

L'Auto: November 24th, 1936

Section Automobile/Motocyclisme

Glory and decline....

Chevrolet tries to find a position

For the past 20 years, the founder of the famous American car hasn't had any connections to the brand that bears his name.

Living with his family in Detroit, he laments the big American automakers ingratitude. After working as a simple mechanic at a Chevy plant, he's now trying to find a job, but gets turned away everywhere.

(From our special reporter Maurice Henry)

November 1936 – Detroit, Michigan. Chevrolet! A name that evokes great memories. Chevrolet! That's the name of a great cyclist who had his time of glory at the end of the last century. Chevrolet! This is the name of the most popular car in the United States.

I was expecting to meet Louis Chevrolet, like all the big automobile industrialists, in a magnificent estate in the Detroit suburbs. To the contrary, I found him in a small cottage on Lakewood Boulevard that was nicely decorated, with his wife, his mother-in-law, and his youngest son (his older son died two years ago). Just before our meeting, he had asked over his friend P.C. Bastien, an engineer who has lived in the United States for about fifteen years.

For Louis, the happy times seem far away. He has to cope with hardships of life, he who has one of the best known names in the United States. He told me his story, not using empty phrases, but with a simplicity that suits a man like him. He told me the facts, added the dates, nothing else. He avoided to draw conclusions.

Not French, but Swiss ...

It has been written so many times, but Louis Chevrolet wasn't French. He was born in Switzerland in 1878, in la Chaux-de-Fonds, a child to Swiss parents. At age six his family moved to Beaune in France, where he and his brothers and sisters were educated. His oldest brother Alfred was naturalized and settled down in Artenay, close to Orléans, where he died in 1934. Another one of his brothers, Arthur, lives in Indianapolis. His youngest brother Gaston died on the race track in 1920, after having won the American Championship that same year.

Louis Chevrolet used to race bicycles, and won numerous events in Burgundy. Looking for new horizons he left Beaune, and moved to Paris where he first worked for Mors, rue du Théâtre, then for Henique in Beauvais. One day, it was in 1900, he left France and embarked for America. He moved to Canada, Quebec and Montreal. The following year he found work in the United States, in New York with de Dion-Bouton. When this agency closed in 1902, Louis studied motors and chassis' in Brooklyn, then came back to New York to work for Winton in 1903. In 1904 he returned to Brooklyn as a supervisor at the Pope-Toledo agency. Later he switched to Rambler, where now the Nash automobile is being manufactured, and then to Waverley, manufacturer of electric cars.

In 1905, back in New York, Louis joined the Fiat agency as a technician. He ran his first race at the wheel of a Fiat car, on May 20th of the same year, at Morris-Park in New York. He beat the world record for the mile in 52.8 seconds, and only a couple of months later he was crowned an American Champion. Late in 1905 he ran with Fiat in the Vanderbilt Cup.

For 1906 and 1907 Louis didn't race, but in 1908 he entered the Vanderbilt Race again for Matheson. 1909 he was contracted with Buick, where he designed race cars that became very successful. In the 1910 Vanderbilt race, he came off the road course, killing his race mechanic, and fracturing his left shoulder.

The first Chevrolet

Louis met William C. Durant, who was a financier, and now runs a grocery business in Asbury-Park, and also Mr. Little, and with them he designed the first Chevrolet car in Detroit. It was in May of 1911. From then on, one thing led to another: Louis, who lived in Flint, an industrial town about 80 km from Detroit, was assured by Durant that he wasn't going to build the Chevrolet plants in Flint, that he would like him and his family to move to Detroit. Trusting Durant, he sold his house in Flint and settled in Detroit, and later went on a trip to France. After his return to the United States, Louis found the doors of the factory in Detroit locked, and to his big surprise he learned that Durant had moved the whole operation to Flint. Discussion followed discussion, and finally Louis left the company in December 1913 while securing some interest.

In 1914, he worked with Albert Champion, a Frenchman who came to the United States, inventor of the spark plug, and with Albert Schmidt to design a pre-selective transmission. The following year, after repeating requests, (he knew W.C. Durant was behind these), he sold his stock in the Chevrolet Motor Company for a nickel and a dime. Just a few weeks later the stock went up considerably.

A new brand

After losing his rights to give his own name to a touring car, Louis designed the Frontenac car in 1915. After winning numerous races, he launched the new brand. When the United States entered the war in 1917 his hopes were low, but he designed race cars that won the Indianapolis grand prix in 1920 and 1921. The same year, a banker from New York, A.A. Ryan, wanted to build the Frontenac touring car. The plan was set up for execution, when the financier Ryan went bankrupt and left debts of six million US Dollars, and so the Frontenac car was swept away.

Having acquired the patent to modify Ford Model T-engines, Louis exploited this business for several years until Ford quit manufacturing this type of engine.

For several years he developed engines and chassis' for different customers. In 1928 he was hired as a technical specialist by Stutz in Indianapolis. In 1929 he began designing an engine for a passenger plane, a four cylinder inverted and air cooled motor, in collaboration with the Glenn L. Martin Company of Baltimore. The engine was tested and proven to be good, so Louis started manufacturing a small series, when the economic crisis hit the enterprise in 1932. In the course of the financial debacle of this time Louis lost all his money he had in the banks. 1933 he got a job as a simple mechanic in a Chevrolet plant where he worked till his older son died in 1934.

And what happened then? Well, Louis Chevrolet kept on looking for new job opportunities, trying to find new employment, but he kept being refused. It almost became a legend: At the Chevrolet plants he was constantly rejected, "We can't do anything for you". And in other plants he was answered: "Impossible to hire you, your name would create a confusion".

From time to time he sells cars

From time to time he sells a car, collects his commission, but more and more his business is being troubled by other salesmen who tend to explain to customers: "Don't buy from the intermediate Mr. Chevrolet, he doesn't need the money as much as I do." And Louis Chevrolet tells me: "If they knew, those salesmen! My situation is certainly less brilliant than theirs is". But Louis explains this without bitterness, and if he really holds a grudge, which would be understandable, he knows how to hide it, not making a big deal of it.

Does he want pity? No, never. He is a simple man, an inventor who didn't know how to deal with the business world. "What do you want, I haven't been lucky", is his formulated conclusion. Deep in his heart he fathoms the big automakers ingratitude, but he knows how to reserve it to himself.

I went with Louis to visit the Chevrolet plant, and went through the shop where he worked as a mechanic two years ago, his former colleagues greeted him with joy:

"Look who is here! A ghost, by golly!"

He greets his colleagues with a handshake, and enquires about their health, says a good word, and has a smile for everyone.

Workers who recognize him, point their fingers: "That is Mr. Chevrolet". He is aware of what's going on, he knows, but he pretends to ignore.

Everywhere there are signs marking the presence of "Chevrolet", "Chevrolet". His name can be seen on every street corner and on private lots, but it doesn't seem to bother him.

Chevrolet! A great name in the United States, but for him it's a handicap.