

## THE IMPOSSIBLE RACE

By Gary L. Blackwood

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EVEN TODAY, the idea would seem outrageous. In 1908, it was positively ridiculous. An automobile race all the way from New York to Paris? The route laid out by the sponsors—the *New York Times* and the French newspaper *Le Matin* — was enough to give even the most seasoned drivers second thoughts.

The race would take the cars across the northern United States in the dead of winter, over the Rockies and through Death Valley, across Alaska and the frozen Bering Strait, then through all of Asia and most of Europe. Much of the route was uninhabited—no gas stations, no hotels, often no real roads.

It would be more of an endurance contest than a race. Even the most luxurious cars had no heaters or air conditioning, and only a folding canvas top kept out the weather. Automobiles weren't known for their reliability, either. After all, they had just been invented twenty years before. Autos were a rich man's toy, in a league with hot-air-balloons. No one considered them a serious means for transportation like the horse.

The few car manufacturers who entered the race meant to prove otherwise — especially the Germans. They entered a huge, heavy car called the Protos, manned by three German army officers who meant to win the race at any cost. There were three French entries and one Italian.

Only a few days before the race, an American firm, the E. R. Thomas Company, decided to take part. The owners had no illusions of winning. They were close to bankruptcy and hoped that their car would make a respectable showing, enough to boost sales. They hadn't had time to build a special automobile as the foreign entrants had done; theirs was basically a stock flyer, like the ones that sold on the showroom floor for \$4,500 — a lot of money in 1908.

The fact that people considered the New York to Paris route impossible didn't keep crowds from filling Times Square on 12 February for the start of the race. People

continued to turn out in droves all along the route to cheer the drivers of the cars. The race was the biggest sporting event of its day — like the Super Bowl and the World Series rolled into one. The *New York Times* sent a special correspondent in the Thomas car and devoted a page or more in every day's paper to the auto's progress.

The Thomas, which was lighter and faster than most of the other cars, took the lead early on and kept it all the way to San Francisco. It wasn't easy. The American team shoveled through eight-foot snowdrifts in New York and Ohio and slogged through ankle-deep mud in Iowa. The Thomas broke down again and again, but the Americans always managed to make the necessary repairs, sometimes through sheer ingenuity. Some of the other entrants were less lucky. One French car dropped out in New York State, another in Iowa.

Two of the German officers called it quits in Chicago, but the third, who still hadn't mastered the art of driving, hired a chauffeur and took the car on to Idaho. There the Protos had a major breakdown. By this time, the American car—which had crossed the continent in just 42 days, only 11 days short of the record—was on its way to Alaska by boat.

But when the Americans reached Valdez, they found that the spring thaw had turned the snow to mush. They couldn't even hope to drive overland, let alone cross the Bering Strait. There was nothing to do but turn back to Seattle.

The Italians, having survived an attack by wolves and narrowly escaping a plunge over a precipice, were waiting there. So was the German driver; determined not to be left behind, he had gotten permission to ship his disabled car by rail from Idaho. But the race committee had penalized him fifteen days for it.

These three, plus the last remaining French team, crossed the Pacific by boat to Vladivostok. There the French manufacturer decided to withdraw his car. The disappointed driver, desperate to reach Paris, bought up all the gasoline in Vladivostok and offered it to the Americans in exchange for a seat in Thomas. The Americans refused; they didn't want the extra weight. Luckily, the Frenchman had overlooked some American powerboats in the harbor. They furnished the Thomas with enough gas to go on.

Meanwhile, the Italian crew had ran out of money and was forced to stay behind while the Protos and the Thomas headed for Paris. To avoid the muddy roads, the

Germans and the Americans jolted along the ties of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, which had been built only a few years before.

In a railroad tunnel, the Thomas almost had a head-on collision with an oncoming train. The driver threw the car into reverse and backed up frantically. Just before the train overtook the Thomas, the driver found a spot wide enough to pull off the tracks.

The German team had lightened its load and was in the lead. The Americans lightened theirs even more; they shipped practically everything but the clothes on their backs ahead by rail. They nearly froze, but the strategy worked. They caught up with the Protos just as it was boarding a ferry to cross Lake Baikal. But the Americans were a few minutes too late. The ferry left without them, and they had to wait twelve hours for the next one.

Near Omsk, they caught up with the Protos again and, cheering wildly, passed it—only to fall behind again when they sank in a swamp. They broke a drive gear getting out and lost another five days.

The Protos reached Moscow almost two days ahead of the Thomas. To make sure they kept the lead, the Germans stripped their car down like a racing auto.

The Thomas, meanwhile, was being threatened by angry peasants waving sickles and throwing rocks. The American team had to swerve around broken bottles in the road. The reason? A year earlier, one of the contestants in an auto race from Peking to Paris had run down and killed a child in the same village.

The Americans poured on the speed, but it was no use. The Protos pulled up in front of the offices of *Le Matin* on 26 July. It was the first car to reach Paris.

But it didn't win the race. Remember, the Germans had lost fifteen days because they shipped the Protos by rail back in the United States. On top of that, the Thomas got a fifteen-day bonus for its side trip to Alaska. So, even though the Americans arrived in Paris four days behind the Protos, they took first place—over the loud protests of the Germans.

The American car—and, in fact, the automobile in general—had proven its worth. The proud manufacturer declared the Thomas was in such good shape that it “could start from Paris today and come back over the same route.”

The exhausted crew wasn't so eager “the trip,” said the driver, “was a most remarkable one. . . . but none of the three of us would undertake it again for any consideration.”

The men returned home as heroes, and the sales of the Thomas Flyer soared, saving the company from bankruptcy.

And what of the hapless Italians stranded in Vladivostok? They soon raised enough money to go on, but were plagued by illness and bad luck. Still, they managed to limp into Paris a month later, the third car to complete a race that nearly everyone had said was impossible.