

SAGA OF A SHELBY



MARK MALMIKAR

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CHAPTER ONE

Two mistakes were made on the car that week. That was the week in September of 1965 that Carroll Shelby and Chuck Cantwell flew back to Dearborn, Michigan to firm up the specifications and marketing plans for the new 1966 Shelby GT350's, which production had already begun on the main shop floor.

"What's your side of this mix-up?" Carroll Shelby's eyes bored into those of Don Larson seated across the desk from him. Thirty-three -year-old Don – one of the mechanics in the racing shop – stiffened in the chair. He felt embarrassed to be in the boss's office wearing his blue shop coveralls. A second ago, his gaze had been out the window looking at two rows of white 1965 Shelby GT350 Mustangs parked on the lot between the two factory buildings and one of the LAX runways.

"I switched two digits on the serial numbers of the two cars. It's right here in my notes," Don handed his spiral notebook to Shelby, his boss. The tall, dark haired racecar driver, turned racecar manufacturer, reached across his desk, and took the notebook.

"See, right here," Don stood and pointed to his inked entry. "Number SFM5-563, install competition heads and intake – blue dot heads and matching Cobra intake – ported and polished, and the 715-center pivot Holly carb. I made a mistake and wrote down the serial number wrong. It was supposed to be SFM5-536." He sat back down.

"Was the car in the racing shop when you went to work on it?" Shelby asked, handing the notebook back.

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“No, I had to look for it in the lot,” Don answered, his eyes glancing outside to the twenty or so white fastback Mustangs outside. They looked strange without hoods. They were delivered that way from Ford’s San Jose plant, so Shelby-American could put on their own hoods. All GT350’s were delivered as ordered with parts deleted at the factory.

“Didn’t you find that strange? The R models are built in batches, you know that?”

“I know that,” Don cringed. He feared he was about to be fired. “But there have been many times in the past several months where we’ve pulled a car at random from the line outside.”

Shelby glanced sideways at Chuck Cantwell sitting on a folding chair towards the back of the factory office. Chuck, the project engineer, shrugged his shoulders. “Yeah, it happens.”

“So, you drove it off the lot and into the racing shop to work on it.” Don nodded meekly.

“Didn’t you notice none of the other standard modifications were done yet?”

“I know it’s no excuse, but it wasn’t my department, so I didn’t pay attention.”

“But you pulled the engine, like normal, did a full R model workup, installed the special heads and intake, located the battery to the trunk, and put the engine back together in one day?”

Don meekly nodded.

“Don is the fastest engine builder we have,” Chuck smiled.

“According to the timecard, you quit work thirty-five minutes after normal quitting time, and took your scheduled day off. You left the car in the end of the shop by the overhead door.”

“Yes, sir. I thought the interior guys were going to gut it and put the competition stuff in. I also left the chassis guys to do their modifications.” Don shrugged, waiting for, whatever.

“I was gone for a day and didn’t follow up,” he added.

To legally race GT350s, Shelby was required to have 100 cars produced and available to sell to the public. For racing he could modify the engine from stock GT350’s, or modify the chassis, but not both. Carroll and team decided to give all Shelbys a competition chassis and modify the engines for the R models. There were a few extra tweaks that were made to R model chassis to make them more competitive.

Carroll Shelby turned to the one other man in the room seated to Don's left. "So, Tom, this is where I hear your side of the mix-up."

Tom McCurry was one of the salesmen. His job was to take walk-in dealers and an occasional retail customer. Other salesmen handled the big, established dealers and the racing teams. "Fortunately, the chassis mechanics were in the middle of their competition modifications when I walked into the shops. They were drilling the upper "A" arms an inch lower when I got there. The interior guys were in the process of removing all the side glass and putting the competition glass in the rear window. One of the guys had just installed the roll bar."

"So, who asked what and why in the middle of all this?" Chuck asked.

"One of the chassis mechanics asked me if I knew why they were converting a street Shelby in the racing shop? That's when I checked the serial number against my list – saw that it was #5 563 – the last of the 1965's. I knew all twenty of the cars out on the lot were already scheduled to be 1966's, even though most of them were build by Ford as 1965's. So I told them the main floor was probably in the middle of change over and farmed it out the race shop."

"So, the racing shop guys were confused as to what they were supposed to be doing with the car?"

Forty-six-year-old Tom didn't appear to be flustered at all, sitting there in his suit and tie.

"That's obvious now."

He continued, "So I told them to just complete the competition chassis and reverse the interior modifications, and leave the glass in. Make a streetcar out of it and take it to the paint shop to put the LeMans stripes on. I was the one who walked over to the other building to get the rear bumper since the racing shop didn't keep any. Also, I was the one to engrave the serial number on the body plaque."

That made the car officially #SFM5S563.

"So, did one of the mechanics in the racing shop drive the completed car over to the paint shop to put on the LeMans stripes?"

"Yeah. And from the paint shop somebody parked it on the front row, east end."

The Shelby-American factory was located beside the runway of the Los Angeles Airport at 6501 West Imperial Highway. The parking lot where the truckloads of not-fully assembled Mustangs were delivered bordering a

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taxiway. The Mustangs were made at the Ford factory with parts deleted: hood, shock absorbers, rear seat and Mustang emblems. They were moved into the hanger in random order to be completed.

Shelby looked over at Chuck. "It didn't help that Chuck and I were in Dearborn all week." (Chuck basically oversaw the racing shop.)

"Tell me about this sailor," Shelby turned back to Tom.

"Nice guy. Came with his dad. Naval Aviator—brown shoe like me. We talked about the Navy and racing." Tom was a former brown shoe – a symbol of Naval aviators— who served six years as a radar-navigator. "He talked a lot about racing, so I gave him a tour of both hangers." (The two factory shop buildings were former hangers.)

"Get to the sales part."

"He just came back from deployment and wanted a Shelby. He had cash. Number 563 wasn't the only car in a saleable condition, but it was the one who caught his eye."

"Why didn't you send him over to one of the dealers?"

"After touring the factory and bitching about the admirals I felt we were brothers. He test-drove it around the lots. Never got out on the highway. You should have seen the look on his face when he talked about the blue LeMans stripes. He was impressed. He laid down close to \$4700 and I wanted the sale." He added, "I ran the money through the front office."

"I'm aware of that."

Silence ensued for a few moments as the four men looked around the room, not really looking at each other.

Shelby shook his head. "Chuck and I special ordered number 563 to be a test bed for the R cars for the 66 racing season. We were going to start engineering work tomorrow."

Chuck spoke up, "That car was a one off. We had Ford install a special one-inch anti-sway bar, beefed up pitman arm and link, plus fabricated torque control arms. They put in special alloy rear axles. The Warner T-10 aluminum transmission was built with a test set of close ratio gears. Their engineers say it's bulletproof."

"And now, poof, it's gone off the lot." Shelby sat back in his chair and took off his necktie. Don thought it must have been a high-level meeting with Ford for him to still be wearing his suit.

“I’m sorry,” Tom said. “If I had known it was a test bed, I wouldn’t have let it go.”

“Gawd!” Chuck swore, shaking his head, a strange smile on his face. “Some sailor is out there in a car with a competition suspension and an R model engine in a streetcar.”

“I’m sorry I used up a set of blue dot heads on a streetcar,” Don apologized.

“Oh, well, shit happens!” Shelby stood. Still fearful of being fired, Don and Tom also stood.

“What about us?” asked the engine mechanic, nodding towards the salesman.

“Go back to work,” answered Shelby. “We’re in the business of manufacturing cars. We can build one more.” He turned to Chuck, “Get Pete Brock to help you on it.”

Chuck headed for the door behind him. “I’ll call up the engineering department over at San Jose and ask them kindly if they’ll make us another one.”

Carroll Shelby walked over to the window and surveyed the two lines of cars as a United Airlines jet streaked down the runway. He said loud enough for the men to hear as they departed, “I won’t make that sailor give it back.”

CHAPTER TWO

Jesse Hutsell eased the ranch's pickup truck off Interstate 10 at exit 299 southeast of Tucson, Arizona. After stopping at the bottom, he turned left and swung around the curve of the dirt Smith Ranch Road heading south. It was an early June day, 1977, and he had been thinking about the car every mile since seeing it on the used car lot in Tucson.

The two wide blue stripes running over the center of the white car was the first thing he noticed. They went over the hood, the hood scoop, the roof, the trunk. He always had a love for the early Ford Mustangs. He'd studied Mustangs all through high school. This one was definitely a 1965 two-door fastback model—he could identify that much from the street as he drove by. Upon turning into the car lot, he could spot other features that intrigued him, like the blue racing stripes under the door running from the front wheels to the back. The wheels were Magnum 500's, one of his favorites.

Jesse was eighteen and had just recently graduated from Benson High School. He'd driven the ranch's 1969 Ford F150 into Tucson to confer about registration for auto mechanics classes at a tech school. If he studied his features in the rearview mirror, he'd see dark, somewhat curly hair of a shorter length. He got the dark hair, larger lips and square jaw from his mother. He got his father's build—five eight, broad shoulders and strong legs. He played football on the line—tackle on offense, tackle and linebacker on defense. His green eyes came from his dad, too. He was dressed in western boots, blue jeans and one of his better western shirts.

The black Ford pickup stirred up the dust for two and a half miles.

He instantly fell in love with the car.

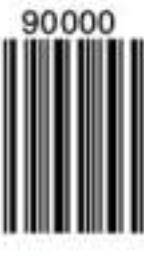
It's 1977 and Jesse Hutsell purchases a 1965 Shelby GT 350. As he drives the car, and fixes it up, he desires to learn about the previous owners. Was it ever raced? How did they treat the car?

His family owns a guest ranch near Tucson, Arizona, where Jesse is expected to help during the 'busy season'. He is attending a tech school, learning to become a mechanic. Drive along with Jesse as he spends the next two years tracking down the previous owners of the rare car, one by one.

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