



# KING OF THE ROAD

## The Legend of CJS Miller

*by George Stroupe*

**V**ast fortunes were made in the Oil Region's early days, and among the greatest were those of General Charles Miller. The story of this Civil War veteran and captain of industry is familiar to many in the Venango region, thanks to his epic business successes and public contributions.

However, this is the story of his genius first-born son, Charles Joseph Sibley Miller (b. 1874, d. 1937), largely forgotten by history until now. Of all his siblings, CJS was by far the most outstanding from an early age. He mastered painting under a renowned art teacher, then moved onto other fields of study. Much of his work is still displayed in homes throughout the

region. His teacher stated, "He knows as much about art as I do." Next, the young man hired a prominent music instructor and soon excelled in that area as well, reportedly able to play any instrument he picked up. CJS then looked for other challenges to excite his genius.

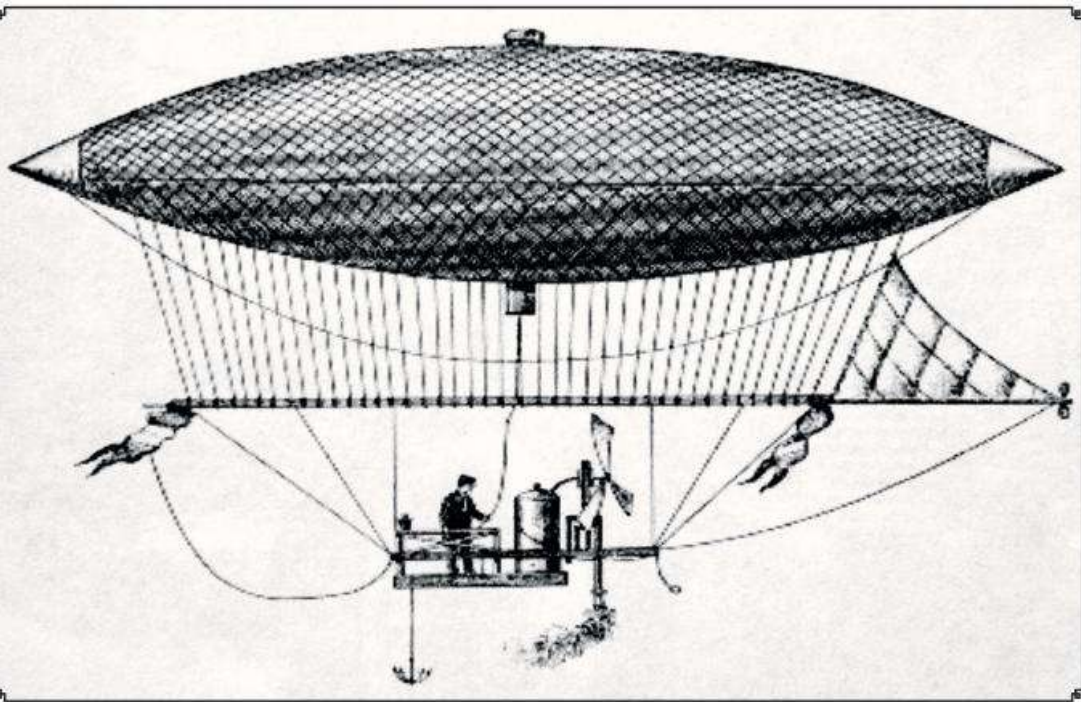
In 1898, at the age of 23, he enlisted as a commissioned officer in the Spanish-American War. He followed that up by serving as Mayor of Franklin in 1900. At this time, he married his childhood sweetheart, Mary Prentice. General Miller gave the newlyweds a spectacular house in Miller Park as a wedding gift (a fire in 1914 destroyed the castle-like mansion).

Young Charley next set his sights on racing cars, which suited his adventurous nature and endless supply of funding necessary. He owned the first automobile in Franklin, a 1904 Peerless. The car was delivered by Louis Chevrolet, who would later design and build the first of the famous Chevrolet line of cars. The young Frenchman taught CJS how to drive the car, and the pair would soon team up to race high-powered speedsters. Shortly after purchasing the Peerless, Charley saw a need for a rear stoplight, and soon invented one. Not caring for the money or fame, he gave one of his brothers the patent rights.



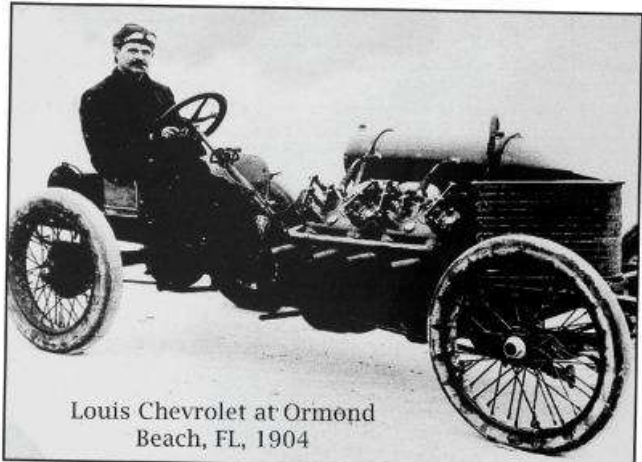
*A young CJS Miller drives up to his first home in Miller Park with his new bride, Mary Prentice. The enormous home was a wedding gift from his father, Gen. Charles Miller. It burned down in 1914.*





*In the Summer of 1906, CJS hired the famed hot air balloonist Leo Stevens and brought him to Franklin to teach him how to fly the airship. Miller then purchased a similar type of balloon and could often be seen flying above the Franklin area. On August 10, 1906, Stevens took CJS's wife Mary for a ride, making her the first woman to ride a lighter-than-air vehicle. Becoming the first woman aeronaut attracted wide attention in newspapers, garnering Mary Prentice Miller international fame.*

Miller's love for the automobile and speed took him to the early racetracks. In 1904 and 1905, he competed admirably in Annual Speed Week at Ormond Beach in Florida. Next, he purchased a 1904 Fiat and won a 100 mile road race in Cuba. This win required some ingenuity by the adventurer. When a gas line started to leak, he tied a rag around the leak and headed for the nearby finish line. Hitting a bump, his battery fell out due to broken straps. He held the battery in place somehow, shifting gears and crossing the line a car length ahead of the second place car. This is believed to be the only race CJS actually won as a race car owner and driver.



Louis Chevrolet at Ormond Beach, FL, 1904

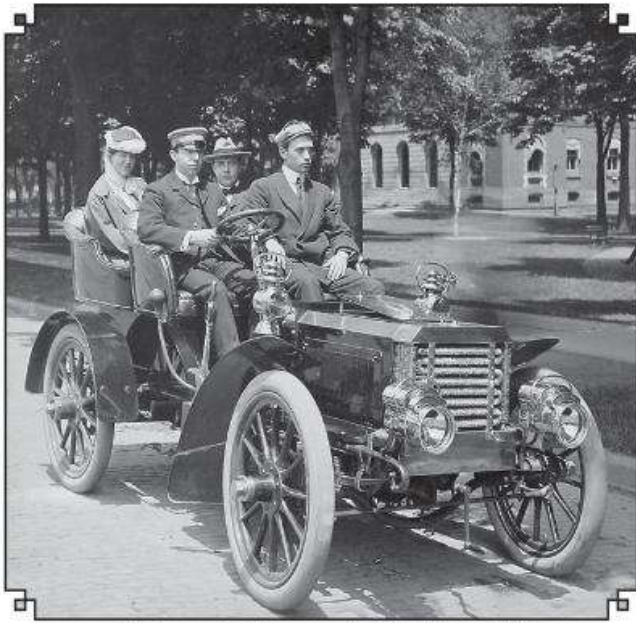


*Charles Joseph Sibley Miller aboard one of his two luxurious yachts, which were moored in New York Harbor. The Alsace was a 122-foot craft that required a crew of 10 seamen to sail. CJS entertained numerous dignitaries aboard his yachts, including Presidents U.S. Grant and Grover Cleveland.*

In 1906, CJS partnered with millionaires John Astor and William K. Vanderbilt in turning a New York City horse track into an auto race track. He placed second to Louis Chevrolet in the opening race that included world-famous drivers such as Barney Oldfield, Louis Strange and others. Miller then decided to team up with his friend, Chevrolet, as a riding mechanic. In early racing, a co-driver was referred to as a riding mechanic, whose job was to check the gauges, watch the tire wear, inform the driver of passing cars, and hang on tight since there were no seat belts or other safety equipment. The pair narrowly escaped one crash in the NYC area, with early reports stating that CJS had been killed. After recovering, Miller and Chevrolet hit the race circuit once more.

*(cont. on p. 6)*





*CJS drove the first auto in Franklin, a 1904 Peerless, with first wife Mary Prentice (left).*



*CJS's second wife, Yvonne LaGrande*

*(cont. from p. 5)*

Miller's first marriage lasted ten years, ending in divorce when Mary could no longer tolerate his exploits, drinking and exorbitant spending. Afterwards, she opened Sleepy Hollow Golf Course, which is still in operation today.

The General finally sent his son to France to control his

costly lifestyle, where he rented a castle near Normandy for three years. When World War I broke out in 1914, CJS attempted to enlist in the British army, but was refused since he was an American citizen. So instead, he volunteered as an ambulance driver for the British army, driving to the front lines to pick up wounded soldiers and transporting them to field hospitals. When General Miller found out about his son's new role, he shipped him a new fully-equipped ambulance.

When America entered the war in 1917, CJS was taken into the U.S. Army. He eventually



rose to the rank of Colonel (**photo at right**), and soon married a young French beauty named Yvonne LaGrande. After the war, the couple moved to Franklin and took up residency in the Miller Park Apartments (which still exist today). In 1926, the pair returned to France where they purchased a villa on the English Channel. Yvonne had hoped the change would have a positive effect on CJS, but he continued his former lifestyle of spending his father's fortune and drinking heavily. She finally divorced him in exasperation.

On December 21, 1927, the General passed away at the age of 84 while CJS was still in France. Hard times had hit Gen. Charles Miller's finances due to several bad investments and a failed second marriage. CJS returned to America in 1934, where his drinking led to a nervous breakdown and a stay in a veterans hospital in New York City. He returned to Franklin and took an apartment in the Park Hotel, which was once owned by the General. He passed away on April 14, 1937 at the age of 62. It was said he had a drawing board in his room with a sketch of a new type of airplane design, indicating that his genius mind was still active to the very end.

