Louis Chevrolet never made it rich

GASTON CHEVROLET WON THE 1920 Indianapolis 500 driving a car built by his older brother, Louis. Gaston was dead by 1921, killed in a racing accident in California.

Louis had been a driver himself. Two years before the first Indianapolis 500, Louis Chevrolet drove a Buick to victory in a 10-mile race on Aug. 19, 1909, the first day of racing at the new Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

The Chevrolet family was French, though Louis was born in Switzerland. At age 12, he was contributing to the family income by repairing and rebuilding bicycles — and in his free time, he raced them.

He worked in several French factories to save money for passage to America, where he heard there were opportunities for mechanics.

In 1900, shortly after his 21st birthday, Louis Chevrolet left France for Montreal. After learning English, he decided to go to New York, where he found a job with the de Dion car company in Brooklyn. He envied the bigger, more powerful cars he saw in the city.

Now with a steady income, he brought two of his sisters to join him in America. Soon after the death of his father, the rest of the family joined them.

Louis became smitten with auto racing the day he attended the 1904 Vanderbilt Cup Race on Long Island. In his first race four months later, Louis outraced the famous Barney Oldfield.

His daredevil style attracted the attention of William C. Durant, who headed the Buick racing team. Durant joined Bob Burman and Lewis Strang to form one of the most formidable racing teams of those days.

But Durant was more interested in business than racing. His plan was to bring together several independent car companies — Buick, Cadillac and Oldsmobile — under one umbrella he called General Motors. He helped Louis form the Chevrolet Motor Co., which would become the dominant carmaker within GM for the next century.

Louis was president of the company and designed its first models but never bought more than a tiny percentage of its stock. When Durant pushed for Chevrolet Motor Co. to change its car designs to something he thought would compete better with the Model T Ford, Louis, who had a temper, abruptly resigned — walking away from a fortune.

He later worked for Champion Sparkplug

Company but had a dispute with its president. He worked with the Stutz Co. in Indianapolis to produce Stutz-Frontenac passenger cars, but that venture fizzled in 1922 when the U.S. economy dipped into recession. In 1929, just before the stock market crash, Louis and his surviving brother, Arthur, were working with Glenn W. Martin to produce a lightweight aircraft engine. That project was abandoned during the Great Depression, but Martin would later resurrect the project and make a fortune during World War II with Martin Aircraft.

Before all of that, when Gaston was still alive, Louis advanced the technology of auto racing with the 1915 Cornelian. Louis could no longer call his cars Chevrolets, so he started using the name Frontenac. It was a Frontenac that Gaston drove to victory in the 1920 Indianapolis 500. After Gaston died, Tommy Milton drove for Louis in the 1921 race and won.

Louis teamed with C.W. Van Ranst to design the Fronty Ford, perhaps the most popular and successful race car of the 1920s. His engineering skills set the pace for race cars for nearly 20 years at Indianapolis Motor Speedway and at tracks around the country. Many of his innovations were incorporated into passenger cars.

Louis was devastated by Gaston's death. He quit racing and would not allow his son, Charles, to become a race driver. Ironically, Charles would die of kidney failure at 27.

Louis Chevrolet never got rich from his various engineering exploits but according to his relatives did not begrudge that fact. He died in 1941 at the age of 62 and was buried at Holy Cross and Saint Joseph Cemetery in Indianapolis, next to Gaston. Arthur, the last Chevrolet brother, hanged himself in 1946, and was interred next to his brothers.

— Rex Redifer, Michael Jesse

1921

LOUIS CHEVROLET AGAIN WAS THE winning car owner, but with his brother Gaston now dead he took on Tommy Milton as the driver.

Milton dueled with Ralph DePalma and Roscoe Sarles to get the win, and once again DePalma was done in by a mechanical breakdown. He had a three-lap lead at the halfway point but lost a connecting rod on lap 112 and his day was done.

Milton was blind in one eye and probably couldn't have become a race driver in a later era, but he went on to become the first two-time winner of the 500. He was badly burned in a 1919 accident but managed to get through his racing career otherwise intact, and decades later served as chief steward at the Speedway.

ABOVE LEFT: Tommy Milton won the 1921 Indianapolis 500 in just his third try. He would win twice in his eight-year career at the Speedway. *Star-News Archives*

ABOVE RIGHT: Ralph DePalma works on his French manufactured Ballot during the 1921 Indianapolis 500. DePalma had dominated much of the race, but finished 12th after having mechanical trouble. *Star-News Archives*

THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR.

MILTON WINS 500-MILE RACE

Speedway Victors Grimy, but Happy at Finish.