

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 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 miles; and later in the catastrophic Le Mans, which the 4.4 was named after, when Castellotti again broke down and couldn't finish the marathon.

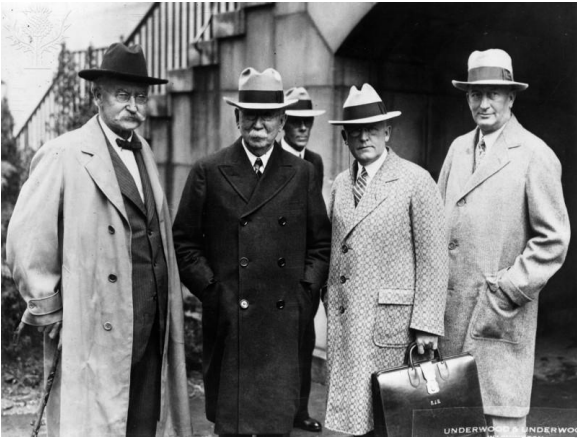
Afterward, at season's end, Ferrari did what it usually did with its failures and sold them off to rich and foolish Americans. Two of the biggest fools were Loyal Katskee, a sports car -- racing fanatic from Omaha, Nebraska, and a non -- racing dilettante from Beverly Hills, California named William 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. William Doheny's 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 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 he 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 travelling 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 Hill 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. 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 Hill 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 – where he died in 1935 – he was unrepentant and was 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; he was 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 pets and would do anything to help them. This 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 this, 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 of 1976.

Calling out the Black Widow on the 20th anniversary of the McAfee fatality seemed to me to be in ghoulish taste. Judges that day awarded it a trophy regardless. This is one of the things wrong with racing.

DO NOT COPY