



CHEVY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

History of a Long-Standing Relationship

By Bill Kelly

For all the hurrahs and hosannas that would later take place, it is astounding to note that what took place in a racketsy Detroit barn in 1912, went virtually unnoticed by the public at large. The historical event was not recorded in the newspapers, for no headline writers—or anybody else for that matter—could see into the future.

At the time, American families were being wafted away by headlines that dramatized the “Flapper” era: The very first Hollywood screen serial, *What Happened to Mary?* was scheduled for release. Boxing’s Heavyweight Champion Jack Johnson was in trouble with the law and had fled to Paris. In April, the world trembled at the news that the British luxury liner, *Titanic*, disappeared into the bosom of the deep during her maiden voyage.

So the fact that the brothers Louis, Arthur and Gaston Chevrolet were developing an exciting new car in a outbuilding, did not attract Ruthian attention among the citizenry, nor did it set off canons in the automotive industry. In truth,

humanity was too busy dancing to Oompah-pah, the Bunny Hug, Turkey Trot, and Grizzly Bear to be bothered about the squabbling going on between the Chevrolet brothers and their financial supporter, William “Billy” Durant, a bluenose from Flint, Michigan.

It was a case of the unstoppable force meeting the immovable object. The Chevrolets wanted to make expensive streamlined cars while Durant was interested in inexpensive, mass-produced cars. Before the predicament could adjust itself peacefully, Louis Chevrolet walked out, leaving Billy Durant in control. Wisely, Durant maintained the Chevrolet name.

History would prove Durant right, for Henry Ford’s inexpensive, mass-produced Model T’s zoomed to an astounding 15 million sales from 1909 to 1927 and transformed the economic and social fabric of the 20th century.

By 1914, the optimism of prosperity was everywhere. The Chevrolet name had become identified with inexpensive, assembly line cars built with a ➤

Chevys and law enforcement have quite a history.



A restored Chevy, used by the Menteca, California police and . . .



. . . a 1999 Camaro currently being used in Oklahoma.



A Gator Bowl delivery of 246 1977 Nova police vehicles.

motor Tex Rickard and the fact that Babe Ruth's estranged wife was killed tragically in a fire, leaving him \$5. Henry Ford opened amours on the buying populace by boosting the daily wage rates from \$6 to \$7, a ploy to keep the unions at bay, some claimed. There were 23,000,000 cars on the roads by now. Chevrolet was at its crest. They introduced a six-cylinder car with the same 46-horsepower engine that sold for the price of the four-cylinder. The same engine was used in Chevrolet trucks, fire engines and ambulances. Although the Virginia State Troopers nor Oklahoma State Troopers did not immediately snap them up, small-town sheriff's departments in both of these states used them to patrol wilderness areas as well as city streets.

During late 1949 and the early 1950's overhead valve, six-cylinder engines remained a characteristic feature of Chevrolets. Police agencies were still leery because they were no match for get-away cars with 8-, 12-, and 16- cylinder engines. Among law enforcement, the Chevrolet withered, and the Ford became the ➤

financial concentration towards the American Dream—"We are too poor to economize. Economy is a luxury," was the slogan of the day.

Just as Durant had prophesied, within two years 70,000 vehicles per year rolled off the Chevrolet assembly lines the way gold was suppose to gush from the cornucopia of the Goddess of Plenty. Chevrolets' utter demolishing of its competitors was just another confirmation of the opulence of the times.

Two privileged things unfurled upon prospering Americans in 1916: a happy world knew the old cotton underwear had given away to the much sexier, more feminine silk, and, most importantly, the Chevrolet brothers formed the Frontenac Motors Corporation.

The Chevrolet brothers were building speed, turning out parts for Ford racing cars, nicknamed "Fronty Fords." Chevrolet made three cars for the 1916 Indianapolis 500. Gaston Chevrolet became the first driver in Indy history that year to go the full 500 miles without a tire change. His was the sheerest pioneering exploration into unknown territory.

In 1918 Chevrolet joined General Motors and their cars were marketed like a new brand of cereal. But if laboring Americans believed the advertisements, law enforcement skeptics doubted Chevrolet's ability to meet their needs for emergency work. When a policeman called into a life-saving emergency situation slammed the accelerator to the floor, he wanted to hear the tires squealing like

work," noted George H. Dammann in his 1973 Book, *Sixty Years of Chevrolet*. "This is probably because the more glamorous police flyers (special models made by these companies) caught the public's imagination."

Car fever had taken a powerful hold on people by 1925 when a new Super K Series was introduced by Chevrolet. Two of these cars were utilized by police departments. The Chicago Police Department's Traffic Division Manslaughter Squad purchased a three-window business coupe to transport its photographic and investigative equipment. The Los Angeles Police Department was the benefactor of Chevrolet's Superior K touring cars.

Because the lack of vibration in a car skirting at top speed along a dirt road allowed a sharpshooter to hit his target every time, the cars were greatly received by several Southern California law enforcement agencies including the LAPD. Slimmed down to save gas, yet retaining its photoflash reaction, the only special equipment on the car was a windshield-mounted spotlight.

In 1929 the "Gee-whizz" news of the day was the sudden death of fight pro-

pigs being slaughtered. The Chevy was not there yet, so law enforcement buyers shunned them like the plague.

Early Chevrolets fall behind Ford, Lincoln and Buick in their reputation for police



A 1975 Nova at GM's Milford, Michigan proving ground.



A 1959 Edsel in Bear Valley, California.



A popular model, 1974 Nova 9C1.



A 1989 Caprice, Illinois State Police.



A 1995 Chevy Durant, Oklahoma police.

choice of lawmen who depended on bullet-fast vehicles for blinding speed chases and regular emergency duties.

At the outbreak of World War II, Chevrolet concentrated on producing cab-over-engine military fire trucks and ambulances for the armed forces. With rare exceptions, the military police were recipients of remaining passenger cars.

"We're doing business without high hats," gangster Dion Banion used to say,

Chevrolet expanded its fleet sales program by offering a factory "police special" package that livened up their law enforcement sales as had hitherto been undreamed of.

and by 1955 so was Chevrolet. They introduced a floral piece called "small block V-8" in a completely modernized vehicle. And what was most marvelous were the four-barrel carburetors and dual exhausts designed to increase power. A greater number of Americans began looking up to Chevrolet and their cars attracted police buyers from around the country.

In 1958 Alaska became the 49th State. The average American income was \$4,550 a year. A new Chevrolet cost about \$2,100. A loaf of bread was 19 cents. Gas wavered between 21 and 25 cents a gallon. Perhaps television show host Ed Sullivan popularized the Chevrolet when he purchased one with a "Big Block" V-8 engine with 280-horsepower and spoke about it over the air. The untold story of the "Big Block" V-8

suddenly became intriguing to buyers of police cars. Chevrolet expanded its fleet sales program by offering a factory "police special" package that livened up their law enforcement sales as had hitherto been undreamed of.

The package was based on the least expensive Del Ray three-passenger Utility Sedan, which was stripped of a back seat. The 348-cubic-inch engine was favored. A second 1958 Police Special was

available in the cheap Yeoman station wagon that carried their biggest engine.

Once the public became enthralled by Chevy's powerful V-8 the car was on its way to automobile immortality. Suddenly they were extremely popular with sheriff's departments and highway patrol car buyers. By the mid 1960s, such beau ideals were obtainable on the compact Chevy II, intermediate Chevelle as well as the full-sized Chevrolet rostrums and a variety of truck chassis.

In 1964 Chevy Vans rolled off the assembly lines with a near-miraculous accomplishment and a new generation of highway patrol buyers snapped them up with traffic-stopping delirium. To the country at large, these vans became more popular than mah-jongg. They were a natural starting point for ambulance conversions, which had formally been limited to station wagons, Suburbans and panel deliveries. And something else: fire truck conversions were accessible on everything from Chevrolet half-ton pickups to cab-over-engine heavy-duties.

This same year, the four-wheel drive Blazer had an impact on law enforcement inasmuch as they were a natural for forest rangers, ski patrols and off-road investigations. They were particularly useful for incredible journeys into mountainous regions.

In 1979 several highway patrol departments experimented with high-performance Chevrolet Z-28 Camaros. These vehicles were tested in various regions ranging from deep, rocky canyons to high plateaus barren of soil. The objective of these smaller cars was to see if they could perform as well as big police cars while saving state police agencies gas money. ▶

They were widely acclaimed by the officers who tested them. Highway patrolmen praised their sleek, elaborate looks, white-lettered tires, mag wheels and trunk-top spoilers. Every car used a 350-cubic-inch-four-barrel engine and had air conditioning, push bumpers, bucket seats and duel spotlights.

These Camaros had magnetism to burn, but they failed miserably where it counted most.

Among the biggest problems were blown engines and worn out front suspensions. Additionally, transporting prisoners was almost impossible. Most highway patrol agencies abandoned these cars and went back to the four-door sedans, leaving the Camaro struggling.

While Camaros failed to cut the mustard with police agencies, several other Chevrolets were recommended by Virginia State Police, California Highway Patrol, and Oklahoma Highway Patrol buyers, to mention a few. Models like the Nova and the Malibu were reported to be excellent vehicles for sharp turns and pickup power while chasing the bad guys. Their service was exceptionally long and more miles to the gallon helped with operating expenses. For these reasons, many police departments favored Chevys for patrol duties over any other car.

The Oldsmobile is the oldest member of General Motors Corporation, dating back to 1887. Cadillac was created in 1902 and Buick a year later. Pontiac evolved from the Oakland Motor Car Company, which began in 1908. So Chevrolet, having joined them in 1912, is the baby of the "family."

One final coda to the look backward



A Chevy Blazer, Oklahoma.



A Chevy Tahoe used by Amtrak Police.



A 1991 Chevy Caprice, Oklahoma.

at the brilliant, courageous success of three brothers who touched on an idea and formulated it into a whooping success story. They were memorable characters who left ineradicable marks upon the business of crime fighting. A critic went further: he said "It is part of our national history that the dream of every boy is to own a Chevy, even before he owns a house." □