

# Joe Scalzo's

## City of Speed and elsewhere

### Black Widow Spider

Ominously created in 1955, the deadliest racing year of the last century, all of the five or six 4.4 liter Ferrari Le Mans models turned into failures, and the worst one of all became a Black Widow Spider.



Nobody but the factory's own Eugenio Castellotti got one going really fast, and that was during his country's Mille Miglia, when, at top speed he overtook and briefly swerved in front of the 300SLR Mercedes of Stirling Moss which won the 1000 mile race; and later in the catastrophic 24 Hours of Le Mans, which the 4.4 was named for, when Castellotti again broke down and couldn't finish the marathon.

Afterward, at season's end, Ferrari did what it usually did with its failures and sold them off to rich and foolish Americans. Two of the biggest fools were Loyal Katskee, a sports car-racing fanatic from Omaha, Nebraska, and a non-racing dilettante from Beverly Hills, California named William Doheny.

Katskee, after finding no success at road racing, surprised everyone by entering his 4.4



in a rough-and-tumble sideshow on dirt, and won, probably the only time a 4.4 did anywhere.

William Doheny's Ferrari was the Black Widow of 4.4's. At Pebble Beach in the spring of 1956, it flew off the narrow roadway, entered one of Pebble's forests, and wrapped itself around a giant pine; the devastating accident killed Doheny's pet driver Ernie McAfee and ended racing forever at Pebble Beach.

However many dollars it had charged William Doheny for his 4.4, the Ferrari works probably never realized Doheny was paying it with dirty dollars, part of the swag he had inherited from his legendary uncle, the oil tycoon and robber baron Edward Doheny, who swindled millions out of Warren Harding's presidency while pulling off the fantastically crooked Teapot Dome scandal of the 1920s.

The Dohenys were a family of oil aristocrats, and Edward Doheny was boss of the clan. What Huntington was to railroading, Doheny was to oil. The son of a penniless Irish settler, he roughnecked his way through the southwest. He drove mules across Texas, picked fruit in Arizona, and, in New Mexico broke both legs after plunging to the bottom of a mine shaft while prospecting for gold.

By the 1900s Doheny was in Los Angeles, now sniffing for oil, and soon sank one of the city's original wells; and by 1920 his surname was on Los Angeles Boulevards, libraries, churches, and even a beach ... he was vying with John D. Rockefeller for the title of America's richest citizen; and controlled what seemed like most of California's oil and all of Mexico's.

To further increase the supply, Doheny started traveling to Washington where he had cronies in the corrupt Harding administration. Gaining the ear of the Secretary of the Interior, he sounded a bogus warning that oil was hemorrhaging from the Naval Reserves at Teapot Dome in Wyoming and Elk Hills in California, and that he, Edward Doheny, must be granted drilling rights immediately.

The Secretary of the Interior swallowed the enticing fable whole, or at least did after Doheny's son Ned arrived with a black bag containing one hundred thousand dollars.

Doheny got to work drilling, but it all ended badly. President Harding took ill, subsequently perishing, it was alleged, of a meal of tainted Alaskan crab, and the Secretary of the Interior became the first cabinet member in history to be convicted of a felony and go to the penitentiary.

Ned Doheny got shot dead by his own secretary, who then turned the weapon on himself. Edward Doheny skated by. Twice acquitted of bribery in a pair of hilariously funny trials, he was made to give up his Elk Hills and Teapot Dome drilling lands and pay a fine of almost 50 million dollars – just chicken feed to him. Living out the rest of his shameful existence in his Greystone mansion (dying there in 1935) he was unrepentant and pressuring Cecil B. DeMille to make an inspirational film about him.

The Doheny dynasty survived the shock and moved on. The depression diminished some of the family fortune but not enough to prevent William Doheny (Ned Doheny's son) from buying his Black Widow 4.4 Ferrari for luckless Ernie McAfee.

William Doheny was one of those rare sportsmen (sprint car racing's Sam Traylor and the Indy 500's Lee Elkins were two others) who made their drivers into pets and would do anything to help them. It became Ernie's ill fortune.

Following the Pebble Beach catastrophe the remains of Doheny's 4.4 were stored for years in an airplane hangar; and then what was left of the 4.4 was unexpectedly restored. Who ordered it, why it was done, or what it means is a mystery. One of its first outings after the restoration was at Pebble Beach's Concours d' Elegance in 1976.

Bringing out the Black Widow on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the McAfee fatality seemed to be in ghoulishly bad taste. The judges that day awarded it a trophy regardless. **-JS**