

James Dean and the Curse of the Little Bastard

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Was the star's race car a real-life Christine?

It was like a silver bullet: Shiny, fast and rare. James Dean's Porsche 550 Spyder was only one of 90 made. And on September 30, 1955, with Dean behind the wheel, the customized racing machine that he named *Little Bastard* proved to be just as deadly when it carried Dean into a collision that took the movie star's life.

Then, inexplicably, the wreckage went on to cause property damage, injury, and even death wherever it went, before disappearing altogether.

Dean acquired the Porsche 550 during filming of *Rebel Without a Cause* for use when he raced. The car was a temporary solution. He'd purchased a Lotus Mk. X, but it wouldn't be delivered in time for an upcoming race in Salinas that he planned to compete in. (A few months prior, he blew the engine out of a Porsche 356 Super Speedster while racing in Santa Monica.)

Immediately, Dean hired legendary car customizer George Barris, the "King of Kustomizers", to work on the car. Barris is known for his design of the Batmobile for the 60's era Batman TV show. The customizer painted Dean's racing number 130 on the front, sides and back. Along with red racing stripes and the name *Little Bastard* on the back. The car's name had been taken from a nickname that Dean had been given while filming the movie *Giant*.

Though Dean had been contractually unable to race while filming *Giant*, once he had finished the movie, he started making plans to race again.

And while the actor was excited to show off his newest race car, his friends weren't happy about the purchase. In the time leading up to Dean's death, friends of the actor - including Barris, Eartha Kitt and Dean's former girlfriend Ursula Andress - said that they felt that the vehicle had a malevolent presence about it.

"James, I don't like this car; it's going to kill you," Kitt is reported to have said to Dean while the two were out for a drive the week before Dean's crash.

Around the same time, Dean introduced himself to Alec Guinness and asked the actor's opinion of the car. Upon seeing it, Guinness stated that the car was *sinister*, and said that if Dean got in it, he would be dead within the week.

Perhaps Dean himself sensed that he was headed for destruction. Prior to his death, he gave away a kitten that Liz Taylor gave to him on the set of *Giant*. His reasoning for doing so was that "some day I may go out and not come back."

And while filming a commercial for the National Safety Council, Dean ad-libbed the words of the script from "Please Drive Safely. The life you save may your own," to "The life you save may be mine."

The anticipated road race was to take place on October 1. On September 30, Dean and his entourage consisting of his mechanic Rolf Wütherich and stunt driver Bill Hickman, both of whom would serve as Dean's racing crew. Also traveling with the group was *Life* magazine photographer Stanford Rolf, who planned on doing a photo story of Dean at the races.

Dean originally planned to trailer the Porsche behind his station wagon, but at the last minute decided to drive the car to the race in order to familiarize himself with it. Wütherich would ride with Dean while Hickman and Rolf would take the station wagon.

During one of the stops along the way, Hickman cautioned Dean to watch his speed (both drivers had already received tickets that day, Dean for going 10 miles over the speed limit. Since Hickman was pulling a trailer, his ticket was for 20 over.) Hickman cautioned that Dean was still getting used to the car. He said that Dean's silver Porsche was difficult to see, thanks to its low profile and silver color. He was concerned that it might blend too easily into the pavement.

At approximately 5:30, Dean was driving west on U.S. Route 466 near Cholame, California, when a 1950 black and white Ford Tudor cut across his path. The driver of the Ford was a college student named Donald Turnupseed, who was on the way home to visit his family. Turnupseed had been driving in the oncoming lane and was attempting to make a left-hand turn on to Highway 41.

The sun had just dipped below the nearby hills, and dusk was quickly falling. Just as Hickman predicted, Turnupseed failed to see Dean.

Though legends say that Dean was driving in excess of 100 miles per hour when his vehicle struck Turnupseed's, responding officers say that Dean was in all likelihood only driving 55 miles per hour when the accident happened. According to Wütherich, Dean's last words were: "That guy's gotta stop. . . He'll see us."

Neither Dean nor Wütherich were wearing their seat belts a the time of the accident. The mechanic was thrown from the automobile, and suffered a broken jaw and leg. Dean remained trapped in the vehicle, which was crushed like a piece of used tinfoil. He was taken by ambulance to nearby Paso Robles War Memorial Hospital, where he was pronounced dead at 5:59 PM. Cause of death: broken neck, multiple fractures of the upper and lower jaw, severe head trauma and massive internal bleeding.

What happened next fueled speculation that Dean's car was cursed, or at the very least, led a cursed afterlife.