



NATIONAL SPRINT CAR HALL OF FAME

C.W. VAN RANST

BY L. SPENCER RIGGS

Imagine an engineer who worked with Fred Duesenberg, Louis Chevrolet, Harry Miller, E.L. Cord and Henry Ford. Imagine that he also found time to design Indy-winning cars for Gaston Chevrolet, Tommy Milton and Fred Frame. Moreover, imagine that he accomplished all this without a high school or college education. However unlikely it sounds, one man did all these things - and more.

On December 7, 1892, Samuel and Anna Van Ranst were blessed with a son (following the birth of their daughter, Bertha, one year earlier). The strapping child was born in New York City, but the family soon moved upstate to Syracuse, where he was reared. Cornelius Willett Van Ranst, known as C.W. to the world, "Van" to his close friends and associates, was inquisitive by nature. From an early age, he always had to know why some machines worked, while others failed.

As a young man starting out in his chosen field, Van Ranst worked for several companies designing engines and special castings. However, he'd never even considered a career in auto racing. That all changed near the end of WWI, when his talent was discovered by race driver Ralph Mulford. It was "Smiling Ralph," who introduced Van Ranst to Louis Chevrolet. In no time at all, Chevrolet signed the angular designer to a contract.

In 1919, Van Ranst's first engine for the 'Chevy Boys' was a six-cylinder, double overhead-cam with a unique crankcase driven supercharger. However, at 300 cubic inches, the motor was deemed obsolete when the American Automobile Association (AAA) cut the Indy displacement to 183.

Van Ranst designed a four-cylinder, double overhead-cam engine to power a team of seven Monroe-Frontenac Indy cars. Van also designed the bulbous-appearing, yet lightweight, racers to house his engines.

On May 31, 1920, Louis' younger brother Gaston Chevrolet drove one of the Monroe cars to victory in the Indy 500. It was the first time an American-built car had won the premier event since Joe Dawson's National in 1912.

For the 1921 Indy classic, Van Ranst designed a pair of straight-eight, double overhead-cam engines. Tommy Milton and Mulford drove the new cars, with Tom Alley, Percy Ford and Jules Ellingboe wheeling the four-bangers.

Van took practice laps in nearly all the cars, and Louis was impressed with his driving. At the last moment, Louis insisted that Van qualify a car for the race. At first, he resisted, but the boss won out. And Chevrolet wasn't the only one impressed with the engineer's driving. When the press learned Van Ranst was going to race, they made him a dark-horse favorite to win.

Since Van's wife Harriet felt her husband hadn't received enough credit for the previous year's Indy win, she was all for his driving in the race. Starting last in the short 23-car field, Van was running a solid sixth, when a broken water hose stopped him at 87 laps. He was awarded sixteenth place. In a masterful performance, Milton and his Frontenac won the 500. Ford finished third, with Mulford ninth.

This and other forays into competition gave Van a new respect for the drivers. It also gave him a hands-on example of what drivers really needed in a racer.

With all the success the Chevrolet camp enjoyed, one would think their financial fortunes were assured. However, Louis was a poor businessman. It wasn't long before he filed for bankruptcy.

Necessity is often the mother of invention. In the early 1920's, the Chevrolet Brothers were in deep financial trouble. With this uppermost in his mind, Louis Chevrolet considered racing his Monroe-Frontenac Indy cars in dirt short-track events. However, he wanted to know what the competition was like. He decided to send Van out to scout some of the local races around Indianapolis.

After two or three weekends of traveling to the dusty bull-rings, Van returned with his findings. "You don't want to take your expensive Indianapolis cars out on those tracks," Van Ranst advised. "You'd just get them wrecked, and there's no real money to be made. The promoters pay very little. However, the cars that are racing out there are a hodgepodge of makeshift equipment," Van continued. "All the fans or the drivers seem to care about is sliding sideways, throwing dirt and making a lot of noise. Most of those brutes are simply stripped-down passenger cars. Nothing is standard, and there's very little speed equipment. And here's where you could make some money. We could build some lightweight, short-wheelbase cars. We could base them on the Ford Model T and standardize

replacement parts. We'd make them easy to repair and maintain. That way, a good shade-tree mechanic, or Joe down at the corner gas station could go racing. Believe me, it wouldn't be long before your equipment would be the standard for such racing."

It wasn't long before Chevrolet's two Fronty-Ford "house cars" started appearing on the dirt tracks. Initially, driven by Ralph and Homer Ormsby, the lithe machines ate the competition alive. Later on, Charles "Dutch" Baumann, Howdy Wilcox II and Benny Benefiel, among others, walloped the competition at the controls of the potent Chevrolet short track cars.

The cars were even more successful than Van Ranst had hoped, and pulled the Chevrolet boys out of their financial tailspin. Their racing endeavors continued for another ten years, largely from the sales of Fronty-Ford racers and speed equipment started at Van's behest. Long after he'd departed the company, the Fronty-Fords turned out under the direction of Art Chevrolet, still bore Van's trademark ideas. Ultimately, his Model R overhead valve Fronty head sold over 10,000 units.

Van Ranst died on October 11, 1972, in Dearborn, Michigan. He was survived by his wife Harriet and his three children, Cornelius, Jr., Robert and Judith. Today, Judith Van Ranst Willcox lives in Norfolk, Virginia.



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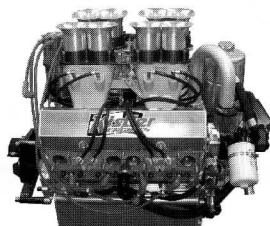
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