. Little was known about Dean’s private life, although a Hollywood snoop, named Dunne, reported he was kinky -- “a human ashtray.” Possibly, but there was no proof.

Dean’s Hollywood counterpart was the silent screen’s Wallace Reid, from the 1920s. Reid was so obsessed with automobiles and racing that he bought his own racing car, a big Duesenberg; his studio panicked and barely was able to stop him from trying to race it at Indianapolis. Known as “the screen’s perfect lover” Reid exhausted himself starring in so many two-reelers that he went mad and in 1923 died of morphine addiction.

Nobody knows whatever happened to Reid’s Dusie, but Dean’s Porsche, which people are still making a mystery about, was, times past, gossiped about as possibly being in the possession of old movie ghoul Vincent Price. **-JS**

