

About the Story Behind the Adventure

Through sheer serendipity and a nice lady on the Mississippi Queen, we found Jeff Mahl. He is the great-grandson of George Schuster Sr., the driver-mechanic who made extraordinary repairs to the Thomas Flyer that traveled around the world in 1908. He drove night and day...in snow, mud and freezing rain...while others slept, exhausted.

Jeff said his great-gramp lived well into his '90s, with great spirit. Listening to his personal adventures gave the inside story to the tremendous struggle.

Jeff sometimes tells the story of this high adventure clad in 1908 motoring costume. He tells his audiences what it was really like to keep that modified 1907 Thomas Flyer roadster moving. It was a real race, too. The German Protos kept right on their tail.

Ralph Dunwoodie (who was at Harrah's Auto Collection when the car was restored) loaned us his enormous file on the race, the car and Schuster. Identification of the car was doubtful when it came to Harrah until Schuster (in person) crawled under and found a frame patch only he knew about. A great moment, indeed.

The car was restored to match the condition of its arrival in Paris. Dunwoodie said it was one of the most careful restorations in the Harrah Collection. The big four puts out 60 hp, which Bill Harrah liked.

The restored car was driven, including a western Glidden Tour. The 60 hp made it a pleasure and the twin drive chains sang their song again. You can read all about it (with great photographs) in the November/December 1964 *Horseless Carriage Gazette*. It's a landmark story.

What Jeff Mahl has done in the accompanying feature, is give us a more personal picture of a great 1908 adventurer. □

— David Rice

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, 1994 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 Zusto, 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. Well, that was true, but only due to the fact that there were no repair shops.

The first day we stopped in Hudson, New York and ground both valves on #4 cylinder. The third day we had to straighten the radius rods (which kept the driving chains in adjustment) with jacks.

In Goshen, Indiana the counter-shaft housing cracked and had to be replaced. But it cracked again in Cheyenne, Wyoming; Ogden, Utah, and San Francisco, California.

At Twin Springs Ranch, six teeth broke from the drive pinion and the transmission cracked and was no longer oil-tight. I rode by horseback to Tonapah, Nevada, removed a pinion from the car of a local dentist, then rode back to Twin Springs. I made the repairs while on my back in a stream bed oozing with quicksand.

The Manchurian border marked the breaking of several more pinion teeth and again cracking the transmission case. We had to wait for parts via the Trans Siberian Railway. At Omsk, 3,400 miles from Vladivostok, our transmission gears stripped. Deep in the Asian interior, we had no choice but to drive ordinary screws into the gear and then file them down into teeth.

The transmission finally disintegrated in Perm, Russia. We transported a factory-shipped replacement from the rail depot in Kazan by horse and wagon relay teams, a total of 430 miles in 4½ days.

There were two frame breaks, both of which we repaired with railroad boiler plate.

In Moscow we could not shift gears and taking the clutch apart, found the adjustment screws in the flywheel stripped. We drilled two holes in the flywheel and drove in taper pins.

In Hanover, Germany, the clutch rotated freely while in gear as the square clutchshaft 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.

I can now see the humor. We had stopped at a small hotel outside of Toledo, Ohio after driving all day in a blizzard. The dining room had a large coal stove to heat the room. During the meal, team member Monty Roberts leaned back on his chair, struck the stove pipe and it collapsed across our table, sending billows of smoke and soot across the room.

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!"

It was 2 a.m. Back into the snow in minus-13-degree weather. We drove into the night.

The Italian crew was the youngest, all in their late teens, early '20s. We called the Zusto the "Children's Car". It seems that there were some unexplained delays in their progress which the driver (Scarfaglio) later explained was the result of some beautiful American women!

Guns came into play on a few occasions.

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.

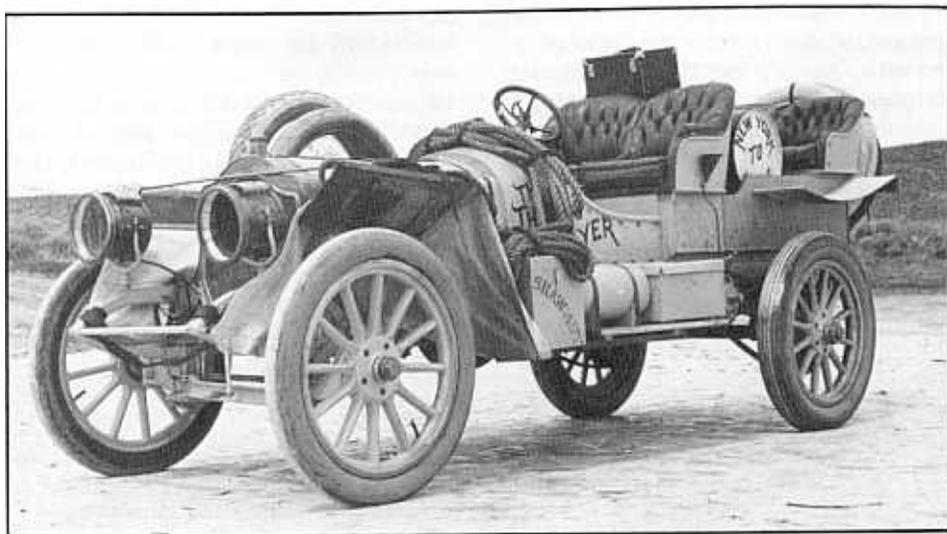
Years later, a friend sent me Monty's obituary which read "The race was sponsored by the New York Times. Roberts won it by arriving in Paris July 30, 1908...conditions in Siberia were surprisingly less severe (than expected)". I guess it would have been less severe if you were back in the states when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

(George Schuster's granddaughter)

When he moved to Springville, New York in the early '20s he had the Dodge dealership. Gramps lived with his son from the time of his retirement until he passed away at the age of 99.

After my marriage, I remained in Springville. This kept our family close. My three children grew up, as I did, hearing about the New York to Paris Automobile Race. We all learned the geography of the Northern Hemisphere from him long before it was taught to us in the classroom.

Gramps had total recall. His recollections were in great detail. He could remember and describe the people that he met along the way, while searching for parts or materials needed for repairs.

Gramps was a very competitive man (a determined German). His dealings were always fair and honest. Often he would tell us of things in such detail that he would lose himself in his story.

I'm sure that he drove that Thomas Flyer around the world hundreds of times.

During World War II, Gramps was a night guard at a local defense machine shop. (He was a very patriotic man.)

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. □