

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

ROOKED

Tommy Lee, a formidable connoisseur of such exotic custom automobiles as Fiat Castagnas, Talbot-Lagos complete with full wheel skirts and luscious Fignoti it Falascti coachwork, and -- the jewel of the vast Lee collection -- a 1937 Mercedes-Benz Grand Prix Silver Arrow, which following the Second World War armistice had turned up mothballed in Czechoslovakia and which, all evidence suggests, Lee acquired as stolen property.

It cost Lee \$25,000 – nobody now knows to whom the money was paid to clandestinely ship his pilfered Silver Arrow to the U.S. aboard the Queen Mary; and, when it finally arrived in Los Angeles at the Lee family residence, Tommy, upon first laying eyes on it, was bitterly disappointed and certain he'd been rooked out of his 25K.

What he believed he was purchasing wasn't a race track Silver Arrow but seemed to be one of the streamliners Mercedes-Benz had been tooling up to break the Land Speed Record, then never got around to.



THIS IS THOMAS S. LEE, SPORTSMAN,
PRESIDENT OF MUTUAL DON LEE
BROADCASTING SYSTEM.

Lee's father, Don Lee, owned various radio stations and was Cadillac's California distributor. Cadillac being a marque his son cared nothing for, Tommy's obsession being all the French and German exotics he kept garaged at Lee Castle, his eccentric residence out on the high and remote Mojave.

As for the Silver Arrow, Lee, upon taking a closer look, discovered that he hadn't been rooked after all, because the Silver Arrow was an almost priceless artifact from the classic Grand Prix racing of the 1930s -- Hitler's leviathan Silver Arrows, fighting raging, roaring battles lasting 200 miles, and more, everywhere from Monte Carlo to the Nurburgring.

Like all Silver Arrows (and there were barely a handful) Lee's was among the most choice that Nazi subsidies ever built; and, with all its firepower – a V-12 with twin superchargers, hundreds and hundreds of horsepower – and next to impossible to control.

...Unless you were Manfred von Brauchitsch.

His name – legendary in Germany -- was chalked on the bucket seat of Lee's Silver Arrow, and von Brauchitsch, a Prussian, was, with the more famous Swiss Rudolph Caracciola, co-star of Mercedes-Benz's mighty works team.

Equally as fast as Caracciola, he won far fewer Grand Prix, but that was largely because of miserable luck and mishaps ... sensational mishaps.

Once, on the vaunted Nurburgring, a steering wheel came off --right in von Brauchitsch's hands -- and after his Silver Arrow jumped off the track it butchered an acre or more of pine forest (he was unhurt; maybe his lucky red helmet saved him, as it possibly did in his other mishaps). Later, back at the 'Ring, and continuing the bad luck, there was a refueling fire that almost burned down the pits, and the vehicle responsible for igniting it was von Brauchisch's same Silver Arrow.

The family von Brauchisch was a dynasty of distinguished fighting soldiers, including a pair of highly decorated generals. Manfred wasn't a soldier -- he once described himself a professional racing driver -- and so, to avoid enlistment, and just three days before World War Two broke out, he was at Belgrade airport preparing to a board a flight out of Europe. But the management of Mercedes-Benz stopped him and he was made to return to Germany.



During the war, serving under the thumb of the disgraced Dr. Albert Speer he was designated a Sturmfuhrer, but what his duties were is unclear. After the war he imitated many of his upper-class countrymen by going into Argentine exile. But after a few seasons under the equator he returned home to East Germany to begin a bizarre existence as an accused spy (he was jailed but released on bail); income tax deadbeat (beat the rap); and recipient of the Olympic Order award, presented to the man who best promotes the Olympic ideal. von Brauchisch lived on and on and on, not passing until reaching the astounding age of 97.

Meanwhile, back in America, Tommy Lee glanced eastward, toward Indianapolis and it's Speedway and, to show the Hoosiers what they were missing with their Meyer - Drake truck engines, entered the Silver Arrow in a pair of 500s. Hard as they tried to wrestled under control Lee's leviathan, Tommy's two drivers could not; exhausting themselves trying, neither one completing Indy's 200 laps. One old observer still remembers what the Silver Arrow's dozen flailing pistons and speeding superchargers sounded like: "...combination of air raid sirens and a just – arriving tornado."

When he returned to Los Angeles, Tommy rode an elevator with the top of a twelve-story skyscraper and jumped off. Though shocked and saddened at the horrifying way he had picked to end is life, Lee's family and few friends were not completely surprised.

Tommy, after all, had been a strange and deeply depressed man. His gorgeous automobile collection and goofy castle failed to provide him much comfort.

Not long after Lee's suicide Mercedes-Benz at last got back its stolen Silver Arrow. Wherever it has been cached for the last half century I don't know, I do know that von Brauchitsch's is one Silver Arrow that is most emphatically NOT FOR SALE. -JS