

Louis Chevrolet Has Nothing Much Left Except His Memories

Misfortune Has Dogged Heels of Auto Engineer

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DETROIT, March 18.—Twenty-seven years ago a famous racing driver sat down and scrawled his name on note paper with a stub pencil.

One afternoon this week Louis Chevrolet, whose signature as written in 1911 has been carried to every corner of the world on the automobile he designed, retraced a lifetime of memories in a trophy-decorated room.

Memories are about all that is left of the spectacular life which carried Louis Chevrolet from La Chaux de Fonds, Switzerland, to Paris and finally to the United States where he became one of the greatest drivers of all time.

On a table in the unpretentious front room of his home stands the Harkness Trophy, won at Sheephead Bay, N. Y., when he beat Ralph de Palma and set a new world's record of 111 miles per hour. On a stand behind the davenport rises the impressive Fort Dearborn Trophy, captured in Chicago in 1917.

Still handsome at 59, Louis Chevrolet is convalescing from a series of strokes which kept him confined for months. The coal black hair of his racing days has turned white and the impressive handle-bar mustache has given way to a small, gray one.

Except for an occasional outburst of Latin fire, Louis Chevrolet resembles a retired banker or physician, and despite misfortune that has dogged him relentlessly, he is not as bitter as one might expect.

Peering through horn-rimmed glasses and pointing with a yellow pencil, he leafed through his scrap-books. A picture of himself chatting with Marshall Foch at the Indianapolis race track. A headline yellow with age—"Louis Chevrolet Breaks World's Record." A shot of the tragic accident which took the life of his young brother, Gaston—"the flying Frenchman"—on a Los Angeles race track.

We asked to see a picture of the first Chevrolet car, the one he designed for William C. Durant, when that wizard of promotion started his comeback after losing control of General Motors Corp. for the first time.

Like all husbands, Louis Chevrolet called to his wife in the kitchen, a handsome woman with a soft voice and sharp intelligence. To his question in French, she asked:

"La premier voiture? Oh, la Chevy?"

"Oui," he said.

Perhaps even more than his racing feats, Louis Chevrolet is proud of that first car. In its design he included the first counterbalanced crankshaft, the first gear shift lever in the middle of the floor, the first out-of-the-way emergency brake under the dash. He even planned for fender skirts like those now universally used, but the machine shops of 1911 could not make them.

The picture, located with Mrs. Chevrolet's aid, was almost a historic document. Around the shiny new car—first Chevrolet ever built—was grouped a crowd of automotive notables. In the center was Will Durant in black bowler and short-collared overcoat. To one side stood Chevrolet in a long linen "duster" with his handle-bar mustache.

Chevrolet's car and Chevrolet's name were destined to sweep the industry. But not Chevrolet himself. In 1914 he withdrew from the company, feeling that it would not succeed.

Perhaps there is a grain of justice for Louis Chevrolet in the knowledge that Durant also eventually lost his share in the Chevrolet gold mine when for the second time he lost control of General Motors. But for Louis Chevrolet, there is the constant reminder of his name rolling by wherever he goes.

Even that failure did not stop Louis Chevrolet. With his name copyrighted everywhere, he set out in 1915 to make another car. This one he called the Frontenac after the first governor of Canada. For three years he returned to the grind of the race tracks. Tommy Milton also drove for him

in that campaign which put the name Frontenac on everybody's lips.

Then came the war, upsetting Chevrolet's plans and forcing him to discontinue racing until peace returned. He tried again when the war was over, obtaining financial backing from the son of Thomas Fortune Ryan, the famous financier. "Wall Street," Chevrolet says, froze Ryan out and incidentally killed the budding Frontenac.

Still, undaunted, Chevrolet designed and began producing the once well-known Frontenac cylinder head for Model T Ford cars. Then, just as the business got well under way and debts were being paid, Henry Ford abandoned the Model T.

Louis Chevrolet then turned his fertile mind to the design of two airplane engines with the backing of Glenn L. Martin, the famous plane designer. Chevrolet told how his engines passed the Federal Bureau of Standards tests with the highest efficiency rating ever recorded. But the year was 1930. Martin soon needed all his spare cash and was forced to withdraw support from Chevrolet.

The cycle completed itself. For 10 months about three years ago Louis Chevrolet worked in the Chevrolet axle plant in Detroit. But he quit when his oldest son died in Indianapolis. After that he worked for a time as Detroit representative for the Suflo Corp. makers of cutting tool oil, but was forced to give that up several months ago when he suffered a heart attack.