

## A VENT WINDOW VIEW – Racing In 1908

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Imagine 250,000 excited people trying to squeeze into New York's Times Square in 1908 for a close-up look at the six cars readying to begin a race to Paris! It is difficult to imagine any event in 1908 that could draw such a crowd but, in this case, it was truly a once in a lifetime affair; the crowd was there to see the start of the New York-to-Paris Automobile Race. To paraphrase the words of Julie M. Fenster, author of a book titled ***RACE of the CENTURY***, the task these drivers and cars were about to take on would launch the *Age of the Automobile*.

When first I read about this grand undertaking, I immediately thought “*there is no way a race can be run from New York to Paris unless the cars can sail the Atlantic Ocean.*” Of course, my thinking was colored by the fact that if one aims to travel “east,” one aims his nose at the rising sun; to go west, one heads toward a sunset. I never considered that the racers might be able to travel in the opposite direction. And, yet, no matter which direction the cars were to go, it seemed clear that somewhere along their route it would be necessary for them to cross a major waterway.

The planners of the race had calculated that by leaving New York City in mid-February, the strait between Alaska and Russia would be iced over, allowing the cars to make a safe crossing. The drivers and the planners did know that the interval during which the crossing would be possible was short and there was a fair chance that the failure of a machine could result in the car's crew becoming a polar bear's entree.

Delays en route caused by snow across New York State and much of the way to Chicago slowed the racers to a veritable crawl. Breakdowns followed breakdowns; snow, ice, and mud made the roads treacherous. Drivers did their best with the underpowered cars, but mechanical failures too often resulted when road conditions overtaxed their vehicles. As time passed, the chances that any of the racers would reach Alaska in time to cross the ice were slim and getting slimmer by the day.

Poorly maintained and unmarked roads frustrated the drivers, a problem that was exacerbated by the fact that this was long before there were service stations in every town with racks of road maps available. Since most roadside residents in the rural locales had never been more than a few miles from their homes, asking for directions was tantamount to asking “can you help me get lost?” And, it didn't help that of the six cars entered two had no English speaker on board. (Oddly enough, over the course of the race, the cars passed through areas that had been settled by migrants from some of the same countries that were sponsoring a race participant. Before the racers reached the West Coast, they traveled through French, German, and Italian communities in which many of the residents were more excited by the race than any American born observers.) Between mechanical problems, near-impassable roadways, overloaded vehicles and a lack of knowledge about long distance travel, it was remarkable that the six teams managed to get as far as they did. One of the cars, the Thomas Flyer, had reached Alaska when the race committee decided not to risk the ice-crossing into Russia. Instead, the racers were told to continue to Russia by sea, a project that required boarding one ship in California and then changing to another vessel in Japan. This exposed the racers to a culture far removed from any previously encountered. In the end, after the boat ride from Japan to Manchuria, three of the autos eventually made it to Paris. I am not going to tell who won the race; but I will say that when you begin to tire during one of our National Tours, just be glad you are not aboard a Thomas Flyer headed west for France!