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Article Summary: The Great Race, a New York to Paris endurance contest, publicized the automobile's potential for long distance travel. Four cars crossed Nebraska on the US route that would later become the Lincoln Highway.

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Names: Antonio Scarfoglio, Montague Roberts, H E Frederickson, Hans Hansen, G Bourcier St Chaffray, Buffalo Bill Cody, William Cody Boal

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*Repairs to the Italian car at Paxton....
A dried water course, Wyoming. Both
from Antonio Scarfoglio, Round the
World in a Motor-Car (1909).*



BAD ROADS AND BIG HEARTS: NEBRASKA AND THE GREAT RACE OF 1908

By Carol Ahlgren and David Anthone

In March 1908 four automobiles sped across Nebraska during the famous New York-to-Paris "Great Race." The event had elements of a slapstick comedy as drivers desperately cut the fences of startled farmers, dug tunnels through snow, pushed their cars for miles, and got hopelessly mired in mud. Loaded with thousands of pounds of supplies and parts, the cars were greeted with sirens, parades, and thousands of cheering spectators as they raced across the continent from the starting point in Times Square.

At the time of the Great Race, automobiles were a new and relatively rare machine; endurance races became a new sport. Attempts to set time and distance records provided publicity for the newly emerging automobile industry. Before 1908, automobile races had occurred between several American cities. In 1903 automobile runs between New York and San Francisco set new records for crossing the continent.¹ Automobile races had also occurred in Europe, and the 1907 Peking to Paris race, sponsored by *Le Matin*, a Paris newspaper, resulted in a proposal for the ultimate race around the world.

Carol Ahlgren is an architectural historian at the Nebraska State Historical Society. David Anthone, a former contractor in Historic Preservation, is a graduate student at Columbia University.

Soon after the race was announced three French teams entered, represented by De Dion, Motobloc, and Sizaire automobiles. Other countries followed but several withdrew until only the French cars, an Italian Züst, a German Protos, and an American Thomas remained.

The course was laid out by an international committee. After arriving in New York City from Paris by boat, the cars would race across North America to the west coast, then be shipped to Alaska to race 1,200 miles to the Bering Strait. Through Russia, the course followed the Trans-Siberian Railroad line into Moscow, then to Berlin and Paris.² Only 2,200 miles of the entire race involved transport by boat or train; the cars would be driven, or in desperate moments, pushed — 17,800 miles, over roads, trails, paths, and open fields.

In America, the course had been established to provide the shortest distance between New York and San Francisco. Five years later, in 1913, the route became the Lincoln Highway, the nation's first transcontinental highway. At the time of the Great Race, however, it was little more than a red line on paper, connected from existing roads through thirteen states. In many places the Great Race contestants abandoned the road entirely and drove beside the railroad tracks or in open fields. In Nebraska most of the route followed

the north side of the Platte River, parallel to the Union Pacific mainline, with official checkpoints at Omaha, Grand Island, Kearney, and North Platte.

The *New York Times* published photographs, maps, and the often dramatic reports telegraphed by members of each team. Local reporters also described the race and interviewed the drivers. The most compelling account of the race was the diary kept by Antonio Scarfoglio, a member of the Italian team. Published in 1912, the diary has been cited as one of the most vivid accounts of early motoring in America.³ Scarfoglio recorded the daily progress of the race, the despair or elation of his companions, and his impressions of America.

The Great Race was an opportunity for Americans to express patriotism, but many immigrants supported teams from their homeland. The Züst was greeted by Italian-Americans, who cheered, wept, and covered the car with flowers. German-American societies donned costumes and met the Protos; in Grand Island, thousands lined the streets to catch a glimpse of the car. Confident of victory, the Americans played up images of the "wild west" in their reports to the newspapers, raced cowboys across the plains, and were invited to Buffalo Bill's home in North Platte.

The race across two continents

required automobiles with tremendous endurance. The Thomas, for example, had a 125-gallon gasoline tank, steel-rimmed tires with chains, 14-foot sideboards, and a winch fitted to the front end. Driver Montague Roberts claimed that except for a few modifications the automobile had a standard design with a four-cylinder, sixty-horsepower engine. The *New York Times* compared the massive German Protos with a "prairie schooner," while the small Italian Züst was called the "children's car." Scarfoglio described the cars at the starting line:

Each nation seems to have put a reflex of its soul into these machines, which are the flowers of their respective geniuses, created in their own likeness: the Protos, heavy and strong to labour; the Thomas, long and impetuous, straining like a greyhound at the leash; the Züst, Motobloc and Sizaire, slender and nervous . . . We would like to read their destiny, to know what is in store for them . . . and for us.⁴

At 11:00 A.M. on February 12, 1908, New York City's mayor fired a pistol and the Great Race began.

The six entrants had been told that there would be little difficulty in getting from New York to Chicago.⁵ Four days later, however, the three leading cars — the Americans, the Italians, and the French De Dion — had encountered snow drifts, rain, and mud. The

troubles began in New York state where four feet of snow covered the route. The Americans and Italians broke the trail and the men worked together to shovel a tunnel through the snow. "We traveled today for ten hours," Scarfoglio wrote in his diary, "fought our way inch by inch and foot by foot . . . we not only traveled the road to Albany, we actually lived it."⁶

Weather and roads were only part of the difficulty; the cars continually broke down. The Americans had a tremendous advantage; they were in their own country and drove an American-made automobile. The Italians, Germans, and French knew that it would be difficult if not impossible to obtain parts so they carried equipment and tools for loads of almost 2,000 pounds, twice that of the Thomas. By March 9 the Italians and French protested to the *Times* and *Le Matin* that the Americans had cheated.⁷ Accusations included the reconstruction of the Thomas in Buffalo, and the use of horses, trolleys, and railroads.

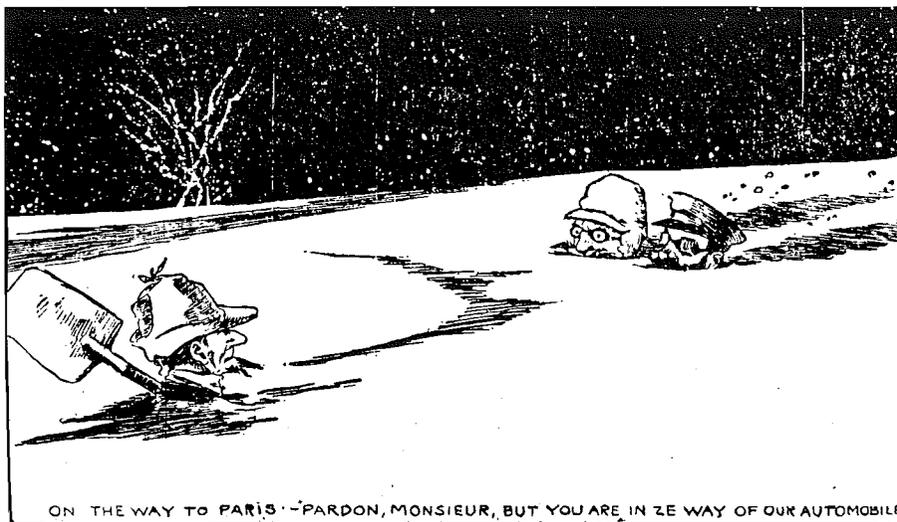
The E. R. Thomas Automobile Company, America's sponsor, stated although they had used "strenuous and expensive" measures to obtain the lead, they had not cheated, then added

that the rules were rather vague. The German Protos and the French Motobloc also telegraphed the *Times* to complain about sabotage by overzealous Americans. Farmers reportedly charged three dollars a mile to haul the cars through mud and five dollars to let the men sleep on a barn floor.⁸ They also claimed that they had deliberately been given the wrong directions and that supplies had been stolen from their cars.

On March 5, twenty-two days after the race began in Times Square, the American car arrived in Omaha, well in the lead. The Züst and the De Dion struggled through mud in Iowa, the Protos and the Motobloc were still in Chicago, and the Sizaire had dropped out of the race. Roberts reported to the *Times* that Iowa's mud was some of the worst they'd encountered; in places it was two feet deep. "Never have I piloted a car through such fields of mud, through such horrible road conditions."⁹

Roberts claimed that the reception in Omaha was the "grandest" outside New York City. Twenty-four miles east of the city the car's approach was announced by a blaring siren from the Union Pacific shops, and thousands of

"On the way to Paris. — Pardon, Monsieur, but you are in ze way of our automobile."
The *New York Times*, March 8, 1908. Courtesy of the *New York Times*.



ON THE WAY TO PARIS. — PARDON, MONSIEUR, BUT YOU ARE IN ZE WAY OF OUR AUTOMOBILE

Great Race of 1908

Italian car stuck in snow in New York state during the early stages of the race. From Antonio Scarfoglio, Round the World in a Motor-Car (1909).



cheering spectators lined the streets for two and one-half miles. After the car crossed the Douglas Street Bridge, eight cannons were fired and “every whistle in the city was let loose.”¹⁰

A dozen policemen accompanied the Americans to the Western Union office where they telegraphed the *New York Times*. Then the “holiday” began: Local automobile owners and dealers, businessmen, and city officials hosted banquets and the Americans were followed by large crowds. H. E. Frederickson, who had a Thomas dealership on Farnam Street, joined the Americans to serve as relief driver across Nebraska. A Thomas Flyer, “America’s Champion,” was on display in his storefront.¹¹ The Americans were also joined by Captain Hans Hansen, self-proclaimed soldier of fortune and Arctic explorer who had begun the race

with the De Dion but had quarreled with G. Bourcier St. Chaffray. In Chicago Hansen leaped to his feet during a banquet, waved an American flag, and announced that he would join the Americans.¹²

Five days later St. Chaffray arrived in Omaha for parts — the De Dion was broken down in Iowa. When asked about Hansen, St. Chaffray accused him of being an “imposter” and claimed that when he had asked him to join the De Dion team, Hansen had been a “wine peddler in Paris.”¹³ Meanwhile, Hansen entertained a crowd at the Rome Hotel with stories of Arctic expeditions. Another famous showman, Buffalo Bill, was part of the reception committee and invited the Americans to stop at Scout’s Rest when they reached North Platte. Roberts closed his report to the *Times*

hastily: “The Colonel is about to buy a drink for the crowd, and I must end this story.”¹⁴

The next day, March 6, the Americans left Omaha, reached Fremont at noon, then continued to Grand Island. Automobiles decorated with red, white, and blue led the Thomas through the crowds. Informed that they were in the lead by over 200 miles, the Americans were ecstatic. Although they were anxious to increase their lead, they allowed the Thomas to be viewed from the doorway of the Hart Garage and hundreds of people filed past.¹⁵

West of Kearney, a cowboy raced them for several miles and Roberts reported to the *Times*, “We are really in the wild west.” When they reached Lexington, a crowd which had been waiting for hours, “went wild.”¹⁶ As had

been planned in Omaha, Buffalo Bill's grandson, William Cody Boal, met them at North Platte and escorted them to Scout's Rest for a brief visit. The Americans followed the road south to Julesburg, Colorado. Residents of Big Springs met the Flyer and gave the men a bouquet with an American flag and a card marked "Compliments of Big Springs — Speed Away!"¹⁷ The Americans had crossed Nebraska in three days; by 1:00 P.M. on March 8 they reached Cheyenne — hundreds of miles in the lead.

While the Americans were triumphantly escorted into Cheyenne by fifty automobiles and cowboys on horseback swinging lariats, the nearest competitor, the Italian Züst, was hopelessly stuck in Iowa mud. On March 5 Scarfoglio and the others had pushed the Züst for nine hours and gained four miles. They were forced to halt and wait several days for the roads to dry.

In a desperate effort to catch up to the Americans they decided to abandon the roads and drive the Züst into Omaha on the railroad tracks, a distance of sixty-eight miles. They set out at night during a hail storm. The Illinois Central provided red and green lamps, and the Züst became the second section of Train No. 1. It was a dangerous journey. The wheels on one side of the car fit inside the tracks; the opposite wheels were outside the tracks, suspended above a twenty-foot embankment. In the rain and darkness the men could not see the chasm but knew that if the wheels slipped, they would be hurled into the space below.

At daybreak, the rain ended and by night they arrived in Nebraska. As they approached Omaha, sirens again announced the arrival of a Great Race car. No doubt because of the long, dangerous journey through the night, Omaha had a symbolic importance for Scarfoglio:

Omaha has one characteristic: a characteristic of all towns built at the edge of a mysterious road leading to wonderful, distant countries. It appears to have been built for the consolation of

men who reach the last stage of their journey before plunging off into the unknown. It is for this reason that it has been made beautiful.¹⁸

As the Züst drove past the crowds it was followed by a caravan of automobiles driven by Italian-Americans. Forced to stay in the city until the following afternoon for repairs, the men talked to reporters and claimed that the American team had broken the rules and would certainly be disqualified. The Italians concluded that their team was actually in first place.¹⁹

After they left Omaha on March 9, they drove nonstop to Grand Island. Despite their arrival near midnight they were greeted by over 1,000 people. The men gave brief speeches and praised the hospitality they had received in Nebraska. Intent on closing the gap with the Americans, they drove nonstop across the state until a broken pinion gear forced them to stop at Paxton. As Scarfoglio sardonically noted, "They had offered us banquets at North Platte and Hershey [sic] but we refused . . . at Paxton they offered us nothing, but we pulled up." As the men waited for the part to arrive from Omaha, they split up and wandered through the hills outside town. When the Züst was finally being repaired at a blacksmith shop, "standing amidst fragments of ploughs and broken wheels," Scarfoglio recorded that the entire population of Paxton, "seventy inhabitants, including old men, children, and invalids" watched with great interest.²⁰ The Züst was soon ready to continue the race, but the men discovered that the chassis could break at any moment. Anxious to regain their lost time, and reach the repair shops in Cheyenne, they decided to leave. That night Scarfoglio recorded his impressions of western Nebraska:

Sometimes the silence is broken by a light caressing wind which bends the grass and whispers amongst the bushes. One hears the lowing of a lost cow, the piercing screech of a locomotive, or the clatter of galloping horses. But beyond this the silence is as crushing and as great as the space around us. We are oppressed by it.²¹

The Italians intended to drive all

night and reach Cheyenne by daybreak. They stopped at Ogallala to eat and a crowd of girls stared at them until one approached Scarfoglio and asked for a kiss. As soon as he did so, the Italians were mobbed. Although it seems unlikely that men who had pushed a 2,000-pound car through mud and snow could not escape, Scarfoglio claimed that they were "seized" and "dragged" from their chairs to the middle of the room where they were given "ferocious, violent kisses."²²

No doubt eager to put Ogallala behind them, the Italians drove all night through winds that grew stronger. Scarfoglio described the storm as a tempest and a hurricane. As the sun rose on March 13, the wind died down and the Italians sped on toward the Rockies.

As the Italians and Americans raced across Wyoming, the remaining cars (De Dion, Motobloc, and Protos) were still in Iowa, waiting for parts or for the roads to dry. In less than a week, from March 16 through the 21st, the rest of the Great Race contenders crossed Nebraska.

St. Chaffray, De Dion driver and veteran of numerous European races including the 1907 Peking to Paris race, seemed unconcerned about the Americans' lead. The De Dion's driving gear had broken as the car was pulled through the mud, and while he waited for repairs in Omaha, St. Chaffray joked with reporters. He claimed that after he crossed the finish line and had a bath and a good shave, he'd start on another New York to Paris race.²³ Like Scarfoglio before him, he was impressed with Nebraska hospitality. Near Silver Creek, a farmer pulled the De Dion through the mud with his team and wagon but refused payment until St. Chaffray insisted. A few miles later they swerved off the road to avoid a dog and St. Chaffray declared that he liked Nebraskans so much that he'd rather run into a ditch than kill one of their dogs.²⁴

Meanwhile the Protos and the Motobloc had arrived in Omaha. The

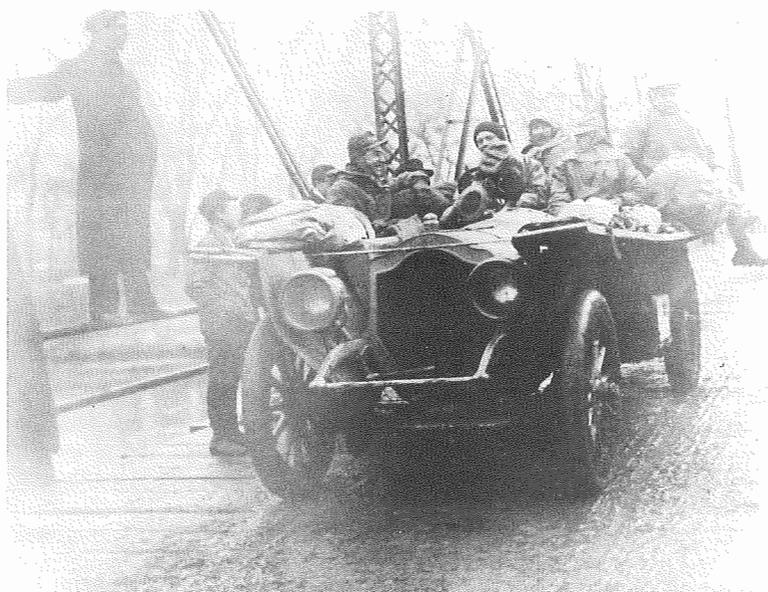
Great Race of 1908

French driver announced that the broken Motobloc would be sent by train to San Francisco to continue the race. (They were ultimately disqualified.) The Protos drove through Omaha during a St. Patrick's Day celebration but was nonetheless escorted into the city by uniformed members of the German Landwehr Society and the Storz Brewing Company's truck. The most enthusiastic greeting for the Protos, however, was in Grand Island, where anticipation had been tremendous. The night before the car arrived, a practical joker pulled the fire alarm and 4,000 people hurried downtown to see the car. The false alarm did not affect the enthusiasm when the Germans finally arrived. Thousands lined the streets of the city to greet the car. The Liederkranz Society held a banquet and its choir sang German songs.²⁵

By the following afternoon, March 20, the De Dion was in Ogallala and the Germans were close behind in Lexington; both cars reached Wyoming the next day. The Americans were still in the lead and arrived in San Francisco at the end of March. After the cars crossed North America and began the second half of the race through Europe, the event faded as front page news in America.

On July 26, 1908, the Protos was the first car to cross the finish line in Paris but was penalized thirty days for having used the railroad in America. The Thomas arrived four days later and was declared winner. After leading a triumphant parade of automobiles through the streets of Paris, the Thomas was shipped to New York City. When President Theodore Roosevelt inspected the car he claimed that "it demonstrates supremacy of [the] United States automobile industry."²⁶ Ironically, on the same day, the Züst had arrived in Moscow; when it reached Paris, it won second place.

The Great Race publicized the automobile's potential for long distance travel and was perhaps the ultimate endurance contest; once



Otto Wilson photographed the Thomas Flyer crossing the Elkhorn River bridge at Waterloo during the 1908 race. Courtesy of Ralph Wilson.

automobiles had raced around the world there were few long distance runs that could attract the same international attention. And the Great Race and its transcontinental predecessors publicized the nation's appalling roads.

The decade that followed the transcontinental and international automobile races saw the number of automobiles increase dramatically. In 1910 there were less than 500,000 registered automobiles in the entire United States; by 1920 there were over eight million; 250,000 were registered in Nebraska.²⁷ The era saw the growth of organizations to provide maps, guidebooks, and promote road improvements which included marked routes. One of the most significant of these was the Lincoln Highway Association, formed in 1912 to establish an improved, marked, toll-free highway over the most direct route from New York to San Francisco. The Lincoln Highway became the nation's first transcontinental highway; through Nebraska its route was that which had been used by the foreign and American automobiles during the Great Race.

NOTES

¹John A. Jakle, *The Tourist: Travel in Twentieth Century North America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 104.

²*New York Times*, Feb. 13, 1908.

³Jakle, *The Tourist*, 105.

⁴Antonio Scarfoglio, *Round the World in a Motor-Car*, trans. J. Parker Heyes (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1909), 27.

⁵*New York Times*, Feb. 9, 1908.

⁶Scarfoglio, *Round the World*, 35.

⁷*New York Times*, Mar. 1, 1908.

⁸*Ibid.*, Mar. 11, 1908.

⁹*Ibid.*, Mar. 5, 1908.

¹⁰*Omaha World-Herald* (morning), Mar. 5, 1908.

¹¹*Ibid.* (Sunday), Mar. 8, 1908.

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Omaha World-Herald* (morning), Mar. 10, 1908.

¹⁴*New York Times*, Mar. 5, 1908.

¹⁵*Grand Island Daily Independent*, Mar. 6, 1908.

¹⁶*New York Times*, Mar. 5, 1908.

¹⁷*Chappell Register*, Mar. 12, 1908.

¹⁸Scarfoglio, *Round the World*, 85.

¹⁹*Omaha World-Herald* (morning), Mar. 8, 1908.

²⁰Scarfoglio, *Round the World*, 89-90.

²¹*Ibid.*, 92.

²²*Ibid.*, 95-96.

²³*Omaha World-Herald*, Mar. 14, 1908.

²⁴*Grand Island Daily Independent*, Mar. 17, 1908.

²⁵*Ibid.*, Mar. 18-20, 1908.

²⁶*New York Times*, Aug. 21, 1908.

²⁷Warren G. Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Auto-camp to Motel, 1910-1945* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1979), 7; Nebraska Department of Public Works, *Fourteenth Biennial Report, 1921-1922*, 148.