Bad Roads to Good Roads
The Great Races: 1908-09
Part Three

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 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 Part Two we set the stage for the Race itself and briefly covered the travails of the "pace car" of the 1909 Ocean to Ocean Race.
- This Part Three and upcoming Part Four will set the stage for the 1909 Race and portray the routes and rules of the Race.
- Part Four will describe hardships faced by the drivers, with emphasis on that portion in Washington State.

Introduction

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. Adrenaline junkie race fans of today would probably yawn at a race that had only 5 cars with maximum 40 hp rating and took 23 days to accomplish.

NEW-YORK DAILY TRIBUNE, WEDNESDAY, JUNE 2, 1909.

Baseball Racing Bowling Automobiling Other Spo

START OF THE OCEAN-TO-OCEAN AUTOMOBILE RACE IN CITY HALL PARK.

ROBERT GUGGENHEIM. Who offered the $500 trophy.

MAYOR McCLELLAN STARTING CARS ON THEIR LONG JOURNEY.

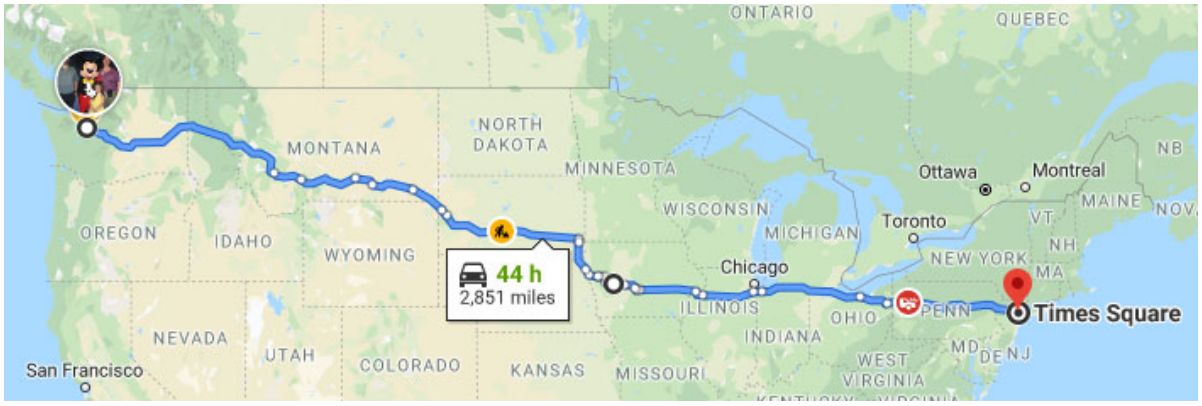
In June 1909, however, Americans were tuned in, as best they could, for the 1909 Ocean to Ocean Auto Contest. On June 1st, 1909 President William Howard Taft flashed a signal on a golden telegraph key in the East Room of the White House, opening the exposition gates of Seattle's first world's fair, the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition of 1909 held on the University of Washington campus. At the same moment five automobiles in New York started their

engines for a transcontinental race across America: destination Seattle. A sixth car left New York a few days later. Coincidentally 1909 was also the year that the Indianapolis Motor Speedway opened in Indiana.

The prize, other than the prestige of manufacturing an automobile that not only survived the abysmal roads of the day, but came in first, was the Guggenheim Trophy plus $2000 cash. The trophy was sponsored by M. Robert Guggenheim, a 24-year old playboy racing enthusiast and an heir to the Guggenheim family fortune.

Guggenheim emphasized how his Ocean to Ocean contest would further the cause of the Good Roads movement. 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. Foreign drivers in the 1908 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.

Today, Google Maps shows paved four lane (at least) Interstate highways from Seattle to New York City with an estimated travel time of 44 hours (4 ½ days at 600 miles per day) for 2851 miles. The fastest time in the 1909 Race was 23 days 52 minutes for 4106 miles



The Automobiles

The automobile industry began in Europe in the 1890's. In 1895 there were only about 300 cars in the U.S.. By the end of 1900 there were 13,000 cars. In 1902 there were 50 companies making cars. By 1904 there were 240 auto manufacturers. (3) 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. It was a natural assumption, since racing had always been the primary means of advertising the quality of particular cars. (3) However, at race time, there were only 6 entries.

Ford Model Ts (F-1 and F-2)

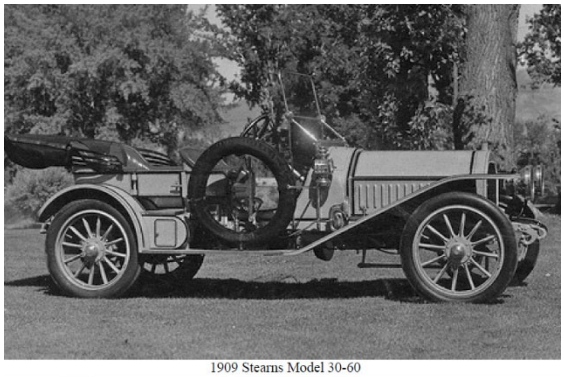
The touring car that finally emerged from Henry Ford's factory in early 1908, the Model T, revolutionized the auto industry. The Model T's inexpensive cost - selling eventually at a price as low as $290 - and high quality, helped it become the most successful car in history, the favorite automobile of 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. The two 20-horsepower Model T Fords were dwarfed by the other contestants.

Ford Car No. 1

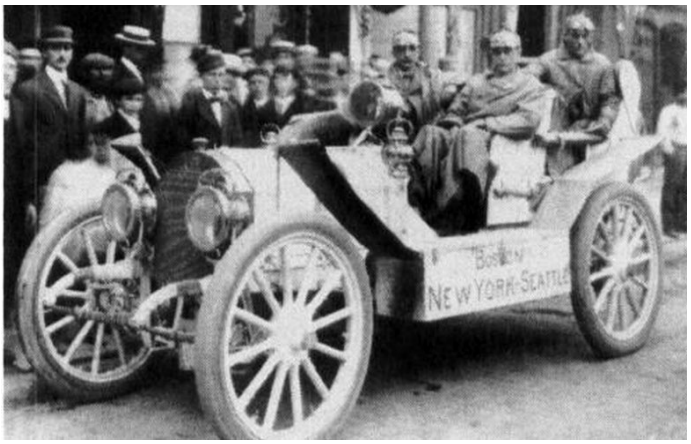
The stripped-down Model T's in the Race were skeletons on wheels, shorn of all possible extra weight, leaving them about 200-300 pounds lighter than the ordinary lightweight Model T, and looking like oversized go-carts. With no windshields and no back seats, the driver and relief driver on the two Fords 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 at (1200#), but from the beginning Ford No. 1 and Ford No. 2 consistently outpaced the competition, running hours or days ahead of the pack. (1)

Stearns

Car No. 3 was a Stearns Model 30-60 4 cyl. 40 hp and weighed 4600 lbs. The 30-60 rode on a 120-inch frame. It had a massive T-head four-cylinder engine with the cylinder block cast in pairs. The Stearns was an exceptional early car that was manufactured in Cleveland thru 1911 at which point it then became the Stearns-Knight equipped with sleeve-valves. This is the mid-sized model and the 30-60 designation was the HP it produced on one or both of its carburetors two barrels fully open. The 30-60 was produced from 1907-1911.


1909 Stearns Model 30-60

Shawmut



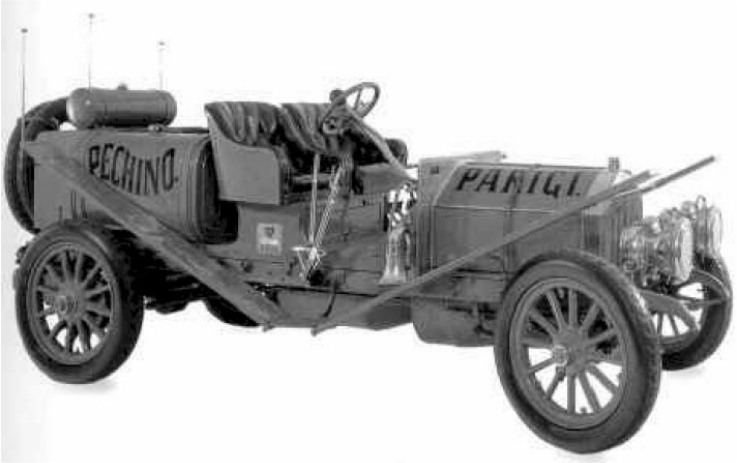
The Shawmut Motor Company was organized in Stoneham, Massachusetts in November, 1905. It was located in the vacant Phelps Motor Vehicle Company plant. The initial product was the Model 6 - a four-cylinder touring car costing $4750. A less expensive Roundabout model was produced later for $3500. The company folded in 1909 after a fire on November 13, 1908 destroyed the factory and several surrounding buildings

Acme Motor Co.,

The Acme was an American automobile made in Reading, Pennsylvania from 1903 to 1911. They were the successor of the Reber which was made from 1902 to 1903 by Reber Manufacturing. Car No.4 was a 6 cylinder 48 hp Acme and weighed 3500 lbs. The car was entered by the Cordner Motor Car Company. The only 6 cyl. in the contest. George Salzman drove thecar and Fay Sheets was the alternate.

Itala

Car No. 6 was an Itala 40–60 hp 4 cyl weighing 4600 lbs. The car is painted gray with Gus Lechleitner at the wheel. His companions were F. B. Whittemore and Elbert Bellows. Lechleitner and Bellows wore khaki suits and Whittemore was dressed in corduroy. Whittemore wore a feather in his felt hat that attracted considerable attention during the ride up Broadway. The Itala was equipped with demountable Continental tires. Robert Guggenheim owned the Itala and it was the only foreign car that entered the competition.



1909 Itala

The Rules

Due to safety concerns, race entrants were limited to local speed limits and daytime driving from New York to the Mississippi River. From the Mississippi to Seattle, there were no speed limits or driving hours restrictions. Basic rules for the race were:

- Cars which required a change of any major components, including an axle, engine, transmission or steering gear would be ineligible for the prize money. Major components of each car were labeled by the race committee and were to be inspected at the end of the race.
- Each entrant, on leaving New York, was provided with a passport containing the names and locations of 32 stations along the route. The checking official at these stations stamps the date and time on the passports which are to be turned into the committee at Seattle. The racecar crew must also sign a prepared card which they will mail to the referee.

Sources:

(1) 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 in *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (Summer, 1991)

(2) HistoryLink.org

(3) 'The 1909 Ocean to Ocean Endurance Contest, C. Cunningam, April 2017

(4) The Story of the Race, Ford Motor Company, 1929