

NO RECORD

NO PAY

*Cannon Ball Baker
had the record business
down to a fine groove*



BY J. L. BEARDSLEY

NO RECORD — NO PAY

NO MAN WHO ever lived could get more performance from a stock automobile than Erwin G. "Cannon Ball" Baker. For nearly four decades, Baker would go blasting off on a cross-country record run at any time and any place, and for any distance. His specialty was to put his attempts on a "No record—no pay" basis.

In the early decades of this century he was Mr. Automobile—the undisputed King of the Open Road—who set 143 transcontinental and other distance speed records on every type of motor vehicle from a 7-bhp motorcycle to a fully loaded 2-ton truck. In addition, he made many shorter test runs—45 for the Rickenbacker Company alone.

Baker's amazing endurance allowed him to drive for days with only a few hours' sleep and his car-handling skill was pure wizardry. Altogether, he was a unique figure in the history of the automobile and an important factor in its development.

His spectacular record runs totaled over 5,000,000 miles in distance, it is estimated, most of it over rough, unimproved roads. He spanned the snow-capped summits of the Rockies, plus thousands of miles of desert and wind-swept prairie, through mud, sleet and snow. Countless times his uncanny skill brought him in with a new record, in one piece and right side up.

Baker always contended that most of his success was because he was a natural driver.

"Practice will make you good," he'd say, "but beyond that you've got to have it in you." A born driver would instinctively do the right thing in a tight spot to avert an accident, he claimed, and Baker was living proof of his theory.

He spent 40 years at his trade of high-speed, dangerous driving. From 1908 until 1915 he raced only motorcycles, then added cars, until his specialty of setting highway speed records became impossible due to increasing traffic and vigilant police patrols. During his career, Baker had been ditched by every imaginable obstacle, from boulders to cows, and once he had tipped over while standing still, after having been chased up a high bank by a reckless driver. However, he was proud of the fact that he had never bumped another car.

"Bake," as his friends were to call him, was born Erwin George Baker, near Lawrenceburg, Ind., March 12, 1882. Later, the family moved from a farm near Weisburg to Indianapolis.

Baker's youth was not promising. He was a victim of many illnesses and his parents sometimes despaired of his survival. He gave no sign of developing the iron constitution that became the marvel of his generation.

Baker, though, gained rapidly in strength and endurance, and when he went to work for the Indianapolis Drop Forge Company at 88¢ a day, he still had energy enough left after a hard 60-hour week to work out at the

South Side Turners Hall gym on weekends. He was picked to be a member of an acrobatic group which gave an exhibition in Atlantic City, N.J., in 1900, where he saw his first automobile.

Together with the club's star acrobat, Baker had worked up an act in which he punched five bags at once with his hands, knees and head. A vaudeville scout caught their act and signed them to a year's tour at the then-fabulous salary of \$100 a week.

Homesickness soon tarnished the lure of the bright lights, however, and in San Francisco the pair quit cold, to take a train for Indianapolis and home. A few hours after they had left a telegraphic report was read on the train that made Baker suspect he had a guardian angel watching over him. It was a news flash regarding the gigantic San Francisco earthquake of 1906. The hotel they had so recently vacated had been demolished, with only one survivor.

For two years Baker was content to remain in his old job, with his family and cronies and his new Indian motorcycle. Then came an event that changed his whole life.

At an Elks' July 4th celebration at Crawfordsville, Ind., Fairgrounds, he volunteered to become an added entry in a dirt-track motorcycle race—and won it. He came in second in another race, and by then the speed bug had bitten him.

He took to track racing like the natural driver he was and in about a year had become a member of the Indian factory professional racing team as well as a firm friend of the president and founder of the Indian Motorcycle Company, George A. Hendee.



A RECORD of another sort was set by Cannon Ball Baker when he drove this Oldsmobile Six from New York to Los Angeles in high gear only. First and second were removed from case.

In 1909 he competed in the National Championships on the newly-built Indianapolis Speedway and won the 10-mile title over a field of star riders.

Finally, in 1912, he was picked by Hendee for a more important assignment, a 14,000-mile goodwill tour of Cuba, Jamaica and Panama for Indian, over roads Baker later referred to as "horrible." This trip revealed his amazing resistance to fatigue. He found that plenty of food, especially peanuts, increased his ability to ride for long hours, or days, with little sleep.

Baker's first transcontinental record was made on a 7-bhp Indian motorcycle. Spanning the arid Southwest taught him valuable lessons about desert driving in 112° heat. Surprisingly, one of the most important of these was to insulate his ignition against water: Mountain storms often caused flash floods in the otherwise dry stream beds. Another top priority item was the preparation of fuel caches along his route.

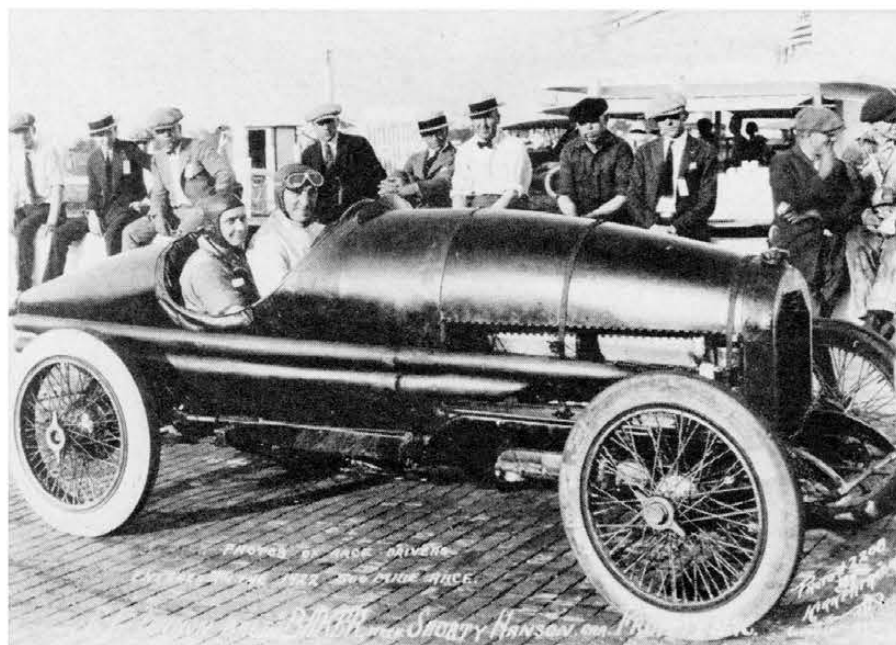
Along with his own fame, he built reputations for many good and some great automobiles in 35 years of sensa-

tional cross-country dashes. His adventures on four wheels began in May, 1915, and he began with a car that already had an impressive name: the fabulous, now almost legendary, Stutz Bearcat.

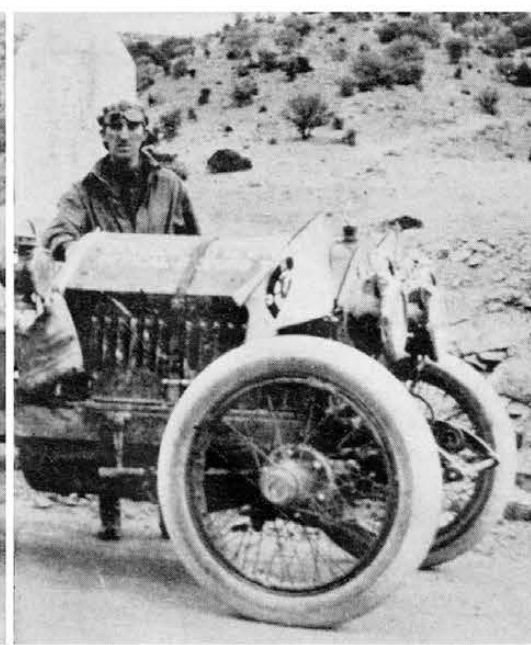
The car was a standard roadster, with 4-cyl., T-head engine of 4.75 x 5.5 in. bore and stroke. The only other changes he made were to strip off the fenders, tape the springs, put a wire guard screen over the radiator and install double shock absorbers.

W.F. Sturm, prominent automotive publisher, rode as official observer for

ONLY INDIANAPOLIS drive came in 1922 when Cannon Ball put a Frontenac into a creditable 11th place. Riding mechanic was Shorty Hanson.



AT CONTINENTAL Divide in Arizona, Baker pauses in his record-setting '15 run.



AS CHIEF TEST "pilot" for the Rickenbacker Motor Co., Baker set records back and forth across the country and West Coast. Here he is with Eddie Rickenbacker (right).



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this AAA-supervised cross-continental run. Baker and his rider were soon clocked out of San Diego, Calif., and on the good California highways Baker often reached 75 mph. This soon ended after the desert had been crossed, though they reached Phoenix, Ariz., that day, having covered 409.1 miles.

They had to be pulled out of quicksand traps twice while fording Texas streams and were mired three times in Oklahoma and Kansas. But, in 11 days, 7 hours and 15 min., Cannon Ball Baker and Sturm rolled into New York City with a new record for automobile travel coast-to-coast by a single driver, arriving on May 18, 1915. Baker had slept just 4 or 5 hours each night while performing this heroic drive.

It was here that some forgotten New York newspaperman gave him the nickname "Cannon Ball." Baker liked it, adopted it and even had it copyrighted. This really wasn't necessary—there couldn't have been another like him.

The Stutz lived up to its rugged reputation. The engine ran well during a one-hour test afterwards. The only breakage was one of the dual shock absorbers, but a wrist-pin was loose, there was end-play in some con-rod bearings and some cylinder-head and piston carbon had formed.

Baker shattered his own mark exactly a year later, in 1916, in a Cadillac Eight. Departing from Los Angeles, again with W. F. Sturm as observer under AAA auspices, Baker spanned the continent and arrived at 42nd & Broadway, New York City, on May 17 in 7 days, 11 hours and 52 min. He had covered 3380.7 miles, from ocean to ocean, faster than it had ever been done before. Rain had held him up at Kansas City an entire day and in Arizona he had driven 84 miles in low gear, but again Baker had amazed the country. He had made the trip with a total of only 19 hours sleep and with absolutely no relief at the wheel.

As guest speaker at a testimonial banquet at the Hotel Astor, Baker held his audience spellbound as he recounted the hazards of the trip: of burning five tires up in the 120° Mojave Desert heat and of battling deep mud in Missouri.

The railroad time needed to travel this route was then 92 hours, but this was done with over 20 locomotives and many changes of train crews. Cannon Ball had done it in only slightly more time, with one automobile and alone.

The year 1916 was a big one for

Cannon Ball. He made a 19,000-mile reliability tour for a spark plug company to all the state capitals. Then in a Marmon, he set a Detroit to Indianapolis record of 7 hours, 10 min. The same year he established a Chicago to Indianapolis mark of 8 hours, 50 min. for 196.6 miles, in a Lexington, and then he was off to Australia to set a world 24-hour road record on an Indian motorcycle, for 1018 miles and all intermediate distances.

Baker was now in a position to choose his cars and if he liked one he made the manufacturer a sporting offer of "No record—no pay." One of his early favorites was the Templar, "The Superfine Small Car." In 1920 he drove a snappy 4-cyl. open touring model Templar on a New York to Chicago record hop in 25 hours, 50 min.

That same year, he wheeled this good, though expensive, sports-type machine across the country well ahead of the record, only to run into a speed trap set in the San Bernardino Mountains by Charles Chenu, California Motor Vehicle Department Supervisor. Chenu had sworn to enforce a 35-mph speed limit on all state highways. Baker posted bond and was allowed to continue.

Baker had to change no less than 19 tires enroute and, even with this added time loss, he ended up with a new record time of 4 days, 5 hours and 45 min. with the Templar.

A few more motorcycle records occupied some of his time then, in the interval before his 1922 feat of driving an Oldsmobile Six across the nation with only high gear.

May 30, 1922, saw his first and only appearance in the Memorial Day 500-mile race at Indianapolis. A member of the Frontenac team, he did well for a new driver by coming in 11th.

What Baker always termed his toughest auto ride was a winter record try in a Gardner in 1924.

Russel E. Gardner, former St. Louis buggy king and builder of the Gardner reasoned that a mid-winter cross-continent record would be a smashing publicity triumph for his car. It had never been done before, and few believed that it could be done.

Cannon Ball made a test drive from St. Louis to Kansas City, but it was tough going.

Gardner began to have doubts, but Baker told him he could stand it if the car could, so the record run was started from New York City—and headed straight into trouble. There was slush



RE-VISITING Indianapolis in 1948, Baker tried on a more modern racing car.

and ice through the Alleghenies, and fog added hazards all the way through Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, but Cannon Ball rolled into St. Louis in slightly over 30 hours.

This may not sound impressive by today's standards, but with a car that had a top speed of 64 mph, on roads unmarked by adequate road signs, in mid-winter, with snow and ice added to indifferent paving—when there was paving—this was a man-sized job.

In St. Louis, Gardner informed Baker that not one car had crossed the state under its own power in the past two weeks.

"The so-called roads looked like a plowed field—only with holes," Baker recalled, but both he and Gardner had faith in the Lycoming engine that powered the Gardner, so he set out.

He chewed his way past farmers sitting on fences shaking their heads, continued bucking the gumbo with no delays, and was in Kansas City in good time. In nine more hours he was in New Mexico and the worst was behind him. In 4 days, 14 hours and 15 min., having driven 1396 of the miles with chains on all four wheels, Cannon Ball had beaten appalling odds with his incredible skill and nerve and he owned the first winter transcontinental record ever established by motor car.

The Gardner remained in Baker's memory as a "built-to-last" car, along with some of his other record cars, like the Rickenbacker, the Wills-Saint Claire and the air-cooled Franklin.

In 1925, as chief test driver for the Rickenbacker Motor Company, Baker set many records in the fine car built by Captain E. V. Rickenbacker, famed American combat ace of World War I. One of these was a mid-winter New York to Los Angeles mark of 71 hours, 33 min., a new low in actual driving time. Then Cannon Ball began

an orgy of record-smashing all over the entire West.

In a Rickenbacker, he beat the San Francisco to Los Angeles times set by Cadillac, Buick, Studebaker and Peerless, with an 8 hour and 57 min. trip at 49.5 mph over a route that was half gravel.

His "Three Flag Drive" of 1558 miles from Vancouver, B.C., to Tijuana, Mexico, was a new time of 40 hours and 57 min.

The 908.5 miles from El Paso, Tex., to Los Angeles were averaged at 42.48 mph, across deserts and mountains for a total of 21 hours, 33 minutes.

He made the 36-mile dash from Ogden, Utah, to Salt Lake City, at better than 60 mph, plus other fast drives from Boise, Idaho, to Idaho City, and Boise to Salt Lake City.

Moving into Colorado, Baker gunned the Rickenbacker into some spectacular mile-high performances. Starting with a Pikes Peak stock car record, he made another to the summit of Lookout Mountain, followed with others from Denver to Salt Lake City, drove the Denver Circle Route, through the mountain parks and return, then Denver to Kansas City, Mo.

In 1926, Baker was active in the eastern states. In order to elude state police, he was forced to make a record attempt on Summit Mountain near Uniontown, Pa., at midnight. It was a 3-mile 9% grade, with 23 turns, but he scaled it in 2:57 min., using lights, and then raced the cops to the state line.

But the Rickenbacker saga ended when the company went into receivership in November, 1926.

Only Cannon Ball Baker would have accepted the GMC proposition made in 1927. A 2-ton tank truck, powered

by a Buick 6-cyl. engine, was loaded to capacity with Atlantic ocean water and driven from New York to San Francisco. Baker accomplished this feat in 5 days, 17 hours and 36 min., for a record that won him many friends among truck operators.

Then, in 1928, Baker teamed up with the builders of what he called, "The best all-around car I ever drove." This was the air-cooled Franklin, and in it he reached the zenith of his amazing career as a "transcontinentalist."

In a 1928 Franklin Airman Speedster, Baker gave his hottest performance when he beat the crack New York Century Limited from New York to Chicago. It was one of the world's fastest trains then, as now, and this was one of the biggest thrills among Cannon Ball's many memories.

Baker fitted some extra shock absorbers on a Franklin Airman to improve cornering, then with a car that had a top speed of 70 mph he wheeled across the continent in 77 hours, 23 min., to clip 17 min. off the standing record.

Back on the West Coast, he again attacked the San Francisco—Los Angeles record in a Franklin 135 Sedan. After covering 300 miles of the inland route, he passed Bakersfield and ascended the Grapevine into the Tehachapi Mountains going through Tejon Pass at a 4123-ft. altitude. Conquering 6 to 10% grades, Baker sent the air-cooled classic over the Ridge Route, "Road of a Thousand Curves" and on to Los Angeles. Western Union clocked him in at 7 hours, 32 min., and a new record. His average was 54.7 mph.

Two years of work by Franklin's Chief Engineer, Carl T. Doman, had perfected a new 87-bhp Six with side-

draft cooling. Baker unveiled this 1930 model Series 14 Franklin in November, 1929, with a record shattering cross-country run in 69 hours, 31 min.

In 1931, he was under contract to Graham-Paige for tests and goodwill tours, and when the Graham was brought out in 1933, Baker ran one across the country in a sizzling 53½-hour dash. But this was not a scheduled record attempt, so it was unfortunately unofficial. This was Baker's fastest coast-to-coast hop and it stood for many years—the official transcontinental record was still 56 hours, 58 min., as late as 1956.

His last mountain record was made by Baker while doing promotional work for the Nash corporation in 1947. In a stock Nash Ambassador, he climbed the 6288-ft. Mt. Washington, N.H., peak, which averaged a 12% grade over its entire 8.2-mile ascent, in a new low time of 15 min., 27.75 sec.

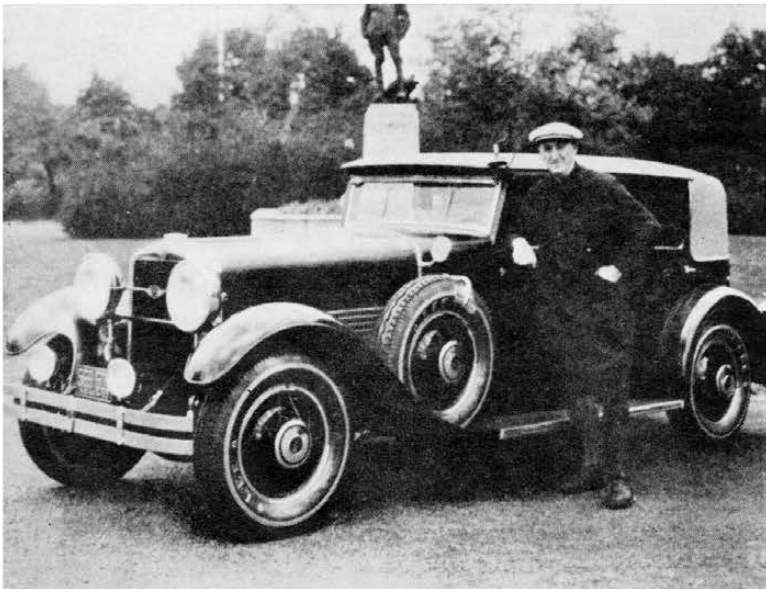
Returning the next year with a light Nash 600 Airflyte, he missed breaking his own record by 15 sec. in this 82-bhp compact.

In 1948 Baker was appointed the first National Commissioner of NASCAR, as the coordinator of competition rules and regulations.

The last long drive by Cannon Ball is said to have been his Boston to Miami, Fla., "Safety & Economy Run" in a 1949 Nash Ambassador. He set an average of 26.5 mpg, with three passengers, for the 1595-mile trip, much of it through city traffic.

At the age of 78, Erwin G. Baker was the victim of a fatal heart attack at the Community Hospital, Indianapolis, on May 10, 1960, and the exciting flights of Cannon Ball were forever ended. ■

ONE OF BAKER'S records was set in 1930 in this Stutz Versailles sedan. He went from New York to Los Angeles in 60 hours, 31 min.



LAST RECORD was in 1948 with Nash 600 Airflyte, in which he hurtled up Mt. Washington in 15 min., 12.75 sec.

