



Buffalo Tales



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THE NEW YORK TO PARIS AUTOMOBILE RACE — 1908

Compiled by Alice Shaneyfelt Howell

Many articles have been written about the famous New York to Paris Great Race of 1908. An account of the race written by George Schuster and titled "Around the World, Almost, in 169 Days," appeared in the *Readers Digest* of January 1963.

The race was sponsored by a Paris newspaper, *Le Matin*, and by the *New York Times*. Schuster was one of the competitors in the race. At the time he was road-testing Thomas Flyers for the E. R. Thomas Motor Car Co. of Buffalo N.Y. A synopsis of his article follows:

"Back in 1908 the idea of an automobile race from New York to Paris was as fantastic as present day space flights. Paved highways were almost unknown, road maps non-existent, tires fragile and cars frail. Nevertheless, six cars and a score of men competed.

"Montague Roberts, a 25-year old driver for the Thomas agency in New York, first proposed that we enter. He would drive the car and I would 'keep it going.' The \$4,000 Thomas Flyer was a 4-cylinder, 60 h.p. car that would do a mile a minute in a road test, 10 miles on a gallon of gasoline, and it used a chain drive versus shaft drive. Moreover, no car had ever crossed the United States in winter.

"There was some opposition in the Thomas Motor Car Co. to entering

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**The French DeDion (#2), west side of Gibbon, north of Highway 30;
Davis house in background. (Photo by Luther W. Gramly)**

WITH THE SOCIETY

A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT:

I am excited to let you know of the upcoming "special event", this year. **TURTLE CREEK: A BLUEGRASS BAND**, and **HOOFIN' HIGH COUNTRY CLOGGERS**, will be returning to the Trails and Rails Museum on Saturday, August 28th. Watch for the schedule of performances in the **KEARNEY HUB**.

This year we have added several other attractions to our line-up. For example, we will be sponsoring a mini-crafts area, children's games, and a Bar-B-Que supper from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. (Meals sold separately.)

Admission "buttons" for this year's fund raiser will be \$5.00 advance, or \$6.00 at the gate for adults. Children 12 years and over will be \$2.50 advance or \$3.00 at the gate. If you would like to reserve your buttons to be picked up at the gate, you may call (308) 234-3041. Or, write to: 2nd Annual Bluegrass Festival, Buffalo County Historical Society, P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848. Checks may be payable to: Buffalo County Historical Society. Buttons will go on sale Monday, August 2nd at these locations: Trails and Rails Museum, Kearney Area Chamber of Commerce, Midtown Communications and the **KEARNEY FIUB**.

**TURTLE CREEK: A Bluegrass Band**

In addition to our two featured groups returning for a second year, we are pleased to announce that we will be featuring two new groups at our event, **PAPIO CREEK** will be coming to us from Omaha, and the **HEARTLAND STRING BAND** from Hastings. This line-up of quality entertainment will not be a disappointment.

SEE YOU THERE! BRING A LAWN CHAIR.

In case of rain... the Bluegrass Festival will be held at the Exhibition Building on the fairgrounds. Oh yes, did I mention that we have invited the Governor and his family.

—Susan C. Lynch

**HOOFIN' HIGH COUNTRY CLOGGERS**

the Thomas Flyer, and it was not until February 11, the day before the race was to start, that I received the message: 'Be in New York in the morning. Your salary will be doubled to \$50 a week.'

"A Lincoln's Birthday crowd of 250,000 jammed Times Square the next day. The Thomas was the only American machine. Lined up against it were a French Motobloc, a French DeDion, an Italian Zusto, a German Protos, and a 1-cylinder French Sizaire-Naudin. All the cars were loaded with gasoline, shovels, chains and ropes. At 11:00 a.m. the race began. The smallest car, the one-cylinder French Sizaire-Naudin, broke its rear axle before reaching Albany and dropped out of the race. The other five continued westward to Chicago.

"Because of the blizzard it took eight days to reach Chicago. From there mud replaced snow as the cars chugged west, following roughly the route of the Lincoln Highway (present U.S. Highway 30) through Illinois, Iowa and Nebraska and on to San Francisco. Schools were dismissed in many towns on the route so that the children could see us."

As the cars headed west to Chicago and beyond, the contestants were escorted by an imposing number of cars of all descriptions. Mention was made in the *Kearney Daily Hub* of February 27 that a procession of gaily decorated cars escorted the American, French #2 and German cars in Chicago, and extended along Michigan Avenue for nearly a mile.

First to arrive in Omaha was the Thomas Flyer, and the people vied with each other in seeing what they could do to make the stay of the racers pleasant. The Thomas spent nearly twenty-three hours in the city, and before leaving the next morning the racers were fitted out with complete outfits of clothing suitable for arctic wear—corduroy trousers, flannel shirts, caps, gloves, and heavy sheepskin-lined overcoats. "When they pulled out of the garage they were bundled almost beyond recognition," according to



The American Thomas Flyer, first car in race to arrive in Kearney, March 6, 1908.
(Photo by S. D. Butcher & Son)

the *Omaha Bee*.

Leroy Walker of Gibbon describes the Great Race cars as they went through Gibbon:

"A young Gibbon High School student had a problem. He had a new camera and wanted to take a picture of a moving object. How close should he stand to get a good picture and not have the result blurred? The moving object he wanted to photograph was a moving automobile, and there were no automobiles in Gibbon to practice on.

"The young student was Luther W. Gramly. He was not yet 17 years of age and probably in the 10th grade. The automobiles he wanted to photograph were the racing cars in the New York to Paris race as each went through Gibbon. Word had gone out ahead of them that if they did not break down or get stuck in the mud too many times they probably would go through Gibbon about the 6th of March. The racers might stop in the bigger cities but they would not even slow down going through Gibbon, and they would probably be going at least 25 miles an hour, so what should be done to keep the photographs from being blurred? Luther took the pictures and developed them himself in his own dark room. The results were good of the American Flyer, the Italian Zust and the French DeDion. There isn't any picture of the German Protos.



The American Car going through Gibbon at 4:10 p.m. on March 6, 1908.

(Photo by Luther W. Gramly)



The Italian Zust, east of Gibbon.

(Photo by Luther W. Gramly)

"The American Thomas Flyer had no windshield and no top, but carried an iron frame over which canvas could be stretched. Superficialities only added weight and all the weight-load was taken up with spare parts and necessary equipment. After all, they were going almost around the world and there were no garages for parts or service.

"The Superintendent of the Gibbon School let the school out to see the American Car go through Gibbon on Friday, March 6. The school house in 1908 was located two blocks east of where it now is in 1993. The *Gibbon Reporter* reported that the American car went through at 4:10 in the afternoon. It had left Columbus, Nebraska at 7:30 a.m. Monte Roberts was at the wheel, and he had with him three companions as machinists and helpers. The pilot car was a few minutes in the lead. Several hundred people assembled along the roadside to see the car. The machines were covered with mud and showed plainly the difficulty they had had in making the trip.

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"The Italian Züst came through on March 10 at 9:30 a.m. It had two pilot cars and a lot less mud. On March 19 the French DeDion (Car #2) went through at 9:34 in the morning. They were making good time but had been at Grand Island for two days waiting for a broken shaft to be replaced. The trip from Shelton to Gibbon was made in nine minutes."

All of the racers stopped in Kearney to register at the Western Union Telegraph Office. The American racers were greeted at 4:45 p.m. on March 6 with the blowing of whistles and a general cheer from the crowds that were out to welcome them. Dozens of cameras were in use for the fifteen minutes they stayed in the city before heading west on 22nd Street bound for Lexington, where they were to stop for the night.

The Italian Züst reached Kearney at 10:00 a.m. on March 10, according to the *Hub* of that date. A large number of Kearney autoists met the car at the eastern edge of the city and piloted it through town.

The *Hub* of March 19 reported that the DeDion, "Frenchy No. 2." left Grand Island at 8:15 a.m., reaching Kearney at 10:05 where it stopped in front of the *Hub* office to take on T. H. Bolte of this city to act as pilot between Kearney and North Platte. (Bolte was credited with designing and building the first gasoline automobile in Nebraska in 1898.)

The German Protos was also expected in Kearney on March 19 but there is no record as to whether it arrived late on the 19th or early on the 20th. It was in Lexington on the 20th.

On March 24 the American Thomas Flyer reached San Francisco. It had taken 41 days, 8 hours and 15 minutes. The Italian Züst was in Utah, the French DeDion and the German Protos were still in Wyoming, and the French Motobloc had given up in Omaha and announced that its broken car would be sent by train to San Francisco to continue the race. (It was eventually disqualified.)

From San Francisco the racers and their cars sailed north to Seattle, then went by steamship to Kyoto, Japan, to Vladivostok in Manchuria, into western Siberia, to Moscow and St. Petersburg in Russia, crossed Germany to Berlin, and on into Belgium.

According to George Schuster's account of the race, "The final dash began early on July 30 from Liege in Belgium on to Paris. Crowds jammed the Blvd. Poissoniere as the Thomas reached the office of *Le Matin* at 8:00 p.m. on July 30 — 169 days after leaving New York. The Thomas Flyer had won the longest race in history. Its speedometer was broken but the drivers estimated it had traveled 13,341 miles. The Italian Züst reached Paris on September 17 and won second place. The German Protos had reached Paris first on July 26 but was penalized thirty days for failing to drive from Utah to Seattle. (The car was damaged beyond repair and had been shipped by rail to Seattle where it joined the race again and sailed to Vladivostok.)"

After leading a parade of automobiles through the streets of Paris, the Thomas Flyer was shipped back to New York City.

SOURCES

Schuster, *Around the World, Almost, in 169 Days*, Readers Digest, January 1963. Ahlgren & Anthone, *Bad Roads and Big Hearts: Nebraska and the Great Race of 1908*, Nebraska History, Spring 1992. *Old Motor Magazine*, February 1967. *Gibbon Reporter*, March 12, 1908. *Kearney Daily Hub*, February 27, March 6, 9, 10, 19, 1908. *Where the Buffalo Roamed*, page 401.

PHOTOS

Copies of Luther W. Gramly photos were given to Earl Hammans, a classmate, who donated them to the Gibbon Heritage Center to be a part of the permanent history of Gibbon.

AT THE MUSEUM

The Museum is having a very good year. Attendance has been up and sales at the Gift Shop have been excellent. We have many new items, so stop and browse.

We were closed one day after the storm to get things back in order. While we did not have severe damage, we had enough. The cottonwood tree that we cherished was blown over. The privies by the school were blown over and damaged, the west end of the roof at the school was damaged plus some damage on the other roofs, storm windows blown off and broken, and the door on the west of the depot was blown in and had some damage.

I wish to thank every one who took part in the "Collections Day" at the Museum. We had many good displays, which took time for those involved. Those who helped in the buildings and many other ways were equally important. It takes a great many helpers to make any event a success.

Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Museum Director

Bluegrass Festival — August 28. See page 2.

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848. It is sent to all members of the Society. Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- Basic Membership \$10.00
 - Institutional Membership \$15.00
 - Supporting Membership \$25.00
- Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual, \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

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- Term expiring June 1, 1995: Glen Wisch, Philip Holmgren, Larry Nansel, all of Kearney; Florenta Sullivan of Elm Creek.
- Term expiring June 1, 1996: Susan C. Lynch, Margaret Hohnholt of Kearney; Wilma Harder of Gibbon; Helen Kinaman of Amherst.

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Buffalo County Historical Society

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