

Joe Scalzo's

City of Speed and elsewhere

Pioneers and Madmen

The date: February 12, 1908.

The place: New York City, starting point of the great horseless carriage free-for-all called the New York-to- Paris.



The racing drivers: Confused and apprehensive.

Sirtori and Scarfoglio, the marathon's two wild-eyed Italians, were smirking like a set



of convicted killers on death row. Lt. Koeppen, a tough professional soldier on emergency leave from the Prussian war department, was goose-stepping and vigorously Deutschland-Uber-Allesing. Returning the lieutenant's fire, the assembled French drivers were quarreling bitterly – amongst themselves. And trying his best not to look like a Yank yokel amongst all the colorful continental aliens was the New

York-to-Paris's only American, one George Shuster, ex-blackmith, who appeared not to understand what was going on.

Nobody else did either, not really. So, as everybody massed for the start, it was sufficient to know that the coming extravaganza had four impossible stages: 1. Race west from New York across the continent to Seattle. 2. Proceed north by ship to Alaska and cross the Bering Strait, which presumably was frozen solid (one team carried along a mast and sail, just in case). 3) Penetrate Siberia's ice desert, cross to the Urals, motor across the steppes of Russia into Moscow. 4) invade Europe and careen on to the finish in Paris.

How many miles? How many weeks or months? Nobody cared to predict. Because there were no highways there were no maps. Because nobody could keep accurate record of where everybody else was, all six participants were kindly requested to cable their location and miles covered each evening – assuming they could locate a telegraph facility.

The half-dozen participants were racing a half-dozen different marques: the De Dion, the Motobloc and the Sizaire-Naudin were French; the Brixia-Zust was Italian; the Protos was as Prussian as its operator, Lt. Koeppen; and Shuster's Thomas Flyer was, naturally, American. Judged the best-engineered of the six was the De Dion, with its optional mast and sail. Judged among the worst was the Thomas, a converted taxicab with running boards 12 feet long, a steering wheel as big as a clipper ship's and a lump

of a chain-drive motor expected to fail not far beyond New York's city limits

A dignitary brandishing a starting pistol pulled the trigger. Some 200,000 skeptical spectators standing in Times Square made room, and the New York-to-Paris lumbered away in the approximate direction of Chicago.

Two weeks later, big and deep-breathing, the lead horseless carriage

arrived. It was the Thomas. Interviewed in the newspapers upon arrival, George Shuster declared that he'd gotten clobbered by blizzards all across Ohio and into Indiana, and had had to shovel snow off unchartered paths and byways for 53 hours without sleep.



And the going had been even harder on the Thomas. Two straight weeks of repairs were required to rehabilitate it for what was yet to come. In the meantime, the race's five other entrants slowly sputtered into Chicago minus one: the Sizaire-Nandin remained stuck fast in a snowdrift back in New York. More newspaper interrogation occurred, and motives were demanded.

All the Frenchmen and Lt. Koeppen began mouthing propaganda about being pioneers advancing the future of the horseless carriage, meaning the automobile. But Sirtori and Scarflogio, the dangerous Italians, were quoted as saying that behaving as pioneers was the last thing on their over-heated brains. No, their shared ambition was "to be madmen!"

Good as their word, once the New York-to-Paris resumed, they began gaining as much as 100 miles a day on the Thomas. One of their speed secrets was to race across trackless terrain by darkest night, and to do this you had to be out of your mind, which, of course, both of them were.

But the end of their nocturnal business occurred in Colorado, where they'd been following a mule trail up and over the high Rockies. Without warning, the brakes of the Brxia-Zust burned out, and the pair of mad Dagos barely missed pitching themselves into the void.



Meanwhile, far behind back in Iowa, was the Motobloc, dead. This was on account of radical mechanical failure, no money left, and dispirited drivers. Equally dispirited were the arguing crew members of the third and last French automobile, the De Dion, which also had broken down, and was stuck in black mud up to the axles, its ever-quarreling crew could do nothing but

sit around in misery, awaiting the delivery of replacement parts.

Misery of a different sort engulfed the Protos and Lt. Koeppen. Teaching himself how to drive as the New York-to-Paris progressed, the lieutenant was refusing to give anybody else a turn at the wheel, meaning that the Protos frequently was bashing into

flora and fauna and having to undergo emergency repairs. Carloads of co-drivers and passenger mechanics were already quitting in protest.

All these disasters were working to the advantage of Shuster and the Thomas. Shuster was canny. Fed up with the rigors of roadless motoring, he had adopted the practice of climbing atop train tracks and riding along the rods. The rules of the New York-to-Paris were unclear about this. But by the time the rest of the teams discovered what Shuster was doing, and concluded they were getting ripped off, it was too late: Shuster had reached the West Coast and was in San Francisco. And then railroad management, rendered apoplectic by the way the lumbering Thomas had trashed its track and trestles, forbid anybody else from joining the act.

Already the New York-Paris's runaway leader, and having beaten everything else into the City by the Bay by a month, Shuster didn't hesitate. To extend his margin even more, he put the Thomas aboard a lumber barge going to Seattle, then loaded it onto another vessel heading to Alaska and Valdez.

Shuster's competition seemed routed. The Italians had blundered onto the floor of California's Death Valley, where they'd been overcome by dehydration and loss of adrenaline; the De Dion, at last repaired and under way again, was coming fast, but still was out on the Great Plains; Lt. Koeppen and his broken Protos were laid up somewhere in Wyoming.



Luck, this time, was not with Shuster. Expecting to make port at Valdez and then proceed up the frozen Yukon River to the Bering Strait, Shuster

instead discovered monster snow-banks which prohibited the Thomas from being unloaded onto the wharf at all. And as Shuster stood there freezing and worrying about what he was going to do next, he received, from the New York-to-Paris officials, a telegram-from-hell saying that he must immediately return to Seattle because the race's Alaskan leg had been cancelled; and, for a new scenario, all the horseless carriages were to be floated to Siberia on a body of water called the Pacific Ocean.

Returning to Seattle as quickly as he could, Shuster was discouraged to discover that the rule change, and the 3,000-mile Alaskan detour, had plunged the Thomas from first place to last. Worse, the Brixia-Zust, the De Dion, and the Protos already had booked passages on Seattle-Yokohama-Vladivostok steamers.

Shuster well knew the handicaps he'd be up against taking the Thomas across frozen Siberia. One of them was that he'd be facing bitter, biting, below zero temps completely out in the open, because the Thomas lacked a windscreen and even a roof.

So everybody's new favorite to win New York-to-Paris was Lt. Koeppen's Protos, a sort of covered wagon on wheels, with warm sleeping quarters, and a gigantic gasoline load of 176 gallons, providing a touring range of nearly 1,200 miles.

And the lieutenant was driving a little better. His disciplined military mind also was beginning to kick into action: he'd wired ahead for diplomatic permission to bypass Yokohama and proceed directly to Vladivostok; as a result, he overtook his French, Italian, and American opponents, while they still were at sea.

Additionally, fresh mechanics from Berlin began arriving to treat the Protos to some needed rehabilitation; the old body got stripped off and replaced with a lighter one. And because Siberia was trackless, a captain from the Russian army was assigned to

accompany the lieutenant in the capacity of guide.

Then, as if he needed one, Lt. Koeppen caught another lucky break. Shuster and the Thomas were still far out on the Pacific, and apparently out of contention. What's more, instead of having three horseless carriages to beat, the lieutenant suddenly had just two.

The De Dion, for one, was finished.

Probably it was the saddest story to come out of the New York-to-Paris. Back in Seattle, members of the team already had defied a cable from the De Dion factory demanding that they abandon the race at once, because it was too humiliating to have its superior product being unable to keep up with the clodhopper Thomas. And when



the factory turned the screws still tighter by firing all of them and refusing to send their salaries, the team members, ever quarreling but now destitute, were reduced to raising passage money , in Yokohama, by selling dockside picture postcards of themselves. A second furious telegram arrived: withdraw the car or else. The response of the team members was to load the De Dion on another ship bound for Vladivostok. And Vladivostok was where the trail ended. Greeting them at customs and demanding to take possession of the De Dion was the vehicle's new owner, a rich Chinaman who collected horseless carriages. Well, the factory had stopped its team after all, but had had to sell the De Dion out from under it to do so.

Lt Koeppen appeared to have little to worry about. The wild Italians and their Brixia-Zust were certain to flame out, and Shuster and the Thomas remained far behind.

The lieutenant's sole handicap was self-inflicted. Twenty miles out of Vladivostok, he got the Protos mired in bottomless mud. Hours passed, days. The Protos stayed stuck fast for so long that it lost all its advantage over the Thomas, and had to be sportingly dragged free by Shuster, who had caught up again.



Then, for the following two months and 9,000 miles, the Protos and the Thomas went at it, exchanging first place four times. Near misses multiplied. Moments after easing the Protos's three tons across a weak bridge spanning a roaring river, Lt. Koeppen looked back and observed the entire bridge collapsing into the water. Furious at what a man and his machine had done to their bridge, a band of

armed bandits tried running down the lieutenant; his own show of arms drove them off.

The Thomas, too, was in trouble. So firmly did it get locked in mud that what seemed like a whole battalion of Russian soldiers had had to pull it free. Next, a string of tire blow-outs began impeding forward progress: every time a tire let go, the Thomas had to be jacked up and the exploded carcass carved off with knives.

Recalling what Shuster had gotten away with in America, and desperate for any advantage he could manipulate, Lt. Koeppen asked permission to haul the Protos over some Manchurian railroad tracks. Permission was rescinded, then granted, but the lieutenant should have stayed on the tracks. Up to his old tricks, once he started racing the Protos on mother earth again, it capsized.

The historic moment of the New York-to-Paris occurred when the Protos and the Thomas caught sight of each other, and Lt. Koeppen and Shuster, the world's two prototype racing drivers, staged the prototype of all future car-racing duels.

The instant they began exceeding 30 mph, both the lieutenant and Shuster realized that their lives were in mortal danger. Not that this slowed them down. Roaring along and shouting defiance back and forth, they continued the duel until the Protos plunged out of control.

But just a few days later, the Thomas threw its own fit and almost disintegrated. This time things seemed terminal, because Shuster was completely out of spares and had to abandon the Thomas, travel by train to a parts depot 500 miles in the opposite direction, and then come back again.



Struggling, too, was the New York-to-Paris's madcap duo of Sirtori and Scarfoglio with their Brixia-Zust. Their continuing hairbreadth escapes, plus the usual mechanical catastrophes, had them positioned thousands of miles behind. Yet they kept coming.

Upon breaking down again, this time in a hamlet called Mittou, they somehow got running again, but there was an unexpected backfire. A horse became frightened, throwing its rider, and the two Italians got hauled off to the calaboose.

Hitting Moscow with a lead of almost 500 miles, Lt. Koeppen and the Protos crossed the Vistula River, were rewarded with a tumultuous welcome upon entering Berlin, and, four days later, in late July, the lieutenant was rumbling across the Champs-

Elysees, the apparent winner of the New York-to-Paris, and was expecting to be paid the \$1,000 first place prize.

No, hold everything, the Prussian was not the winner. The organizing association was adding roughly two weeks to lieutenant's aggregate time -- punishment for his flaunting the rules by allegedly shipping the Protos by rail during the race's American leg.

There was more. As compensation for the Thomas Flyer's fruitless detour to Alaska - - Shuster's own dalliance with the railroads of the U.S. was overlooked – the Thomas was rewarded with the subtraction of two weeks from its time. So, after Shuster and the Thomas limped into Paris four days behind the Protos, all the penalties and rewards made them the winners of the New York-to-Paris.

No one could say with accuracy how many miles the Thomas had covered – its speedometer having long been frozen -- but George Shuster estimated the figure at 13,341, and that wasn't counting the 7,000 consumed crossing the Pacific, or the 3,000 wasted in Alaska. Crossing three continents and an ocean had consumed 169 days and nights.



The New York-to-Paris never was repeated. If the true intent of the New York-to-Paris was to pioneer the use of the automobile, It flopped resoundingly. All of the race's marques were soon out of business, including Thomas which went bankrupt and had to stop manufacturing Flyer models;

getting the Thomas and Shuster around the world had cost the tiny concern the fantastic sum of \$10,000.

So Sirtori and Scarfoglio must have been right all along. At last breaking out of Mittou's house of slammers, the two madmen hit the Paris finish line three months behind the Protos and Thomas. Yet Surely they'd shared the most life-enhancing adventures of anybody in the New York-to-Paris.