

Chevrolet Brothers Built Race Car Here

Joined Plainfield Firm as Engineers

By N. BLAINE LEFLER

I eased that powder blue and cream 1955 car of mine into a parking space just across the street from 7 Johnston Dr., Watchung, sat back in the seat and listened to the motor, which a thousand, or ten thousand, engineering minds had labored to produce over 45 years.

It was a strange sensation. Across the street from me were the last living memories of the man whose name, etched in blue and silver, marked my car and had marked millions of the same make of car since 1911.

The street on which I parked, now macadam but 40 years ago a hard-packed dirt trail, once resounded to the thr-r-rum of the hard-driven engines. They were engines this man designed to conquer the bricks of Indianapolis, the treacherous boards of Altoona, Pa., and the oil-streaked, 136-mile-an-hour oval of death at Langhorne.

Made Brief Stay

For, I was on the trail of Louis Chevrolet of Switzerland and France, and of Gaston, his brother, a sacrifice on the altar of speed in 1920. Both of them, for a brief time, were Plainfielders, whose labors began here just 40 years ago this Summer.

Much of the information gleaned about the death-defying, mechanically-minded Chevrolets came from their sister, Mrs. Albert L. Desnoyers of the Johnston Dr. address.

Louis Chevrolet, Swiss native found a measure of fame in the France of the '90s as a bicycle racer who was virtually unbeatable on the flat tracks around Beaune in the Cote D'Or Department of France.

Came as Chauffeur

Enamored of the motor age, he went to Paris to study motors. As a chauffeur, he came to America. He remained to study automotive design with a branch of the French company producing "De Dion Bouton," an early automobile which eventually fell by the wayside.

Louis didn't.

He began race driving early. On May 20, 1905, he drove a Fiat racing automobile over a measured mile at Sheepshead Bay, New York, in 52.8 seconds for a new world's record.

Led Racing Teams

He headed the Buick racing teams of 1909 and 1910 which made a clean sweep of racing titles. In 1911, he organized the Chevrolet Motor Company in Detroit in cooperation with William C. Durant, who gave the automotive industry much of its original impetus.

In 1915, he sold his interest in the car he had designed and perfected to Mr. Durant and shortly thereafter General Motors purchased the car, the name and the distinctive nameplate, now known all over the world.

Mrs. Desnoyers, (Martha Chevrolet) came to America in 1920. Her husband, Albert L. Desnoyers operated until his retirement the appliance business now conducted by his son, Albert L. Jr. at 114 North Ave., remembers the Chevrolet brothers' advent here.

Developed Racer

"Louis was only a consulting engineer for the American Motors Corporation," she says. "Gaston was a consulting engineer for them, too. They used the corporation's plant to develop their own racing car—the Frontenac Special."

"American Motors Six," the passenger car developed in the local plant, corner of Grant Ave. and W. Front St. at the rear of where now is the United Plumbing and Heating Supply Company Inc. of Abraham Kantor, never was a success.

It lingered in this area—only passenger car ever manufactured in Plainfield—from 1916 to 1919. William H. Hoople was president; George F. Baright, treasurer; Proctor W. Hansl, secretary; Joseph A. Carmody, manager, and Louis and Gaston Chevrolet, consulting engineers.

Reputation for Success

The reputation of the Chevrolets for success in motor designing (The Courier-News of the day advertises the Chevrolet Motor Car for \$490) was the reason for their being brought here. Originally, it was hoped the "American Six" would be another "Chevrolet." In The Courier-News for Jan. 11, 1917, appeared a dignified "invitation" asking Plainfielders to come to the New York Automobile Show in Grand Central Palace and see the Plainfield-made "American Six." Actually, the car shown was a hand-made pilot model over which the Chevrolet brothers labored just 40 years ago this month.

Eventually, a few cars moved down the assembly lines, Mrs. Desnoyers remembers, but, for the most part, Louis and Gaston labored into the wee small hours of each morning perfecting the Frontenac Special.

Lived in City

At the time, Louis lived at 1232 Park Ave. and Gaston at 818 Monroe Ave. It was in those three years of experimenting that they perfected the Frontenac.

Contemporaries of famed Tommy Milton (he won the Indianapolis "500" in a Frontenac Special in 1921), the Chevrolet name was one to conjure by on all the fast tracks of the '20s.

Gaston conquered at Indianapolis in 1918 and 1920, the latter year being after the brothers left here, their Frontenac completed. The same year in November, Gaston died when his machine crashed into that of Eddie O'Donnell on the Los Angeles Speedway during a 250-mile race.

Tested Cars Here

The Chevrolets made quite an impression on motor-minded Plainfield in the World War 1 years. Early mornings, and late at night, they hurled their experimental models of the Frontenac over the packed dirt of Johnston Dr., Watchung and Dugway Hill.

They played some part in the civic life of Plainfield, too.

Shortly after he arrived Louis Chevrolet was a judge for the "Mammoth Elks' Auto Parade" which Plainfield Lodge 885 BPO Elks had as highlight of its 1916 "Week of Merriment." He shared duties with Mayor Leighton F. Calkins of Plainfield and William Smalley of North Plainfield.

Joined Stutz Firm

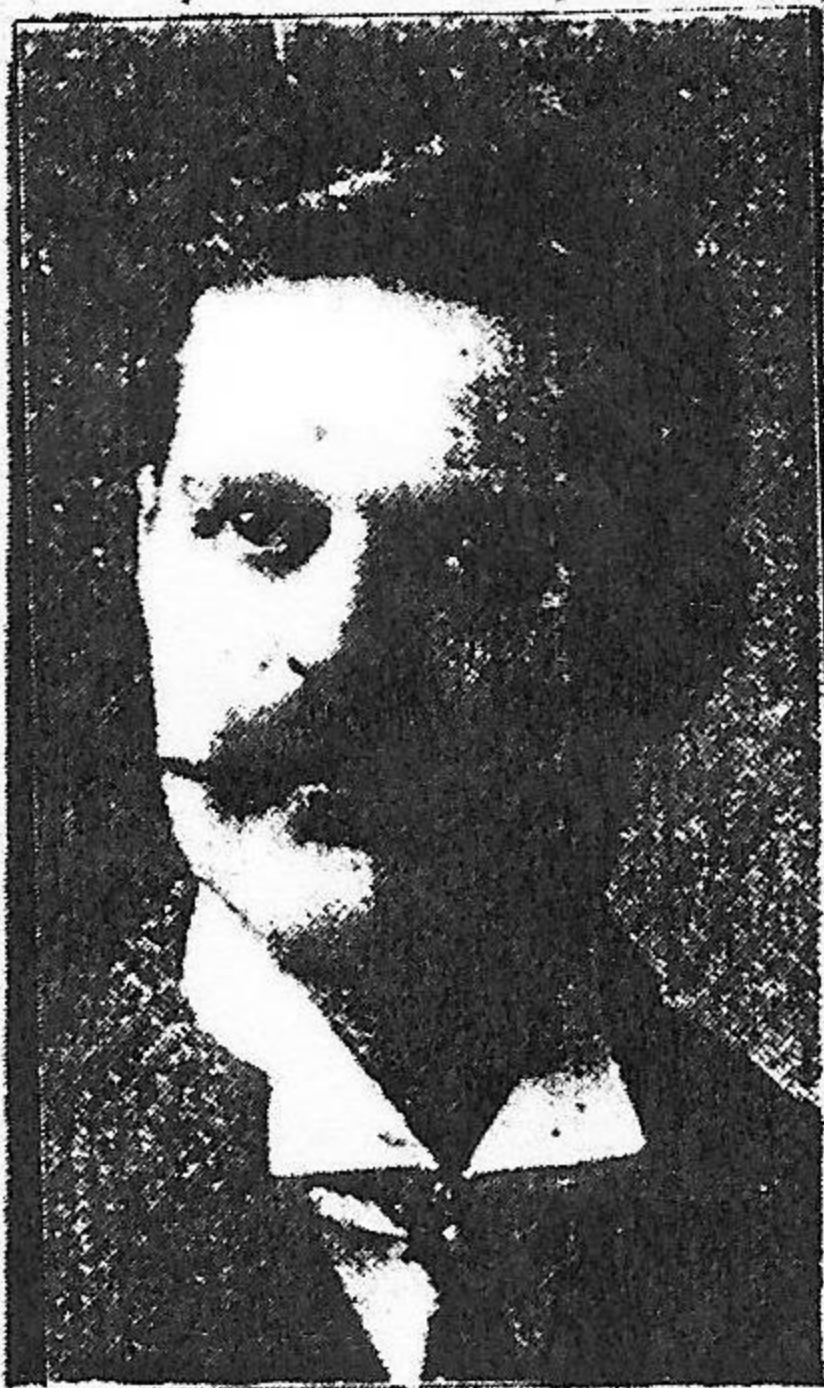
About 1923, Louis became consulting engineer for Stutz Motor Company. Later, he entered aviation manufacturing but didn't make a success of it. He died in 1941 in Detroit where his wife, and his son, Alfred, still reside.

A third brother, Arthur, died a few years ago.

Mrs. Desnoyers still cherishes the plastic-encased clippings and the memories.

Somehow the chrome signature on the front of my car seems to have a little more importance these days, too.

It's a memento of champions: Drivers AND engineers.



MOTOR PIONEER — Louis Chevrolet, whose name adorns one of the most famous cars in the world today, lived at 1232 Park Ave., Plainfield in the three years from 1916 to 1919, as consulting engineer for the short-lived "American Six." While here, he and his brother Gaston, both famed race driver champions, designed the Frontenac Special, known on the "Roaring Roads" of America in the hectic auto-racing '20s.



CHEVROLET FAMILY — This group picture, taken some 40 years ago on the lawn in front of 1232 Park Ave. includes members of the family of Louis Chevrolet, designer of the car which through the years has borne his name, and who was a resident here from 1916-19. Left to right are: Mrs. Trevor, mother of Mrs. Louis Chevrolet; Marthe Chevrolet, today Mrs. Albert L. Desnoyers of 9 Johnston; Dr. Watchung, sister

of Louis; Mrs. Louis Chevrolet; Mrs. Louis Francke of New York (Fannie Chevrolet), another sister and Mrs. Andre Fuller, New York, sister of Mrs. Louis Chevrolet, who lives today in Detroit. The children are Alfred Chevrolet, son of Louis, living in Detroit, and Louise Franck, now of Valley Stream, Long Island. Muhlenberg Hospital's original building is in the left rear.