

Bad Roads to Good Roads  
The Great Races  
Part Two

In 1909 only seven percent of the two million miles of highways in the United States were classified as "improved." In rain and snow, most American roads became impassable. [Encyclopedia.com](https://www.encyclopedia.com) notes:

“When the Office of Public Roads Inquiries undertook the first inventory of all U.S. roads in 1904, the country had 2,151,570 miles of rural public roads, but 1,997,908 miles, or 93 percent, were dirt. Of the 153,662 miles with any kind of surfacing, only 38,622 miles were stone or macadam, while the remainder included 108,232 miles of gravel and 6,810 of shell, sand, clay, brick, or other materials. Only a few hundred miles of roads in the entire country were suitable for motor vehicles.” ..... “As motor-vehicle sales grew rapidly—exceeding 1,000 for the first time in 1899, 100,000 in 1909, and 1 million in 1916—Americans demanded and got good roads.”

In 1908 and 1909 two long distance endurance automobile races with ties to Washington State helped to focus public attention on the deplorable condition of American roads. These were the 1908 New York to Paris Race and the 1909 Ocean to Ocean Race, from New York City to Seattle.

- In Part One of this blogpost series, we touched briefly on the 1908 New York to Paris Race.
- In this Part Two we will set the stage for the 1909 Ocean to Ocean Race itself and briefly cover the travails of the “pace car” of the Race.
- Parts Three and Four will set the stage for the 1909 Race and describe the routes and rules of the Race and the hardships faced by the drivers, with emphasis on that portion in Washington State.

### The First Seattle World’s Fair

Washington's first World's Fair -- the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition -- was held in Seattle on the grounds of the University of Washington campus between June 1 and October 16, 1909 and drew more than three million people. Visitors came from around the state, the nation, and the world to view hundreds of educational exhibits, stroll the lushly manicured grounds, and be entertained on the Pay Streak midway, while Seattle promoted itself as a gateway to the rich resources of Alaska, the Yukon, and Asia.(1)



Arctic Circle and Rainier Vista, shot from Government Building, Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition, Seattle, 1909 Courtesy UW Special Collections (AYP923)

### Good Roads Building



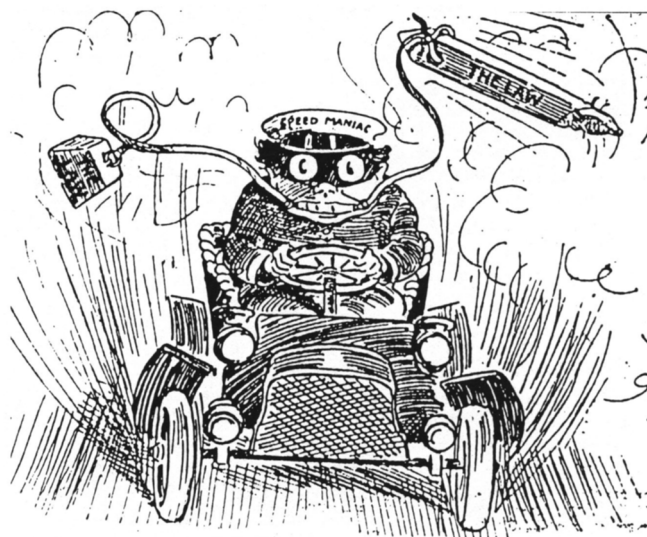
The Good Roads Building was erected by the State of Washington to promote better highways for travel and commerce. Exhibits included road building materials, and processes. Roads in 1909 were undeveloped outside of urban areas; the 1906 census showed 763 autos in all of Washington. Outside of the cities, roads meant rutted, muddy tracks. Roads were described as elongated mud holes in winter and dusty, sandy tracks in the summer. There were no signs and if the driver made an unlucky choice, driving might mean long detours, dead ends or impassable roads.

The Good Roads building was used for various purposes until it was destroyed by fire in 1961. (1)

### Pedestrian Paranoia

“On the racetrack 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 were killed and 1,244 injured in auto accidents, an increase of about 50 percent over 1906.”(2)

In 1906, speeds are limited to 4 mph downhill in Seattle and 8 mph uphill. Vehicles are first licensed in 1909 although license plates won't appear until 1915. Shell will bring the first gas station to Seattle in 1912. (1)



He Must Be Stopped

### Ocean to Ocean Race



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. (2)

Race organizers (Seattle Automobile Club (SAC), Automobile Club of American (ACA)) faced opposition from the Manufacturers' Contest Association (MCA), a self-appointed industry watch- dog of sporting events, who had become very skittish about pedestrian paranoia. Rather than a flat-out race from New

York to Seattle, the SAC agreed to change the rules to meet some of the objections of the MCA. 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 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. 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.



### The Pace Car's Slow Pace



Pace-maker car arriving  
at AYPE

To auto racing fans the Holy Grail of annual races is the Indianapolis 500. Depending on cautions and - God-forbid - wrecks, 33 Formula 1 racecars with 700 hp engines careen round the racetrack at speeds often greater than 200 mph, traveling 500 miles in 3-5 hours. The Corvette ZR1 led the pack as the pace car in 2019, with a 755-horsepower supercharged engine under the hood.

The pace car for the Ocean to Ocean Race was the prestigious Thomas Flyer, winner of the 1908 New York to Paris Race, with a 60 hp engine. It also was used as a pathfinder, as the race route from New York to Seattle west of the Mississippi River and on to Seattle was anything but certain. It took the Thomas Flyer over two months to make it to Seattle.

### Sources:

1) UW Special Collections: [When the World Came to Campus, AYPE 1909](#)

2) *Ocean to Ocean by Model T: Henry Ford and the 1909 Transcontinental Auto Contest*, by Terrence M. Cole Associate Professor of History University of Alaska Fairbanks

# A.-Y.-P. BUILDING FOR GOOD ROADS

## Federal and State Govern- ments to Prepare Joint Exhibit

If the plans of the members of the State Good Roads Association do not miscarry, the national government and the state of Washington will combine in installing a good roads exhibit at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific exposition in a building specifically erected for that purpose. Gov. Mead and State Regents J. T. Ronald and John P. Hartman compose the committee appointed for the purpose of reporting plans for raising the funds for the erection of a separate good roads building, and their report will be forthcoming within a few days.

Heretofore the national government has refused to pool issues with any state in a good roads exhibit, but at the solicitation of Samuel Hill, who recently visited Washington, the interior department agreed to write a letter to the officers of the State Good Roads Association, outlining its views on the proposition. The letter arrived in time for the recent session, and proved to be an agreement to install the national exhibit jointly with the state exhibit, on the consideration that the state would provide a separate building for that purpose.

It was the hope of those in attendance at the Kennewick session that the state officers appointed as a ways and means committee could locate a state fund that could be used in part for the purpose of erecting a good roads building, and this will be made known when the committee makes its report.

The exposition management assures the good roads people that a favorable site for the building will be set aside, and it is altogether probable, according to the statement of those who have followed the work of the committee, that the funds will be raised and the building erected.

