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Hélène Mariette Delangle (Hellé Nice)

December 15, 1900 – October 1, 1984

Nationality: French

Raced between 1929 - 1949

Origin: Hellé Nice was of French descent, born in Aunay-sous-Auneau, forty-seven miles southwest of Paris. She moved to the city sometime around age sixteen and spent her time modeling and dancing before she became involved in racing. While her racing career took her to all parts of the world, she spent the last forty years of her life in France and died in a poor, rundown district in Nice.

Early Influences: Although no concrete evidence exists indicating why Hellé Nice was so drawn to racing, many myths have hypothesized her interest in the sport. One such story, detailed in Miranda Seymour's *The Bugatti Queen*, describes Nice's first encounter with the racing world. At the age of three, she attended the Paris-Madrid race in May 1903, with her brother Lucien and their schoolteacher Chopiteau. The story details how Nice was so excited by the number of people present and the atmosphere surrounding the race that she grabbed her schoolteacher's hand. Some believed it to be a sign of her early interest in the sport, but as Seymour says, Nice was most likely too young to have absorbed all that was happening, even when the famed racer Louis Renault passed them. It was not until the 1920s that her interest in motor-racing was peaked. After becoming friends with racers like Henri de Courcelles and Marcel Mongin and attending a number of races with them, including a 200-mile race at Brooklands in the fall of 1921, she gained an interest in the field. She may also have been inspired by the other women who were racing in the 1920s. However, the greater part of the decade would pass before she ever raced herself.

Racing Accomplishments:

- Nice's racing career began on Sunday, June 2, 1929, when she participated in the Grand Prix of the third Journée Feminine at the Montlhéry circuit. Described as the only serious sporting event for women drivers at the time, Nice was one of five women to compete. Driving her Omega Six at an average speed over 100 kph, she won the race,

beating out Violette Morris and Lucy Schell. The following week, she participated in the Actors' Championships and took the speed record of the day from men, driving in a Bugatti 35C.

- Racing at Montlhéry in December 1929, Nice broke the world land speed record for women. Her fastest lap was recorded at 197.708 kph and she averaged 194.266 kph over the course of ten miles.
- She covered 233 km in 7 hours on a trial run during the Casablanca rally in April 1930, but withdrew from the race after learning that Comte Bruno d'Harcourt, whom she had had an affair with, had been killed while racing.
- She competed in her first actual Grand Prix on June 1, 1930, at Le Man's. She earned 3rd place after covering 32 laps and 566 km.
- On May 23, 1930, she signed a contract with Hot News Agency to drive a Miller in a number of races throughout the United States.
 - She became the first woman to drive at Woodbridge (in New Jersey) on August 10, 1930. She broke no records that day, but she played to the crowds and earned the nickname "The Speedbowl Queen."
 - She was the only French woman to race on American board and dirt tracks at the time.
- In 1932 she participated in the Paris-Saint-Raphael Féminine rally and set the record time of the day.
- Nice won the Woman's Grand Prix at Montlhéry in June 1933 and the following month at Coupe des Alpes she earned 3rd place out of 121 entrants, co-driving a T-43 Bugatti with Roger Bonnet.
- She participated in the tragic race at the Monza circuit in September 1933 where at least three racers were killed. Nice earned 3rd place.
- In the July Grand Prix of 1934, despite not initially qualifying, she was given a concession to compete because a friend of hers had been killed there. She placed in 7th in an all male field.
- At Mount Ventoux hill in Provence she was the only woman participant and ended in 2nd place, setting a new women's record in the process (September 1934).
- Nice also participated in the Monte Carlo Rally of 1935. Driving with Madame Marinovitch, the two covered 4,000 km and of the 22 competitors, they won the Ladies' Cup.
- In the summer of 1936, Nice traveled to South America with her lover Arnaldo Binelli to race in the Rio de Janeiro Grande Prix and the São Paulo Grand Prix.
 - At São Paulo, she went from third place to second place and back again. As she was coming to the end of the race and vying for the second place finish she hit a bale of hay that had been thrown onto the track, causing her car to launch into the air before crashing. Six died and thirty-four others were injured in what many considered to be the worst racing incident in South America's motor-racing history. Nice, who was originally laid out with the dead, ended up in a coma for three days. She was given third place in the race, but spent the next few months recuperating in South America.
- Nice got back into the racing arena in May 1937, when she teamed up with Simone des Forest, Claire Des Collas, and Odette Siko in the Yacco Oil Endurance Trials. The team of four started the 10-day trials on May 7th, but had to stop after Claire Des Collas pulled out. Beginning again on May 19th, the four women set 26 new records, most of which remain unbroken today.
- Nice was set to participate in the Monte Carlo Rally of 1949, but at a reception on January 22nd, the night before the race, fellow racer Louis Chiron denounced her as a Gestapo agent. The incident ended her career. Nice tried to make a return and race again at the Nice Grand Prix in 1951, but her career had been too severely damaged by Chiron's comments, despite the fact that no proof existed regarding the statements.

Life off the Track: Hellé Nice lived a fast life both within and outside the world of racing. She was an adventurer and spent her free time participating in activities like mountain climbing and skiing. After moving to Paris in her late teen years, she took up modeling and dancing in order to make a living. It was not long before ballet critics began to realize that she had a real talent, and despite showing some interest in racing in the early 1920s, Nice chose to pursue a career in dancing. In 1926, she partnered with Robert Lizet and the two received a number of positive reviews in *Le Journal* for their performances over the course of the next year. According to biographer Miranda Seymour, the press fell in love with Hellé Nice and in the spring of 1927, she was offered a solo gig at the Casino de Paris, which she accepted, leaving Lizet behind. Nice acquired somewhat of a star status after performing in "Les Ailes de Paris." She continued dancing throughout the next few years, but a skiing accident in 1929 caused serious injury to her knee and ended her dancing career. The incident did not slow her down though. She became actively involved in racing later that year and the field opened her up to a whole new world. She traveled frequently to participate in races wherever possible and she gathered a number of admirers and lovers in the process.

Sources Consulted

Books:

- Bouzanquet, Jean-Francois. *Fast Ladies: Female Racing Drivers 1888-1970*. Dorchester, England: Veloce Publishing, 2009.
- Seymour, Miranda. *The Bugatti Queen: In Search of a French Racing Legend*. New York: Random House, 2004.

Newspaper and Online Articles:

- Autosport.com Bulletin Board. <<http://forums.autosport.com/index.php?showtopic=13990>>. -This is an online forum in which many have asked questions regarding Hellé Nice and have made references to Seymour's book.
- Ayers, Kate. "Review: 'The Bugatti Queen: In Search of a French Racing Legend,'" *Bookreporter.com*.
- "Christie's Pedigree Motor Car Auction Coming to Lyndhurst," *Half Moon Press*. April 1997.
- "Fast and Loose," *Camden New Journal*. 5 February 2004.
- "Hellé Nice," *EconomicExpert.com*. -Much of the information from this website seems to have been taken from Wikipedia.
- "Leading Women Archive: Miranda Seymour," *BBC*. 2 February 2004. -This is a 7-minute audio clip of Seymour discussing Hellé Nice and *The Bugatti Queen*.
- "Motor Sport: A Girl with Guts," *The Economist.com*. 26 February 2004.
- *New York Times*:
June 8, 1936: "250,000 Witness Auto Race at Rio; Argentine Drivers, Cappoli and Caru, are First and Second in Long Grind. Teffe, Brazilian, Third Fifteen Cars Finish in 281 Kilometer Contest over Famous Gavea Circuit."
Apr. 27, 1997: "A Speed Demon Reappears, A Ghost Now at the Wheel." By Mitchell Owens.
Dec. 26, 2004: "'Bugatti Queen': Fast and Loose." By Liesl Schillinger.

Collections that Miranda Seymour cites:

- The Brunkhorst Collection - which consists of the Bugatti 35C and Hellé Nice's two scrapbooks
- The Agostinucci Collection - which consists of a trunk of documents concerning Nice's life that Andree Agostinucci, the daughter of Nice's last landlord, kept in France

Photos credited to Automobile Club de France and Jean-Francois Bouzanquet's personal collection.

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