

Can History Repeat Itself?



Times Square, New York City - February 12, 1908. Moments before the crack of a gold plated pistol sent six teams from five countries on the ultimate automotive adventure.

In 1908 an outlandish concept was being discussed, running an automobile Race from New York City to Paris, France. The idea was simple; the recently invented automobiles would drive the full distance across the continents of North America, Asia and Europe. Yes, drive from New York to Paris crossing the frozen Bering Straits, which meant starting the Race in the dead of winter to insure the ice would be adequate to support them. Was it possible, at a time when according to the London Daily Mail newspaper “the motor car, after a woman, is the most fragile and capricious thing on earth”? For many the around the world Race was quite simply, madness!

In 2011 we will find ourselves at a very similar moment in history when the challenge is again proposed. Only now, it will be the World Race 2011 with both ultra modern “green” automobiles and of course vintage classics. The Race will be from New York to Paris, over much of the same course taken 100 years ago. After all, for many today the hybrid automobiles and other exotic technologies are still very much new and untested. For some, these automobiles are a passing “fad”, suitable only for local travel. The thought of alternative technology having the endurance to make such a journey, absurd!



It will not be easy. The start of the Race on April 14, 2011 in New York will mark the 103rd Anniversary of the original automobile Race round the world, which began in Times Square at 11:15 AM on a cold February 12th morning. In 1908, the Square and Broadway were crowded with 250,000 people, each trying to catch a glimpse of these new fangled machines and the competitors in this epic International competition. Teams then represented the world superpowers of the day, Germany, France, Italy, and the United States. The American built Thomas Flyer was poised at the starting line. The 2011 competitors will face many of the same challenges the early Racers did. Those of weather, fatigue, seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and certainly time.



In 1908 roads were virtually non-existent, and much of the world's population had never seen an American much less an automobile. Services we today take for granted like fuel, repairs, communications, even food and lodging for the weary competitors were sparse and often unavailable. The threat of bandits, illness, endless miles of snow drifts, and bottomless quagmires were just a few of the obstacles they encountered on a daily basis.

The original Race had inspired moments of courage, despair, humor, camaraderie, and "Yankee" ingenuity. At one point the German Protos became stuck to the axles in a Siberian bog.

The American Thomas Flyer made it around the quagmire and then, with a sense of true sportsmanship, threw the rival German Team a towline pulling them out to resume the Race.

Some of those challenges faced by the early Racers have been improved for the 2011 event, with highways and far better communications. However, in many parts of the world the new Racers will cover, where will they find the alternative fuels, or specialized parts required for cars with the new exotic technologies? How will they cope with the language barriers, and more importantly the unpredictable weather? These challenges will need to be faced by both the modern and vintage automobile 2011 World Racers. The 2011 Teams will vie for the title of World Champion. That title is now held by George Schuster Sr.*, winner of the 1908 New York to Paris Race, driving the American built Thomas Flyer.



The 1908 victory has been unchallenged for the over 100 years. Will someone claim it in 2011? Will the carefully restored vintage classics be up to the challenge of retracing the [route](#) of their predecessors? Will the new "green" technology of 2011 equal the rugged endurance of the 1908 automobiles?

What would the winner of the 1908 Race think about the 2011 competitors? I can anticipate the response of my Great Grandfather George, who with a knowing chuckle, would have said, "Those chaps have a big challenge ahead of them. It will take sheer determination and a bit of luck for them to succeed!"

Can history repeat itself?

**George Schuster was inducted into the [Automotive Hall of Fame](#) on October 12, 2010.*

About the author:

Jeff Mahl is the Great Grandson of George Schuster Sr., driver of the Thomas Flyer and winner of the 1908 New York to Paris Race. For additional information on the 1908 Race, please visit: www.TheGreatAutoRace.com