

April 22, 1996: Zora Arkus-Duntov - Obituary

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Zora Arkus-Duntov

He was called the "Father of the Corvette," a dream maker, a Detroit legend and an engineering genius. Zora Arkus-Duntov was all of these things -- and then some.

He died Sunday (April 21, 1996) of natural causes in a Detroit hospital.

Duntov will probably be best remembered for his years as Chief Engineer of the Chevrolet Corvette. Duntov began his 22 years with Chevrolet in 1953 after seeing the XP-122 Corvette prototype at a GM show.

Duntov wrote Ed Cole, then Chevrolet's Chief Engineer and later General Motors president, appraising the car. Cole was so impressed that he asked Duntov to join Chevrolet as a research and development engineer. He was named a design and development engineer in 1956, and perfected Chevrolet's famous Rochester fuel injection system which was optional on the 1957 Corvette.

During that time, he was also charged with organizing a factory race team for the 1957 Sebring Race. The result was the Corvette SS with its tuned 283-cube Chevrolet V8 delivering 307 horsepower. It was later transformed into the Corvette Sting Ray. Both cars considerably influenced Corvette design throughout the '60s.

Duntov set a fast pace for himself, too. In 1957 he became Corvette's engineering coordinator, and was named Director of High Performance Vehicles. Duntov became responsible for Corvette engine and chassis design in 1963, and in 1968 was named Chief Engineer of the car that drew him to Chevrolet.

Often cited as the engineering genius behind the Corvette, Duntov was responsible for such advances as disc brakes, independent rear suspension and limited slip differentials -- items that eventually found their way to other Chevrolet models. He also masterminded the CERV-II, the world's first mid-engine car with full-time, 4-wheel drive.

A rugged individualist, Duntov also filled his life with numerous successes outside the engineering field. He drove in major automobile races, such as LeMans, in which he was a 1954 and 1955 class winner. In 1955, driving a pre-production 1956 Chevrolet, Duntov set a Pike's Peak stock car record of 17 minutes, 24.05 seconds -- a record that lasted 13 years.

In 1956, he broke the "flying mile" record in a 1956 Corvette at Daytona Beach with a speed of 150.583 miles per hour.

Duntov, born of Russian parents in Belgium, came to America in 1941. He was graduated from the Institute of Charlottenburg, Berlin, Germany, in 1934, with a degree in mechanical engineering.

In recent years, Duntov was a consultant to Chevrolet and the specialty equipment industry, and continued to attend Corvette shows and events across the country.

One of those events was held in January 1995. Duntov celebrated his 85th birthday at the opening of the National Corvette Museum in Bowling Green, Ky. The crowd of 120,000 Corvette fans gave him a long, standing ovation, a fitting tribute from the people who best appreciated his genius.

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