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Within eight days of its unveiling, 5,000 orders for this new BMW were placed

Germany didn't quite know what hit it during that unseasonably warm fall afternoon in 1989.

It was the second day of the Internationale Automobil-Ausstellung in the middle of industrial, ultra-chic Frankfurt. Big news was on the auto-show horizon. An even beefier BMW was ready to be rolled out of the automaker's lair, direct from Dingolfing, deep in the heart of the Black Forest.

With testing still in progress and with Bimmer executives unaware that

demand would quickly outstrip supply, the BMW 850i took the main stage for the world press.

You could have heard a pen drop. What BMW couldn't have possibly imagined in its sleek, sporty, supercar coupe was the initial hysteria that would instantly trail it like a shadow.

Within eight days of the Frankfurt Auto Show, 5,000 orders for the new BMW were placed — five months before production was even slated to begin. Once the assembly line began to roll, some of the first buyers paid twice the price to avoid waiting six

months for delivery. Others waited three years.

A classic BMW was born. A classic BMW would die a decade later.

In between, it was considered the 'ultimate' in the 'ultimate driving machine' experience, from a company that prides itself on building the absolute best car money can buy.

The reasons for its appeal were obvious. In the simplest form, the 8-Series stood on its own for what you couldn't possibly get anywhere else. The two-door 850i roared in with a 12-cylinder engine that spewed out 300 horsepower and served up a top speed of 250 km-h (155 mph). It was truly Autobahn-minded muscle. And it was smooth, refined, unique and somewhat un-BMW-ish. Some owners said the classic shape reminded them of an Aston-Martin Lagonda. Others simply bathed in its beauty. For BMW, it had been a long time coming.

The notion of producing an upper-class coupe was brewing in Bavaria in 1981, long before the E31

platform (as it was known) had been given the green light. This was ground-breaking stuff. Three years later, BMW would build the 8-Series from scratch and it would charge a hefty sum — about \$100,000.

The decision for BMW wasn't an easy one. After assembling more than 100 prototypes, after spending millions in crash tests, after tests in Death Valley at 40 C, and in the polar regions at -40 C, the final prototype was unveiled on June 15, 1989 to the staff of more than 2,000 engineers, technicians and developers.

Instantly, it was a mouth-watering proposition from a car company that regularly served up delicious entrees. Crowds loved it. Heads turned to follow it.

Designed to be a highly desirable status symbol, the 8 was the ultimate elegant luxury performance coupe and a technological statement. But, as fate would dictate, it was hardly perfect.

Criticized for its size, price and weight, it would go through a few incarnations before fading into the sunset.

By 1993, the 850Ci had replaced the 850i and, eventually, two more models would roar into town: an eight-cylinder, 286-hp version (840Ci); and a 12-cylinder, 380-hp 850 CSI that had the option of BMW's 'M' sport performance package, which meant more oomph than oaf.

More than anything, in any model the 8-Series offered something few BMW's could claim: Machismo. It started with the shark-like nose in front and ended with a sharp back end and an aggressive powerplant.

But, ultimately, the long-term interest wouldn't keep pace with the initial euphoria. One disgruntled 8-Series owner summed up the car's early inaccuracies in a 1995 issue of Road & Track.

"Boulevard cruiser."

The showrooms wouldn't disagree.

Despite an initial flurry of activity, the 8 never really caught on. The first year of production (BMW sold nearly 2,000 units in North America) was the best for the E31. The problem was that the years following would never quite match.

The steep price tag didn't help, nor did nagging reports of the performance-for-luxury tradeoff.

By August of 1997, BMW decided to cease U.S. production. Two years later, it was done completely.

A total of 30,609 E31s were built over nearly a decade. Fewer than 7,000 found their way to our shores.

Although the 8-Series never sold in the numbers BMW had hoped, it appealed to a seriously well-heeled audience. Many of BMW's European customers modified their 8s, or added special equipment including larger wheels and tires. Many took pride in the fact they owned a rarity.

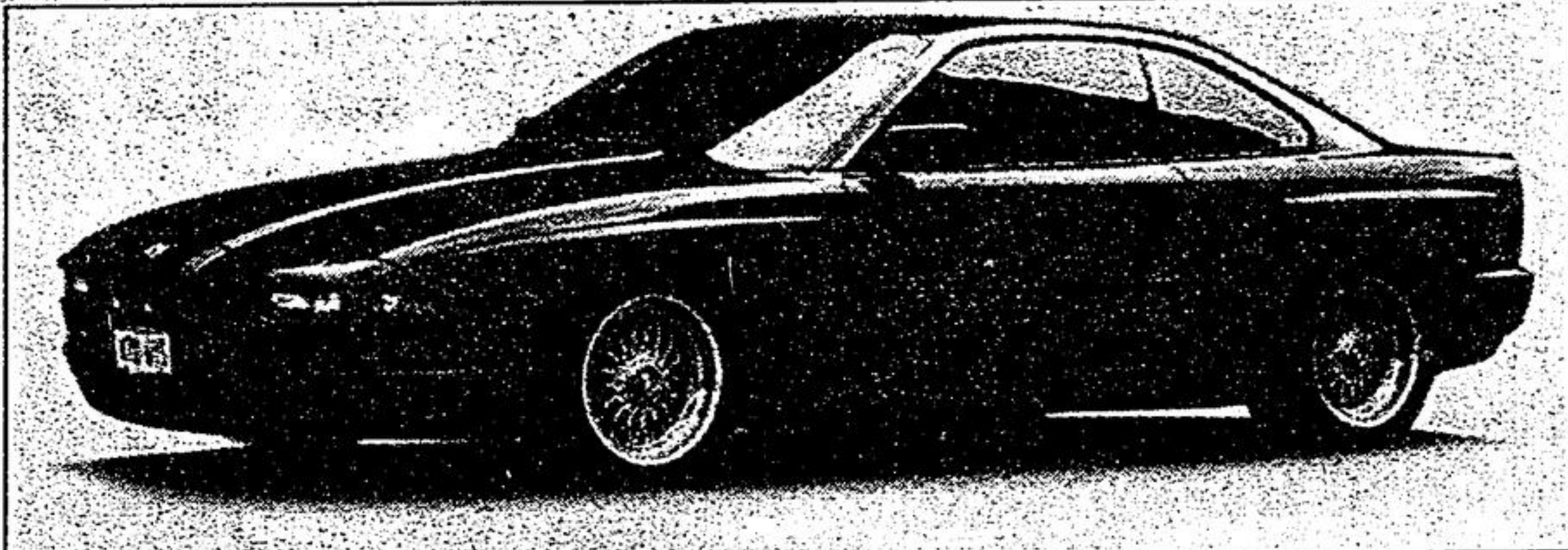
It was a curious page of BMW history.

Conceived in the 'me generation' of the 1980s when consumption was politically correct, the 8-Series made its debut just prior to the collapse of world markets and changing values. Sales just seemed to follow suit.

At its core, however, the 8-Series was nothing if not silky smooth. It reached terminal velocity in no time.

But, it was a legend with a limited life — if only for one glorious day in 1989.

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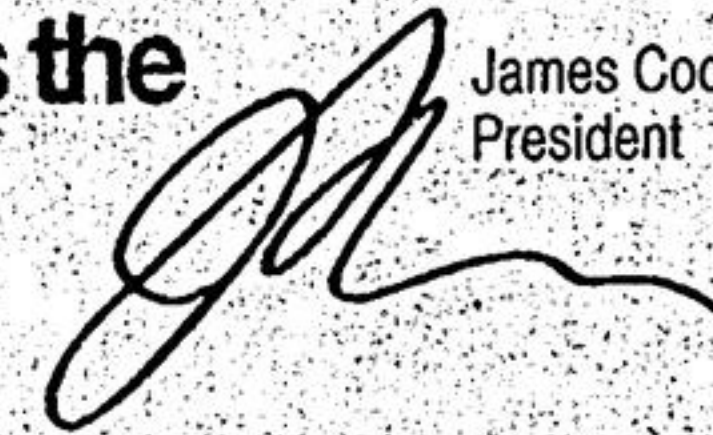


2.9%

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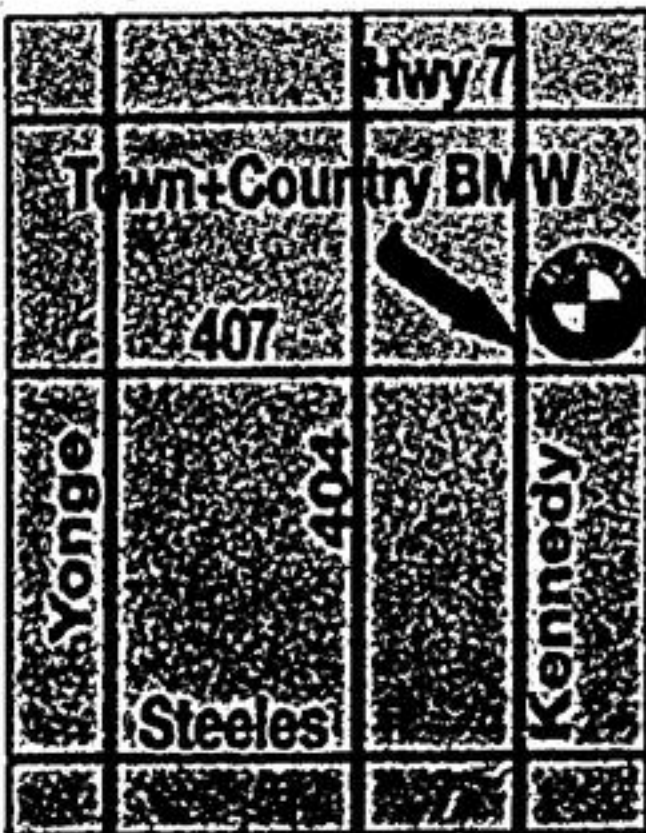
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