

Three EMF Model 30 racers at the 1911 Tiedeman Cup at the Savannah road course.

When eventual winner Albert Lemaitre pulled his Peugeot up to the starting line of what is generally accepted as the world's first automobile race on July 22, 1894, it was only natural that he and his 20 other competitors were road racing. Organized by the *Le Petit Journal* newspaper, the course was mapped out between Paris and Rouen, France — all on public roads. There was no other option. The purpose-built courses that leap to mind when road racing is mentioned today — such as Spa or The Glen — were not even a concept at the time.

Some 16 months later on Thanksgiving Day, the *Chicago Times-Herald* saw an opportunity to sell tons of newspapers by staging America's first auto race. The 54-mile course was charted on the public roads between Chicago and Evanston, Illinois, and back. There were only six entries in this contest, about a third the size of the French race's field. This reflected not only the reality that America lagged Europe in

automobile development and production, but also that French manufacturers dominated the industry worldwide.

At this point and for much of the next 15 years, the *raisons d'être* for motorized competition was to demonstrate that a manufacturer's product could traverse the craggy terrain of what passed for public roads as well as scale hills and do all of it reliably. Demonstrating this performance on the very same roads customers used was inarguably relevant.

As the 19th century wound down, motor racing proliferated with the accelerating growth of the automobile industry. Europe set the pace with the great city-to-city auto races of the era. By 1899 some 30 such contests were organized in France, Belgium, Germany, and Italy.

The infamous and deadly Paris-to-Madrid race of 1903 forced a re-think of how such events were conducted. During Paris-to-Madrid there were several fatal accidents. While the passage of time has obscured the precision of history, it is



THE BIRTH OF ROAD RACING

The Glorious and Dangerous Genesis of Auto Racing

by Mark Dill | photos courtesy of Blain Motorsports Foundation

generally accepted that up to eight lives were lost, including three spectators.

Not surprisingly, the races on the open roads attracted throngs of onlookers. Many of these people in the countryside had never seen a car before and the concepts of speed and braking distance were beyond their imagination. They lined the courses, some venturing out on the road during competition and others reached out to touch cars as they sped past, many times at speeds exceeding 60 mph even before 1900.

The Automobile Club of France (ACF), the precursor to today's FIA, drew up new policies and procedures to address the safety issues. They arrived at an approach of questionable efficacy by asserting that all races be conducted on a closed circuit. That is, while public roads were still used, the courses were charted around a community to complete a loop, which quickly became referred to as laps. This was a dubious precaution, but based on the premise that a circuit would

be easier to police for crowd control than the vast distance through rural areas between cities.

It was at this time James Gordon Bennett, Jr., an American expatriate living in Paris, stepped forward to offer a trophy in his name for an international competition that, in Olympic style, focused on national pride. Entries were limited to three cars per each industrialized nation, which, at the time, included France, Germany, Italy, Austria, Belgium, Great Britain, and the United States. Bennett was the scion of a wealthy New York family and the publisher of the *New York Herald*, as well as the *Paris Herald*, which eventually was renamed the *International Herald Tribune*.

The first race for what was called the Gordon Bennett Cup was held in 1900 on a course from Paris-to-Lyons. For the next two years the Bennett Cup was embedded in larger contests, the Paris-to-Bordeaux and the Paris-to-Vienna races. With a surprise British Napier victory in 1902, the following →

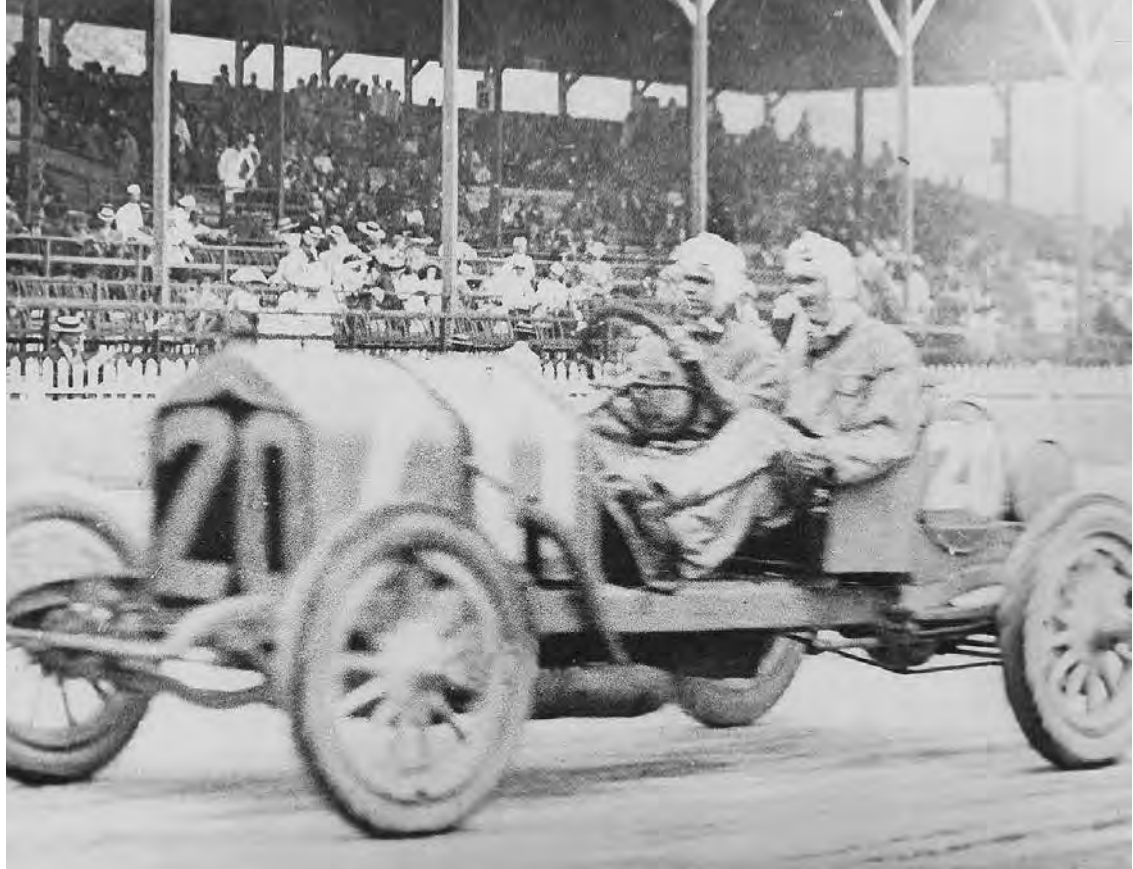
Birth of Road Racing

year's event was to be hosted by the victorious nation. Because auto racing was illegal in England, the 1903 Bennett Cup was hosted by Ireland.

By 1904 the Gordon Bennett Cup was recognized as the most important race in the world. A Mercedes victory in 1903 – which annoyed the French – meant Germany had hosting rights for 1904. Leon Theret's win for Richard-Brasier and France did not placate leadership of France's automobile club as they announced a new race, with new rules for 1906. It was called, "The French Grand Prix."

The ire of the French had been raised because they were still indisputably the world leader in automobile production. Limiting them to three cars in the Bennett Cup leveled the playing field for countries with far fewer car factories. The new Grand Prix was open to the world, but with no limitations on the number of car manufacturers representing a nation.

The Gordon Bennett Cup had made a lasting impression, and most evidently on William Kissam Vanderbilt, Jr. Known as "Willie K" to friends, Vanderbilt was a scion of America's wealthiest family. They enjoyed a great fortune built by Willie K's great-grandfather Cornelius Vanderbilt, who launched steam shipping and later became a railroad baron. His son,



Charlie Merz at the wheel of this National Motor Vehicle Company team car, one of three entered in the Indianapolis 500 in 1911. Merz finished seventh.

Henry, doubled what was already mind-boggling wealth into holdings that exceeded any other assets in the world.

Willie K frequently traveled the continent in his youth and became fascinated with French leadership in automotive technology. He purchased a succession of French and German cars and took part in a number of the city-to-city races, even finishing third in a Belgian road race with dozens of competitors. In 1904 he showed up at the first annual time trials tournament near Daytona Beach with an aluminum Mercedes and established a land speed record of 92.30 mph.

Vanderbilt, with all his European experience, recognized how advanced the overseas auto industry was compared to what he saw in America. Reasoning that competition would awaken Americans to the need to develop their industry he began work with Art Pardington, the chairman of the contest board of the fledgling American Automobile Association (AAA) to produce America's first international road race – the Vanderbilt Cup.

The Vanderbilt Cup took many cues from the Gordon Bennett race. A closed circuit on 30 miles of public roads was charted through rural Long Island, New York. Instead of limiting a nation to three entries, officials set the restriction to five. The cars had to conform to maximum weight restrictions, but little else. The reasoning →



This 1912 Packard race car was discovered during the 1950s in Argentina. It is seen here at the 1914 Visalia Road Race with Billy Campbell at the wheel.

behind setting a limit on how heavy cars could be was to limit the size of engines. It would not be for three more years before cylinder displacement was introduced.

The Vanderbilt Cup was an attraction that far exceeded organizer expectations. People flooded into the area to hitch their horses or park their cars at the roadside to find the ideal vantage point. While the only ticket purchasing customers were limited to a wooden viewing stand at the starting line with a capacity for 5,000, tens of thousands more lined the course – at no charge.

It was a boon to the Long Island economy as the Garden City Hotel and roadhouses filled to capacity. Local farmers set up makeshift concession stands offering coffee, lemonade, sandwiches, and fruit.

The success of the Vanderbilt Cup inspired similar road races around the country, especially in the east, which was more attractive to European factories sending entries because of shipping access. Road races in Savannah, Georgia, Lowell, Massachusetts, and Briarcliff, New York were among the first to organize. Officials repeatedly struggled to make such events viable. It wasn't feasible to charge spectators for their vantage points as they fanned out around open road courses ranging from 12 to 30 miles.

Another issue was simply finding roads suitable for high-speed competition. While Europe had a history of paved roads dating back to the Roman Empire, America had but a few hundred miles of paved roads in the early 20th century. Most passageways were not roads at all, but really rough trails more suited to slow-moving horse-drawn wagons.

Typically, the American road races produced epic copy for newspaper reports, but failed to deliver a sustainable business model. The exception was the Vanderbilt Cup, but only because of the patronage of Willie K. The event was not generating revenue sufficient to cover costs.

The Vanderbilt Cup's undoing would prove to be the uncontrollable crowds. Thick walls of people lined the roadsides, creeping out onto the running surface and craning their necks to look for oncoming racers. When the virtually brakeless behemoths did blast through at 70 mph, the tunnel of humans expanded in accordion fashion to accommodate their approach. They then closed up again until the next big, smoking machine forced them to gangway.

This came to a head in 1906 when Curt Gruner, a spectator was struck and killed by the Hotchkiss racer of Elliot Shepard. The race always had its opponents on Long Island – especially among church elders and farmers who resented rich men

appropriating public roads – and Gruner's demise triggered cries of “senseless slaughter.”

Vanderbilt and his team scrambled to assuage their critics. They set forth to build a private circuit, but eventually would fail to deliver. The 1907 Vanderbilt Cup was cancelled. Eventually, they created a concrete-paved toll road named the Long Island Motor Parkway. It was a prototype modern highway, but not a private road racing course.

In the meantime, the ACF hosted delegates representing automobile clubs from around the world in Ostend, Belgium in July 1907 to establish new rules for the sport for 1908. The landmark change was that officials would classify cars by engine capacity, not maximum weight. Vanderbilt and the AAA were not informed of the meeting. Instead, members of a far less active but nonetheless internationally recognized New York organization called the Automobile Club of America (ACA) represented the United States.

The ACA had little interest in the success of the Vanderbilt Cup and took the attitude that they should do as they were told. This



This Locomobile Model I racer is seen here being driven by George Robertson to third place at the June 1909 Cobe Trophy road race at Crown Point, Indiana.

put Vanderbilt into a squeeze play as American manufacturers resented rules changes they had no hand in creating because compliance required that they design and produce entirely new cars. This was deemed an expensive imposition.

A civil war of sorts ensued between the AAA and the ACA, not unlike the more recent Championship Auto Racing Teams (CART) and Indy Racing League (IRL) struggle. For a second year in a row, the Vanderbilt Cup appeared in jeopardy for lack of entries. Eventually the two organizations came to a compromise. The AAA would sanction national events while the ACA managed events deemed, “international.” →

Birth of Road Racing



Jack Tower in the EMF Model #33 at speed during Savannah's Tiedman Cup in 1911.

The only true example of this new international designation was the American Grand Prize, staged in Savannah for the first time in November 1908 with Louis Wagner winning. The event went on hiatus in 1909 and returned in 1910 and 1911 with David Bruce-Brown the winner for Benz and Fiat respectively.

Original plans called for the Grand Prize and the Vanderbilt Cup to share the Long Island circuit in 1910, but a chaotic Vanderbilt race producing two deaths and spectator injuries ended Willie K's event on Long Island forever. ACA officials and Savannah organizers scrambled to return the Grand Prize to Georgia.

The two races remained a package deal traveling to different venues in Milwaukee, Santa Monica, and San Francisco until they had run their course by 1916. The struggles with crowds and lack of revenue made them hard to sustain. Road races, such as California venues like Point Loma, Corona, Venice, and Portola proved to be little more than one and done affairs.

Another example is the Cobe Trophy, dubbed the "Western Vanderbilt" when the Chicago Auto Club organized it in around Crown Point, Indiana in June 1909. The remote location made it impossible to sell out even a modest temporary grandstand and the race cars crumbled under the treacherous roads, replete with large rocks

and ruts. Louis Chevrolet captured the contest with his Buick, but finished the race on seven cylinders.

The Cobe Trophy was staged one other time — in July of the following year at the new Indianapolis Motor Speedway. This is symbolic of the changing times as America turned to speedways to find quality running surfaces and gates to force people to pay for the privilege of watching.

Other speedways began to pop up, especially those made of boards at places like Playa Del Rey, Sheepshead Bay, Uniontown, and Altoona. Dirt tracks had served as the only alternative to road racing in the early 1900s, and began to transform from horse racing venues to facilities more suited to big, heavy race cars. Champion drivers like De Palma and

Bob Burman legitimized such venues.

Road racing stumbled on, but by the close of World War I, oval tracks had become the default American venue. Meanwhile, after Europe recovered from the devastation of war, the motorsports community found ways to develop road circuits as viable venues. This was reinforced through the support of manufacturers steeped in the culture of road racing. Q



This is a 1911 Mercer 35R Raceabout, the only one known to still exist.