Was it the Men or the Machine?

by Jeff Mahl
(Occasionally commenting from his great grandfather’s viewpoint...Ed.)

Looking back, I sometimes wonder if we could do it again.

The technology is vastly improved, the roads are much better, and there is now (more or less) world understanding. Yet, I would be hard pressed to imagine how anyone departing New York City on February 12, 1904 would survive open-car driving (in winter) crossing the lower 48 states then Alaska, Japan, across Asia and Europe finishing in Paris before the end of July.

Could we have really changed that much?

At the time, I guess I hadn’t given it much thought. You see, it was 1908 and I was the 35-year-old chief mechanic of the Thomas Motor Company.

For me, it was a bit of an adventure. But more than that, it was part of my responsibility to the company and the American team. As you probably already know, this was to be no idle excursion. It was an out-and-out international automobile race with the then-world superpowers: France, Italy, Germany and (of course) the United States. We were competing head-to-head.

It had the plot of a good television mini-series: suspense, drama, romance and even some violence.

The race was certainly a test of machines: the French De Dion, Italian lust, German Protos and the Thomas Flyer. But now I think of it as more of a test of wills.

It was said after the race that the Flyer (a stock 1907 roadster) had not been in a repair shop during the meal, team member Monty Roberts leaned back on his chair, struck the stove pipe and it collapsed across our table, and we had to pay, but her reply was “Get to Hell out of my place!”

In Hanover, Germany, the clutch rotated freely while in gear as the clutch shaft had rounded off. I carried the 30-pound clutch assembly three miles to a blacksmith’s shop. He made a collar which was shrunk over the shaft and filed square. This cracked while cooling.

The carbide headlight was broken by a pigeon outside of Moscow. We felt it was insignificant at the time. However, a Paris policeman saw it as a defect and blocked our entry into the city. In a final burst of ingenuity, we strapped a Parisian’s bicycle (with its lamp intact) to our hood. This allowed our victorious entry into the “City of Lights”.

As hard as it was on the machine, the race also took its toll on the human side as well.

The hotel owner, a short, stout Irish lady, was very angry. We apologized and offered to pay, but her reply was “Get to Hell out of here. No rough house in my place!”

We drifted two holes in the flywheel and drove in taper pins.

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Once in Manchuria, we approached a crossroads. There were several horsemen waiting, well-armed and blocking the way. We had been warned of marauders, but it was too late to turn back. We were armed, but outnumbered.

So we started up a lively conversation among ourselves which (combined with the novelty of seeing their first car) cause them to part. We drove between them heartily waving, leaving them with quite perplexed expressions.

The ordeal of the race also tested tempers.

In Asia, one crew member (Hans Hansen, who had defected from the French team to join ours) decided he knew the best route.

I had been navigating with a handmade sextant and a map approximately three feet long. Asia and Japan were on the right side, Europe and Paris were on the left. I was the team captain and quite certain we were on the right trail.

At that point, I found myself looking down the barrel of Hansen’s revolver. While I was considering my options, fellow crewman George Miller pulled his revolver on Hansen. Hans finally relented and we proceeded.

Later we enlisted the aid of some Russian Cossack soldiers, to pull us from a quagmire. They invited us to their sparse and infested barracks for dinner. Stale black bread and a round of vodka was the daily fare. I went to the Thomas and retrieved a jar of stawberry preserves. You would have thought it to be the finest caviar the way they savored it. They telegraphed barracks up the line “whatever happens, help the American drivers as they have an excellent jam!”

There were even some egos to deal with.

Monty Roberts, the young and dashing race car driver of Glidden Tour fame did drive the Flyer from New York City to Cheyenne, Wyoming with me as mechanic. He then left the race and did not return.

Years later, a friend sent me Monty’s obituary which read “The race was sponsored by the New York Times. Roberts won it by arriving in Paris July 30, 1908...conditions in Siberia were surprisingly less severe (than expected)”. I guess it would have been less severe if you were back in the states when it happened.

During the race, I had been clearly instructed by the company that “stories should tell of what the car had to overcome, never mind what the men had to do”. You see, the advertising value depended on the triumph and not the trials and tribulations. I think it was that facet that made the restoration of the Thomas Flyer one of my greatest satisfactions.

I was 92 years old when William Harrah of Harrah’s Casinos invited me to Reno for the restoration. You can imagine my delight to sit again behind the wheel (that had taken us some 22,000 miles) and recollect some of those experiences. It still stretches the imagination how such a test of men and machines was successful. Yankee ingenuity, determination and a little luck, I would guess.

To ever see such a test again? I wonder.  

A Personal Picture

by Barbara Maht
(He was also a very health-conscious man. His cure for most ailments was running, years before it was “the thing to do”. He exercised daily (I still have his wooden dumbbells). He also watched his diet and abstained from smoking or drinking.

He hunted and fished until his late 80s. When I was 14 he taught me to shoot a rifle and a 22 pistol. We walked to the Field & Stream Club once a week. (I had very intense, detailed lessons.) He always said, “If you are going to learn something new, do it right.”

At about 85, his eyesight began to fail.

At the age of 90 he was blind. Glaucoma.

That didn’t keep him house-bound though. He still did his chores around the house. He walked the long concrete driveway several times a day in the summer, and shoveled the snow from it in the winter. In fact, a new snow shovel was always under the tree for him at Christmas.

We all loved him dearly and will always remember his little chuckle.