

EMPIRESS
NOW SHOWING
LEMANS
STARRING STEVE MCQUEEN

EMPIRESS
NOW SHOWING
LEMANS
STARRING STEVE MCQUEEN

FILM CAREER

WHAT A CAR, WHAT A STAR!

The 911S from the classic Hollywood film *Le Mans* has remained in motion to this day. Collectors are keen to acquire Steve McQueen's Slate Gray Porsche. The next station in its story will take place at an auction in California.

By Matt Stone
Photos by Darin Schnabel (RM Auctions)



Steve McQueen's seminal motorsport film, 1971's *Le Mans*, featured many stars, credited and uncredited. Thundering Porsche 917s and screaming Ferrari 512s. Beautiful women. A world-class roster of sports-car-racing and F1 legends that drove the film's many racing and stunt sequences. The co-star of the steely blue-eyed McQueen in the film's haunting opening scenes is a Slate Gray 1970 Porsche 911S. This magnetic pair opens the film in convincing fashion, and the tranquil images of McQueen driving the snarling 911 through the French countryside contrast starkly with the manic racing mayhem that dominates subsequent action scenes.

McQueen had a similar 911S at home in Los Angeles (the same model and Slate Gray color as the car in the movie, just a year older), but it was likely easier to acquire a new car in Europe than to ship his own 1969 911S twice across the Atlantic. Perhaps Porsche, which supported the production of *Le Mans* to some extent, wanted him driving the latest model. No matter, the car seen in the opening sequence, and in several other scenes, was invoiced to Solar Productions on June 1, 1970. It was a more heavily optioned car than McQueen's own 1969 model, including factory-installed air-conditioning, tinted glass, a Blaupunkt Frankfurt radio, the Comfort Group (which includes leather upholstery and other interior upgrades), and front fog lamps with the yellow lenses then required in France. The total cost of this machine, which was at the top of the 911 street machine range in 1970, cost just over 30,000 German marks, or around \$8,338 in 1970.

According to a letter from Porsche, "The car was driven directly to Le Mans by our people, for use by Steve and the Solar Production crew. At a later date, the car was returned to our repair shop for modifications," which included the installation of a limited-slip differential and revised gear ratios.

Male-male bonding between McQueen and the 911S takes place on the screen—complete harmony without a word.



Clear focus:
This 911S concentrates on the essentials even in its interior; the displays are explicitly featured

Clear lines:

The Slate Gray hue accentuates the 911's form and complements its chrome bumpers

**Clear winner:**

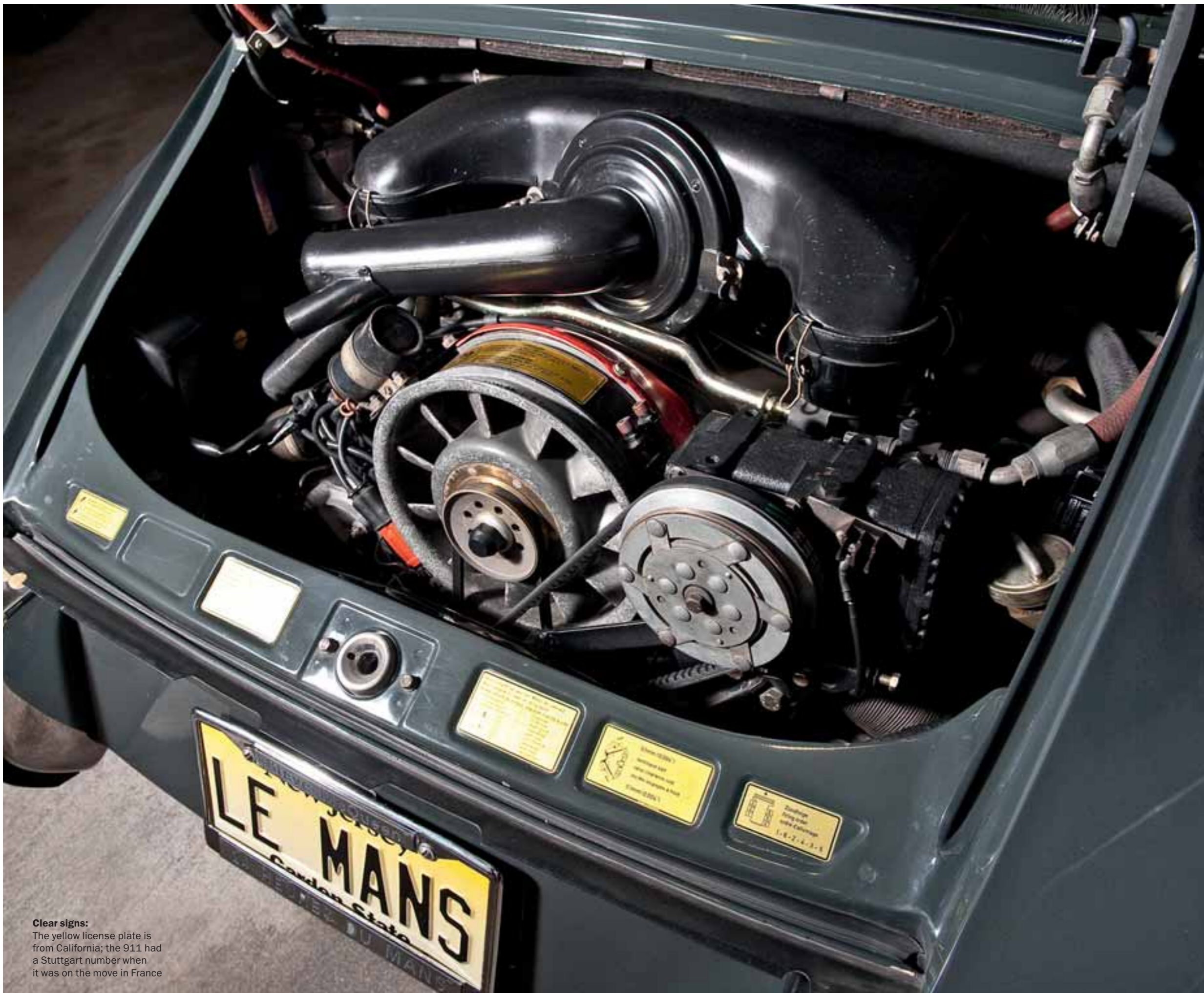
The 911S has been well treated and maintained, but not restored

After its starring role in McQueen's motorsport magnum opus, the car was shipped to Los Angeles in January 1971. McQueen elected to sell this one, instead of his '69. There is no clear reason why he chose one over the other, but one theory is that he already had installed an upgraded stereo in his first car. The *Le Mans* car was advertised in the *Los Angeles Times* and purchased by an attorney in L.A. He kept the car, largely in secret, for more than three decades. Another Southern California resident, 356 owner and expert Jesse Rodríguez, then purchased it in April 2005; Rodríguez has since sold it to the current owner.

Other than one respray in the factory color, reupholstered front seats, new shock absorbers, and a fresh windshield, the car is completely in its original state. It is likely the original amber fog-lamp lenses were replaced with clear ones when the 911 was brought to

the United States all those years ago. The engine and transmission are original, with all numbers matching. The odometer currently reads just over 100,000 original miles, and the *Le Mans* 911S has never suffered any rust or accident damage—a wonderful example of preservation versus restoration. It wears its original, and correctly sized, factory-installed Fuchs alloy wheels. The 1970 "S" was viewed as such an impressive performer in its time that it was routinely compared by contemporary magazine road-testers with the Ferrari 246 Dino and other high-end exotics.

The 911 S was Porsche's top street model offering in 1970, towering over a range that began with the carbureted 142-horsepower "T" model. The next step up was the Bosch mechanically fuel-injected 911 E, rated at 175-horsepower at 6,500 rpm, and then came the 200-horsepower 911 S. *Road & Track* magazine tested the new 2.2-liter S from 0 to 60 mph



Clear signs:

The yellow license plate is from California; the 911 had a Stuttgart number when it was on the move in France

in 7.3 seconds, the quickest of the lineup, of course, and more than able to run with several other European exotics.

The early, "chrome bumper" 911 S have become extremely valuable, and are prized and much sought after by Porsche aficionados the world over. This example's incomparable Hollywood-movie and ownership provenance make it that much more a historic proposition. Finally, the car embodies an impressive file of original documentation, including letters from the Porsche factory (some signed by former Porsche PR and racing boss Rico Steinemann), plus the original invoice, and numerous documents authored and signed by McQueen himself. The car also was photographed on the *Le Mans* movie set in France, with McQueen and his family always near it or aboard.

All of the early 911 cues are present and accounted for. This special hue of Slate Gray complements the lines of the chrome-bumpered 911 to the maximum degree. It looks purposeful and elegant, yet not quite sinister. The view from the driver's seat is just as it should be: racy and businesslike, for the business of driving, of course, with all gauges clearly visible through the 917-style steering wheel. Twist the key and the engine cranks and chuffs before firing with the turbocharged hair-dryer rasp you expect of a non-catalyzed Porsche flat-six. A few minutes in idle to mix and warm the several gallons of oil in the sump, and it pulls away easily. One difference between this '70 and McQueen's '69 911 S is the 2.2-liter version of the engine, new in the 1970 model,



Clear views:

Photo documentation of historical value from the period in Le Mans



which employs magnesium engine blocks and aluminum cylinder heads. It was rated with a bit more low-end torque than that of the earlier two-liter engine, but still revs as a 911 should. The exhaust system has worn a bit over the years, and though it doesn't leak, it offers a slightly bassier tone than usual. The shifter lacks the in-gate precision of later G50-trans-equipped 911s, but shifts well enough when guided by a deft hand. The shifter won't suffer ham-fisted drivers, but move it smartly and crisply from gate to gate and it'll hold any pace. Then there's that steering: the organic, telepathic manual steering of a not-too-heavy-in-the-nose 911. It reads the pavement with precision, and is meaty and nicely weighted in your hand. Plus this car is quick—still! Make no mistake: a well-driven Cayman S will outrun it, but not by an amazing amount, nor would the newer machine be any more satisfying. The classic ethos of the 911 is as valid today as it was in 1963 or 1970. No wonder McQueen drove them at home, and in his ultimate motorsport movie.

The ride quality is relatively supple for a committed sports car, something that is too often lost on stiffly sprung, modern motors with hyper “welded shut” suspensions and ultra-low profile tires. The classic

Porsche is still quite precise, in spite of the narrow, relatively tall 185/70-15 rubber. We never pushed this one-of-a-kind, highly valuable 911 hard enough to test its tendency to oversteer, or not, but there's no mistaking the weight of the engine hanging out behind the rear wheels. No matter, this is a car that covers ground quickly, easily, and with confidence, begging, though not requiring, the driver to hold it in gear to the redline with each acceleration run.

It's an interesting comparison to McQueen's own 1969 S; that car, with about half the miles on the clock as this one, is a bit fresher all around; the bushings, bearings, and other tuneables are tighter, as you'd expect. The earlier two-liter engine is a little sweeter overall, and has a bit more rev, but it doesn't match the *Le Mans* car's torquey feel. “I love these cars,” comments Steve's son Chad McQueen, who now owns both the '69 and his father's original 1958 Speedster 1600 Super, as well as a highly modified, 911 S/T-styled early 1970s machine. “I've always wondered why my dad kept the '69 and not the '70 from the movie. I don't really know; he loved to rev an engine, and the slightly revvier nature of the '69's smaller engine might have felt better to him. It's hard to say, and, unfortunately, we'll never know because we can't ask.”

Is McQueen's *Le Mans* S the world's best-known, most significant non-racing Porsche 911? Quite possibly. Driving this car is like piloting a time machine that will take the driver back to what it must have been like in that summer of 1970 in France during the filming of *Le Mans*. It gives off all the right early 911 vibes. After bidding the car farewell, you'll want to head to your nearest DVD player and watch the opening scenes of *Le Mans* (just now being re-released in DVD and Blu-ray formats) for the umpteenth time—but with a new and freshly expanded appreciation of what it all means. A star car indeed. ●

THE LE MANS 911 ON AUCTION

Fascinating vehicles from another age: The Rolex Motorsport Reunion and the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance will take place in Monterey, California, in August 2011. In conjunction with this summit for car lovers, RM Auctions will hold an auction of coveted historical vehicles on August 19 and 20. One of the stars

at the Portola Hotel & Spa and Monterey Conference Center (2 Portola Plaza, Monterey, California) will be Steve McQueen's 911 from the classic Hollywood film *Le Mans*. This 911 S will go on offer together with its comprehensive documentation. For more information, see: www.rmauctions.com.