

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

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 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.
- Part Three set the stage for the 1909 Race and describe the routes and rules of the Race.
- This Part Four describes hardships faced by the drivers, with emphasis on that portion in Washington State.

### **Roads? Where We're Going There Ain't No Roads**

Back to the Future Part II, starts with:

Marty: "Hey, Doc, we better back up. We don't have enough road to get up to 88 mph."

Doc: "Roads? Where we're going, we don't need roads."

That catchphrase, adapted to the 1909 Ocean to Ocean Race could be:

Roads? Where We're Going There Ain't No Roads!

Quotes and pictures from the four sources listed at the end of this Part Four illustrate the hardships faced by crew members of the five cars who made it to Seattle. (The Stearns car started late and never made it out of New York State.)

From *The Story of the Race, Ford Motor Company, 1929* (Source 4):

"And still it rained--not your ordinary showers, but hard pelting torrents when the heavens seemed to open and pour out their contents in floods. Roads ceased to be anything but mud trails and waterways. The fields provided better going than the highways. Mile after mile cross country made fast time impossible. In 15 hours on June 11th the two Ford cars covered 90 miles. Five inches of water fell June 10th and 11th."



"To get into Rawlins [Wyoming] necessitated using the railroad ties for a mile, this including the approach to and the railroad bridge over the Platte River at Fort Steele. The track was not ballasted and the ties 15 to 18 inches apart. Our 30-inch wheels hit every separate tie a distinct and separate bump and each car came into Rawlins with a broken wheel. It delayed us twelve hours making repairs and we were now second and 3rd."

Source 1: *Ocean to Ocean by Model T: Henry Ford and the 1909 Transcontinental Auto Contest*



"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."

Source 1: *Ocean to Ocean by Model T: Henry Ford and the 1909 Transcontinental Auto Contest*

"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, 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



Stuck in the gumbo

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.

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.<sup>54</sup>

### **Snoqualmie Pass**

While crossing Kansas and Wyoming, the contestants had to battle rain and mud, but Snoqualmie Pass was probably the most difficult part of the transcontinental route. The first automobiles had crossed the pass just four years before. Even after King, Kittitas, and Yakima counties had improved the Snoqualmie Pass road for the event, the route over the pass was little more than a wagon road. On the west side of the Cascades in King County, a portion of the road included following the Snoqualmie River bed.

Source 1: *Ocean to Ocean by Model T: Henry Ford and the 1909 Transcontinental Auto Contest*

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.

From *The Story of the Race, Ford Motor Company, 1929* (Source 4):

We were at the top of the last difficulty. We had pushed through the snow with less trouble than we had expected. We would be in Seattle by four o'clock. Wilen a rock hidden in the mud and snow sprang up to give us a last foul blow. For seven hours we worked on the top of tile mountain up among the clouds. remedying the trouble that that rock caused. At 5 P M. we were going again. A half mile over the ties of the new "Milwaukee" railroad brought us to the down grade and ninety miles from the finish. The rest was easy.

### The Not So Photo Finish

(1) *Ocean to Ocean by Model T: Henry Ford and the 1909 Transcontinental Auto Contest,*



Ford No. 2 in Seattle. Henry Ford on the right and Robert Guggenheim at the left

"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.<sup>55</sup> 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 Guggenheim's Itala, hopelessly in last place, dropped out in Cheyenne, Wyoming."

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 car was disqualified for illegally changing an engine, and the Shawmut was quietly declared to be the winner. An elated and shrewd Henry Ford used the Ford victory in the Ocean to Ocean Race to promote the Model T, very successfully to be sure. However the Acme and Shawmut crew protested the results, charging that the Ford #2 had replaced an engine and even bribed a ferry operator to delay them by several hours. On October 29th a dispatch from New York said:

**FORD THE WINNER**  
OF THE  
**OCEAN-TO-OCEAN CONTEST**

Model T Touring Car, \$850, L. A. S. Detroit      Model T Roadster, \$725, L. A. S. Detroit

**FIRST AND THIRD PLACES** in the race from New York to Seattle have been secured by Ford cars. That is the biggest demonstration of our superiority ever offered—the greatest proof of genuine automobile merit that could be secured. In the hardest, longest run ever pulled by a Ford car second first place and a second Ford car third place, actually from cars that sell for from \$750 to \$1,000. It is a significant fact that of the three cars to finish, two of them were Model T Fords.

**BUT THE IMPORTANT CONSIDERATION** for automobile buyers is that the Ford car used is a Standard Ford, an exact duplicate of the regular Model T four-cylinder 20 h.p. car, of which 6,500 have already been sold. It is special, nothing better than regular, nothing different from what any buyer gets when we deliver to him a Model T Touring Car, Roadster, Coupe, Town Car or Truck.

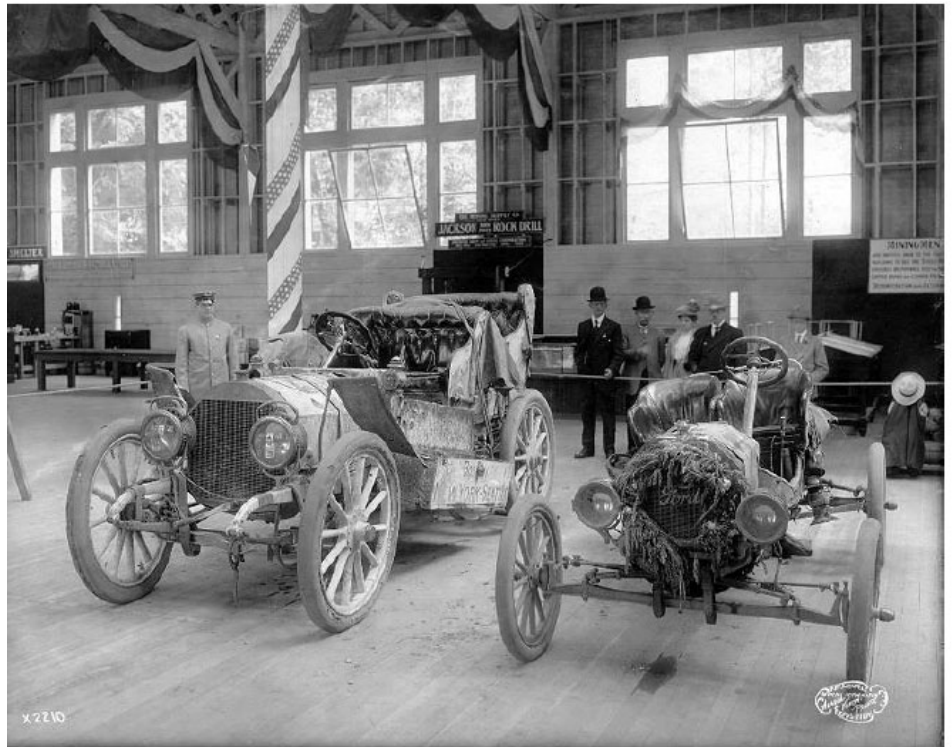
**FORD MOTOR COMPANY**  
532-6 19th Ave.      R. P. DIEZEL, Manager      Phone 2-1111

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

The contest committee of the Automobile Club of America today awarded the Robert Guggenheim trophy and \$2,000 prize to the Shawmut car, which finished second in the race last summer. The committee found that the Ford ear, which finished first, put in a new engine at Weiser, ID.

So, the official order of the finish is:

- First Place and winner of the cash prize of \$2,000 and the Guggenheim Trophy worth \$3,500 was the Shawmut, which arrived on June 23. The driver and mechanic were Bert Scott and James Smith.
- Second Place was the Model T that spent seven hours at Snoqualmie Pass, which arrived on June 23.
- Third Place went to the Acme that arrived about June 30.
- The other Model T finished before the Shawmut on June 23 but was disqualified because an engine was changed during the race.
- The Itala arrived in Seattle on a freight car.
- The Stearns never made it past New York state.



The Shawmut and Ford No. 2 on exhibit in the Good Roads building

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