



“CANNON BALL”

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“NO RECORD, NO MONEY,” WAS THE MANTRA OF RUGGED ERWIN GEORGE “CANNON BALL” BAKER, BEST KNOWN FOR TRAVERSING THE COUNTRY COAST-TO-COAST ON THE ROADLESS, CRAGGY TERRAIN OF EARLY 20TH CENTURY AMERICA. AFTER ONE RECORD-SETTING GRIND IN 1915, NEWSPAPERS NICKNAMED HIM “CANNONBALL” AFTER NEW YORK’S UNSTOPPABLE CANNONBALL EXPRESS LOCOMOTIVE. IT WAS JUST ONE OF HIS 143 ENDURANCE RECORD ATTEMPTS WITH MOTORCYCLES, CARS AND TRUCKS.

**E.G. "CANNON BALL" BAKER
ON ONE OF HIS NUMEROUS
COAST-TO-COAST RECORD
ATTEMPTS, ILLUSTRATING THE
CHALLENGES OF THE JOURNEY
MAINLY DUE TO LACK OF
EARLY ROAD CONSTRUCTION.**

Born March 12, 1882 near Lawrenceburg, Ind., Baker's first home was a log cabin. From such common circumstance, a scrawny, sometimes sickly boy named Erwin must have seemed an unlikely candidate for international fame.

Fortune took a turn when Baker's parents moved the family to Indianapolis shortly after their son's 12th birthday. He became well acquainted with hard work, toiling at the Indianapolis Drop Forge Company 10 hours daily for a meager 88 cents. This spawned a craving for an earthy, vigorous lifestyle, and by 1905 he joined a traveling acrobatic vaudeville act where, among other things, he beat punching bags with his hands, feet and head.

Baker was also a bicycle racer and stepped up to gasoline power in 1906 when he purchased an Indian motorcycle. Two years later, at a Fourth of July picnic in Crawfordsville, Ind., he entered a race and won. By 1909, he was a member of the factory Indian motorcycle team. This was just in time for Baker to claim his greatest victory in conventional motorcycle racing at the first motorized competition of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway on Aug. 14, 1909.

Conditions at the new Speedway, at this time unpaved except for a thin coating of "asphaltum oil" and crushed limestone, were deemed treacherous to riders accustomed to running surfaces of hard-packed beach sands or board tracks. The sharp rocks were hard on tires, and the original entry list of 30 riders dwindled to four brave men with Baker at the top of the list.

In the span of 11 minutes, 31.2 seconds, Baker won the Federation of American Motorcyclists (FAM) 10-mile amateur competition and became the first Hoosier to secure victory in an FAM event. This no doubt thrilled the G.H. Westing Company, the sole distributor of Indian motorcycles in central Indiana.

While the next logical step might have been to continue closed-

circuit bike racing, that wasn't Baker's style. Instead, he began a series of stunts racing passenger locomotives from town to town. While the image of a lanky, big-nosed, leather-capped rider bouncing full-tilt along side a train was strange enough, consider there were virtually no roads. He slithered through mud, bounded over boulders and weathered rain and snow in open fields to make sure Indian motorcycles showed their best.

George Hendee, co-founder and president of Indian, approached Baker about staging a South American tour in 1912. It was a resounding success, as Baker logged 14,000 miles through Jamaica, Cuba and Panama on a seven-horsepower Indian. Months later, he rode his Indian into Savannah, Ga., as the first man to cross the United States on a motorcycle.

Subsequent endurance runs enhanced the Indian brand and established Baker as the long-distance riding marvel. He cemented this reputation in May 1915 by crossing the United States on four wheels, not two. Harry C. Stutz, founder of the Indianapolis-based Stutz Motor Company, asked Baker to cross the country in one of his famed Bearcats.

**A CONFIDENT MAN BUILT OF
IRON AND STEEL, JUST LIKE THE
MACHINES HE RODE, BAKER
HAD A FEARLESS ATTITUDE
AND A CERTAIN PHILOSOPHY
ABOUT RIDING AND RECORD
BREAKING THAT WAS UNLIKE
ANY OTHER OF THE TIME.**

"NO RECORD, NO MONEY."

Barren lands across the plains offered dangers hidden beneath tall grass, including a bout with quicksand that nearly sunk his effort. When Baker arrived in New York after 11 days, seven hours and 15 minutes, newsmen crowned him with the moniker of the great city's juggernaut train, "Cannonball."

Baker, a natural showman since his vaudeville days, recognized the value of the name and copyrighted it as "Cannon Ball." Differing from the train, he fashioned a name of two words that survive today on his gravesite monument at Crown Hill Cemetery in Indianapolis.

Cannon Ball bested his transcontinental mark by four days in 1916, this time in a Cadillac. During this period, he popularized his guarantee to manufacturers of "no record, no money." He drove



(TOP TO BOTTOM)

AUGUST 14, 1909:
"CANNON BALL" BAKER
PARTICIPATES IN THE
FIRST MOTORCYCLE RACE
AT THE INDIANAPOLIS
MOTOR SPEEDWAY.

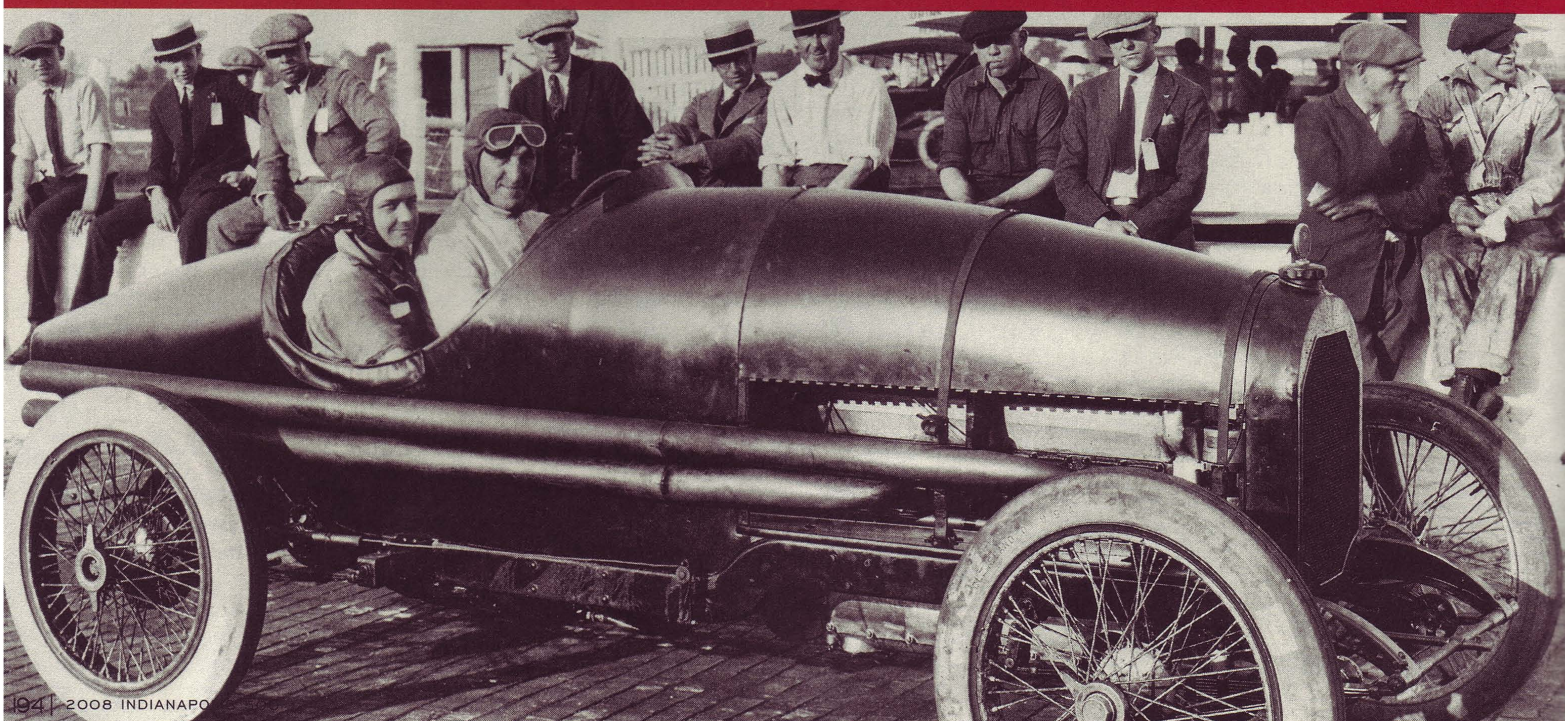
UNKNOWN YEAR AND PLACE:
SECOND RIDER FROM THE
RIGHT, "CANNON BALL"
PREPARES FOR ONE OF THE
MANY LONG DISTANCE RACES
IN WHICH HE PARTICIPATED.

1922:
E.G. "CANNON BALL" BAKER
(RIGHT) ALONGSIDE HIS
RIDING MECHANIC, SHORTY
HANSON, FINISHING 11TH IN
THE INDIANAPOLIS 500.

for dozens of companies, including Lexington, Nash, Willys St. Claire, Franklin and Graham-Paige — none of which exist today.

The more runs he made, the more twists he put on the task. He drove an Oldsmobile cross-country — exclusively in high gear. He challenged promoters in Australia to pick two cities and he rode between them, setting records with his Indian motorcycle. In 1924 he made the first North American transcontinental winter run for the Gardner car company. Later, driving a Rickenbacker, he ran a "Three Flags" tour, starting in Vancouver, British Columbia, and ending in Tijuana, Mexico. A big attention-garnering contest was his 1928 victory in a New York to Chicago run over the 20th Century Limited locomotive promoted as the "pride of the railroad industry."

Baker's oddest adventure may have come when he drove a 2-ton Buick truck loaded with Atlantic Ocean water to San Francisco in just under six days. Perhaps his greatest victory was his 53-hour solo drive across the United States, an incredible feat with today's

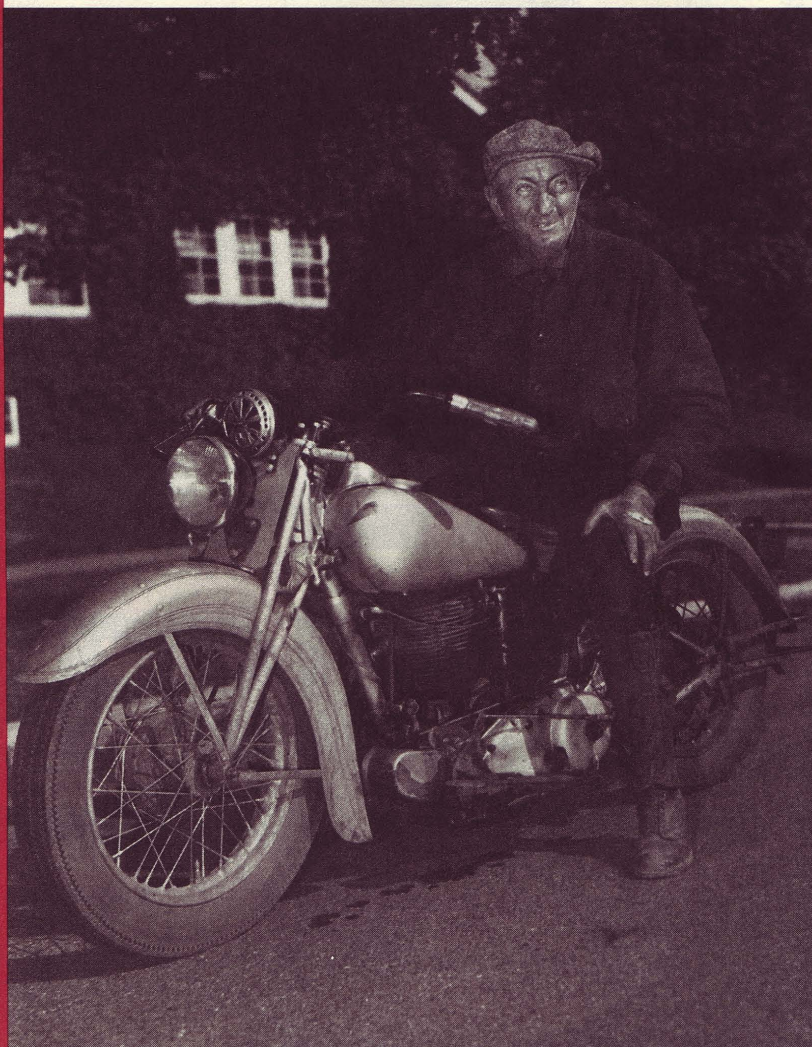




UNKNOWN YEAR AND PLACE:
"CANNON BALL" BAKER
CROUCHING DOWN ON ONE OF
HIS MANY INDIAN MOTORCYCLES.

1941:

AT THE AGE OF 60, BAKER SITS ON HIS 1941 INDIAN SPORT SCOUT WITH A SPECIAL CHAIN-DRIVEN ROTARY VALVE SYSTEM HE DESIGNED AND BUILT HIMSELF. HE WOULD RIDE THIS MOTORCYCLE FROM LOS ANGELES TO THE HOLLAND TUNNEL IN NEW YORK CITY, TAKING HIM SIX DAYS, SIX HOURS AND 25 MINUTES.



interstate highways but unfathomable with the road conditions he encountered in 1933.

Despite Baker's penchant for lucrative promotional runs, he did dabble in more conventional aspects of motorsport. At Henry Ford's urging, Baker returned to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1922, driving a Frontenac in the Indianapolis 500. Despite being forced to endure several pit stops in the first 50 miles, he completed the full 200 laps for an 11th-place finish. In 1948, Baker accepted a position as commissioner of a fledgling series called NASCAR.

In 1971, 11 years after "Cannon Ball" Baker passed away in Indianapolis of a heart attack at age 78, automotive journalist Brock Yates launched his infamous outlaw rally called the "Cannonball Run," which spawned a book and a movie. Inspired by one of the greatest characters of early American motorsport, the rally demonstrated the enduring impact of a Hoosier daredevil with a truly original American spirit. ■