

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

AIR RAID

Exploding connecting rods blasting grenade holes through cylinder blocks ... savage arguments breaking out between pistons and valves ... crankshafts ripping in two -- a race car's engine is a dangerous place, heaving with mayhem and destruction, and this was especially so during the dawn of American racing.

The open roads were being supplanted by dirt tracks, and Ford's tin can Lizzies were, mostly, all that early soil souls and hop-up merchants had to race. Fastened together with bailing wire and inspired imagination, the early economy hot rods wheezed, clanked, and split at the seams until speed pioneers such as: Frontenac, McDowell, Roof, Rajo, Gallivan, Norton & Brett, Dreyer, Riley, and others began offering purported staying power.

There was a lot of this aftermarket hardware being turned out, and not all of it bad, but soon the thoroughbred Millers and Meyer-Drake Offenhauser motors were annihilating all the made-at-homes. Still, out in Los Angeles, lived a racing innovator who stubbornly refused to join the thoroughbred parade.

He was an aircraft machinist named Paul Fromm, who, dipping into his aviation ways, machined in half an over sized aircraft power-plant out of a Hispano-Suiza; named it a "Hisso;" and, before it was banned for going too fast, campaigned it as a sprint car at Legion Ascot. Drivers relished the big air-machine's horsepower, but complained that its vibration frequently put their hands to sleep.

Around this same era, back on the county fair tour of the corn-pone Midwest with its merry-go-rounds, Ferris wheels, livestock exhibits, and dirt tracks from hell, a hillbilly crooner named Buddy Callaway jumped on the bandwagon with a Curtiss airplane motor.

Still existing is a fateful picture of Buddy, who obviously didn't miss many meals, wedging himself with difficulty inside the cramped confines of his ungainly invention. And just because his Curtiss caught a few fences in its time, and ultimately caused Buddy to meet his end, other out-of-step inventors weren't spooked from going the flying machine route with an oddity named the Ranger.

Rangers were Fairchild Aviation's low-wing trainers, and, on paper, were guaranteed Meyer-Drake killers. The whole air-cooled package included six droning cylinders, displacement of 440 cubic inches, horsepower of 450 – twice that of a Meyer-Drake -- and a sophisticated electrical system of high-voltage, double-magneto, dozen-spark plug, electrical system But a Ranger's biggest plus was that weighed in at a flyweight 380 pounds, just like a Meyer-Drake.

Small wonder, then, that no more than a handful of Rangers ever raced, and, among this handful, the most potent was the four-wheel-drive monster created and chauffeured by the funny fraud known and ridiculed as rural racing's "Kentucky Colonel."



And a renegade Hoosier, Diz Wilson, a really remarkable Rangerphile, kept and competed with a whole backyard's worth of Rangers, each one spray-painted school bus yellow, because Diz maintained all of Monroe County's children's buses.

Just like their opponent Meyer-Drakes, Rangers didn't get to race on paper, but had to enter combat on lovely Podunk ovals edged by flimsy wooden walls at best and by no walls at all at worst.

And high on the hierarchy of such horror dirt tracks was the one in backwater Tennessee that was bordered by a polluted moat, complete with divers in motorboats patrolling just in case anybody vaulted into the reeking drink. Another beauty was in Iowa, whose east end featured a fragrant trash pit to fall into.

And there was this joint in Minnesota, where an out-of-the-ballpark jumper named Jimmy Campbell got served with a summons and a bill for butchering 80 bushels of an irate farmer's corn.

Chauffeurs of Meyer-Drakes had mastered the trick of throwing their pedigree four-bangers into fairgrounds corners all chockablock with holes ridges, ruts and traffic and doing so at better than 70 mph.

And the Ranger cadre of chauffeurs duplicated them by droning into battle as though everything were OK and conditions were just the same for themselves. But they weren't. For one thing, a Ranger power band of between 4,000 and 5,000 rpm was the narrowest window imaginable. Worse, the 6.1 compression ratio provided not nearly enough back pressure to whoa a Ranger when its chauffeur came off the pedal. Add to that, unless the local atmospheric were perfect, and a dirt track surfaced went dry-slick, wrestling a Ranger wasn't any fun at all.

Against all odds, one blackballed Ranger chauffeur somehow, briefly, managed to shine. He was Emmett Maurice Barton, a moon-faced rascal off Oklahoma's prairie known as "Buzz" Barton from his races in a stretched Offy midget buzz-bomb. Stumpy and brave, the quintessential outlaw dirt tracker, Buzz was the Barney Oldfield of his era; just like Oldfield, ashes from Buzz's foul-smelling cigar forever was spilling onto his pot belly.



Tricky and difficult to control as a Ranger was, Buzz nearly swung it. But he couldn't get along with his lady car owner, a harridan whose former driver – the lady's own spouse – had earlier lost an argument with a guard rail. Word has come down that she was mean as snake and had Buzz frightened to death.

You no longer see Rangers racing, except, maybe, in vintages matches.

But at the end of the last century, when I was in Iowa, covering the Knoxville Nationals for winged sprint cars, I saw a Ranger in an old barn in Des Moines. Complexities with the dry sump oiling system and the tallness of its six cylinders mandated that a Ranger be installed in a racing car backwards!

This one's competition days were long concluded and generations of field mice had constructed nests inside it.-JS