

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

VESTRIS

Two hundred miles off Cape Fear, resting on the floor of the Atlantic, where the sea is two miles deep, lies the wreckage of the SS *Vestris*, the notorious death liner which on November 29th, 1928, ran into a violent storm; tilted and quickly sank; and managed to drown 100 crew members and passengers, including the Indianapolis 500 and board track race drivers Earl DeVore and Norm Batten.



The doomed pair, along with their wives and DeVore's puppy mascot, "Speedway Lady", were on their ways to South America, and a series of velodrome matches in Buenos Aires. Both of them were fast chauffeurs on Indy's carpet of red bricks, as well as the towering board bowls of Beverly Hills, Culver City, Fresno, Seattle in the west, and Atlanta, Laurel, Altoona and Kansas City in the east. Fast, yes, but neither DeVore or Batten was in the class of Jimmy Murphy, the hero of the French Grand Prix, or Frank Lockhart, both one-time Indy 500 champions; or Indy's two-time

celebrity winner Tommy ("Cyclops") Milton; or the Brickyard's first triple winner six-toed Louie Meyer.

All this was in the 1920s, decade of the Duesenburg and Miller wars. DeVore and Batten were Miller soldiers, mostly. But during the epic 500 when Duesenburg team captain Peter DePaolo won and became the first combatant to average better than 100 mph for the entire 6 hours, Batten had had his small share in DePaolo's big moment: when DePaolo had to stop to have his blistered hands bandaged, it was Batten who relieved him for 50 miles. As for DeVore, his big 500 occurred when he came in second, but the following year smacked the wall in the first turn on the first lap..



The *Vestris* had a history of disaster. During the Great War she had a narrow escape in the North Atlantic when she was part of an Allied convoy and a U- Boat torpedo narrowly missed her. Then just a few years later, on a cruise to Havana, fire broke out

in a coal bunker—*Vestris* drifted five days before touching land!



Obeying an ancient tradition of the sea, Captain William J Carey, master of the *Vestris*, chose to go down with his ship, as did, unwillingly, 99 of the vessel's crew and passengers. Causes of the calamity and large loss of life were many: overloading of the coal port; delay in sending an SOS which caused the rescue ships to arrive in darkness and 37 miles away; the cowardly actions of the crew, which kept the lifeboats and life preservers for themselves instead of sharing

them with the drowning passengers.

DeVore and Batten were brave men who saved their wives and “Speedway Lady”. But neither one had a chance of survival in an ocean of sharks. Batten was already celebrated for an amazing act of bravery in one of his first 500s. This was when his Miller’s fuel tank split open and a big fire erupted. Rather than entering the pits and subjecting other drivers and pit members to the first and second degree burns he suffered, he chose to stay on the Speedway until the fire blew out.

Unconfirmed reports claim that DeVore’s Miller , the Chromolite Special, went to the bottom with the *Vestris*.