

What Was He Thinking?

First U.S. Auto Race Was Held in Chicago — On Thanksgiving 1895!

Jack McGuinn, Senior Editor

Well. It seemed like a great idea at the time — to Herman Henry Kohlsaat.

Having read about an automobile race in France, Kohlsaat decided he'd host America's first auto race in Chicago. The year was 1895 and automobiles were still a great curiosity. Kohlsaat, owner/publisher of the *Chicago Times Herald*, planned to exploit the growing interest in motoring by sponsoring a 54-mile race from downtown Chicago to nearby suburb Evanston, Illinois, and back. The match was open to all comers, foreign or domestic, whether powered by gas, electricity, or steam. The top prize: \$2,000 (that's 50,000 2016 dollars).

To draw a big holiday crowd Kohlsaat set the race date for Independence Day, 1895. But he quickly learned this was too soon for the entrants; they pleaded with Kohlsaat to delay the race so they could ready their vehicles for racing competition. So Kohlsaat delayed the race to Labor Day. As that date drew near, *again* the contestants pleaded for more time. Ultimately Kohlsaat scheduled the race for Thanksgiving Day, November 28. While optimistically hoping that fair weather would hold for the race, Thanksgiving Eve a storm blew in off of the lake and buried Chicago's streets in snow. High winds followed, with snowdrifts gusting across racecourse streets.

Come morning, only six cars made their way to the event's Jackson Park starting line. At 8:55 a.m., a small, shivering crowd watched the first vehicle set off. It was the only gas-powered American car in the contest and had been built by industry pioneering brothers Charles and Frank Duryea. The other three gas vehicles were all German machines built by Karl Benz — yes, *that* Benz — one representing the De La Verne Refrigerator Machine Company, one representing Macy's Department Store in New York, and the last driven by Oscar Mueller of Decatur, Illinois, who proved to be a tough adversary.

A Sturges Electric and a Morris & Salom Electrobat were the race's two electric entries. No steam models competed.

The six cars soon disappeared into the white-out. It being 30 degrees and seasonably windy on the lakefront, the crowd did likewise. With cars "racing" at 5 mph there would be nothing to see for 10 hours.

The vehicles struggled mightily up Lake Shore Drive, fighting the wind, ice and snowdrifts. As they passed Lincoln Park they were unexpectedly greeted by cheers from a crowd of thousands. But these weren't race fans; they were returning attendees from a football game between the University of Chicago and University of Michigan who noticed the horseless carriages slowly working their way up The Drive. Soon afterward, as Frank Duryea was crossing the Rush Street Bridge, the steering arm on his vehicle snapped. He managed to get his vehicle to a blacksmith's shop where the arm was repaired, but the delay put him an hour behind the leading Benz car.

In the late afternoon as the driver of the Macy's Benz tried



to cut into Duryea's by then lengthening lead, he ran into a sleigh that had overturned in the street. He was able to extricate car from sleigh and motor on, but he then soon ran into a horse-drawn hackney cab, damaging the car's steering. The driver somehow managed to roll the car in between the trolley car tracks *and drive it to the next checkpoint*. Mechanics spent 80 minutes putting the Benz back in running order. But by 6:15, the darkening sky and cold winds were too daunting. The Macy's Benz vehicle dropped out of the race.

This left just Duryea and the other Benz — driven by Mueller.

Duryea had now been driving for nine hours and was experiencing ignition trouble and forbidding snowdrifts. In addition, *he'd taken a wrong turn that added several miles to his route*. But he was still ahead of Mueller, who had even greater problems of his own..

You see, before the race Mueller decided he would not just carry a referee, like all entrants were required — but an extra passenger as well. *Not* good strategy. After spending the day in the back of the car huddled against the freezing winds, the passenger was overcome by the cold. He had to be lifted out of the car and was then transported in a sleigh for medical attention. Mueller? He kept driving but he, too, was losing consciousness.

Six-thirty p.m. rolls around and Duryea is nearing the finish line. Kohlsaat wrote in his memoir, "Lacking spectators — except here and there a solitary workman on his way home — the men on (Duryea's car) gave vent to war whoops, cheers, catcalls, and other manifestations of joy over the victory they were winning." Not exactly a victory lap, but it would have to suffice. And at 7:18 p.m. Frank Duryea crossed the finish line — taking 10 hours and 23 minutes to travel 52.4 miles.

About two hours later, Mueller's Benz loomed into view. But now the referee was driving. In one hand, he held the steering tiller, and, in the other, he held up Mueller, who'd collapsed from exposure.

Chicago's Thanksgiving Day auto race did not become a holiday tradition. It's not that Chicagoans are afraid to spend hours standing in the cold for a sporting event — as countless Bears-Packers December contests demonstrate. As the *Chicago Tribune* declared on its front page that day, Thanksgiving was "The day we celebrate — the day when football and turkey rule." (Source: "The First Auto Race: Thanksgiving 1895," by Jeff Nilsson and H.H. Kohlsaat, *The Saturday Evening Post*, Nov. 26, 2015.) 