

Ocean to Ocean by Model T Henry Ford and the 1909 Transcontinental Auto Contest

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In the summer of 1909, the same year that the Indianapolis Motor Speedway opened in Indiana, another landmark event in the history of American automobile racing began in downtown New York City: the first automobile race from the Atlantic to the Pacific. It was staged as part of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition of 1909, a Seattle world's fair celebrating the resources of the Pacific, which officially began at noon Seattle time on June 1, 1909. When President William Howard Taft flashed a signal on a golden telegraph key in the East Room of the White House, the exposition gates swung open in Seattle. At the very same moment an estimated crowd of 20,000 people in New York City saw Mayor George B. McClellan, son of the famous civil war general, fire one shot in the air from a golden pistol, marking the start of the first auto race in the United States from ocean to ocean. Perhaps even more importantly, this race from coast to coast launched the spectacular career of the world's most popular car: Henry Ford's Model T.¹ The story of the first transcontinental auto race to Seattle reveals the history of the close relationship between the automobile industry and the sport of automobile racing. It provides a striking example of the early links between merchandising and sports, which have become so pervasive in modern professional and amateur athletics.

Competitive trans-continental road racing-with or without roads-first caught the public imagination with the 1907 automobile race from Peking to Paris, sponsored by *Le Matin*, a leading French newspaper. The race was such a success that the following year *Le Matin* and the *New York Times* combined to stage what still must rank as the greatest and most rugged long distance automobile race in history: 13,000 miles from New York to Paris in five-and-a-half months.² Originally the organizers planned the race to be 20,000 miles by land around the world. They envisioned contestants driving north in the winter

1. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 2 June 1909, p. 1; *New York Times*, 2 June 1909, p. 3; *Seattle Times*, 2 June 1909, p. 10. For general information about the exposition see: George Frykman, "The Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, 1909," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 53 (July 1962): 89-99; for a summary of the sporting activities at the AYP see: Janet A. Northam and Jack W. Berryman, "Sport and Urban Boosterism in the Pacific Northwest: Seattle's Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, 1909," *Journal of the West*, 17 (July 1978): 53-60.

2. Frederick A. Talbot, *Motor-Cars and Their Story* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1912), pp. 91-97; E. R. Thomas Co., *The Story of the New York to Paris Race*, (Los Angeles: Floyd Clymer Reprint, 1951).

through thousands of miles of unmapped wilderness across Canada and Alaska, and over the ice of Bering Strait into Siberia, a feat which would be virtually impossible even today, though a farcical 1965 movie about the 1908 contest, “The Great Race” starring Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon, showed the cars sailing across Bering Strait on icebergs.³

In 1908, driving across Illinois or Indiana was adventure enough. Montague Roberts, the driver of the American car in the New York-Paris race, a Thomas Flyer manufactured in Buffalo, said it took 10 horses to pull the car out of a snow drift near Chicago. “The drifts in some places were fully thirty feet high,” Roberts said. “These we went around over fields and through fences until we thought there were no roads whatever in the State. The snow stretched everywhere, an unbroken blanket covering the earth in an uneven roll, and you could never tell whether it was one or ten feet deep.” In Iowa the cornfields were better for driving than Iowa’s “gumbo” roads, which Roberts said resembled tracks of “fresh cooked molasses candy.”⁴ When race officials belatedly realized that the cars which had struggled across the central United States would never make it across Alaska, they changed the rules, permitting the vehicles to be carried across the Pacific by steamship to Vladivostok, from where they would follow the route of the Trans-Siberian Railway. Ultimately the American Thomas Flyer reached Paris on July 30, 1908, and was declared to be the winner.⁵

Many in the automobile business considered the New York to Paris race to have been a ridiculous stunt, despite the immense publicity it generated. “Probably no event has ever been started with such an utter lack of organization and foresight,” noted *The Autocar*, an industry publication, “and the sooner it falls into oblivion the better it will be for everyone concerned, though, after the interest which has been excited, it will take some time to bury it.”⁶

Promoters of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition in Seattle, from where the New York-Paris cars had been shipped across the Pacific, yearned for publicity like that of the round-the-world race. In early 1909, the Seattle Automobile Club, in conjunction with the organizers of the AYP, unveiled plans for a great race of their own, an ocean to ocean automobile trek to Seattle. It would be sanctioned by the Automobile Club of America and sponsored by M. Robert Guggenheim, a 24-year old playboy racing enthusiast and an heir to the Guggenheim family fortune. The winning car would receive the \$2,000 Guggenheim Transcontinental Trophy plus a \$2,000 cash prize.⁷

Like millionaire racer William K. Vanderbilt Jr., who sponsored the Vanderbilt Cup, America’s first premier automobile race, Robert Guggenheim also liked to own and drive fast cars, and hoped his backing of the race would earn him prestige as a sportsman. Guggenheim owned the only foreign car that

3. *The New York Times Film Reviews*, 1959-1968, Vol. 5 (New York: *New York Times* and Arno Press, 1970), p. 3568.

4. *New York Times*, 15 March 1908, pt. 4, pg. 1.

5. *The Story of the New York To Paris Race*, p. 62, p. 62.

6. *The Autocar*, (18 April, 1908): 576; *Detroit News*, 21 February 1908.

7. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 1 April 1909, p. 1; 4 April 1909, pt. 2, p. 10; 31 May 1909, p. 1; *New York Times*, 1 March 1909, p. 7; 16 April 1909, pg. 7.

entered the competition to Seattle, though he hired a crew and driver and didn't personally drive in his own race. In mid-June, while the race was in progress, Seattle police arrested Guggenheim for driving through downtown Seattle in a "high power auto" at a speed between 50 and 60 miles per hour. At first he told the police his name was "John Doe." When he paid his bail he found he had nothing smaller than a \$50 bill. "Well, it may as well be \$50 bail," a local newspaper quoted Guggenheim the next day, as he left his \$50 note at the station.*

Guggenheim hoped his race would, like the Vanderbilt Cup, attract top international competition. He and the Seattle organizers hired the most famous automobile in the world to be their pathfinder car to select the race route to the Pacific Northwest, the Thomas Flyer which had won the race to Paris. Driving the pathfinder car was George Miller, who had served as the mechanic on its winning trip round-the-world in 1908.⁹

Guggenheim expected perhaps as many as thirty-five entries in the race, predicting that major car makers from the United States, France, Italy, Germany, Great Britain and Belgium would all want to be represented.¹⁰ It was a natural assumption, since racing had always been the primary means of advertising the quality of particular cars. In 1909, more than 250 firms were building automobiles in the United States.¹¹ Locked in cutthroat competition, the race track provided a way for car makers to stand out from the pack, even if they had to apologize for it, as did one manufacturer's advertisement published in January 1910:

You do not want a racing car. Neither do we. We have never built one. We have not gone into races merely for the fun of it.

It is simply a cold dollars and cents business proposition. We have gone into contests because we believed that was the best way to prove our cars.

A man might say he was the best Marathon runner in the world. He might show you that he had a deep chest, and strong legs, and that his wind was good, and give you other reasons for thinking he was a good Marathon runner, but unless he actually went into competition against other Marathon runners and defeated them, you would have a right to doubt his claim of being the best.

The same is true of cars. It is easy to claim that a certain car is the best car made, or that it is the best car at the price. It is easy to advance plausible arguments to support such claims, but the one unassailable proof is that of performance.¹²

On the race track drivers and racing fans loved speed, but the general public feared the obsession with ever bigger and faster cars on public streets, especially as the death toll on the nation's highways mounted. In 1907, 324 people

8. *Seattle Star*, 18 June 1909, p. 1. For information about the life of M. Robert Guggenheim see his obituary, *New York Times*, 17 November 1959, p. 35; *Who Was Who in America*, Vol. 3 (Chicago A.M. Marquis Co., 1963), pp. 352-353. The story of the Vanderbilt Cup is described in Albert R. Bochrack, *American Automobile Racing: An Illustrated History* (New York: Viking Press, 1974), pp. 45-68.

9. *New York Times*, 11 April 1909, pt. 4, p. 4.

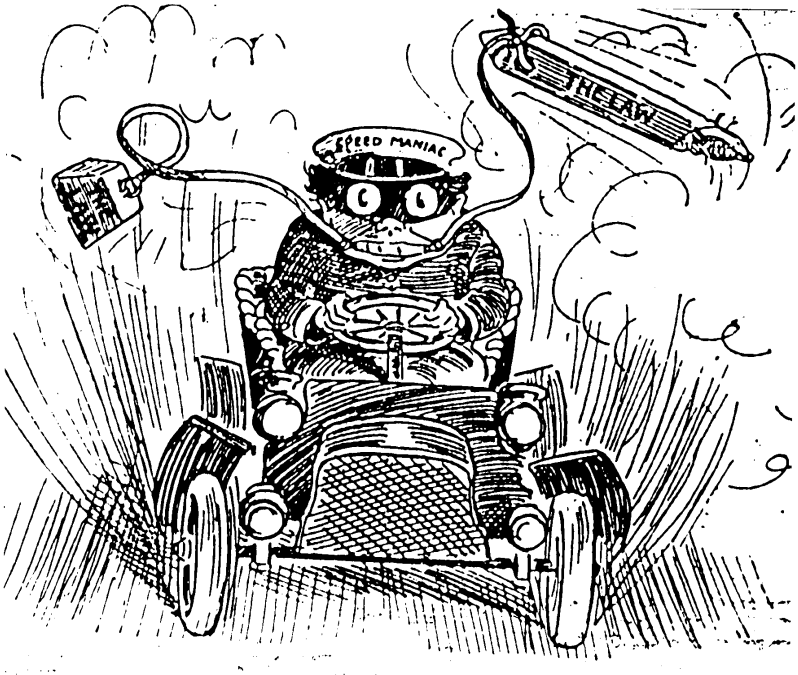
10. *Ibid.*, 1 March 1909, p. 7; *The Story of the Race: How the Ford Car Won the Transcontinental Contest for the Guggenheim Trophy* (Detroit: Ford Motor Co., 1909) p. 4, copied from original in Archives and Library, Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, Dearborn, Michigan.

11. "The 1909 Automobile," *Scientific American*, 100 (16 January 1909): 40-41.

12. *Colliers*, 44 (15 January 1910): 245.

were killed and 1,244 injured in auto accidents, an increase of about 50 percent over 1906.¹³ Many nonmotorists shared the opinion of an English journalist who wrote in 1907 that the young automobile industry “suffered from youthful diseases, chief of which . . . was the desire for extremely high rates of speed.”¹⁴ In a world where the fastest self-propelled individual machine had been the bicycle, the automobile was a terrifying leap forward in technology. Fatal automobile accidents were guaranteed to be gruesome front page news, and to elicit calls for reform. As one defender of the motorcar explained in 1910, “The automobile is new and blamed for everything. . . . The newspapers print columns when one person is killed by an automobile, but there must be at least six persons killed in a trolley accident in order to make a story.”¹⁵

In 1908 *The Outing Magazine*, a respected sporting journal, urged that “speed maniacs” be curbed by passage of a “law forbidding the installation of an



He Must be Stopped

A 1909 Seattle newspaper cartoon of a “speed maniac” breaking the law. The rising fear of reckless speeding on public roads led for calls for strict regulation of road races, such as the New York to Seattle contest in 1909. (*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, April 12, 1909)

13. *New York Times*, 2 January 1908, p. 10.

14. “The Motor Industry and Motor-Racing,” *The Spectator*, 98 (19 January 1907): 79-80.

15. Alfred E. Ommen, “The Right of the Road: An Aggravating Phase of Motoring,” *Colliers*, 44 (15 January 1910): 11. For information about the technological and cultural links between the bicycle and the automobile industries, see David A. Hounshell’s *From the American System to Mass Production 1800-1932: The Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984).

engine capable of driving a car over twenty miles an hour."¹⁶ Preachers like the Rev. Mark Matthews in Seattle claimed the cure for "speeditis" would be to set the city speed limit close to walking speed. "No man has a right to run a machine faster than the pedestrian could run if he were in danger," Matthews told his followers in 1909. "The speed of the machine ought not be greater than the ability of the individual to escape danger."¹⁷ After a run-away auto killed a Seattle woman in March 1909, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* demanded the city start to license automobile drivers. "Too many boys and girls," the newspaper stated, "not to speak of ignorant grownup persons, are allowed to handle a thirty-horse power engine as if it were a child's toy instead of a death-dealing machine."¹⁸

Supporters and opponents of automobile racing-especially road racing-argued over whether the sport helped or harmed the industry. Were typical road races of thirty or forty miles a "supreme test" of man and machines, or a dangerous amusement? Growing resentment toward high speed races on public roads raised fears of punitive laws that would infringe on the rights of all motorists and hurt the market for automobiles.¹⁹

The Manufacturers' Contest Association, a self-appointed industry watchdog of sporting events, sensitive to the charge that the auto industry endangered the lives of innocent people by encouraging reckless driving, unanimously refused in March 1909 to sanction the Ocean to Ocean race to Seattle. The MCA claimed it would not approve a mad dash across the continent, or a race of any kind on public roads that would encourage drivers to violate local speed limits. The regulatory board explained that the entry blanks which the Seattle organizers sent out "state that it is a 'race,' and as such it cannot but place a premium on speeding in violation of State laws. . . ."²⁰

The Seattle backers of the Ocean to Ocean drive claimed it was not a race, but a "motor contest" with rules requiring contestants to observe all state and local speed limits. No one ever explained how a contest, which would be won by whomever crossed the finish line first, differed from a race. A Seattle newspaper charged, "The Manufacturers' Contest Association is evidently laboring under a misapprehension, for at no time has the event been designated as other than a contest, and in no part of the entry blanks is it referred to as a race."²¹

Beyond denying that the run to Seattle was a race, the Seattle Automobile Club agreed to change the rules to meet some of the objections of the Manufacturers' Contest Association. Cars which required a change of any major components, including an axle, engine, transmission or steering gear would be ineligible for the prize money. Theoretically by forbidding replacement of broken axles or blown engines, cars would be forced to drive more slowly. Furthermore to stop "undue speeding" in the more heavily populated eastern

16. "Speeding the Speed Maniac," *The Outing Magazine*, 53 (October 1908): 115.

17. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 3 October 1909, p. 5.

18. *Ibid.*, 31 March 1909, p. 6.

19. *Ibid.*, 21 March 1909, "Real Estate Section," p. 5.

20. *New York Times*, 31 March 1909, p. 12.

21. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 1 April 1909, p. 1; 4 April 1909, p. 2.



MAP OF UNITED STATES, SHOWING ROUTE OF RACE AND RETURN ROUTE OF FORD CAR No. 2

A Ford Motor Company map of the transcontinental race from New York to Seattle. (Henry Ford Museum and Library, Dearborn, MI)

states, all cars would be required to adhere to a controlled schedule between New York and St. Louis. In essence the organizers divided the Ocean to Ocean contest into two events, an endurance run from New York to St. Louis and a speed race from St. Louis to Seattle.²² East of the Mississippi driving would be permitted only during daylight hours for twelve hours at a stretch, at legal speeds, between six controlled checkpoints. For the first 73 miles of the race from New York to Poughkeepsie, the cars could run at a maximum speed of 14 miles per hour; between Syracuse and Buffalo—15 miles per hour; between Chicago and St. Louis—18.8 miles per hour, etc. No car could leave the checkpoints before the posted times; late arrivals would be penalized with a 12-hour delay. West of St. Louis the rules were wide open. The Seattle Auto Club believed the western roads were so bad and the speed limits were so high anyway that “speed law violations” would be impossible.²³

Whether the Ocean to Ocean competition was a race or merely a contest, and whether or not cars were held to their strict schedule east of St. Louis, the Manufacturer’s Contest Association and many others in the automobile industry continued to oppose it as a wasteful and dangerous exhibition. F.B. Stearns, President of the Stearns Motor Company, protested bitterly when Oscar Stolp, a private individual who had purchased a Stearns Model 30-60, entered the competition. “As manufacturers we are not at this time in favor of any transcontinental race,” the president wrote his old customer, “and would not directly or indirectly support such a race, or support any of our owners, either financially or by establishing repair stations, the lending of mechanics, or other assistance.”

Stearns claimed a person would have to spend between \$15,000 and \$20,000

22. Ibid., 9 May 1909, “Real Estate Section,” p. 2; *Seattle Times*, 3 June 1909, p. 6; *New York Times*, 2 June 1909, p. 3; Leo Levine, *Ford: The Dust and the Glory, A Racing History* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 29.

23. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 9 May 1909, “Real Estate Section,” p. 2; *The Story of the Race*, p. 5.

to match the rival automakers with “fully equipped factory organizations” who were willing to bare any cost “to get their car to Seattle in record time.” “I cannot advise you too strongly,” Stearns wrote, “against attempting to make this run.” Despite Stearns’ disapproval Oscar Stolp was determined to go to Seattle. He told the *New York Times* he was disappointed that “the Stearns people have not sufficient confidence in their car to back up its performance.”²⁴

The *New York Times* took an odd position in the controversy, especially considering that the newspaper had spent half of the previous year lavishly promoting its own far more costly auto race to Paris. Now the Times had suddenly found the virtues of economy and said the race from New York to Seattle should not be “a race of dollars”:

To be really significant, from the purchaser’s point of view, the victory in an endurance race should not be determined by mere priority of arrival at the chosen destination. Every dollar spent for repairs on the road should count adversely in the score, and to have crossed the continent cheaply, as well as at reasonable speed, would be a vastly better advertisement for a car than a demonstration of amazing swiftness, conditioned on the maintenance of a well-equipped machine shop at every crossroad and the burning of more money than gasoline.²⁵

Several car manufacturers reportedly pressured the Automobile Club of America to withdraw their sanction, but the auto club replied that even if only one automobile showed up at the starting line, they would still be willing to approve the event. That attitude fit perfectly with the plans and personality of Henry Ford, who decided he would send two cars to Seattle even if the race was not held.²⁶

Henry Ford made a fortune by going against the conventional wisdom. Ignoring the general opposition of the auto industry to a race on public roads, he saw the run to Seattle as a splendid opportunity to prove the worth of his new 1909 lightweight touring car called the Model T, especially since his string of Ford dealers along the route could be called on for help.

Ford had built his company on the solid reputation he had earned at the racetrack, even though he admitted that racing around in circles proved little about the quality of an automobile. “I never thought anything of racing,” Ford later claimed in his autobiography, “but the public refused to consider the automobile in any light other than as a fast toy. Therefore, we had to race.”²⁷ Ford-built racing cars like the 80-horsepower “999,” named after a record-breaking locomotive on the New York Central, and the “Arrow,” were two of the fastest cars in the world in 1903. “Going over Niagara Falls would have been but a pastime after a ride in one of them,” Ford said. For a brief time Ford held

24. *New York Times*, 22 April 1909, p. 10.

25. *Ibid.*, 23 April 1909, p. 8.

26. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 16 May 1909, p. 3; *The Story of the Race*, p. 5. For information about the early life of Henry Ford see: Allan Nevins and Frank Ernest Hill’s *Ford: The Times, the Man, the Company* (New York: Charles Scribners Sons, 1954).

27. Henry Ford, *My Life and Work* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Co., 1922), p. 36; David L. Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford: An American Folk Hero and His Company* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976), p. 24, 44, 495. Lewis notes, “Ford was never more inconsistent than in his racing views.” (p. 495).

the automobile land speed record; in 1904 he became the first man in history to officially drive a car more than 90 miles an hour.²⁸

Ford gave up racing in 1907 after Frank Kulick, his top driver, and one of the first five employees of the Ford Motor Company, was nearly killed in an accident at the Michigan State Fair. Ford himself had to saw the car apart to save Kulick's life. The automaker vowed afterwards not to race again until the industry agreed to limit the size and power of racing engines, an issue that has continued to plague the sport of auto racing to the present day. "There must be a change in conditions if motor racing is to continue," Ford said in 1907. "At present track racing is more cruel than the gladiatorial contests of ancient Rome. We must get back to contests that will prove something to the motoring world."²⁹

Ford's decision to abandon auto racing complemented his emerging corporate philosophy and his long time dream of building a low priced, light weight but durable, high quality car for the mass market. The touring car that finally emerged from his factory in early 1908, the Model T, revolutionized the auto industry. The Model T's inexpensive cost-selling eventually at a price as low as \$290-and high quality, helped it become the most successful car in history, the favorite automobile of the average American. By the end of the First World War half of the cars on earth were Model T's. Ford sold more than 15 million of them by the time he stopped the assembly line in 1927.³⁰

Due to Ford's adoption of vanadium steel, a lightweight alloy, and the Model T's simplicity, it weighed only 1,200 pounds. Where other auto makers continually built more powerful engines, heavier frames, and larger cars, Ford resented the waste and inefficiency of an overweight motorcar. "Excess weight," he said, "kills any self-propelled vehicle."³¹ A great admirer of the physical culture theories of Bernarr Macfadden, Ford hated the idea of dead weight on both people and cars. Like a fanatical fitness instructor, trimming ounces became Ford's obsession, as he made clear in his autobiography.

There are a lot of fool ideas about weight. . . . There is the phrase 'heavyweight' as applied to a man's mental apparatus! What does it mean? No one wants to be fat and heavy of body-then why of head? For some clumsy reason we have come to confuse strength with weight. . . . Weight may be desirable in a steam roller but nowhere else. Strength has nothing to do with weight. The mentality of the man who does things in the world is agile, light, and strong. The most beautiful things in the world are those from which all excess weight has been eliminated. Strength is never just weight-either in men or things. Whenever any one suggests to me that I might increase weight or add a part, I look into decreasing weight and eliminating a part³²

28. Ford, *My Life and Work*, p. 50; Levine, *Ford: The Dust and the Glory*, p. 16; Alex Gabbard, *Vintage and Historic Racing Cars* (Tucson: H.P. Books, 1986), pp. 5-7.

29. Levine, *Ford: The Dust and the Glory*, p. 44; Nevins and Hill, *Ford*, pp. 347-348; Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, pp. 26-27.

30. For the history of the Model T see: Philip Van Doren Stem, *Tin Lizzie: The Story of the Fabulous Model T Ford* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955).

31. Ford, *My Life and Work*, p. 53.

32. *Ibid.*; William R. Hunt, *Body Love: The Amazing Career of Bernarr Macfadden* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Press, 1989), p. 154.

Ford's self-imposed exile from the racing world ended in April 1909 with the announcement that he would enter two of his new lightweight Model T's in the race to Seattle. He believed the Seattle race would "prove that a light weight car, well built, was the right car for every day, all-kinds-of-road use."³³ Ford argued that the race to Seattle, despite the opposition of the Manufacturers' Contest Association, would be of immense benefit to the auto industry. It would resemble the Glidden Tour, the annual long distance road rally across the United States sponsored by Boston millionaire Charles Glidden. The Glidden Tours were designed to prove that automobiles were a safe and practical method of transportation by demonstrating their reliability and endurance across thousands of miles. In fact the Glidden Trophy was the most prestigious award an auto manufacturer could win; a good showing on the tour was supposedly the most honest and practical measure of the quality of a normal automobile. According to auto historian David Lewis, the Pierce-Arrow so dominated the Glidden Tours (winning the trophy five years in a row from 1905 to 1909) that "the resultant publicity made that car almost an automatic choice for people of wealth and for funeral directors."³⁴ Rather than test specially-modified cars in an artificial environment like a racetrack, the Seattle contest, like a Glidden Tour, would show how ordinary vehicles could perform over an extended period of time under harsh, but true life conditions. Ford said that on the road to Seattle no "sudden short lived burst of speed on the part of a possibly inferior car" would make any difference.³⁵

"This will be the first real auto contest ever promoted," Ford told the *New York Times* in early April. "It will give Americans an opportunity to appreciate the vast possibilities of the motor car. The contest will show manufacturers the weak points in auto construction that are to be overcome, and the buyer will learn more about motor cars than he could in any other way. . . . The best car should win, which is not generally the case in the average race or contest."³⁶

Unlike Henry Ford, Robert Guggenheim did not have a car to sell. In response to Ford's overt commercialism, and to attract more contestants, Guggenheim emphasized how his Ocean to Ocean contest would further the cause of the good roads movement. Guggenheim claimed that his principal reason for sponsoring the contest was "not to proclaim the merits nor the defects in any particular make of car," but to offer a competition of "true sport" and to "create a transcontinental wave of enthusiasm in the direction of the good roads movement."³⁷

Certainly America's road system needed improvement. ". . . The road is part of the automobile," a 1916 history entitled *The Romance of the Automobile Industry* stated, and in those early years "the roads of the world were a joke."³⁸

33. *The Story of the Race*, p. 5.

34. John B. Rae, *The American Automobile* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 31; Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, p. 496.

35. *The Story of the Race*, p. 4.

36. *New York Times*, 12 April 1909, p. 8.

37. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 2 May 1909, p. 2; "Real Estate Section," p. 3.

38. James Rood Doolittle, *The Romance of the Automobile Industry* (New York: The Klebold Press, 1916), p. 263.

In 1909 only seven percent of the two million miles of highways in the United States were classified as “improved.” In the rain and snow, most American roads became impassable. Foreign drivers in the New York to Paris race thought that even the trails in Alaska or Siberia would have to be better than the horrible roads of New York State.³⁹

At a time when many people still doubted the future of the automobile, convincing voters to raise taxes for better highways required a massive conversion of Americans to the gospel of good roads. According to one tally out of a total U.S. population in 1909 of 80 million, about 155,000 Americans (less than .2 percent) owned automobiles. Only an auto owner fully realized how bad American roads were. ⁴⁰ “The farmer for years has been content to plod along at a snail’s pace over all but impassable roads,” one trade journal stated in 1908, “but just as soon as the same farmer becomes the proud possessor of an automobile, no matter how antiquated, he immediately becomes dissatisfied with the road that was previously good enough and forthwith joins . . . the ranks of the good roads workers. . . .”⁴¹

President H. M. Sternbergh of the Acme Motor Co., one of only two American car makers besides Henry Ford who endorsed and entered the Ocean to Ocean contest, echoed Robert Guggenheim’s view of the race for good roads. Sternbergh said the transcontinental contest would “demonstrate the durability and strength of American cars, but it will call very general attention to the execrable road conditions throughout the country.”⁴² Local roads needed to be improved, but the primary promotional goal of the Ocean to Ocean contest was to advertise the need for a national highway across the continent.⁴³ “It is a source of everlasting disgrace,” Sternbergh said, “that in an enlightened and civilized country like the United States there should be no transcontinental highway connecting the states of the two seaboard.”⁴⁴

The race to prove how bad Americans built roads, and how well they built cars, began when New York Mayor McClellan fired his gold plated pistol in the air on June 1, 1909. Only five cars were at the starting line: two Model T Fords, an Acme, a Shawmut, and an Itala, an Italian car owned by Robert Guggenheim, the only foreign car in the contest. Guggenheim blamed the poor showing on the antagonism of the Manufacturers’ Contest Association, and the fact that the Thomas Flyer pathfinder car had taken more than two months to reach Seattle.⁴⁵

The five cars left New York with less than a blazing start. Mayor McClellan had promised New Yorkers there would be no reckless speeding on city streets,

39. *Chicago Tribune*, 21 February 1908; Agnes C. Laut, “The Price We Pay for Bad Roads,” *Colliers*, 43 (17 July 1909): 14.

40. Laut, “The Price We Pay for Bad Roads,” p. 14; C. F. Carter, “Automobiles for Average Incomes,” *The Outing Magazine*, 55 (January 1910): 410-411.

41. From the “Cycle and Automobile Trade Journal,” quoted in *New York Sun*, 14 February 1908.

42. *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 6 June 1909, “Special Section,” p. 3.

43. *Ibid.*, 20 March 1909, p. 1; 11 April 1909, “Real Estate Section,” 2; 2 May 1909, “Real Estate Section,” p. 2, 3; 19 May 1909, p. 6; 21 May 1909, p. 12; 23 May 1909, p. 5; 3 June 1909, p. 6.

44. *Ibid.*, 6 June 1909, “Special Section,” p. 3.

45. *New York Times*, 13 June 1909, pt. 4, p. 4; *Seattle Daily Times*, 19 June 1909, p. 3.



The Thomas Flyer, winner of the 1908 race from New York to Paris and pathfinder car for the 1909 Ocean to Ocean contest, arrives in Seattle in May 1909. (Courtesy of University of Washington)

and New York's finest ensured his pledge would be kept. When the starting gun went off the five Seattle-bound cars, all equipped with axes, shovels and ropes, slowly followed a squad of uniformed bicycle policemen all the way down Broadway to Riverside Drive and past Grant's Tomb to the edge of the city limits. Four days later a sixth entrant plagued by mechanical problems—a Stearns—was the last to leave New York and the first to drop out of the race only twenty-four miles from the city.⁴⁶

The two 20-horsepower Model T Fords were dwarfed by the other contestants. The stripped-down Model T's were skeletons on wheels, shorn of all possible extra weight, leaving them about 200-300 pounds lighter than the ordinary lightweight Model T, and looking like oversized go-carts.⁴⁷ With no windshields and no back seats, the driver and relief driver on the two Fords were completely exposed to the elements. The other cars all had permanent crews of three or four men, compared to two men in each Model T. The Fords had only half the horsepower of the other cars and only one-quarter the weight, but from

46. *New York Times*, 2 June 1909, p. 3; 7 June 1909, p. 7.

47. Levine, *Ford: The Dust and the Glory*, p. 32.

the beginning Ford No. 1 and Ford No. 2 consistently outpaced the competition, running hours or days ahead of the pack.

The secret of the Fords' success lay with the company's nationwide network of car dealers, who served as ready made aid stations and pit crews along the route. As the driver of the Shawmut later complained, "there is a Ford agency in almost every city and large town, while there are few Shawmut cars in operation west of New York State."⁴⁸ On each leg of the journey the closest Ford dealers served as escorts and navigators for the Ford cars. Since the race did not follow an exact route, drivers could take any roads they wished between New York and Seattle, as long as they registered at thirty required checkpoints along the way. Time and again the Shawmut or the Acme took wrong turns down back country roads losing many hours, while the Fords, guided by locals who knew all the shortcuts, pushed straight on towards the next checkpoint.⁴⁹

From New York to St. Louis the race kept an orderly pace. After the Stearns scratched, the only major mishap involved the Itala, whose driver came down with diphtheria on the road between South Bend and Chicago and had to be replaced.⁵⁰ The race began in earnest at St. Louis, where the open cars headed west in a hard rain, driving around the clock. The crews ate and slept in the cars, nearly collapsing from exhaustion, as they raced day and night.

At the wheel of Ford No. 1 was Frank Kulick, the Ford Motor Company's top race driver, whose serious accident in 1907 had once helped to convince Henry Ford to give up racing. Kulick's relief driver and mechanic, H.B. Harper, the advertising manager and editor of Ford's company newspaper the *Ford Times*, later wrote an official account of the race which was published and distributed by Ford Motor Company.

"Every day we wore rubber coats and hip boots and pushed through mile after mile of mud," Harper wrote. In places the "clinging, clayey mud" was like quicksand. "Then we thanked our lucky stars that we of the Ford crews were driving light cars," Harper added. "Where a heavy car had to resort to horses and a block and tackle, the two men in each Ford car could pick up their car, place the wheels on planks and proceed across."⁵¹

Thirty-five miles from Denver both Ford cars became mired in quicksand in the bed of Sand Creek. "We were 30 feet from shore and working in water up to our waists," Harper said. "If we had not had light cars, we might have been there yet, but with the aid of the roof of a deserted pig pen which . . . we shoved under the wheels after lifting the back end of the car, we got both cars out and made Denver."⁵²

After Wyoming the two Fords decided to split up, as the powerful Shawmut car jockeyed with them for the lead. By the time Ford No. 1 reached Pocatello,

48. *Seattle Daily Times*, 23 June 1909, p. 2.

49. *New York Times*, 5 June 1909, p. 7; 7 June 1909, p. 7; 8 June 1909, p. 8.

50. *Ibid.*, 7 June 1909, p. 7.

51. *The Story of the Race*, pp. 10-11.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Idaho, it had opened up a nine-hour lead. "We began to plan on what to do with our money," Harper wrote. "We might better have saved our breath." He said the pilot recommended by the local Ford dealer was a "bone-headed" individual, whose "previous experience must have been largely confined to piloting schooners over the bar." The Idaho pilot proceeded to run them out of gasoline and get them lost in the desert 55 miles off the road.⁵³

Ford No. 2 then surged ahead with driver Bert Scott at the wheel, and mechanic C. J. Smith at his side. In second place was the Shawmut driven by T. A. Pettengill, who was assisted by R. H. Messer and E. H. Chapin. Ford No. 1 was third, followed by the Acme, which carried a four man crew. A near disaster for the leading Ford occurred in the small town of Prosser in central Washington. While an attendant was filling the car with gas, a bystander struck a match on the side of the tank and it exploded in flames. Much of their gear was lost, but the car was only slightly damaged.⁵⁴

The very worst road on the entire trip, according to Bert Scott, was the fifty-mile-long stretch through Snoqualmie Pass in the Cascade Mountains east of Seattle. Scott and mechanic Smith struggled through the deep snow without sleep for nineteen hours. "Besides the snow," Scott said, "there were steep grades, and it was pushing, pulling, holding back and digging all the way through the fifty miles." Helping the exhausted driver and his mechanic dig out of the snow were R. P. Rice, the local Seattle Ford dealer, and President Henry Ford himself, who had come out from Detroit to help his Model T's race to victory.

In front of a crowd of approximately 10-15,000 people, the exhausted crew of Ford No. 2-followed closely by manager Rice and Henry Ford in another car-crossed through the gate of the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition at 12:55 p.m. on June 23, having covered the 4,106 miles from New York in almost exactly 23 days. Scott and Smith looked like they were on the verge of collapse; both men were badly sunburnt and covered with grime. They were too tired to celebrate, unlike company President Henry Ford, whom one newspaper described as the happiest man in Seattle.⁵⁵

The Shawmut arrived second seventeen hours later, while Ford No. 1, driven by Frank Kulick, arrived third the following day, again escorted to the finish line by Seattle Ford dealer Rice and Henry Ford. Ford No. 1 had been ruled ineligible for prize money, as it had been forced to change a broken axle in Snoqualmie Pass. The Acme reached Seattle a week later, while Robert Gugenheim's Itala, hopelessly in last place, dropped out in Cheyenne, Wyoming.⁵⁶

Henry Ford heralded the victory of the little Model T as proof of the superiority of his durable, but lightweight and inexpensive new car. The victory in the New York to Seattle race became a cornerstone of the marketing campaign for the Model T. Ford published a booklet by his advertising manager

53. Ibid., p. 18.

54. Ibid., 20-21; *Seattle Daily Times*, 21 June 1909, 1; *Seattle Star*, 22 June 1909, p. 1.

55. *Seattle Daily Times*, 23 June 1909, 1-2; *Seattle Star*, 23 June 1909, p. 1.

56. *Seattle Daily Times*, 25 June 1909, 4; 26 June 1909, 2; *Seattle Star*, 24 June 1909, 1; 25 June 1909, p. 14; *New York Times*, 27 June 1909, pt. 4, p. 4.



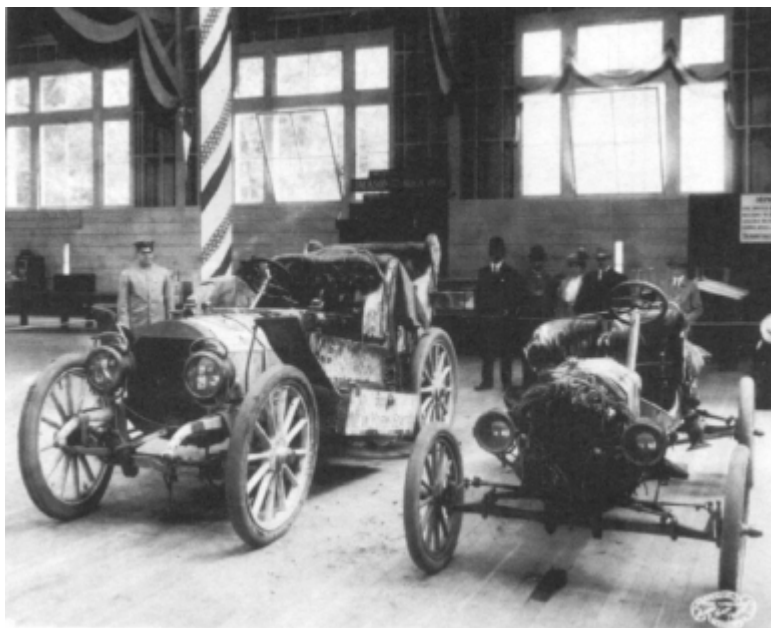
Exhausted from nearly three weeks on the road from New York to Seattle, a weary Bert Scott stops Ford No. 2 at the finish line in Seattle. The man wearing a dark bowler hat standing immediately to the right of Scott is Henry Ford. To the left of the car, smiling and wearing a button down hat, is race sponsor Robert Guggenheim. (Special Collections Division, University of Washington Library, Nowell Collection, Neg. No. 2204)

entitled, “The Story of the Race: How the Ford Car Won the Transcontinental Contest for the Guggenheim Trophy,” and distributed tens of thousands of free copies to Ford dealers all across the country.⁵⁷ The Ford company boasted in ads of its victory and stressed that the Model T which beat the high-priced competition in the Seattle race was a “standard stock car, and exact duplicate” of the ordinary Model T that anyone could purchase for about \$825. One ad claimed the Ford victory in the “hardest, longest race” in history was “the biggest demonstration of car superiority ever offered—the greatest proof of genuine automobile merit that could be secured.” Another Ford advertisement stressed Henry Ford’s favorite theme: light weight.

Light Weight, coupled with quality is what really won the race. It was light weight that kept the Ford going over the mud and sand, when those heavy cars were stalled for hours. It was light weight that enabled them to climb grades that other cars required outside assistance to surmount. It was light weight that permitted speed over those rough and often ditch-cut wagon trails, that served for roads in the Western states. It was the ability of the light-weight Ford to make quick stops and as quick getaways that made fast time possible. Without quality, the light weight could not possibly have stood the strain.⁵⁸

57. Nevins and Hill, *Ford*, p. 406; Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, pp. 44-45.

58. *Seattle Star*, 24 July 1909, p. 8.



Compared to the Shawmut (left) which weighed four times as much as Henry Ford's lightweight Model T, the stripped down Ford No. 2 (right) looks like an oversized go-cart. The Model T reached Seattle first, however it was later disqualified and the Shawmut was declared to be the winner of the 1909 race to Seattle. Nevertheless it was the Model T which won the race on the showroom floor, becoming the most popular automobile in the history of the world. (Special Collections Division, University of Washington Library, Nowell Collection, Neg. No. 2210)

To get his fair share of publicity, the Firestone tire dealer in Seattle took out a newspaper advertisement announcing with pride that there was "New York Air in Both Front Tires on Winning Ford Car No. 2."⁵⁹

At the awards banquet in Seattle given in honor of the drivers, Robert Guggenheim paid a special tribute to Henry Ford. "Mr. Ford's theory that a light-weight car, highly powered for its weight, can go places where heavier cars cannot go, and can beat heavier cars, costing five and six times as much, on the steep hills or bad roads, has been proved. I believe Mr. Ford has the solution of the popular automobile."⁶⁰

Most observers recognized, as one newspaper writer explained, that the Ford victory was largely due to "far sighted business acumen on the part of the management of the Ford company."⁶¹ A Seattle newspaper, however, chagrined about the commercialization of the event by the Ford company, strained to see the

59. *Seattle Daily Times*, 27 June 1909, p. 19; see also "Fact From Ford: The Model T Ford is a popular Car because . . .," *Colliers*, 44 (20 November 1909): 3.

60. Nevins and Hill, *Ford*, p. 406.

61. *Seattle Star*, 26 June 1909, p. 4.

FORD THE WINNER

OF THE —
OCEAN-TO-OCEAN CONTEST



Model T Touring Car, \$850, I. C. B. Detroit



THE CAR THAT WON THE RACE



Model T Roadster, \$928, I. C. B. Detroit

FIRST AND THIRD PLACES in the race from New York to Seattle have been secured by Ford cars. That's the biggest demonstration of car superiority ever offered—the greatest proof of genuine automobile merit that could be secured. In the hardest, longest drive ever pulled, a Ford car secured first place and a second Ford car third place, winning from cars that sell for from five to ten times the price. It's a significant fact that of the three cars to finish, two of them are Model T Fords.

BUT THE IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION for automobile buyers is that the winning car was a Standard, priced at an exact duplicate of the regular Model T four-cylinder 20 h.p. car, of which 6,500 have already been delivered. It's special, nothing better than regular, nothing different from what any buyer gets when we deliver to him a Model T Touring Roadster, Coupe, Town Car or Taxicab.

FORD MOTOR COMPANY

532-6 10th Ave. R. D. RICE, Manager PHONES

A Ford advertisement in the *Seattle Times* announcing the Model T's victory in the 1909 Ocean to Ocean contest.

race in simple, romantic terms as “pure” sport between the men who drove the cars, not a contest between machines or the companies which manufactured them. The *Seattle Times* said the victory was a great “feather” in Ford’s cap, certainly worthy of advertising. “But at the same time we believe that the credit is really due to the men who sat in the seats of that car all of the tiresome twenty-three days and who rode through the streets of Seattle so tired that they could scarcely hold their machine steady and avoid contact with the cheering crowds.”

The original object of the transcontinental contest, at least in the view of the newspaper, had not been to boost sales of Ford cars. “There is too much of the spirit of commercialism in automobile racing,” the newspaper charged. “It should be confined to amateurs for the benefit of the sport itself. It is rather grating on the nerves to cheer a commercial enterprise or give a living cup to a business institution.” In fact, the tremendous costs of auto racing guaranteed that corporations be involved. Race car drivers were often treated as just one more interchangeable part, but the Seattle editor said the laurels should be placed on the head of the “dirty, dusty, greasy man who has held the steering wheel,” rather than “upon the desk of the president of a great manufacturing concern.”⁶²

In the wake of the massive publicity about the Model T’s victory, comparatively few people ever learned that about five months after the race, the winning Ford was disqualified for illegally changing an engine, and the Shawmut was quietly declared to be the winner.⁶³ Almost immediately after reaching Seattle, both the Shawmut and the Acme crews had charged the two

62. *Seattle Daily Times*, 26 June 1909, p. 6.

63. Stern, *Tin Lizzie*, p. 70.

Fords with several violations of the rules, including bribing a ferry operator to delay the passage of the Shawmut car; sending in a replacement driver from Seattle while stuck in Snoqualmie Pass; and illegally replacing an axle and an engine on Ford No. 2.⁶⁴ At the time Robert Guggenheim, who acted as referee, determined there was insufficient evidence behind the charges. In November 1909, however, the Automobile Club of America reversed Guggenheim's ruling and threw out the Ford victory on the grounds that the engine on the winning car had been changed in Idaho.⁶⁵

Those associated with the Ford crew always maintained that they had not cheated. But with Henry Ford's personal prestige on the line, and that of the entire Ford Motor Company, there was enormous pressure for the Model T to win. Years later C. J. Smith, the mechanic on Ford No. 2, admitted that the engine might possibly have been changed en route without his knowledge "by one of the many Ford dealers who were eager to see it win."⁶⁶

With all the controversy that surrounded the Ocean to Ocean contest, it is not surprising that the 1909 event seemed to have little lasting impact on the sport of automobile racing. The automotive industry realized that the era of long distance racing on open roads had passed, and the contest was never staged again. Despite the disqualification of both Model T's, however, the Ocean to Ocean contest was an unqualified promotional success for the Ford Motor Company. Though the Model T may have lost the Guggenheim transcontinental trophy, it won the race on the showroom floor. The disqualification five months after the finish received virtually no publicity. As an article in *The Outing Magazine* noted in January 1910, the race across the continent proved that a lightweight, inexpensive car could "stand up remarkably well with anything on wheels," and that "cheap cars will go anywhere that a fancy priced car can go, though they will not go so fast."⁶⁷

Ford never really accepted the fact that the Model T had lost the 1909 race. In 1959, the 50th anniversary of the original Ocean to Ocean contest, the Ford Motor Company commemorated its 1909 "victory" with a highly publicized "re-enactment" of the run to Seattle. In conjunction with preparations for the 1962 Seattle World's Fair, a 1909 Model T was driven along the race route, stopping in 85 cities on its way to Seattle. On hand to greet the car at the finish line was William Clay Ford, Henry's grandson.⁶⁸ No one was reminded that both Model T's entered in the race had actually been disqualified, and that the winning trophy had gone to the Shawmut, a car produced by a company that had long since been forgotten. In one sense, however, the Model T had won the race. Beginning with Ford's entrance in the Ocean to Ocean Contest in 1909, Henry Ford had made sure that no one would ever forget the Model T.

64. *Seattle Star*, 25 June 1909, p. 14; *Seattle Daily Times*, 25 June 1909, p. 4; 26 June 1909, p. 2; 29 June 1909, p. 1; 30 June 1909, p. 5.

65. *Seattle Daily Times*, 30 June 1909, p. 5; Stern, *Tin Lizzie*, p. 74.

66. Stern, *Tin Lizzie*, p. 74.

67. Carter, "Automobiles for Average Incomes," pp. 411-412.

68. Lewis, *The Public Image of Henry Ford*, pp. 44-45.