

Erwin George “Cannon Ball” Baker

(March 12, 1882 – May 10, 1960)

Crown Hill Cemetery, Lot 150, Section 60

Erwin Baker got off to a slow, inauspicious start in a four-room log home near Weisburg, Indiana in Dearborn County. But over the years he picked up speed; so much so that when he met President Hoover in the 1920s, Hoover remarked that more Americans knew the name of Cannon Ball Baker than knew the name of Herbert Hoover. And though his speed slowed down in his final years, ten years after his death they were still running Cannon Ball Baker Sea-to-Shining-Sea Races, unsanctioned, no rules coast-to-coast road races on public highways that actor Burt Reynolds was able to turn into two “Cannon Ball Run” movies at the peak of his own career. They were named after this man who drove an estimated 5.5 million miles (he told Ernie Pyle that five thousand of them were just up and down Pikes Peak), including at least 126 cross country trips during which he set 55 different cross country records, as well as countless other point to point records in the early days of automobiles when such things were still so novel and required such stamina that they were indeed noteworthy.



So it was a good thing that the family moved from Weisburg to Indianapolis in 1893, for Indianapolis was going to be an important city in the development of the automobile. Erwin himself got his first job as an apprentice machinist at the Indianapolis Drop Forging Company. He saved enough of his \$3.50 per week to buy an Indian motorcycle and joined the local motorcycle club. In 1908, he took part in his first race, a 4th of July event in Crawfordsville and became hooked on the thrill of speed and competition. He took part in other midwestern events, and by the time the Indianapolis Motor Speedway began promoting a series of events with which they were going to open the track in 1909, his picture was appearing in the *Indianapolis News* with the caption “Daredevil Indianapolis Rider.” He lived up to the publicity by winning the one of the first races held at the speedway, a ten-mile motorcycle race on August 12, 1909.

He followed this with many other races over the next few years, coming in first 53 times, second nine times, and third eleven times, also setting eleven new speed records. It’s no wonder that he was the factory representative of Indian Motorcycles from 1912 until 1924. When he took part in a cross-country race in 1914, only four of his 3,379 miles were run on paved roads, sixty-eight miles were actually on a railroad track. He finished in 11 days, 11 hours, and 11 minutes, a full nine days faster than the previous record and even four days faster than the record for an automobile. This feat led one New York reporter to call him Cannon Ball Baker, a name Erwin liked so well he adopted it and eventually had copyrighted.

Well known now for his motorcycling, he turned to the automobile. Harry Stutz offered him a new Stutz Bearcat, a model worth \$20,000 if he could manage to set a new record in it. Cannon Ball took him up on the offer. As they always did, he and his wife spent a good deal of time researching routes before getting started, and on May 7, 1915, he and *News* reporter Bill Sturm left San Diego on a trip sanctioned by the new American Automobile Association. They arrived in New York 11 days, 7 hours, and 15 minutes later. They repeated this in 1916, arriving in only 7 days, 11 hours, and 53 minutes later, breaking their old mark by four days. It was on this trip that Cannon Ball got his first speeding ticket. As his fame continued to grow, so did the desire of the

new automobile patrols to catch him, so much so that his route planning began to take into account known speed traps as they plotted their course across the continent.

When World War I arrived, Baker did his part by leading bond drives and teaching army recruits how to drive while they were stationed at Fort Benjamin Harrison. After the war, with the focus temporarily on reliability instead of speed, and perhaps on patriotism too, he made a trip to all 48 state capitols, covering 16,234 miles in 78 days, 18 hours. But in 1920, speed again dominated as he drove from Los Angeles to New York in 6 days, 17 hours, and 33 minutes, getting only seventeen hours sleep and one speeding ticket. He immediately followed this with a motorcycle run from Tijuana to the Canadian border in 2 days, 5 hours.

Louis Chevrolet hired him to drive in the 1922 Indianapolis 500. Despite mechanical problems, he drove to an eleventh place finish and became the only man to race at the speedway on both two and four wheels. Though he never raced there again, he logged at least 48,000 miles at the track on test drives.

In 1926 he changed his focus a bit and set a new record of 5 days, 2 hours, 13 minutes at the wheel of the common man's car, a Ford Model T. In 1927, General Motors hired him to drive one of their trucks coast to coast. He hauled three tons of seawater from New York to San Francisco in 5 days, 17 hours, 36 minutes, pouring his load into the Pacific in a ceremonial conclusion after only four hours of sleep. Then in 1928, he drove an air-cooled Franklin from New York to Los Angeles in 69 hours, 31 minutes, setting many other records with the car as well, including a run from Indianapolis to French Lick at an average speed of 66 mph.

But times were changing. Roads themselves were improving, making the feats seem less and less notable. At the same time, concern for safety, as shown by both the better roads and the state police departments to patrol them, robbed the glory from speed. But in a new Stutz, he set a new record of 61 hours, 51 minutes. In the spring of 1933 he did the ultimate, driving a super-charged Graham the distance in 53 hours, 30 minutes. The 30 minutes, he said, were for his one rest stop. No one has claimed to have broken this record in the seventy years since.

Despite his habit of driving from coast to coast on little to no sleep, Cannon Ball had not logged a collision in all of his 3.5 million miles on the road. So he spent most of the rest of 1933 on a "safety tour" before pretty much retiring from the road for the rest of his life. He tinkered in the garage of his Garfield Park home, inventing a Gas Engine Fuel Economizer that he told reporter Ernie Pyle would make him a million. He tested his rotary one cylinder motorcycle engine, guaranteed to make him another million, on his final official cross-country trip in 1941. Neither sold. But in 1947, he became the first commissioner for NASCAR, a post he held until his death from a heart attack on May 10, 1960. He was buried in the lot he had purchased following the tragic death of his only child, Sherman, who had died in 1930 at the age of sixteen following complications from a tooth extraction. His wife, Elnora, had died in Arizona in 1950, as the couple was returning to Indianapolis following a winter in California.

Cannon Ball Baker is enshrined in the Motorsports Hall of Fame and in the Motorcycle Hall of Fame, where the 1909 Indian he rode to victory at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway, is on permanent display. Ernie Pyle summed up his career when he wrote, "Cannon Ball Baker held more auto records than any five other men combined."

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