

Cheyenne Motor Club Races

Additional Information researched and compiled by:

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The above photo, found in the Wyoming State Archive Stimson photo collection was taken on August 17, 1909 and depicts the starting line-up of the first race, a 200 miler, run over the Cheyenne race track, organized by the Cheyenne Motor Club (CMC). Aside from being a commercial photographer, J.E. Stimson was also a founder of the CMC and was elected as a vice-president and general secretary of the club. I have cropped the photo to feature the automobiles more clearly.

Generally, the CMC wanted to attract drivers and cars with a national reputation, and for this inaugural race, they partially succeeded. Mostly, the cars and drivers present came from Denver. All the same, there were several well-known drivers anxious to show what they could do.

Car #1, the first flagged away, was a large Oldsmobile piloted by Martin Fletcher. Hard-core auto historians will recognize this Denver driver's name. He was a frequent entrant in races at Denver's Overland Park race track and was associated with Linn Mathewson's automobile sales empire. Fletcher might be most well remembered as the driver of a little 2-cyl REO (nicknamed "The Rabbit") that piloted the Thomas Flyer across the west in the 1908 New York-Paris race. Fletcher and the REO made it all the way from Cheyenne to San Francisco with only a few hick-ups.

Directly behind Fletcher, in the number two spot, was the #5, snow-white, Moon of another famous Denver driver, Harold Brinker. He too won fame at Overland Park with various fast cars, but also participated in many city-to-city contests and held the record for the fastest time between Denver and Cheyenne. The below photograph, taken from a motoring journal of the time (The Motor) shows Brinker and his Moon, placing second in the Denver to Laramie road race, run just a month before the Cheyenne track photo was taken.



His racing exploits aside, Brinker was also the regional sales manager for Thomas Flyer automobiles and an associate of Linn Mathewson. Brinker will be remembered as one of the lesser recognized drivers in the New York-Paris race, taking over the wheel of The Flyer in Ogden, UT and taking it into Frisco. He continued an active racing career clear into the 20's.

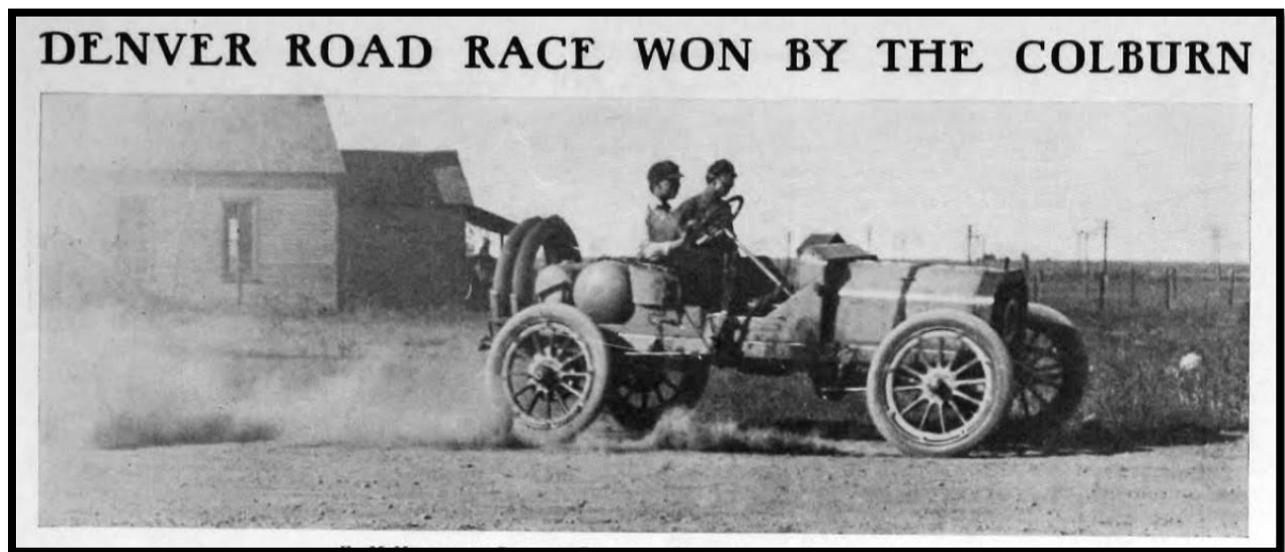
In the number 3 position is a French-built Renault 45 racer, a powerful car one might not expect to see in Cheyenne, WY. But its driver, Charles Basle was not on the starting grid by accident. Basle was born in France and came to the U.S. at the age of 18 to seek his fortune. Mechanically adept, he got a job with a wealthy New York lawyer, with a stable of fast cars, as his chauffeur and mechanic. His boss soon entered Basle and a fast Mercedes in races and hill climbs around the east coast. Eventually, Basle parlayed his skill as a reliable driver into a career that included a run in the 1911 500. He was probably the most experienced and well-regarded driver, with national fame, in the Cheyenne line up.

At the time, Renault was trying to increase car sales in the U.S. by granting agencies in cities in all parts of the country, but especially the west. Several were up and selling cars, one in LA and another in Denver, so Renault sent Basle on a western tour to visit these new agencies, demo cars and run exhibitions where possible. The rest of the story in a moment.

Right behind Basle's Renault was Harry Ball, another well known Denver driver, in a quick Marmon 32 racer. These Marmons, designed by Ray Harroun, were cleaning up in races around the country, many on the west coast. Cheyenne book-makers touted Harry Ball and his Marmon as the odds-on favorite to win the race.

Now the rest of the Renault story. Behind Ball's Marmon were two Colburn cars, a 40 hp driven by Ernest Griffith and a smaller 30 hp driven by Al Ingersoll. Colburns were Denver built automobiles and both Griffith and Ingersoll were factory mechanics and test drivers. Designed by a couple of brothers and financed by their wealthy father, Colburn automobiles were touted as specially built for western and mountain driving conditions. They were largely assembled cars with many parts supplied by or made under license by other manufacturers, in the Denver factory. Unusually Colburn cars used Renault-designed or made parts, hence the Renault connection. The Denver Renault agency had been recently purchased by the Colburn brothers. In later years, Colburn automobiles were nothing more than rebadged Renaults.

The below photo (also from The Motor) depicts the winner of the afore mentioned Denver-Laramie road race, a Colburn 40. Colburn cars had a reputation for being fast, robust machines. Colburns could be recognized a mile away from the oversized brass "C", centered in the middle of the radiator. The pictured car may be the same one on the Cheyenne starting grid.



Bringing up the rear, and the last car to be flagged away, was Gaston Morris in a fast, little Buick. Morris was, as far as I can determine, the only driver who actually hailed from Cheyenne, and thus, a local favorite. And his car was no slouch either, rumored to be an ex-Buick team car once driven by Bob Burman.

A big crowd was on hand to witness this first race on the new 4-mile track. The positions shaped up quickly with Ernest Griffith in the Colburn 40 charging to the lead and staying there for most of the race. However, tragedy struck when he tried to lap Morris in his Buick. Griffith lost control of his car, which struck a ditch and summersaulted into the infield, flinging his mechanic 30 feet into the air. The mechanic escaped without a scratch, but Griffith was not so lucky. Pinned under the overturned car, he died four days later of his injuries.

A somber mood fell over the crowd after this accident, bringing an anti-climatic end to the first Cheyenne Motor Club 200 Miler. Martin Fletcher and his Oldsmobile was flagged to the finish, after the accident, and declared the winner with a time of 3 hours, 39 minutes and 47 seconds. I cannot recall what his take was for the win, but I don't think it was much. Charles Basle in the Renault came in second with Harry Ball in his Marmon awarded third. Everyone else was flagged off the course. So ended the race.

My list of the names of the riding mechanics is incomplete at the moment so I did not include them.

I also have put together a recap and info on the 1910 race and identifications for all the cars, drivers and mechanics, as well as the later races, which several of the photos depict. I will send this information along in another email later today or tomorrow.

Bob Rampton