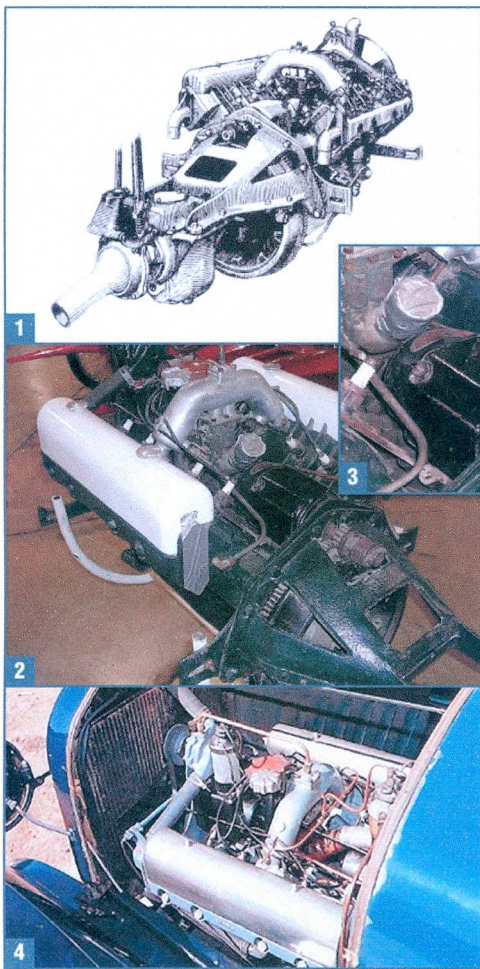


# THE FIRST V-8

WAY BEFORE '55, CHEVY WAS MAKING POWER WITH TWO BANKS



**1** Period drawing of the 1917 V-8 from the Model "D" brochure. Note the large flywheel, "open" bellhousing and three-speed transmission. **2** Top rear view of the 1917 V-8. Note the exposed pushrods, minimal valve covers and rear-mounted starter. The Zenith updraft carburetor is visible below the intake manifold. **3** Close-up of the rear-mounted starter and Bendix drive. Note the inboard-mounted spark plugs between the exposed pushrods. **4** The 1917 V-8 in a Model "D" Chevrolet. Note the generator in the front of the "V", top-mounted coil, and central water pump. A great performer, but too expensive for its time.

## READER'S QUESTION:

We had a presentation at our Corvette Club tech session last week on the history of the Chevy V-8 from 1955-up, and one of the members mentioned that he had read somewhere that Chevrolet made a V-8 engine during World War I. That was news to the rest of us. Do you have any information on such an engine?

## RESPONSE:

That's correct – Chevrolet did manufacture a V-8 engine in 1917-1918 that was very modern and innovative for its time, used in the Chevrolet Model "D" series.

The engine was 288 cubic inches ( $3\frac{3}{8}$ -inch bore, 4-inch stroke), and had a two-piece iron block, split vertically with the two halves bolted together. Most engines of the day were flatheads with the valves in the block, but the Model "D" V-8 had a central camshaft, pushrods, and overhead valves, with crossflow cylinder heads (intake on one side, exhaust on the other), and the cylinder heads were interchangeable so the same head could be used on both sides.

The lifters and pushrods were exposed, and the valve covers did little more than keep dirt out of the rocker arms and valvesprings, much like the Liberty aircraft engines of the day. It used a Zenith dual-jet updraft carburetor, and the

spark plugs were located on the inboard side of the cylinder heads.

Other innovations included the Kettering electric starter (invented in 1913) with a Bendix drive, and the starter was located within the "V" at the rear, just like on today's Cadillac "Northstar" V-8s. It used a leather-faced, cone-type clutch and a three-speed transmission, when most other cars only had two speeds.

It developed 55 horsepower at 2,700 rpm and 110 lbs-ft of torque, with 4.75:1 compression, suited to the 50- to 60-octane gasoline available in those days, which made it very smooth and powerful compared to the four-cylinder engines used by most of its competition.

Unfortunately, it was also very expensive to produce, and the Model "D" Chevrolet was very costly. As a result, sales were poor, and only about 3,500 were built during 1917-1918. The V-8 was discontinued after 1918, and Chevrolet focused on their bread-and-butter four-cylinder engines in order to remain price-competitive.

V-8s didn't appear again in popular-priced cars until the Ford flathead V-8 60 in 1932. Chevrolet continued to develop their straight-six and introduced the small-block V-8 we're familiar with in 1955.

The 1917-1918 Chevrolet V-8 was very advanced for its time and established the basic overhead-valve architecture later adopted for all high-volume V-8s that appeared across the industry over 30 years later. ■