

David Bruce-Brown

story by: Mark Dill • photos by: IMS Archives

To his contemporaries, he was an awesome talent; perhaps auto racing's greatest prior to World War I. With a James Dean-like charisma born of athletic good looks and quiet demeanor, he loved fast cars, much to the distress of a widowed mother. He died young, making him a mysterious figure today even for the few that know of this gifted driver named David Bruce-Brown.

The mystery of David Loney Bruce-Brown begins with his date of birth, frequently reported as sometime in 1890. In truth, he was born August 13, 1887, to parents of two prominent families.

Father George inherited a fortune in New York real estate and tobacco. His great-grandfather was J. P. Lorillard, the tobacco kingpin behind the Kent and Newport brands. When George's first wife, Virginia McKesson, died, he inherited her holdings in McKesson Pharmaceuticals. Second wife Ruth Arabella Loney was heir to another real estate fortune.

George had four children, one girl and three boys, with David the youngest. George died at 48, when David was five. Ruth, a widow at 39, clung to her sons, David and older brother William.

Part of the first generation to grow up with automobiles, David was enthralled. At 19 he received driving lessons in his mother's "curved dash" Oldsmobile. Driving too fast, he wrecked it.

Undeterred, Bruce-Brown raced at the Empire City horse track in another Oldsmobile in May 1907. Victorious, he caught the attention of Fiat driver Emanuel Cedrino of Italy, who established a 15-mile world's speed record that day.

Bruce-Brown began serving as a Fiat mechanic. Encouraged by Cedrino, he left Harstrom's preparatory school to participate in the Daytona Beach races run March 3-6, 1908. His mother fired telegrams from New York to Daytona threatening lawsuits if her son was allowed to race.

The handsome David Bruce-Brown, who rarely smiled for the cameras, led 81 laps of the 1911 "500" and finished third.

Despite her demands, officials allowed Bruce-Brown to join Cedrino as riding mechanic in a 300-mile beach race. Cedrino won, motivating Bruce-Brown to drive the Fiat for the one-mile amateur record. He smashed the four-year-old 92.308-mph record of William K. Vanderbilt Jr. with a new mark of 101.124 mph.

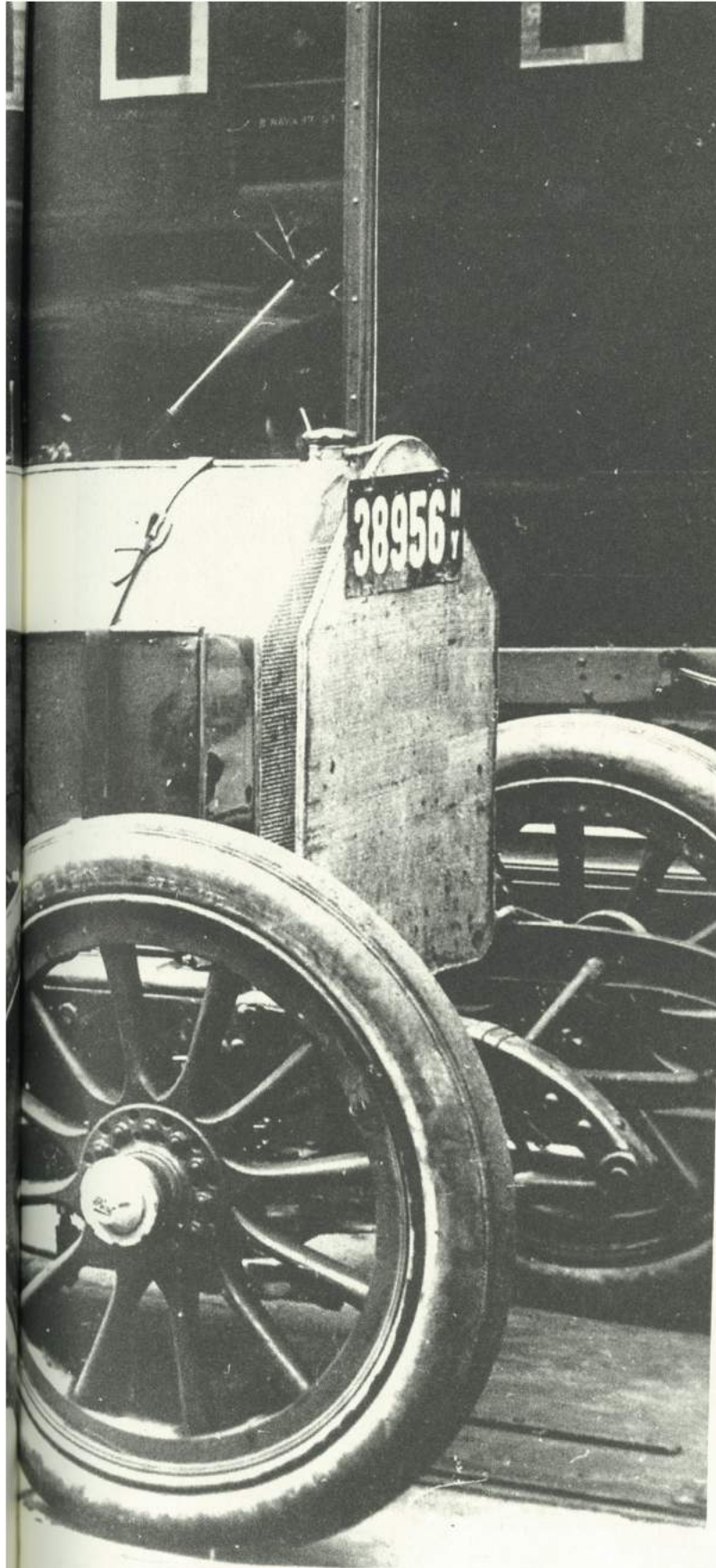
The dangers of early auto racing ended Cedrino's relationship with Bruce-Brown. The master driver, once Italian Queen Helena's personal chauffeur, was killed May 29, 1908, at Pimlico horse track.

Cedrino's death was an emotional shock, but Bruce-Brown forged ahead in 1909. At Daytona, he drove the 120-hp Benz of boxing promoter "Huge Deal" McIntosh. He improved his amateur mile record to 109.091 mph on March 23 and then returned to set the professional 10-mile land speed record at 114.504 mph.

On April 26, the Bruce-Brown-and-Benz combination won the Fort George hill climb. Bruce-Brown set a new record for the 1,900-foot incline at 48.8 seconds.

Sixty-six cars gathered May 26 for the Yale Automobile Club Shingle Hill Climb. Bruce-Brown drove McIntosh's Benz to a 66.5-mph record. Five days later he won the Giant's Despair Hill Climb, an event still conducted today.

Bruce-Brown's association with the Yale Automobile Club and Harstrom's school are at the heart of other mysteries about him.



1933: A qualification run is expanded from the customary four laps to 10, a rule that will stand until 1939.

Legendary race starter Fred Wagner promulgated the myth that the millionaire scion attended Yale University and was on their boxing team. Bruce-Brown never attended Yale, but Harstrom's was known for its Yale graduates and many of his friends went there.

Bruce-Brown was a budding star and 1910 was his breakout year. A natural road racer, his moment came November 12 at the American Grand Prize in Savannah. Bruce-Brown was the newest member of the Benz factory team. His teammates were Willie Haupt and Victor Hemery, winner of the 1905 Vanderbilt Cup.

The race was a battle between three Fiats of Felice Nazzaro, Ralph De Palma and Louis Wagner, and the Benz drivers. The 17.3-mile natural-terrain course took its toll on equipment. While the Fiats of Nazzaro and Wagner led early, both retired with suspension damage. De Palma took over, pressed by Bruce-Brown.

When De Palma's Fiat cracked a cylinder, the race became a shootout between 23-year-old Bruce-Brown and the veteran Hemery, 12 years his senior. Hemery whittled down his teammate's lead, but the 415.2-mile contest wasn't long enough. Bruce-Brown won by the closest of margins for the era: 1.43 seconds.

By 1911, Bruce-Brown was established as a top competitor. Now driving for Fiat, he was a favorite to win the first Indianapolis 500. He lived up to expectations, dominating the first half, leading 81 of 102 laps. His 80-mph pace took its toll. A rear tire blew in the south short chute and two miles of riding on the rim bent it out of shape.

Bruce-Brown was among the finest of the early-day American road racers. But for an unfortunate disqualification over a rule infraction, the two-time American Grand Prize winner would have finished third in the 1912 French Grand Prix at Dieppe.



A fuel consumption rule is put into place, requiring the entire 500 miles to run on 45 gallons. c. 1911

Fiat mechanics spent three minutes replacing the rim. A lap down, Bruce-Brown set out to catch eventual winner Ray Harroun in the Marmon Wasp. He gradually drew closer to Harroun, but ignition troubles slowed his progress. He salvaged third place.

Bruce-Brown fared better at the 411.36-mile American Grand Prize on November 30, 1911. At 340 miles it was a three-way battle between Benz driver Eddie Hearne, Bruce-Brown and Ralph Mulford, who finished second at Indianapolis in the same American-built Lozier.

With two laps to go, the three leaders pitted simultaneously. Bruce-Brown slung the heavy mounted tires himself, changing the rubber with a hand wrench in 68 seconds. He re-entered the fray just behind the Lozier. Within a few miles a broken driveshaft ended Mulford's day. Hearne suffered a tire puncture to allow Bruce-Brown to win by over two minutes.

His second try at the Indianapolis 500 in 1912 proved disappointing despite the fact that he was fastest qualifier at 88.45 mph. When his National's valves failed on Lap 24, he reportedly wept in frustration.

Perhaps the most impressive drive of his career came on June 25, 1912, at the French Grand Prix. Matched against Europe's greatest drivers and cars, he was magnificent.

The race was conducted over two days on public roads in Dieppe.

Switching to the National team for 1912, Bruce-Brown turned the fastest single-lap time trial at 88.45 mph. He moved from 23rd starting position to seventh in only two laps and was battling for second when mechanical trouble forced him out after only 24 laps.

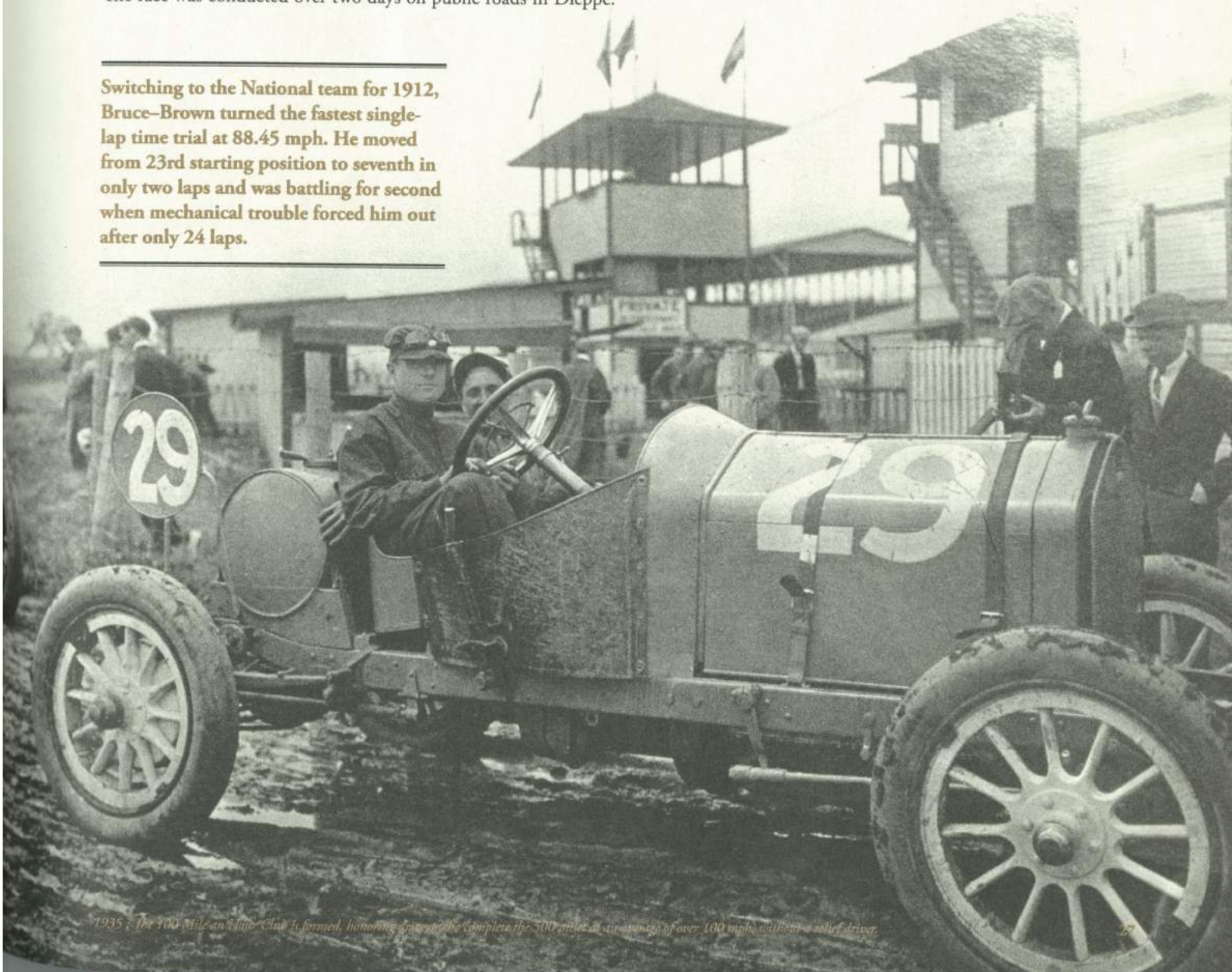
Bruce-Brown dominated the first day, only to be disqualified the second day when he took fuel outside his pit area. He had actually completed the full distance and would have finished third. It was his last great drive.

In pursuit of his third successive American Grand Prize, he arrived by train from New York to Milwaukee, the site of the 1912 race, on October 1. His life would end less than three hours later.

He arrived at the 7.88-mile public roads course and went to work, posting the top speed at 80.18 mph. At his pit, Fred Wagner noticed the Fiat's tires were threadbare and ordered the 25-year-old driver to his garage.

Bruce-Brown ignored the order and at 1 o'clock on the backstretch of the course, while traveling at 90 mph, a tire exploded. The car barrel-rolled, throwing Bruce-Brown and riding mechanic Tony Scudalari out. Both died of massive head injuries. Widely respected and popular among his peers, giants of the age including Ralph De Palma and Teddy Tetzlaff wept in the hospital corridor when doctors informed them of Bruce-Brown's passing.

Like James Dean 43 years later, Bruce-Brown's brief, brilliant career left admirers wondering what he could have accomplished if he'd only had more of what he fought to defeat on the track — precious time. 🕒



1935: The 100 Miles an Hour Club is formed, honoring drivers who complete the 500 miles a circuit course of over 100 mph without a relief driver.