

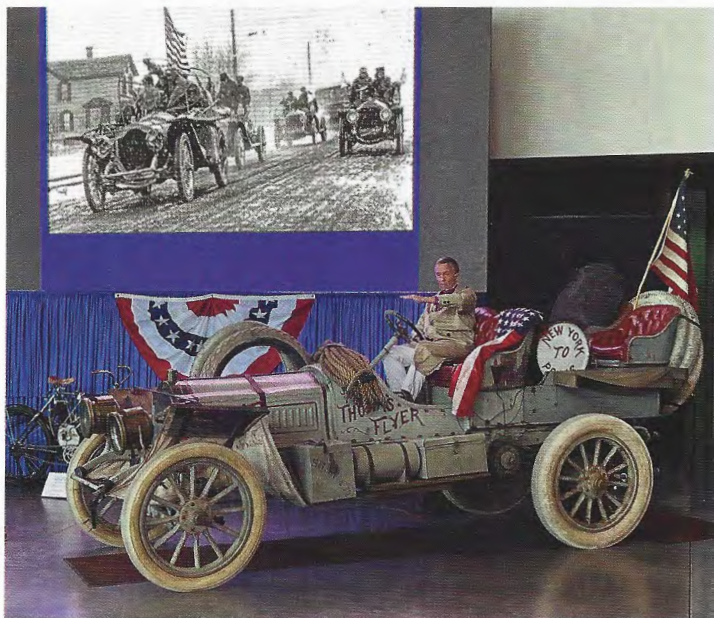
WEST PETERSON



NATIONAL TREASURE

Like many of you, I was in Louisville in 2010 when AACA was celebrating its 75th anniversary. It was a grand weekend, with some 375 antique cars participating on several self-guided tours to historical locations with opportunities to visit horse farms and a few places on the bourbon trail ... not to mention the filled-to-the-brim indoor showfield that accommodated more than 650 cars.

The absolute highlight of the weekend, in my opinion, was when some 1,100 AACA members packed into a ballroom to witness Jeff Mahl's presentation that he titled "Bandits, Guns, and Automobiles." Jeff, dressed in a full-length duster and sat in a Thomas Flyer to play the part of his great-grandfather, George Schuster, who in 1908 was selected to not only represent the Thomas Motor Company, but all of America, in the most formidable sporting event of all time: the New York to Paris race driving a four-cylinder 1907 Thomas Flyer fresh off the assembly line. Schuster not only participated in the grueling 169-day race, he actually *won* it! The Thomas Flyer Jeff from which Jeff made his presentation wasn't the real car in which Schuster won the race, but was a reasonable facsimile supplied by Corky Coker.



It was one of the best old-car experiences in my life, and I've been blessed with a relatively rich upbringing in regard to old-car experiences. A few years ago, Jeff gave his presentation again during the AACA Annual Convention in Philadelphia. Despite not having a Thomas to sit in during that production, AACA members again raved ... it is a story that seems to never get old, and always leaves audiences begging for more.

During this past year, Jeff informed me that there would be a Thomas Flyer reunion in Buffalo, New York on July 30, 2023. It would be the 115th anniversary, to the date, that George Schuster crossed the finish line in Paris, putting America in the lime light of the industrial revolution. Buffalo is where the Thomas was built, and the factory still stands where every Thomas was built from 1902 to 1918 (see World Champion's Homecoming on page 78). Jeff really captured my attention when he said that the National Motor Museum in Reno, Nevada (formerly Harrah's Automobile Collection), had committed to sending the actual race-winning Thomas Flyer, an American National Treasure restored by Harrah's in the 1960s to represent its condition on July 30, 1908.

I was enthusiastic learning that his presentation would be given again ... this time from the seat of the *original* Flyer. Without hesitation I knew I had to be there. Unfortunately, AACA had planned for a Nationals to be held in Hamilton, New York, on the same weekend, prohibiting me from joining the week-long festivities that were being held in Buffalo. As luck would have it, Jeff's presentation was going to be staged at 5pm Sunday afternoon in the Buffalo Transportation Pierce-Arrow Museum built by AACA member James Sandoro (a must-see museum in its own right).

I'm not sure what Jeff changed in his presentation during the past 13 years (if anything), but his breathtaking performance this past July 30 not only confirmed my previous thought, but firmly placed the experience as THE BEST I've ever witnessed ... if for no other reason than the fact that he was in the actual car this time. Furthermore ... Jeff is the spitting image of his great-grandfather.

While engulfed in the show, I kept thinking, "This should be filmed. This should be recorded professionally. To merely remain in the memories of the relatively few people present would be a loss to automotive history": George Schuster's story as told to his great-grandson, who shares it passionately from the driver's seat of one of America's national treasures.

Jeff is also national treasure, carrying his great-grandfather's torch in keeping the history of this car and its accomplishment, along with George's tremendous, unmatched perseverance, alive.

West

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