

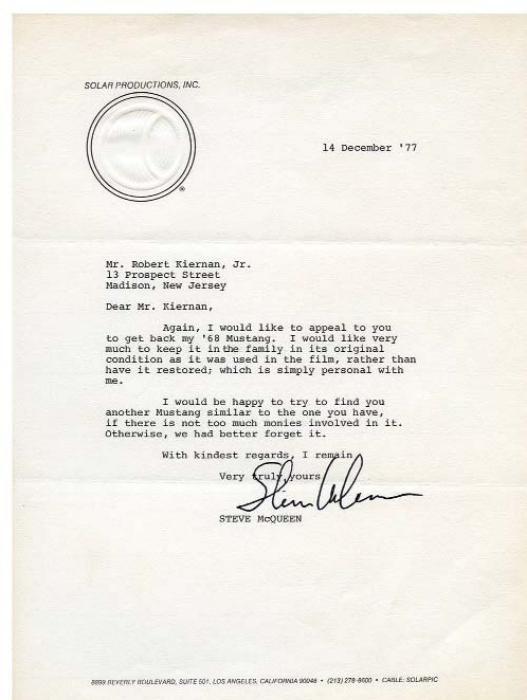
## The Real Bullitt Mustang



Steve McQueen made one last effort to buy his favorite Mustang in 1977. He sent a letter, typed on a single piece of heavy off-white vellum, to the car's owner in New Jersey. The logo for his movie company, Solar Productions, was embossed in the upper left corner and opposite that resided the date, December 14, 1977. The letter is just four sentences.

"Again," it begins, "I would like to appeal to you to get back my '68 Mustang." McQueen offered no specifics as to why this particular Ford was important to him, except to say that he wanted to keep it unrestored and that it was "simply personal with me."

McQueen's star may have dimmed by 1977, but he remained an icon, a rare actor loved by both genders. McQueen was also one of us, an aficionado and a racer, someone who understood the instinctual joy of automobiles and motorcycles and indulged in both. And with that '68 Mustang, McQueen gave us a gift, one of the greatest car chases ever filmed, a duel with a Dodge Charger up, down, and around San Francisco. The Bullitt chase is coveted for the usual crashes and jumps, but it had something more: Unlike most cinematic chases that feature cars performing impossible feats, the one from Bullitt was every bit as exciting, but the driving was obviously real. Those who know cars knew. It's 10 minutes of film nirvana. McQueen wanted the Bullitt Mustang back.



## ***The Real Bullitt Mustang (Cont.)***

The rich and famous are often allergic to the word “no,” and so was McQueen. His impatience over being rebuked in his quest emerged in the last sentence: “I would be happy to try to find you another Mustang similar to the one you have,” he wrote, “if there is not too much monies involved in it. Otherwise, we had better forget it.”

The owner was just fine with forgetting it, and then the Bullitt Mustang made an exit, stage left, from recorded history.

On a gray and cold December afternoon, 38 years after McQueen wrote that letter, Casey Wallace and Sean Kiernan finished their sales calls and got into a blue Chevy Avalanche for the two-hour drive back to Nashville. The two worked as automotive paint salesmen for LKQ and Sean was a car guy. During the course of killing time, Wallace asked his car-loving employee what cars he owned. Sean Kiernan, 36, recited the few old cars sitting around his house.

“What color is the Mustang?” interrupted Wallace, when a ratty ‘68 GT390 was mentioned. “Green,” said Kiernan. “That sounds like the Bullitt Mustang,” Wallace remarked casually.

At this point in 2015, few people knew under which out-of-the-way rock the McQueen Mustang might have slipped. For years, speculation abounded about the two Highland Green 1968 Mustang fastbacks purchased for the movie. Both had the GT package and a 390-cubic-inch V-8. They were aesthetically modified by removing the badges and backup lights and bolting on gray Torq Thrust wheels. One Mustang had a roll cage and performed the majority of the most brutal stunts. It was in sad shape when the shoot finally wrapped and was, reportedly, sent to the crusher. The other car, also in the celebrated chase sequence was the less abused “hero” car.

Going back in time, an ad on page 121 of the October 1974 issue of Road & Track magazine read: “1968 ‘Bullett’ [sic] MUSTANG driven by McQueen in the movie...Can be documented. Best offer.” The phone number had a New Jersey area code.

A man from Madison, New Jersey, saw the ad. He had always wanted a ‘68 Mustang fastback, so he bought the Bullitt car for \$6000, and it became a regular on the streets around Madison.

The car’s path to New Jersey included a stint as a commuter for a movie editor, as illustrated by the Warner Bros. parking sticker on the bottom right corner of the windshield. It also passed through the hands of Frank Marranca, a police detective, who bought the car from the studio in 1971 with a letter from Ford certifying that the Mustang with VIN 8R02S125559 had been purchased by Solar Productions for



the movie. Marranca shipped the car to New Jersey, and along the way, the shift knob and the aftermarket wood steering wheel were stolen. When Marranca’s growing family needed a station wagon, he put the otherwise untouched car up for sale.

The third buyer, one Bob Kiernan, fell hard for his new car and never even considered McQueen’s 1977 request to get it back. When Bob got a company car, his wife drove the Mustang to her teaching job at a nearby school. “The Bullitt likes to drink the gas,” she said back then. In 1980, the car’s clutch went out, and with 65,000 miles on the clock, it was moved into the garage, for what turned out to be a long stay.

Bob, a Hartford Insurance executive, was relocated to Cincinnati in 1984, and the Bullitt car moved with him. Another transfer took the family to Florida in 1994, but the Mustang remained behind at a friend’s place in Kentucky. A year later, the family moved to Nashville. The Mustang rejoined the family there, moving into the two-car garage attached to a modest ranch home.

Now, back to 2015: “Can I tell you something?” Sean Kiernan asked his boss, Casey Wallace. “Sure.” “I have it.” “You have what?” Wallace answered. “I have it. I have Steve McQueen’s Bullitt Mustang.” (*Cont. on page 4*)

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## The Real Bullitt Mustang (Cont.)



"Casey was the first person I told about the Bullitt," Sean said, "For some reason I felt comfortable telling him. I'm pretty sure it was my dad smacking me in the back of the head, lining up all the stars."

The pair sat in the Avalanche in the Nashville LKQ parking lot "geeking out," as Sean put it. Then Wallace asked if he could let his movie-business friend Ken Horstmann in on the secret. The previous hours seemed too crazy to be just chance. This was fate. Sean told Wallace to call Horstmann.

The Bullitt was, at this point, in pieces. In 2001, right about the time Bob Kiernan retired, Ford introduced a Bullitt Mustang GT. That, plus Bob's newfound free time, sparked a plan between father and son to get their car back on the road. "We didn't want to keep it from the public," Sean said, "but the attention over the years was annoying." Nevertheless, they agreed the time had come to share their treasure.

Now 33 years old and with a bad clutch, the Bullitt was tired. "We planned to do just enough to make it drivable. We didn't want to touch the history," said Sean. They took it apart, but then, Sean said, "Life happened." Bob was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Sean got married and had a kid. And the Mustang sat, in pieces.

Sadly, in 2014, Bob unexpectedly died. Sean, remembered sitting on a step in the garage and staring at the pile of Mustang parts wondering, with some dread, "What am I going to do with the car?"

The day after Sean revealed his secret, Horstmann, the film director, drove to Nashville to meet Wallace and Sean for lunch. Horstmann slid a copy of script he had written about two young guys buying a barn-find car with plans to earn a fortune in the flip. The cover of the script was a copy of the redacted letter McQueen had sent to Sean's father. Sean took out his folder and showed the genuine document. Sean was now in the movie business.

Horstmann guessed they needed about \$15 million for the movie. Among the three amigos, they had energy, possibly some talent, and a secret car that anyone with an ounce of gasoline in their veins would love to see, but they didn't have \$15 million. "We figured a private showing of the car would be a good way to get investors involved," Sean said. "I just needed to put the car back together."

That was a horrifying task. "I can build a show car all day long," he said, "but this was history. What if I screwed it up? The Bullitt scared the shit out of me." None of them had the money to bring in a professional who was used to curating an artifact. The lucky break was that Sean and his dad had left the body largely untouched. They hadn't removed the doors or the dash. Everything was there. So during the first five months of 2016, Sean carefully put it back together in his father's small garage.

In May, he loaded his still-not-running Bullitt onto a trailer and hauled it to Horstmann's studio in Atlanta. They needed a third party to validate that the car was, in fact, real. They called Kevin Marti, who signed a nondisclosure agreement and flew to Atlanta on his own nickel. "I walked in to see the car," Marti said, "and thought, 'Here's another car that looks like the Bullitt.' I went over, looked at the VIN on the tag, and immediately, my emotions flipped from skepticism to 'Oh, my god, it's real.'"

Marti marveled at the modifications made for the movie. Underneath the rockers, three metal tubes were clumsily welded perpendicular to the car's center line for camera mounts. There were holes cut in the trunk for the cords that ran from a generator to power the cameras and lights. Even tape residue remained—on the tachometer to mark the redline, and on the floor, presumably to secure the seatbelts and wires. "Ninety-eight percent of the original car is there," he said. "It's an incredible artifact." (Cont. on page 6)



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## ***The Real Bullitt Mustang (Cont.)***

Horstmann filmed everything and used the footage over the summer of 2016 to make a teaser reel. The trio then reached out to anyone they thought had the means and interest in the project. They hosted a few showings, actually secured some funding, and prepared for the big fish they hoped to hook at the annual SEMA show: the Ford Motor Company.

The timing could not have been better. Ford was preparing to launch a third Bullitt Edition Mustang at the Detroit auto show in early 2018, and what better way to secure mass attention than by debuting the car alongside the lost original? Ford was in.

On the advice of Kevin Marti, Sean called McKeel Hagerty, who told Sean that the car should be part of the National Historic Vehicle Register. The Register is a thorough dossier on significant cars prepared and placed with the Library of Congress by the Historic Vehicle Association (HVA), which is run by the ebullient Mark Gessler. Gessler and his team then flew to Nashville last fall with a photographer to see the car at Sean's house.

On a Tuesday morning in early September, they turn off a tree-lined country road onto a paved driveway that looks almost too steep to climb. It's a long ascent, perhaps 800 feet, until the road crests at Sean Kiernan's house. The garage is on the side, with the doors positioned perpendicular to the front of the house. One is open. There's the Mustang, sitting on jack stands, the rear of the car nearly flush with the opening.

Sean points out the sloppily welded patches that covered the holes left when the under-bumper backup lights were removed. "McQueen," Sean says, "was very specific about how he wanted the car to look."

They open the trunk, and notice a couple of foam blocks glued to the forward wall and other modifications for camera rigging. Sean points out a chip on the edge of the passenger's-side rear fender, which reveals a thick layer of filler. "This entire side is Bondo," he says. "There must be 40 gallons of it in the door alone. It oozes out of the inside. Whoever put it on was a real sculptor, because it matches the lines of the car perfectly." The door was smashed in during the closing stages of the chase scene, and the filler is the result of the shortcut repair.

Then they move to the engine bay. The V-8 doesn't look like anything special. It was originally modified by Max Balchowsky, the same guy who opened Hollywood Motors and built the Old Yeller II race car plus several movie cars. Sean and his father had the engine rebuilt using as many original parts as they could. Before installing it, they had the engine tested, and it produced 315 horsepower at 4500 rpm and 400

pound-feet of torque at 3000. The air cleaner is not original; Sean says it was stolen by someone who broke into the Kentucky barn at some point. I see new screws holding the fenders to the frame and ask about them. "The original ones were junk," Sean says, "but believe me, I tried to save them." Lying on the floor to get a look at the underside. The only shiny bits are new brake lines and a few bolts. The welded camera bars still jut out from both rockers; the original custom exhaust is still in place. Inside, the bottom of the seats are torn along the pleats. Sean did replace the carpet, because the original was simply too far gone to save. There are two adhesive smudges on the tachometer, one at 5600 rpm and another at 6500.

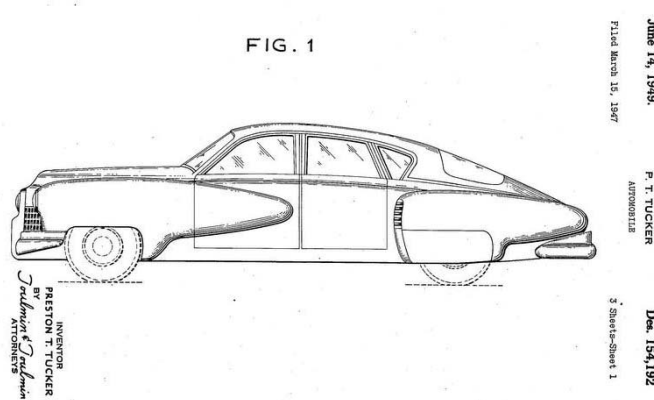
Soon, the son will finish the mission he started with his father. After that, who knows? Kiernan has no plans to sell, but he recognizes the car is worth multigenerational money. In the meantime, he hopes the movie project moves forward. He wants to build the Bullitt replicas for the film. "Who better to build them than the guy who owns the original?" he asks.

Whatever happens to the Bullitt Mustang, it's in good hands. It always has been.

*(This article was edited and reprinted from Hagerty.com. There is a documentary coming out about the Bullitt Mustang.)*



## Tucker Patents



Preston Tucker is best known for his ill-fated car company which produced 51 "Tucker '48s," the "Car of Tomorrow." While many people associate the man with his car, those who knew him best knew that he was an inventor at heart. Tucker loved to tinker with things, trying to find ways to improve them. And while launching his car company, Tucker was granted more than a few patents for his inventions.

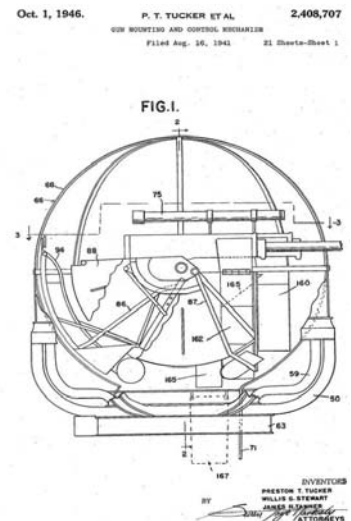
Shortly before the US entered World War II, Tucker thought that aerial combat – that is, airplane vs. airplane – would hinge on better gun control mechanisms. Tucker designed a working prototype of an electrically-controlled

gun turret which he demonstrated for the US military.

He was granted two patents for the invention and although it was widely believed that Tucker's design was used by the US, it was not. Not because it was impractical but simply because Tucker's company was not equipped to manufacture the devices in the quantity required by the military.

When Tucker turned his attention to automobiles, he was always looking for ways to improve on technology. He touted his cars as being on the cutting edge of design and wanted to include the latest developments in his cars. Some of that technology was of the sort that only Preston Tucker could dream of. How about a steering wheel that contained the car's instrument panel? Look no further than U.S. patent #2,465,825.

*(Continued on next page)*



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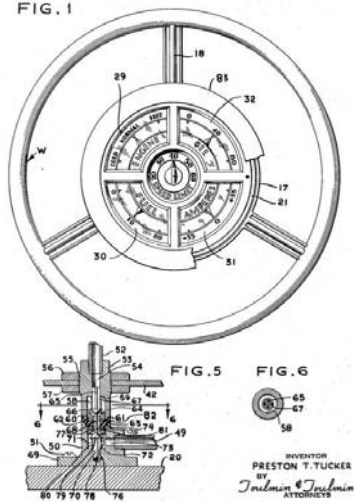
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March 29, 1949. P. T. TUCKER 2,465,825  
STEERING WHEEL MOUNTED INSTRUMENT PANEL.  
Filed March 24, 1947 3 Sheets-Sheet 1  
FIG. 1



Like some of his other ideas, this invention was not used in the production of the Tucker '48. If his company had survived, however, many Tucker fans think the steering wheels would have found their way into production.

spent much of his time in the year preceding that defending himself (successfully) against a litany of charges brought by the federal government.

Likewise, he was granted a patent on his hydraulic disk brake system in December 1950. U.S. Patent #2,535,763. And then later, his patent for hydraulically actuated valves was granted in 1952. U.S. Patent #2,615,438. The system had not been used in the production run of Tucker '48s but the original engine in the Tin Goose had used hydraulic valves. After he was exonerated at trial Tucker returned to Ypsilanti.

Although he toyed with the idea of starting another automotive venture, he pretty much disappeared from public view until he passed away in 1956. Most remember him for selling his one big project: the Tucker '48, which was granted design patent #154,192. He really should also be remembered as an inventor.

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*ED: I am looking for other Cars of the Month. These cars do not have to be concours award winners, just cars that have owners who are proud to own them. (Don't we all feel that way?) To nominate a car and owner, please contact me at gakiyama@earthlink.net. Thanks.*

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