



## THE GREAT AUTO RACE: BUFFALO AND THE NEW YORK TO PARIS 1908 AUTOMOBILE RACE

by Alan V. Manchester

**A**t a time when the horse and locomotive were seen as the only reliable means of transportation, *Le Matin*, a Paris newspaper, encouraged *The New York Times* to join in sponsoring an event to eclipse all other motor car competitions up to that time. They suggested a race that would practically encircle the Earth.

France eagerly entered three vehicles De Dion-Bouton, Moto Bloc and Sizaire-Naudin. The Italians entered the Zusta and Germany, viewing the

motorcar as having military potential, entered the Protos. No ordinary crew, the Germans sent an Army Lieutenant and two engineers to assist. The offer of a \$1,000.00 prize did not entice any Americans to enter. Buffalo auto builder Edwin Ross Thomas and others viewed the race as a foolhardy venture and even predicted that no entry would reach Chicago. Thomas continued to resist even though prompted by a young employee Montague Roberts who also had teased fellow employee George N. Schuster

about joining him in a great adventure. President Theodore Roosevelt, in an effort to gain an American entry, challenged the fledgling industry to step up. European entries were specially built or modified and shipped overseas to New York City. Finally word was sent from Buffalo that a 1907 Thomas Motorcar stock vehicle from inventory was being shipped by train for entry in the race. George Schuster was in Providence, Rhode Island, on February 11, making a new car delivery and giving the owner a



The Thomas Flyer with the American flag flying February 16, 1908 in Clarence or Amherst, as it is approaching Buffalo on Main Street. Members of the Buffalo Automobile Club accompany it. PHOTO COURTESY: [www.TheGreatAutoRace.com](http://www.TheGreatAutoRace.com)

thorough explanation of the vehicle when word arrived to take the train for New York. The race was set to begin at noon on Lincoln's Birthday, February 12. Schuster arrived shortly before the start of the race at 11:15 a.m. A crowd of 250,000 had gathered in and around Times Square and up Broadway to witness the start of the epic race.

Upon heading out of New York City, they were immediately hit by one of the worst blizzards in years. On to Albany, Schenectady (at times using the Erie Canal tow path), Fonda, Syracuse, Auburn, Geneva, Rochester and Buffalo, arriving on the 16th. The next day *Buffalo Express* proclaimed, "Thomas Flyer Scorches Across Western New York at Express Train Speed and leads nearest Competition by 2½ hours into Buffalo." Roberts was at the wheel and upon arrival retired to his room while Schuster left to join an ailing wife and young family at their 23 Manhasset Ave., South Buffalo home. The car was removed to the Thomas factory at 1200 Niagara St. for



The big gray 1907 Thomas Flyer in the Buffalo snow, February 1908, prior to undergoing modifications.  
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installation of a 35-gallon gasoline tank and other refinements including a higher front axle less likely to get stuck in snow and mud.

Buffalo, which in 1901 boasted having more miles of paved streets than any other city in the world, was seeing the race in an optimistic light. The real race lay ahead in the uncharted wilderness of North America, Asia and Europe where approximately 8,000 of the 13,341 miles driven by the Thomas Flyer would be in an engine and transmission punishing low gear.

Later that evening, E.R. Thomas hosted a dinner at the Iroquois Hotel where he stated, "When I found there was no American car entered in the race I could not forego the opportunity to defend America's name. That was my sole motive for entering the Thomas car in the race...I was forced to go into this contest to defend the American industry."

Over the next 164 days numerous crew changes would leave Schuster, (the son of South Buffalo German immi-

grants Casper and Barbara Schuster residing at 14 Shumway Street), as driver and the only person to endure the entire course of the race. George Miller joined the team at Buffalo and remained with Schuster the rest of the race.

The Thomas Flyer was a large and expensive vehicle. It was a \$4,000, 4-cylinder, 60-horsepower open car capable of 60 miles per hour. There was no windshield. Glass was regarded as unsafe. Hand cranking was the only option to start the engine.

The departure from Buffalo was not as orderly as it had been from New York City. Crews from the Thomas, De Dion and Zust were scheduled dinner guests of the Buffalo Automobile Club but the Zust crew broke rank and sped west. Through Erie, Cleveland, Toledo and into Indiana, the Thomas Flyer crew had relied heavily on factory sponsor or auto club cars to break a trail in the snow and leave tracks for them to follow. After an 8-hour, 4-mile endurance drive into Kendallville, Indiana, with horses break-

ing a path and pulling them, they were faced with what seemed to be endless snowdrifts. A decision was made to have a stone boat constructed. Farmers had long used these flat sled, horse-drawn devices to collect and carry away unwanted rocks from their fields. They built one and hauled it to the car, which was then loaded on, but eight horses could not move it. So much for that idea; time and a precious \$20 were spent.

Arriving at Chicago on the 25th, they were 13 days out of New York City and had averaged 1.3 around-the-clock miles per hour in the past 256 miles. Not exactly Scorching Express Train Speed.

At this juncture, it became obvious that "bitterness was developing" and Captain Hans Hendrick Hansen, the Norwegian Arctic explorer from the French De Dion crew, expressed a desire to join the Thomas team. The Thomas Flyer crew would reach Omaha, Nebraska, before Hansen would get permission from E.R. Thomas.

It had been snow in Indiana, but as the Thomas traveled west of Chicago through Illinois and Iowa, mud was to be encountered, which burdened the chassis with hundreds of pounds of added weight. Removing the mud became critical and was accomplished by visits to fire stations along the way. On to Council Bluffs, Iowa and Omaha, Nebraska, where along the way schools closed to allow children to see the car pass. Arriving at Cheyenne, Wyoming, driver Montague Roberts departed for previously scheduled races back east. Linn Mathewson and Harold Brinker, skilled mountain drivers, were to get the car through the Rocky Mountains to San Francisco where Schuster would take over.

At Cheyenne, Schuster was advised that wild and open stretches lie ahead and that he had better get a "real gun and holster." He had been carrying a small caliber handgun in his pocket. He then purchased a six-inch barrel .32 Colt and carried it for the rest of the race. It was brought back to Western New York and gotten out when he served as World War II night watchman at Winfield A. Smith (now Peerless Winsmith Corporation) in Springville.

Finding their way required more than referring to their AAA Trip Tik or GPS. They got across the country and around the world by navigating using a handheld compass, the stars, a sextant, a hired guide, following railroad tracks and pioneer wagon ruts or even asking for directions. Hardships were not limited to any one team. The Italian team mechanic was described as "so tired that he falls asleep changing a tire. We rouse him lest he freeze to death." Event planners had anticipated driving on frozen rivers; this first happened in Wyoming.

Facing a confusing landscape, the American team sought and obtained Union Pacific Railroad "special train" designation, complete with a lantern-carrying conductor in Colorado and Utah. This was not exactly hazard free travel with frequent tire blowouts and close encounters with trains. Permission to use the tracks in high mountain country was denied because a breakdown in a snow shed would delay numerous mainline trains. Under conditions of extremely poor visibility, Schuster would ride on the radiator or walk out in front



The famous photo by George MacAdam of the Thomas Flyer stopping to rescue the German Protos automobile from the Siberian mud. PHOTO COURTESY: [www.TheGreatAutoRace.com](http://www.TheGreatAutoRace.com)



"Thomas Wins." At the victory celebration in New York City, August 16, 1908, the two winners from Buffalo pose with "Uncle Sam." PHOTO COURTESY: [www.TheGreatAutoRace.com](http://www.TheGreatAutoRace.com)

of the car carrying a lantern, and like the passengers behind him, protect his eyes with a gloved hand. Each night it was an absolute ritual to drain the water from the radiator and engine block. Antifreeze had not yet been invented. Western sand and terrain became a problem especially when a cracked crankcase required a rental horse on which to search for local Thomas car owners who might be willing to have parts scavenged from their vehicle so that the race could go on. Those who have driven in sandy places like the beaches of the Outer Banks in North Carolina can appreciate the benefit of partially deflated tires, which is what the Thomas crew did. Early cars like the Thomas did not have full or half drive shafts, but rather chain drives with inherent sprocket, link and alignment problems.

They next went through Death Valley, Tehachapi, Bakersfield, and Fresno, California. In Fresno, the fire chief, who had gone west in 1888, said to Schuster, "Did you ever live on Seneca Street in Buffalo?" He turned out to be a childhood friend.

On to San Jose, Oakland and the ferry to San Francisco. They arrived with only two days to get ready for the trip to Alaska for the proposed crossing of the Bering Strait to Siberia. It had been 41 days, 8 hours and 15 minutes since the Thomas Flyer had left New York City and it became the first automobile to cross the country in winter. The Thomas was placed on a ship March 27 for arrival at Seattle on the 29th. Once there, *New York Times* correspondent George MacAdam joined mechanic George Miller and driver George Schuster. Some "George" confusion arose, with Schuster finally answering to "Schus."

St. Chaffray of the French De Dion team was both a competitor and commissioner general of the race. He advised Lt. Koeppen of the German Protos team to leave his car on the train at Ogden, Utah, for shipment to Seattle for parts and repair. That bad advice almost disqualified the Protos, which was given a 15-day penalty instead.

It was envisioned that upon arrival by ship at Valdez, Alaska, a land, frozen river and sea route would be utilized. Specifically, they would be driving to

Fairbanks, then on the frozen Yukon River to St. Michael, back on land to Nome and finally crossing the frozen Bering Sea to Siberia.

The U.S. Mail, in one of its finer moments, delivered a letter addressed:

George Schuster  
Driver of the Thomas Flyer  
Somewhere in the World

Wife Rose hadn't even included the zip code – amazing! Their cargo with MacAdam included a crate of homing pigeons intended to fly reports from Alaska to Seattle. The sea gulls put a quick stop to that plan devouring one of the first birds released.

At Valdez, Alaska on the 8th of April, Schuster conducted a survey and determined that in addition to house-high snow drifts, there was only a narrow trail through a 40-mile forest. For that he contemplated cutting down 40 miles of trees. For mountain passes too narrow for an automobile, he contemplated blasting away rock. For ice too thin or rough to support an automobile, he contemplated loading 600-pound segments of the Thomas Flyer on dog sleds and reassembling them in Siberia.

Upon reporting these conditions to the race committee, he was ordered to report back to Seattle and the route was changed. The cars would be shipped to Asia.

On the *S.S. Shawmut*, headed for Japan, Schuster was surprised upon inspection of the Flyer to find that the leather fenders, installed at Buffalo to reduce vehicle weight were missing. He soon discovered that the Chinese ship crew all had new leather sandal soles. He reported to the Captain who quickly ordered heavy canvas replacement fenders made and installed.

The American team arrived in Yokohama, Japan, and then it would be just a drive in the country. Well just a little bit more complicated than that. There were narrow winding roads, one requiring the removal of the front of a house. There were incredibly steep grades. The highest grade required the Flyer to labor in low gear and be towed to the summit by 32 villagers who then lowered it down the other side. Arriving at Tsuruga on May 15th, they had driven 350 miles to accomplish the 90-mile island crossing in five days. The Züst and De Dion encountered similar difficulties but had teamed up to ease the burden. As for the Protos, they skipped Japan and shipped directly to the Russian port-city of Vladivostok in northeast Asia.

Once in Russia, a gasoline crisis emerged. St. Chaffray, whose sponsor quit the race and sold the De Dion to a Chinese merchant, tried to strong-arm Schuster into giving him a ride to Paris in exchange for the Frenchman's fuel. Annoyed at the proposal, Schuster located a German Trading Company and paid a deposit on gasoline. The company then reneged on the sale trying to give the German car, the Protos, an advantage. Schuster countered with a threat to expose their scheme to the *New York Times*. The fuel was delivered and St. Chaffray took a train on to Paris.

It was now a three-car race: the American Thomas, the German Protos and the Italian Züst. On May 22, the Protos left Vladivostok first, followed shortly by the Thomas. The Züst would not leave until June 5. It was mud as far as the eye could see. What was to turn out to be one of history's most celebrated acts of sportsmanship was just around the corner about 20 miles from the city. The German Protos was in the melted permafrost mud up over its rear wheels when the Thomas came upon them and carefully maneuvered past. They then stopped and Hans Hansen suggested that they pull the Germans out. Upon being freed from the mud, Lt. Koeppen of the Protos got out the bottle of champagne he had been saving for his anticipated victorious drive into Paris. It was shared

by all and he proclaimed the Thomas gesture as "a gallant and comradely act." A George MacAdam photo and later Peter Helck's painting preserved the moment. The tundra quagmire was in many places seemingly bottomless. Many nights were spent in Russian Army barracks where a strong friendship developed after Schuster's gift of strawberry jam. Having been warned of thieves and marauders, the crew spotted heavily armed horsemen ahead at an intersection. With no other choice, the crew broke into hysterical insane laughter and drove right through the bandit's ranks.

An attempt to use a railroad tunnel was almost disastrous with the Thomas quickly backing out of the way of a fast mail train. Meeting Felix Neuville from *Le Matin* resulted in a deep friendship and the loan of his Russian pistol permit. Neuville also made arrangements to secure supplies, parts and fuel. Mud, breakdowns, repairs and more of the same again and again took a physical and emotional toll. Hansen, at times, became



The Buffalo crewmembers, George Miller, center, and George Schuster, left, pose with the car at the New York celebration. George Miller joined the team in Buffalo and remained with the car all the way to Paris, France.

PHOTO COURTESY: [www.TheGreatAutoRace.com](http://www.TheGreatAutoRace.com)

belligerent. After a second threat by Schuster to be expelled from the car, Hansen rose and aimed his pistol at Schuster; "Do that and I will put a bullet in you." George Miller then pulled his gun and retorted, "If any shooting is done, you will not be the only one." That settled, they moved on. While attempting to cross a heavily guarded railway bridge, they calmly showed an illiterate officer the borrowed and brightly colored pistol permit, accomplishing their goal.

On June 21 they reached Lake Baikal, the world's deepest, and saw the German Protos taking the last space on the ferry, delaying the Thomas crew by 12 hours. They had time to purchase 40 pounds of Vaseline to lubricate their leaking transmission. Motoring around the clock, presented a problem for the sleeping relief driver in the doorless car; he often fell out. They fashioned a buckle and strap and invented the first "seatbelt."

The Thomas and the Protos jockeyed with one another, catching up, sighting, passing, and falling behind because of circumstance only to do it over again. The race was not without excitement; they caused dozens of horse runaways at the sight and sound of their strange machine. At times, they used the ancient Great Asian Tea Route, but often they were forced to use the Trans-Siberian Railway roadbed. The constant hammering of ties and spikes led them to wrap rope around the tires to reduce wear.

One four-day breakdown and repair session became known as "Camp Hard Luck," the subject of which was the 2007 Concord Historical Society's winning entry at the Erie County Fair. At another gear-stripped failure of the transmission, mechanic George Miller drove screws into the gear body and then filed teeth from them. Finally, there was no choice but to replace the transmission. That required a 430-mile roundtrip by Telega, a springless 4-wheel cart to get a new 600-pound unit. Hardship, how about 13 days without bathing or even taking your shoes off, that was one of many Schuster endured.



Pigeons again, but not the homing variety, just roadside stragglers who took off hastily and knocked out the left headlight. Not a big deal, oh really. And the ultimate insult, Schuster received a letter from E.R. Thomas asking, "When will you be in Paris?" "Do you want us to send Montague Roberts to help you when you get to the good roads of Europe?" Deeply hurt by the "Roberts" suggestion, Schuster curtly replied, "I hope to be in Paris about July 26." This, by a proud and determined man who had said to his reluctant crew, "as long as the wheels will turn..." "I'm going to drive this car." He deeply admired Roberts and later shared the victory with him even though Montague by then was on the outs with E.R. Thomas.

July 20: Moscow and a splendid meal and then back to work, adjusting and repairing for two days. The Protos was now four days ahead.

George Schuster operated the Dodge Brothers automobile dealership in Springville, NY in 1921. The business was located in a converted church building at the corner of North Buffalo and Church streets.

COURTESY OF THE CONCORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

July 27: Berlin with Lt. Koeppen's father as host and Germans proud of their Protos winning arrival at Paris on the 26th.

Didn't they know or want to know that the race committee has penalized the Protos 15 days for its railcar ride back in the U.S. and that the Thomas was awarded 15 days for its trip to Alaska. That's 30 days and plenty of time for the Thomas to get to Paris and be declared winner.

July 30: approaching Paris at 50 miles per hour, greeted by crowds 25 miles out. Stopped by a police officer that insisted

that they needed two headlights to legally enter the city. Never lacking, the crew convinced a bicycle owner to sell them his light. When it couldn't be unbolted, they



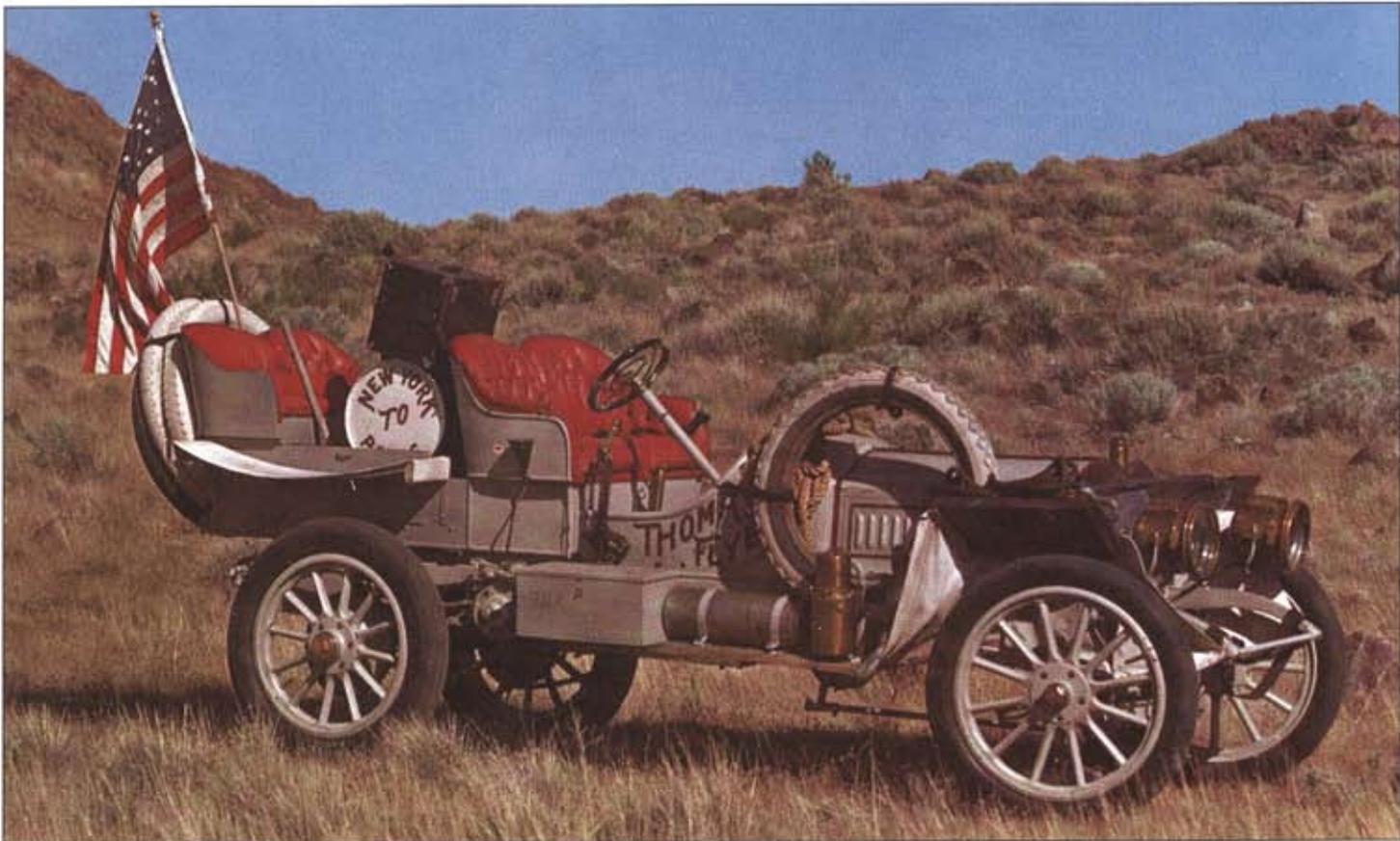
The non-restored 1907 Thomas Flyer was on display in 1963.  
POSTCARD COURTESY OF BUFFALO TRANSPORTATION MUSEUM

strapped the bike on the fender and drove into the city.

At 6 p.m., 169 days after leaving New York City and having driven 13,341 miles, 3,246 more than the Protos, and 26 days ahead, they pulled up to *Le Matin*. The Zust would arrive a month and a half later on September 12.

Champagne and more champagne, rest and on August 5, on the ship toward home.

Back in the U.S. on August 15 there was a grand reunion with family and friends. A New York City welcome and parade was followed by a personal reception by President Theodore Roosevelt at Sagamore Hill. They arrived in Buffalo on September 6, after celebrations at cities along the way. Met at the city's edge by the 74th Regiment Band and a mile-long line of automobiles, they were escorted to Lafayette Square. That evening they were invited to a 1,000-man dinner at the Ellicott Club. "Buffalo is



The restored Thomas Flyer. After reading George Schuster's article in the 1963 *Reader's Digest*, William Harrah, founder of the National Automobile Museum in Reno, Nevada, purchased the car. He restored the car after consultation with Schuster.



George Schuster at 91 years of age sitting behind the wheel of the restored race winner, c. 1964. PHOTO COURTESY: [www.TheGreatAutoRace.com](http://www.TheGreatAutoRace.com)

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proud of you," proclaimed acting mayor Louis P. Fuhrmann. South Buffalo neighbors presented Schuster with a silver cup at a Cazenovia Park gathering.

George received a bonus from Mr. Thomas and other fees for products endorsed produced a purse large enough for a down payment on a new home at 89 Fields Ave. Attempts to collect the \$1,000 winner's prize were fruitless at that time. Schuster did, however, get his check from *The New York Times* in 1968, 60 years after the race at the age of 95.

The Thomas Company went into receivership in 1912 and George Schuster was out of work. He went into retail hardware, then sold Ford cars, worked for Pierce Arrow and sold Dodge Brothers automobiles before working in the Far East and Africa. He finally moved his family to Springville, New York to establish a Dodge dealership, which he operated until 1936. Schuster then worked for Winfield Smith Corporation at Springville until 1946. He appeared on TV's, "I've Got a Secret" program. A story about him and the Great Race in *Reader's Digest* saw renewed interest in the old Thomas. In 1964, William Harrah of Reno purchased what was left of the Thomas and asked Schuster to authenticate it before restoration.

On June 12, 1964, at the age of 92, George Schuster again drove the Thomas on the sands of Nevada near the original 1908 route. In his later years, he spent cherished time reciting the events of the race to three of his great-grandchildren, Jeffrey, Matthew and Jennifer Mahl. Just as he had decades before, 98-year-old Schuster cleared snow accumulations from his Springville driveway despite near total loss of sight. George N. Schuster, at 99, died on July 4, 1972, and is buried at Springville's Maplewood Cemetery.

The story of a great man surrounded by great men and a Buffalo machine that changed the world doesn't end there. Following a celebration by the Concord Historical Society of the commemorative stamp honoring Springville's famous



George Schuster's great-grandson Jeff Mahl poses with the restored vehicle.  
PHOTO COURTESY: [www.TheGreatAutoRace.com](http://www.TheGreatAutoRace.com)



Cheyenne, Wyoming, action shot of cowboys escorting the Thomas car just as they did 100 years ago, from a documentary film recreating the epic race. Jeff Mahl served as a consultant to the film that will be screened at a July 30, 2008 centennial celebration.  
PHOTO COURTESY: [www.TheGreatAutoRace.com](http://www.TheGreatAutoRace.com)

college football coach "Pop" Warner in 1997, member Donald Orton suggested that a similar effort be undertaken for long-time resident George N. Schuster. Orton developed and chairs a core committee consisting of: Jennifer Mahl Burkhalter and Jeff Mahl (Schuster

great-grandchildren), Thomas Kazmark, Jean and Joel Maul and the author. The group enjoys strong historical society and community support.

Jeff Mahl has acted as a consultant and will appear in the two-hour historical docudrama, "The Longest Auto Race On

Earth" licensed for television throughout the world featuring new-old Thomas, Protos, De Dion and Züst vehicles with modern propulsion systems. That film will have its world premiere big-screen showing at Springville's Joylan Theater on July 27, 2008. Joylan will also be showing the 1965 Tony Curtis classic slapstick comedy "The Great Race."

Douglas Drake of the Rochester area Antique Automobile Club is putting together a 100 vintage car motorcade to Buffalo for a reception at the Buffalo Transportation Pierce Arrow Museum and a viewing of a Great Race exhibit on Saturday, July 26. They will drive to Springville for a parade and barbeque and join Jim Sandoro's 1909 Thomas Flyer in witnessing the dedication of a marker at the site of Schuster's 1920 Dodge dealership. Vintage car clubs and individual owners wishing to participate are encouraged to contact Joel Maul at [jmaul2@Juno.com](mailto:jmaul2@Juno.com). Prizes will include Franklin mint precision die-cast Thomas Flyer models courtesy Niagara Hobby & Craft.

The original race route record has never been broken. A 2008 rerun over much of the route will feature several types of vehicles and fuels, including vintage vehicles. The route from New York to Albany and then across Canada does not follow the original route. An appeal has been made for at least a swing through Buffalo. Jeff Mahl will leave following the Springville celebration to greet the winners at Paris on August 2 and help present the George Schuster trophy.

For more information on the celebration and all aspects of the 1908 race, please visit [www.TheGreatAutoRace.com](http://www.TheGreatAutoRace.com). ❀



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