

As Found Classic Number 24: The Racers Fiat Vignale

by PETE on AUGUST 21, 2016



As Found Classic Number Twenty Four

By Pete Vack

The last automotive star of the movie *The Racers* has been found and is now under restoration and being readied for Pebble Beach 2017. The Vignale-bodied 1400 Fiat had a very brief role in the movie. It was difficult for even the hard core among us to determine exactly what make and model it was.

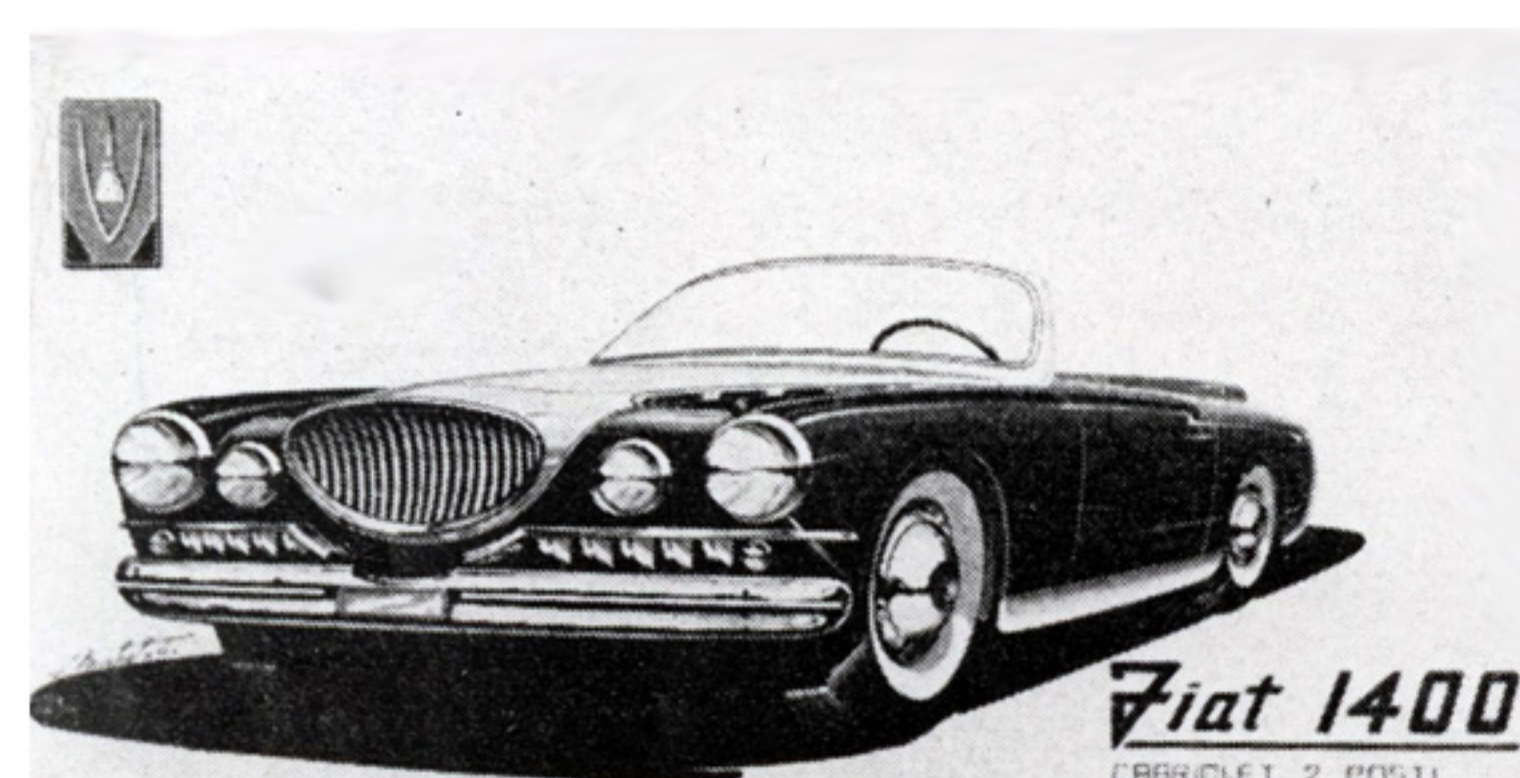


But sharp eyes would have noted that a similar cabriolet had appeared on the cover of the February 1953 issue of *Motor Trend*. And that in turn appears much like Michelotti's 1952 sketch, which was a part of an ad for Vignale with other designs. Could the *Motor Trend* cover car be the same as the car in the movie?

According to *Motor Trend*, the model was "...Mrs. Dorothea Herrscher, who, incidentally, is the owner of the trim \$6000 Fiat. She bought the car, designed by the Italian auto stylist, Vignale, over from Italy. Not too long ago she entered the car in the Oakland Sports Car Show where it won first place in its class. Considerable

interest in the car was evident at our own Motorama show. Interior work is exceptionally well done."

Not mentioned by the magazine was the fact that the designer was really the remarkable Giovanni Michelotti, and the Fiat was among his many achievements during the early 1950s. (Read [Vignale Parts 1-3](#)). Below is his original sketch for the Fiat 1400.



Our feature on *The Racers* several weeks ago prompted long time reader and historian Jim Sitz to comment on the find...

"That special Vignale bodied FIAT 1400 cabriolet belonged to a lovely lady in Beverly Hills named Dorothea who could certainly afford such a machine. I met her at Concours d'Elegance on the lawn of the Ambassador Hotel, on July 11th, 1953, which offered Stars and their Cars--it was quite a day! She was accompanied by my friend John Hart who was better known then as The Long Ranger, They made quite the couple. Hart was riding high back then, and best known for having replaced Clayton Moore in 1952 for one season of the television series, The Lone Ranger."

Jim couldn't confirm that the Herrscher car was the same one used in the movie, but like real estate, location is important. The scenes in the *Racers* with Kirk Douglas were all filmed in Hollywood, so the Fiat Vignale was not in Europe at the time, but in Los Angeles.



While John Fitch worked as a consultant in Europe on the film, on the West Coast Phil Hill was hired to help keep the competition machinery in running order. "In August of [1954] I joined the Racers company out at Twentieth Century Fox as their technical adviser....The studio had a camera crew in Europe in the spring of '54 equipped with 12

CinemaScope lenses. They got much more than 90,000 feet of color film, most of it at events such as the Mille Miglia, French Grand Prix, Nurburgring and Spa.

"On the Fox back lot they'd duplicated the pit areas....Douglas and other the others would roll in for a tire change, or accelerate out of the frame. I taught them how to take off without spinning the car or stalling."

Sitz recalled talking to Phil Hill about the movie. "In late 1954, the cameras crews returned from Europe and then realized a shortage of film from the German Grand Prix, so they had Phil Hill and his old racing friend Dave Sykes take a pair of Maseratis down to north San Diego county on road at bottom of Mt Palomar, to shoot more.

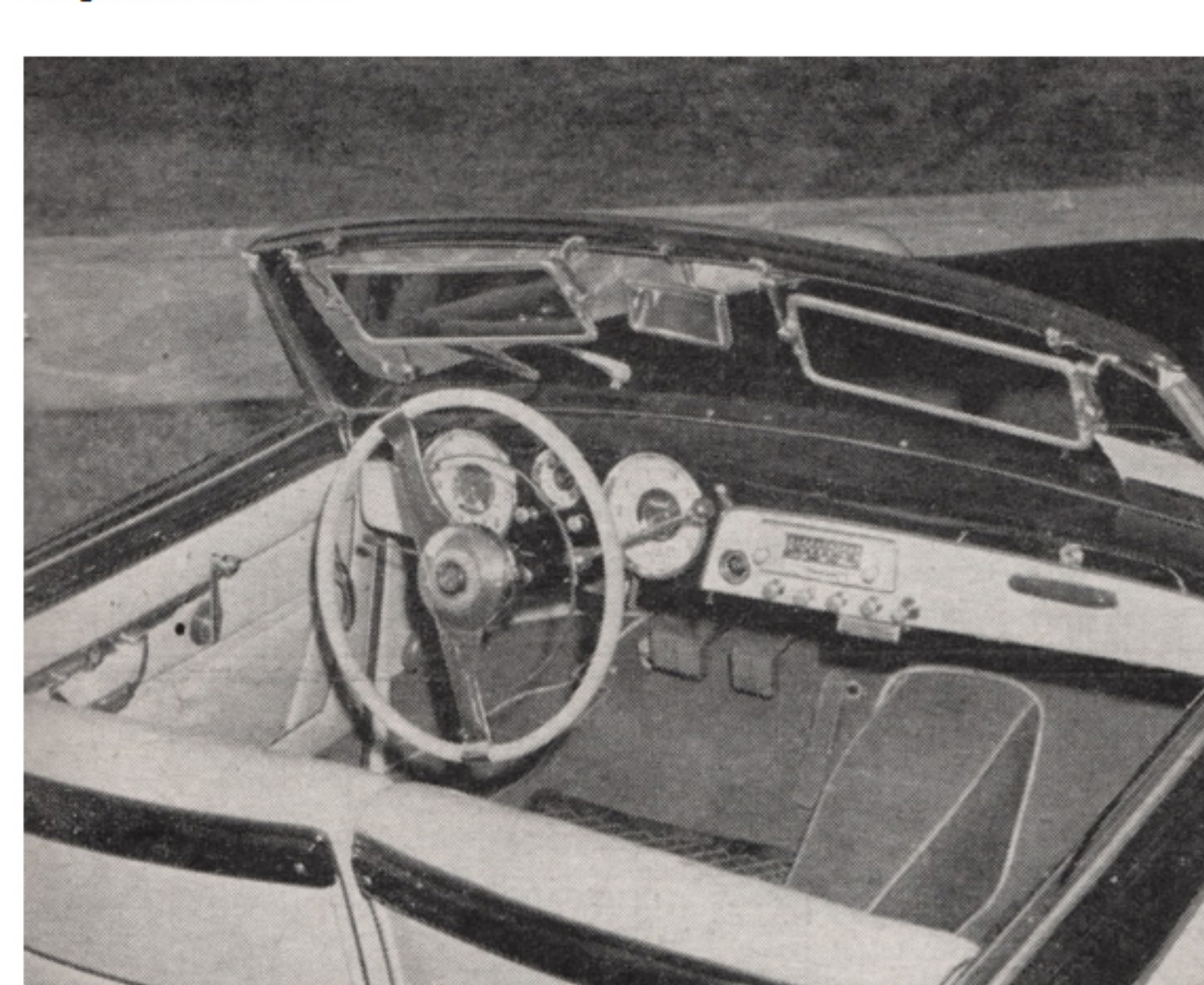
"I asked Phil about this 40 years later and he laughed about it, comments How they merely unloaded the GP cars and made a few runs up the Hill At village called Rincon Springs--I told Hill I knew it well from still using it for fast motorcycle rides over to Borrego Springs in 1990s.



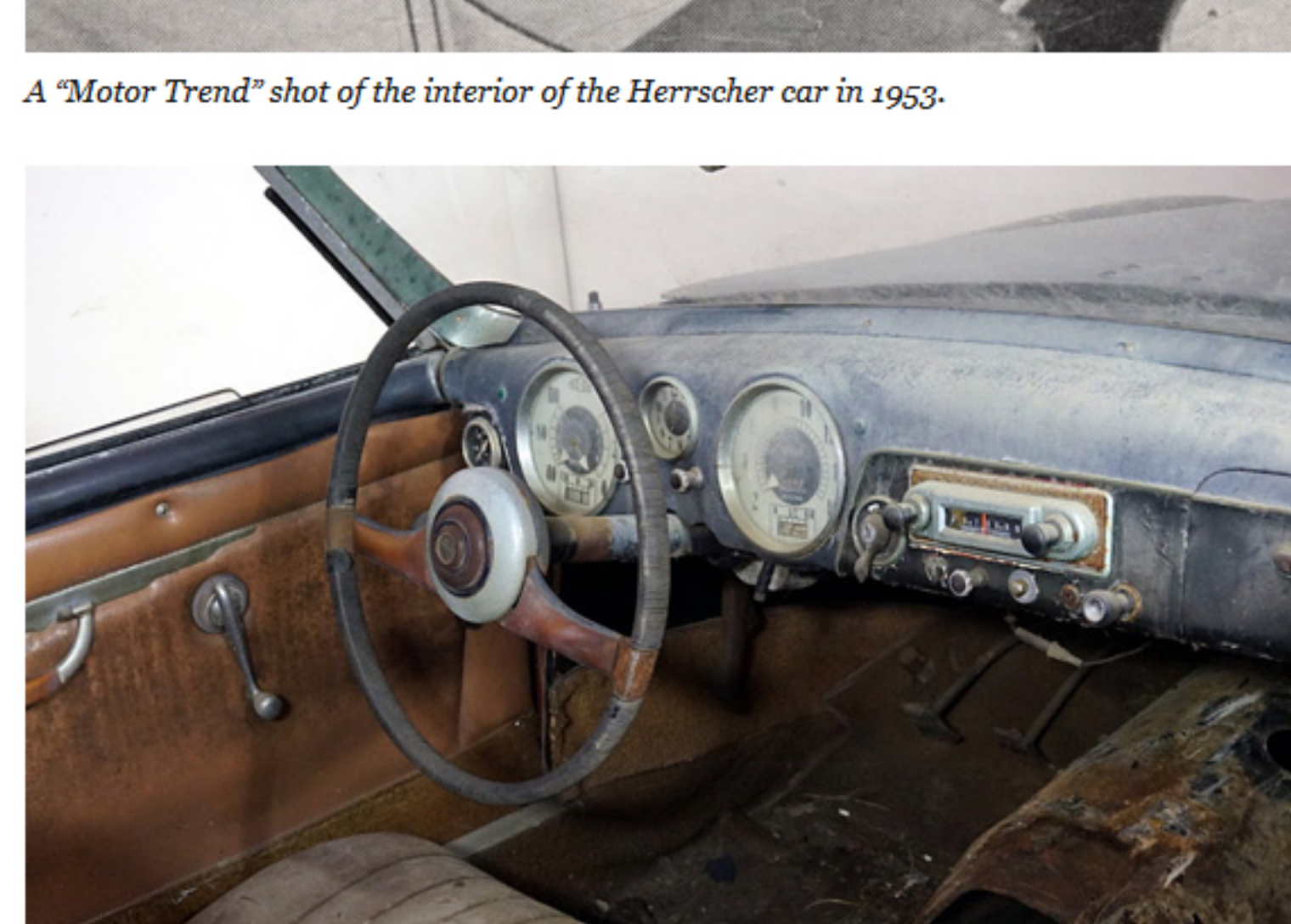
"The Racers" movie poster is really a lobby card now in the collection of Paul Chenard.

"After Hill mentioned this I made point to re-run the movie and sure enough, the greenery of the Ring turns to the brown of your typical Southern California surroundings, with a grove of orange trees on each side of the road. I had to call Phil back to report those oranges still growing in California-- rare now with so much development. Hill also spoke of shooting more scenes in San Fernando valley... I think Chatsworth of Northridge... to simulate French GP at Reims. That area is 100% covered in cheap homes now!"

Hill, however, said nothing about the Herrscher Fiat 1400 Vignale and the scene with Kirk Douglas on the back lot.



A "Motor Trend" shot of the interior of the Herrscher car in 1953.



Interior of the Fiat 1400 as found.

But Jason Wenig, CEO of Creative Workshop in Dania Beach Florida, has determined that the Herrscher Fiat is the one in his shop; the Italian registration that came with the car identifies it at the same one as sold to Dorothea Herrscher. Wenig has laid out his case below:

1) Italian license plate info for plate 163933 confirms this is the plate shown on the car in the Motor Trend cover. This document also lists the chassis number of this car. This document definitively ties our car to the "Motor Trend" cover car. That said, we are unsure if the car in "The Racers" carried the same plate (163933)...but we continue to review the film to see if there may be a glimpse...

2) The above noted, here is the argument/anecdotal evidence that ties it together:
- The car in the movie is the identical body style as the car on the cover of Motor Trend.
- The car in the movie is the same color scheme as the car on the cover of Motor Trend.
- The "Motor Trend" cover and The Racers movie were shot within a year of each other.
- IF two were made, how likely would it be that they would have been painted in identical fashion?

...SO the opposing argument would be:
- They must have made two (or more) (although we have found no evidence that this is the case and that would mean any/all of the cars they built are still lost - except of course, for ours).
- They were painted identically (highly unlikely).
- They were both in LA at the same time (would be a remarkable coincidence).

View the film clip below to see the similarities:



If our readers can be of any help, here is how to contact Jason Wenig at the address below or send an email to the Editor at vack@cox.net.

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www.TheCreativeWorkshop.com
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