



# Race of the Century: The Heroic True Story of the 1908 New York to Paris Auto Race

By Julie M. Fenster

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On the morning of February 12, 1908, six cars from four different countries lined up in the swirling snow of Times Square, surrounded by a frenzied crowd of 250,000. The seventeen men who started the New York to Paris auto race were an international roster of personalities: a charismatic Norwegian outdoorsman, a witty French count, a pair of Italian sophisticates, an aristocratic German army officer, and a cranky mechanic from Buffalo, New York. President Theodore Roosevelt congratulated them by saying, “I like people who do something, not the good safe man who stays at home.” These men were doing something no man had ever done before, and their journey would take them very far from home.

Their course was calculated at more than 21,000 miles, across three continents and six countries. It would cross over mountain ranges—some as high as 10,000 feet—and through Arctic freeze and desert heat, from drifting snow to blowing sand. Bridgeless rivers and seas of mud blocked the way, while wolves, bears, and bandits stalked vast, lonely expanses of the route. And there were no gas stations, no garages, and no replacement parts available. The automobile, after all, had been sold commercially for only fifteen years. Many people along the route had never even seen one.

Among the heroes of the race were two men who ultimately transcended the others in tenacity, skill, and leadership. Ober-lieutenant Hans Koeppen, a rising officer in the Prussian army, led the German team in their canvas-topped 40-horsepower Protos. His amiable personality belied a core of sheer determination, and by the race’s end, he had won the respect of even his toughest critics. His counterpart on the U.S. team was George Schuster, a blue-collar mechanic and son of German immigrants, who led the Americans in their lightweight 60-horsepower Thomas Flyer. A born competitor, Schuster joined the U.S. team as an undistinguished workman, but he would battle Koeppen until the very end. Ultimately the German and the American would be left alone in the race, fighting the elements, exhaustion, and each other until the winning car’s glorious entrance into Paris, on July 30, 1908.

### **Lincoln's Birthday, February 12, 1908 . . .**

The crowds gathering on Broadway all morning were not out to honor Abe Lincoln, either. They were on the avenue to catch sight of the start of the New York-to-Paris Automobile Race. There would only be one—one race round the world, one start, and one particular way that, for the people who lived through it, the world would never be the same. The automobile was about to take it all on: not just Broadway, but the farthest reaches to which it could lead. On that absurdity, the auto was about to come of age.

“By ten o’clock,” reported the *Tribune*, “Broadway up to the northernmost reaches of Harlem looked as though everybody was expecting the circus to come to town.” The excitement was generated by the potential of the auto to overcome the three challenges most frustrating to the twentieth century: distance, nature, and technology. First, distance: in the form of twenty-two thousand miles of the Northern Hemisphere, from New York west to Paris. Second, nature: in seasons at their most unyielding. And third, the very machinery itself, which would be pressed hard by the race to defeat itself. Barely twenty years old as a contraption and only ten as a practical conveyance, the automobile couldn’t reasonably be expected to be ready to take on the world. But there were men who were ready and that was what mattered.

—From *Race of the Century*



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### Editorial Review

#### From Publishers Weekly

In February 1908, six teams entered an automobile race heading west from New York to Paris. It's difficult to overstate the audacity of this project: still crude, most autos died after about 10,000 miles; the prospect of nearly 22,000 miles of unpredictable weather and terrain over three continents with many unpaved roads, unbridged rivers and ravines, and craggy inclines probably sounded about as enjoyable, expensive, useful and likely to succeed as a trip to the North Pole. The now-forgotten auto manufacturers taking part (Züst, Protos) seem cribbed from Jules Verne, as does the venture. The public enthusiasm over the endeavor was as outsize as the project: 50,000 people witnessed the race's start, and the competitors—from Germany, Italy, France and the U.S.—were greeted as conquering heroes in city after city. Automotive historian Fenster keeps the focus of this sprawling subject matter as much on the constantly shifting locales and the fervid onlookers as on the hardy and weary travelers. The book has much in common with *The Devil in the White City*, in terms of the excitement the event generated, and although Fenster's work lacks the spark of Larson's, it's nevertheless a fine chronicle.

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#### From Booklist

On February 12, 1908, 17 men from four countries in six cars began a New York to Paris race—21,000 miles across three continents. They traveled over mountain ranges and drove through deserts and the Arctic cold. The race took them west across the U.S., then by ship to Japan. After driving across that country, they took another ship to Vladivostok, then drove across Siberia and eastern Europe, ending in Paris on July 30. And, of course, there were no gas stations along the way and no place to buy replacement parts. Fenster describes New York City and the crowd of 250,000 people who watched the start of the race as well as offering a brief history of the 17 drivers—Germans, Frenchmen, Italians, and Americans—and their cars. She recounts the race in detail; the weather (blizzards, blowing sand, mudholes, and flash floods) and tells what the drivers ate and wore. It was an arduous race to say the least; that's what makes the story so fascinating. *George Cohen*

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#### Review

"If America dreams driving, this is when the dreams began." —*Men's Health*

"Fenster has saved an important part of the history of the automobile and adventure. All in all, it makes *Race of the Century* impossible to resist." —*Cleveland Plain-Dealer*

"Fenster tells her story with zest and humor." —*American Heritage*

"Fenster is a superb storyteller." —*Kirkus Reviews*

*From the Trade Paperback edition.*

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**Michael Burr:**

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