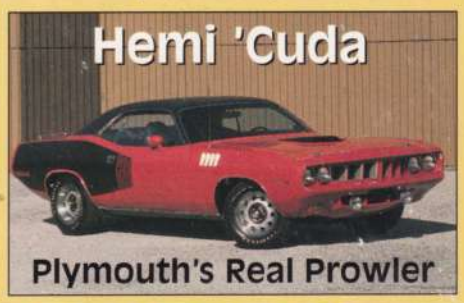
SPECIAL INTEREST
AUTOS
COLLECTOR CARS OF DISTINCTION

SIA #174, December 1999
$3.95 US/$4.95 Canada



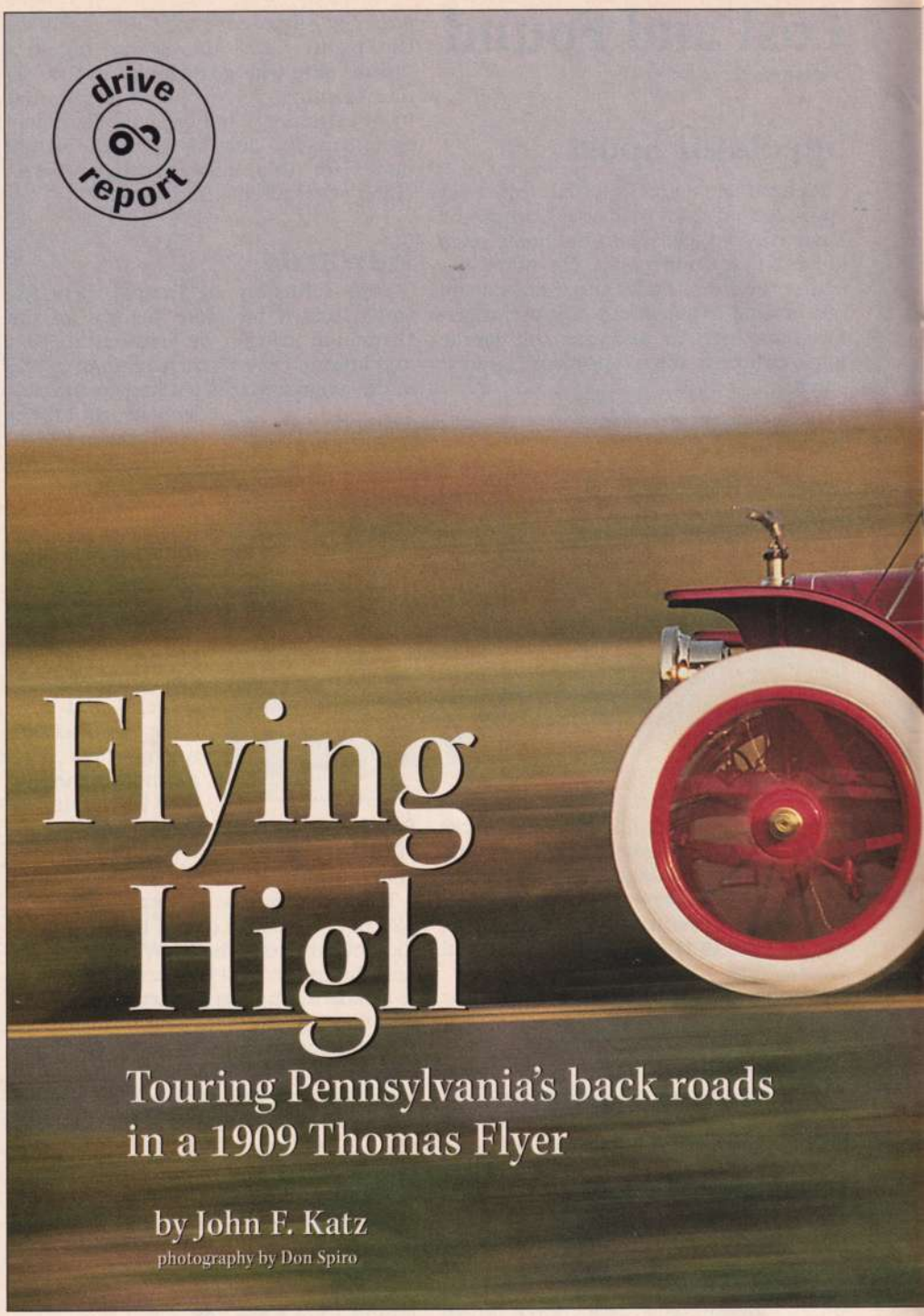
FLYING HIGH

On the road in a 1909 Thomas Flyer

0 76956 14201 9 12

Plus: 1934 Chevy vs. Ford • BMW 507 • Lotus Cortina

SPECIAL INTEREST AUTOS: A PUBLICATION FROM HEMMINGS MOTOR NEWS



Flying High

Touring Pennsylvania's back roads in a 1909 Thomas Flyer

by John F. Katz

photography by Don Spiro

The gear lever is too short, that's the problem. I have to lean forward to reach it, especially to throw it into second, and then, unconsciously, I keep on leaning forward, hunched over the thick-rimmed wooden steering wheel, intent on herding 3,500 pounds of wandering Edwardian elegance straight down a steeply crowned road. The heavy lever *thunks* back into third through its narrow, outboard gate, but my tense posture doesn't change.

Owner Ross Myers notices my attitude and suggests that I relax. Huh? Oh, yeah. I pull myself back up straight and settle into the snugly contoured driver's seat—a true "bucket," wrapped tightly around my kidneys and fitted with only thin, hard padding. Now the near-vertical steering column places the thick-rimmed wooden wheel at a perfectly natural distance for my arms, and I even stop over-correcting and allow the old touring car some wiggle room as it finds its way down the road.

It feels better to hold your head high and, in 1909, the E.R. Thomas Motor Company seemed to have every right to do just that. Only months before, in the summer of 1908, a four-cylinder, 60-horsepower Thomas Flyer had won the Great Race from New York to Paris, arguably the most grueling automotive adventure of all time.

Today, however, we're driving a very different Thomas Flyer, the smaller and somewhat controversial Model L 6-40 that appeared around the same time that the Great Race was won. With six cylinders instead of four, and torque-tube drive instead of chains, the L 6-40 should have represented an improvement in every way. But George Schuster, the primary driver of the New York-to-Paris car, disparaged the L as leaky, slow, and noisy, built with too much haste and too little attention to quality. (Schuster lived more than 90 years and told his story first-hand to *Automobile Quarterly* founder L. Scott Bailey.) For Thomas, he said, the Model L was the beginning of the end.

Today, Schuster's criticism is difficult to understand. The engine in our driveReport L 6-40 has been mildly massaged by Robinson's Restorations of Schwenksville, Pennsylvania, and seems to perform more than adequately, lighting off with the typical burst of brass-era clatter, then settling into a six-cylinder staccato, playing above the steady hum—you couldn't call it a whine, it isn't that high-pitched—of the driveline. I did notice a tingling vibration in the toeboard, and in the steering wheel itself, but no worse than I've felt in some more modern cars. The headlamps vibrate visibly, too, but again that's not uncommon in brass-era machinery. The Thomas is hardly quiet by modern standards, but I've driven or ridden in other Edwardian cars whose fenders literally flapped up and down to the rhythm of the engine.

I don't have to worry about reading the instruments; there aren't any. Just a sight box to monitor the oil drip through four separate lines, and I know that Ross has his eye on that. Low on the center of the dash is the magneto switch, with two equally valid "on" positions (to the left or right) and a single "off" between them. Over on the left—the passenger's side on this right-hand-drive car—is the wooden box containing the Atwater-Kent coil and distributor used for starting.

The cast metal pedals, sprouting from the angled toe board, aren't particularly small, but they seem crowded together. The brake and clutch have little fence-like ridges on their outboard edges to keep feet from slipping off, but this also means you need a more deliberate aim to hit either pedal in a hurry. Clutch travel is short and stiff and feels like crushing an aluminum beer can. When I push the pedal in slowly, it actually makes the same sound as a collapsing can, too. Ross attributes this to the separate brake built into the clutch, which slows down the driveshaft and transmission to ease shifting. The brake pedal doesn't move very far either, and feels more elastic than solid, but the

brakes are reasonably effective if used with some advanced planning. Ross, who has driven more brass cars than I have, claims they are "better than on a Pierce-Arrow and as good as a Packard."

The accelerator is a little button on the flat part of the floor, behind and centered between the brake and clutch. Its spring is very light, and its travel short, so the first time I stepped on it, I mashed it straight to the floor. It takes some practice to learn to modulate it. I wonder if those early motorists relied more on the hand throttle instead. Factor in the heavy clutch, and launching the Thomas smoothly requires both concentration and coordination.

Upshifting, on the other hand, isn't difficult at all. Just wind the engine out a bit, and then lean forward and clunk-clunk the heavy, gated lever into the next gear. Then wind it out a bit more and do it again. Rev it too high, and it won't shift at all, but I've operated newer transmissions that were more speed-sensitive than this one. I even managed a downshift from third to second, with a quick double-clutch and only a slight crunch.

Get it right, and our Thomas pulls briskly up to 45 mph (a chase car confirmed our speed), which is about as fast as Ross thinks we should go, given the limitations of the chassis. "It isn't a 60-mph beast like a Stutz Bearcat," he commented, although it will do close to that on a wide-open Interstate. A steep hill encountered in high gear slowed the Thomas down to a walking pace, the engine chug-chug, chug-chug, chug-chugging with a beat I could almost count, but when I reached for the gear lever Ross told me no, let the car climb the hill on its own. And indeed the Thomas did it, cresting the rise and then, as the road leveled off, slowly but smoothly regaining its previous speed.

The Thomas rides soft and smooth on its big vanadium-steel leaf springs. The steering is fast and tight; for small corrections it requires more effort than

Gleaming brass on red coachwork gave the Flyer strong road presence.

actual motion. I doubt there's a full turn from lock-to-lock. The front end isn't overly heavy but, with its tall touring body the Thomas feels tippy, even when trying to drive straight on a hump-backed country road.

As with most cars this age, the starting procedure is a bit involved. There are primer cups on each of the cylinders, but we didn't need those on a 90-degree summer day. (According to the manual, these may also be filled with kerosene to de-gum the piston rings.)

Switches for both the Atwater-Kent ignition box and the Bosch magneto are removable, presumably to discourage theft. So the first step is to plug in the switches, then make sure the magneto is off, and the Atwater-Kent is on, so that current flows from a bank of dry cells to the coil. Prime the carburetor by pulling the priming rod under the radiator. Then using the levers on the steering wheel, retard the spark all the way and open the throttle a few notches. The Thomas seems to require at least one full turn of the crank to start it, even when warm. Switch from battery to magneto ignition and you're ready to drive.

I-beam/kingpin suspension very strong.

It's a high step up into the cabin.

Incredibly, the car so celebrated as the winner of the Great Race, the epic adventure of New York to Paris, has attracted very few scholars to chart its history. Probably the best chronicle of the Thomas appeared in *Automobile Quarterly* in 1970, written by Maurice D. Hendry. It was the main resource for the lines that follow.

Erwin Ross Thomas started out in the railroad business, then manufactured the Cleveland bicycle in the 1890s, along with a partner named H.J. Haas. Thomas added motorized tricycles to his menu in 1897 and in late 1900 introduced what he claimed to be America's first practical motorcycle, the Thomas Auto-Bi, which he manufactured in Buffalo, New York. "The Thomas Auto-Bi at $200 will yield more enjoyment than $2,000 in the most expensive automobile," read Thomas's ads, while the factory was already developing its first four-wheeler. It would not be the last time that Thomas ad men would have to stuff down a heaping plate of their own florid verbiage.

The development of a new automobile demanded serious investment, and Thomas talked Buffalo businessmen out of some $2 million—some of it from hotelier E.M. Statler. By 1902, Thomas claimed to be the largest motorcycle manufacturer in the world, and also introduced two single-cylinder, Stanhope-style automobiles, the 3.5-horsepower Buffalo Junior and 6-horsepower Buffalo Senior. Both featured three-speed sliding-gear transmissions and roller-bearing axles, and by 1903 they came with a steering wheel instead of a tiller. During that year a front-engine (but still single-cylinder) tonneau joined the lineup, and Thomas consolidated his various businesses as the E.R. Thomas Motor Company.

Thomas advertising ridiculed the unnecessary complexity of multi-cylinder cars; then the company launched a three-cylinder tonneau for 1904. Also available as a limousine, it was the first Thomas called Flyer—a name suggested by Chicago Thomas agent C.A. Coey.

Now the admen crowed that a Thomas three delivered equal performance to a four with only 75 percent of the parts. Of course a couple of four-cylinder Flyer models followed in 1905. The company even built a 60-horsepower six, which finished fifth in the Vanderbilt Cup eliminating trials, although it failed to qualify for the race. Cataloged at $6,000, civilian versions were probably built only on special order, if any were built at all.

Far more important, both to Thomas's immediate commercial success, and to the company's ultimate place in history, was the bigger of the new fours, on a 118-inch wheelbase, with a 5.5 x 5.5-inch bore and stroke for 522 cubic inches and 50 brake horsepower with T-

"The Thomas feels tippy, even when trying to drive straight on a hump-backed country road."

The elegance of this Edwardian thoroughbred lies in its refined styling.

head valve gear. Fitted with a four-speed transmission and chain drive, it could honestly cruise at 60 mph, which was no small achievement in those days. The car also featured what Thomas called a "three disc" clutch, although factory diagrams show what we would call a single-disc clutch today, with the flywheel and pressure plate labeled as "discs." It was cork-faced and ran in oil, in the standard manner of the time.

To design this car, Thomas had actively recruited engineers from Europe. Charles Muller and Michel Amide Longeron both brought experience from Mors and other French automakers. Supervising them was Gustave Chedru, who had worked at de Dion-Bouton, Richard-Brasier, and at Thomas Edison's European operations. Twenty years later, with Andre Dubonnet, Chedru would create the knee-joint independent suspension.

Thomas was now reaching the peak of its success. In 1906, one Thomas Flyer grabbed a perfect score in the Glidden Tour and another clocked the fastest lap (at 67.6 mph) in the Vanderbilt Cup, although it finished the race a lackluster eighth. The Buffalo factory now covered 300,000 square feet and employed 1,500 people. For 1907, Thomas even launched the subsidiary Thomas-Detroit, a smaller car built in the Motor City under ex-Olds men Roy D. Chapin, Sr. and Howard E. Coffin. Five hundred three were completed in the first and only model year, but then Hugh Chalmers bought Thomas's share of the company and re-named the firm Chalmers-Detroit.

To fill the gap, Thomas expanded its lineup of Buffalo-built cars down-market with the 16-20-horsepower Model G 4-16, available in both civilian and taxi variations, both powered by an L-head monoblock four with a bore and stroke of 3.625 x 4.3125 inches. This engine was much smaller and lighter in construction than the big Thomas engines and, despite what has been written elsewhere, the G appears to have been the first Thomas with shaft drive. Its three-speed transmission was contained in its live rear axle, the entire unit located by a torque tube. Perhaps significantly, Thomas does not appear to have used the "Flyer" name in promoting this entry-level model.

The big four-cylinder Flyer, now rated 60 horsepower and riding a 127-inch wheelbase, continued as the Model F 4-60. But during 1908 Thomas also released its first six-cylinder production cars. First came the gargantuan Model K 6-70, on a 140-inch wheelbase. With the same 5.5 x 5.5-inch cylinder dimensions as the big four, it displaced a formidable 784 cubic inches. Thomas claimed 70 brake horsepower and 70 mph, regardless of body style—plausible for the open cars, a bit of a stretch for the limo. Nonetheless, the *Los Angeles Times* greeted the K as "the climax of automobile construction [and] the fastest stock car in the world."

Joining the K some months later was a smaller six, the Model L 6-40, with the same 3.625 x 4.3125-inch cylinder dimensions as the four-cylinder Model G. With its cylinders cast in threes and mounted atop a cast aluminum crankcase, this engine displaced 267 cubic inches and developed 40 brake horsepower. The L followed the chassis layout of the G as well, with torque-tube drive to a three-speed transaxle, and full-elliptic springs in the rear, while the K and the F retained chain drive and semi-ecliptics all around. All Thomases were now "Flyers," except for the little G.

Some individual Flyers may have carried custom coachwork, but most were bodied in the company's own shop, using 16-gauge aluminum over a framework of ash. Hendry credits their styling to department head A.A. Woodruff. The painting process alone could take as long as three weeks, after which upholstery was added, and then a final varnish coat that was allowed to dry in the dark for three days.

Open body styles included roomy, six-passenger touring cars with flat cowls; lower, more rakish, four-passenger "Flyabouts" with more protective, rounded cowls; and doorless Tourabouts, which were essentially runabouts with a second pair of bucket seats for four-passenger capacity. (Thomas cataloged true two-passenger runabouts only sporadically.) Each of these could be ordered in either Thomas Red with Light Red running gear (the colors of our driveReport car) or Royal Blue with Straw running gear. Most chassis were available in limousine or landaulet styles as well, and these were painted Maroon, with the buyer's choice of Fawn or Olive Gray upholstery. Thomas limousines featured, according to Hendry, "toilet cases, electric cigar lighters and ash trays . . . electric annunciators, electric

From the rear, Flyer's design is similar to a horseless carriage.

CLUB CORNER

Horseless Carriage Club of America
128 S. Cypress St.
Orange, CA 92866-1357
714-538-4222
Fax: 714-538-5764
E-mail: hccaoffice@aol.com

Finely crafted components like this brass lamp are very ornate.

dome lights, ventilators and 'every detail known to coach construction'." The one oddball style was the Town Cabriolet, a doorless but awkwardly tall tourer offered only on the Model G chassis, and only in Chocolate Brown, with Fawn running gear and upholstery.

On a visit to New York during the winter of 1906-07, Charles Stuart Rolls made some unfortunate remarks about American cars, particularly about the inadequacy of American engineering experience regarding something so sophisticated as a six-cylinder engine. Rolls had in fact just launched his own six-cylinder Model 40/50 (subsequently known as the Silver Ghost), after persistent crankshaft failures had forced the 30-horsepower Rolls six off of the market. Both Franklin and Stevens-Duryea were already building perfectly satisfactory sixes by then, and Pierce-Arrow and Peerless would soon follow.

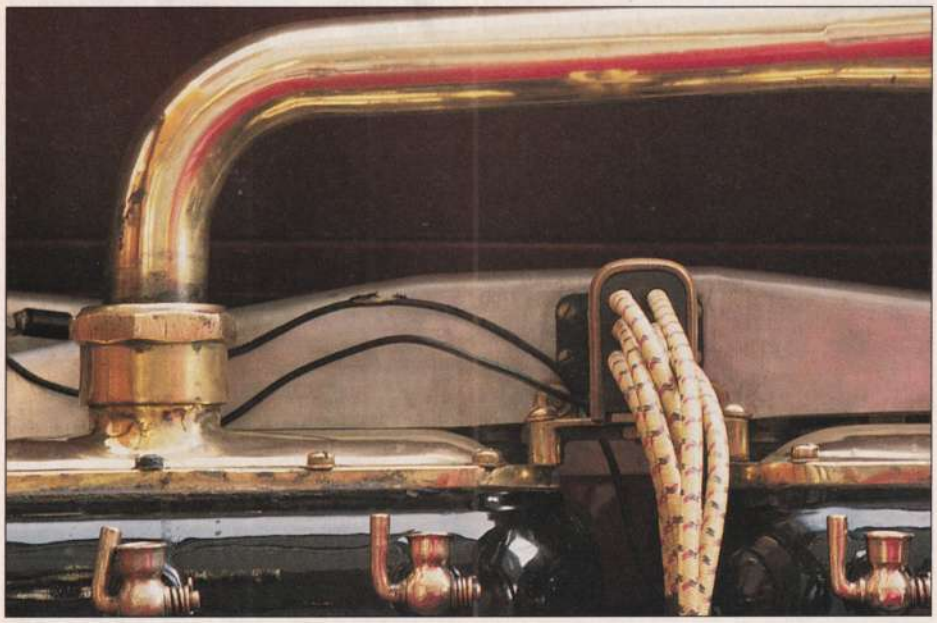
Nonetheless, it was E.R. Thomas whom the *New York Herald* called, looking for a answer to Mr. Rolls's insult. Thomas replied that European cars were fine for Europe, or even for "the smooth and level roads of New Jersey," but that a motorist wishing to "drive through Death Valley" or face various other "adverse conditions on American roads" would wish for the rugged reliability of an American car. And then he threw down his gauntlet: "I hereby challenge Mr. Rolls to a long distance road contest between a Thomas Flyer and any regular stock touring car made by the Rolls-Royce Company, from New York to Chicago and return."

Rolls gingerly side-stepped the challenge, and so did his American representative. Several months later, however, the Parisian newspaper *Le Matin*, along with *The New York Times*, suggested a contest of immensely greater magnitude: to drive from New York to Paris, crossing the Bering Strait on the winter's ice. At that time, no motorist had yet crossed even the North American continent in winter.

Thomas did not exactly spring to answer this challenge, but neither did any other U.S. manufacturer, and when American newspapers bemoaned the absence of any home-grown entry in the race, E.R. Thomas could take it no longer. Three days before the contestants were scheduled to leave Times Square, he asked production manager George Whiteside to select a car from stock and prepare it for the race. On that day there were four unsold cars in the factory parking lot and Whiteside picked the fastest of them, a big four-cylinder runabout. The drivers, master mechanic George Schuster and veteran racer Montague Roberts, were given even less notice than that. The magnitude of their accomplishment cannot be overstated. The Thomas arrived second in Paris in July 1908, but was declared the winner for reasons that we will attempt to explain in a sidebar (see "The Great Race," page 20).

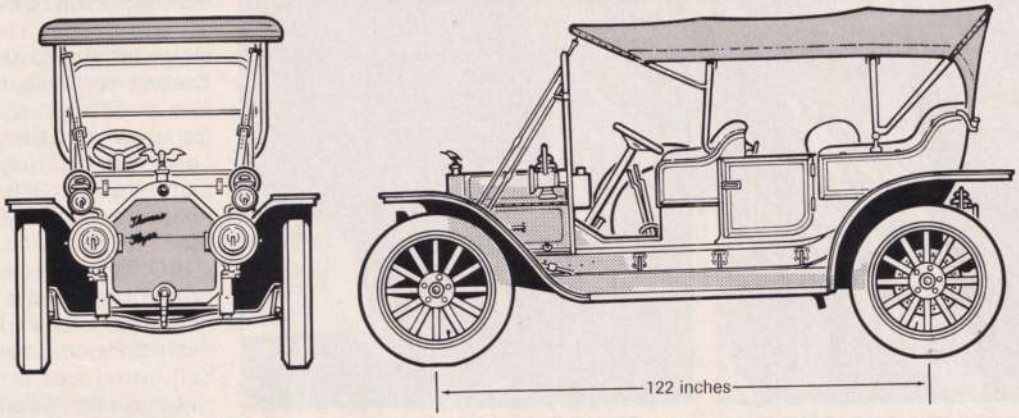
Thomas sales soared—relatively speaking—from 816 in 1908 to 1,036 in 1909, with neither figure counting taxis or fire trucks. The globe-trekking runabout was returned to New York in August, and then to Buffalo a few weeks later, fortuitously in time for the debut of the 1909 models. Both homecomings drew cheering crowds and generous coverage in the press. All of this had to be heartening to Thomas management, who had spent $100,000 on the race, and now needed to recoup that cost through increased sales.

Properly publicized, its incomparable feat should have turned the Thomas into a legend of the same order as the Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost (whose greatest accomplishment to date was to shuttle from London to Glasgow and back until it had accumulated 14,371 trouble-free miles). But for those in charge of publicity at the E.R. Thomas Motor Company, the mere truth—however grand—wasn't quite grand enough. Instead, they audaciously implied that the Thomas had circled the globe with no service whatever. According to one company publication, the Flyer was "never in a repair shop" (well, there weren't any shops around where it had needed repair), while "none of the valves were ground or changed, not a spark plug was changed." Schuster told Hendry



Engine details are exquisite.

specifications



1909 Thomas L 6-40 Flyer

Base price	$3,000
Std. equip. incl.	Prestolite generator with head, side, and taillamps; horn; tool kit
Options/accessories	None

ENGINE	
Type	6 cylinders in-line, cast in two blocks of three
Bore x stroke	3.625 inches x 4.3125 inches
Displacement	267 cubic inches
Compression ratio	N/A
Bhp	40
Torque @ rpm	N/A
Taxable horsepower	31.5
Valve gear	L-head
Valve lifters	Mechanical
Main bearings	3, ball-type
Induction	Single-barrel updraft carburetor
Ignition	Dual, Atwater-Kent coil and distributor for starting; Bosch magneto for running
Fuel system	Gravity feed
Lubrication system	Splash, gear-driven oiler
Cooling system	Pressure, gear-type pump
Exhaust system	Single
Electrical system	6 dry cells, for ignition only

TRANSMISSION	
Type	3-speed sliding-gear manual, in unit with rear axle

CLUTCH	
Type	Single wet plate with integral brake

DRIVE AXLE	
Type	Rear, bevel, full floating
Ratio	3.5:1

STEERING	
Type	Thomas worm-and-sector
Turns lock-to-lock	1.0 (est.)

BRAKES	
Type	Mechanical, drum, internal-expanding, on rear wheels only
Swept area	308 square inches
Parking brake	Mechanical, external-contracting bands on rear drums

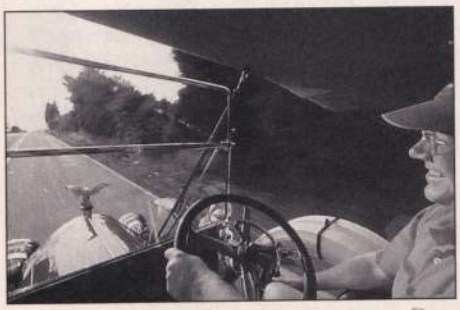
CHASSIS & BODY	
Construction	Channel-section steel ladder frame
Body	Aluminum panels over ash frame
Body style	6-passenger touring car

SUSPENSION	
Front	I-beam axle, kingpins, semi-elliptic leaf springs
Rear	Live axle with torque tube, full-elliptic leaf springs
Tires	P.J.A. Pneumatic
Front, original (current)	36 x 3.5 (37 x 4.5)
Rear, original (current)	36 x 4.0 (37 x 4.5)
Wheels	36-inch wood with Marsh detachable rims

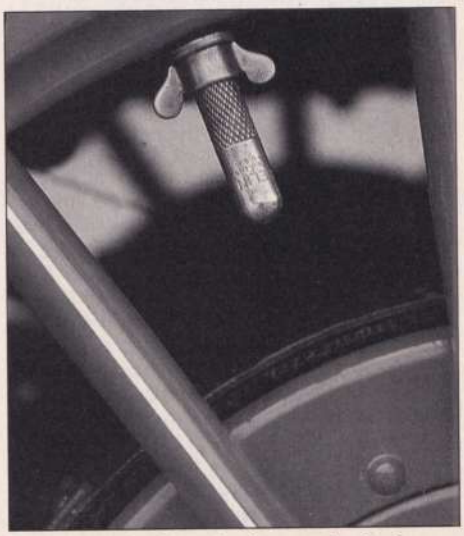
WEIGHTS AND MEASURES	
Wheelbase	122 inches
Min. road clearance	10.8 inches
Weight	3,500 pounds

CAPACITIES	
Cooling system	22 quarts (est.)
Fuel tank	16 gallons

CALCULATED DATA	
Bhp/c.i.d.	0.15
Stroke/bore	1.19
Lb./bhp	87.5
Lb./sq. in. (brakes)	11.4



Lots of concentration needed at speed.

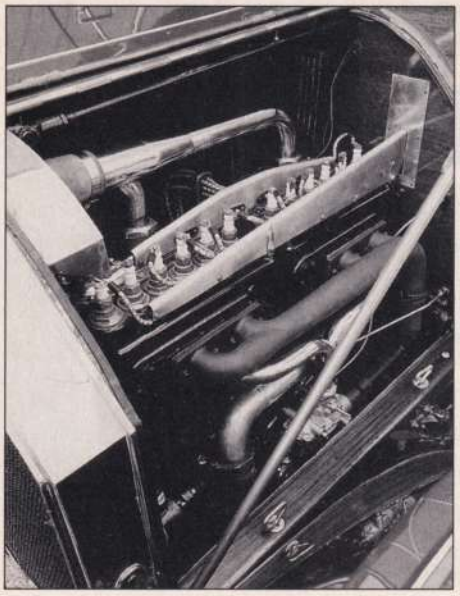


Even the tire valve is a work of art.

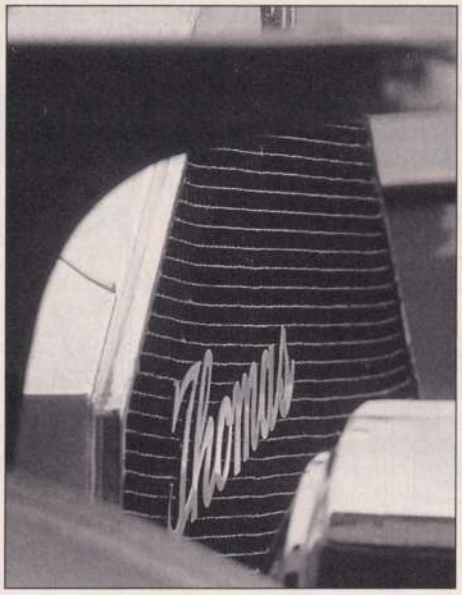
Eagle mascot symbolizes power and freedom.

that these transparently spurious claims hurt Thomas almost as much as the real decline in quality control that accompanied them.

Quite simply, Thomas began cutting corners to meet demand. The relatively low-volume, $6,000 Model K seems to have been affected only minimally, but the new policy proved disastrous with the more innovative Model L, and it was on the $3,000 L that Thomas had staked its future. When Roberts, now a factory inspector, re-routed leaking or otherwise unsatisfactory L's for addi-



267 cu. in. inline six makes 40hp.



Form following function at its best.

tional attention, he was rebuked for holding up production.

In the fall of '09 Thomas launched the Model M, conceptually a larger (125-inch-wheelbase) and more powerful version of the L. Its six 4.5 x 5.5-inch cylinders yielded 524 cubic inches, and with an improved combustion chamber shape produced 64 bhp at 1,500 rpm. Factory tests showed it would run as fast as 57 mph or as slow as 4 mph in top gear. At the same time Thomas announced a major expansion of the plant, to 790,000 square feet, with a resulting capacity of 7,500 cars per year.

H.G. McComb, chief engineer on the M project, released a statement when the new model was introduced, describing the elaborate test procedures Thomas had introduced during the past year to eliminate the "personal element" in construction, and to assure more uniform

THE GREAT RACE

On August 10, 1907, Prince Scipione Borghese, Ettore Guizzardi, and Luigi Bargini swung their 35/45-horsepower Itala triumphantly into Paris, having departed from Peking (now Beijing) 10,000 miles and precisely two months before. It was the end of one epic adventure and, in a way, the beginning of another.

The race had been sanctioned by *Le Matin*, a Paris daily newspaper. Whether the editors were looking for an encore, or perhaps a second chance for a French car to win, or both, within a month they announced an even more ambitious challenge: To race from New York to Paris, crossing the Bering Strait on the winter ice.

Le Matin sought an American co-sponsor, and found an enthusiastic one in *The New York Times*. The decision of E.R. Thomas to participate appears to have been entirely impulsive, and because of that the Thomas entry was surely the least prepared. Production manager George Whiteside replaced its fenders with removable wooden planks, to be used as ramps for climbing out of snow or mud. He added a fourth seat, attached extra fuel tanks, and drilled holes in the floor so that engine heat would warm the driver's feet. One major mechanical modification was a higher-ground-clearance front axle. The tires were shelf-stock Diamond units.

The European entries—a De Dion-Bouton, a Motobloc, and a Sizaire-Naudin from France, plus an Italian Zust—were all specially modified; the De Dion had removable railroad wheels and a mast and sails to take advantage of the tail winds anticipated in Siberia! Two of the three French cars rode on special off-road tires, and each of the French crews included at least one veteran of the Peking-Paris adventure.

But even they were not as prepared as the German Protos. Sponsored by Kaiser Wilhelm II himself, and commanded by Lt. Hans Koeppen, this six-cylinder, four-speed, 6,000-pound monster had been designed to win the Great Race. Its 80-inch wide body included sleeping quarters. It could reach 70 mph, against a maximum of 60 for the Thomas.

The six competitors started from Times Square at 10 o'clock in the morning on February 12. The Sizaire-Naudin barely made it out of New York due to a 36-inch snowfall, and the Motobloc would quit in Iowa. The crew of the snowbound Zust nearly froze to death, but were rescued and pressed on. Thirteen days out of New York, the Thomas pulled first into Chicago. Unfortunately, a court order was waiting there for driver Montague Roberts, demanding that he honor a previous contract and return to drive in the April 24 road race at Briarcliff. It was all up to George Schuster now.

Two Thomas dealers in succession accompanied Schuster to San Francisco, where he arrived 41 days, 8 hours, and 15 minutes after leaving Times Square.

By then, however, confusion had already overtaken the race. The Protos, running a full three weeks behind the Thomas, threw two rods in Utah. So Koeppen requested permission to send the car to Seattle by rail, skipping about 1,000 miles of the race. Permission was denied, but he did it anyway.

Meanwhile, Schuster arrived in Alaska to find that the Bering Strait wasn't frozen. So he shipped his car back to Seattle, where he met Koeppen and told him the news. Koeppen sailed directly to Vladivostok, where a new engine and two factory mechanics were waiting. The De Dion team also shipped to Vladivostok directly. But E.R. Thomas himself ordered Schuster to sail to Yokohama, following the original route as closely as possible. Thus the Thomas became the first automobile to cross Japan, and from the western shore of that country it went by ship to meet the Protos and De Dion in Vladivostok.

Officials penalized Koeppen 30 days for his deviations from the specified course. The De Dion team also received a penalty and withdrew in protest, but Koeppen elected to continue. He agreed to start even with the Thomas the following morning, but instead grabbed an early lead during the night.

Schuster took off in pursuit, now carrying with him mechanic George Miller, *New York Times* reporter George MacAdams, and Hans Hansen from the De Dion crew. Three days out he encountered the Protos, up to its hubs in mud, and graciously stopped to pull it out, while MacAdams's camera recorded the scene. Koeppen discussed with Schuster whether they should follow the planned course or save time by driving up on the single track of the Trans-Siberian railway. Both men agreed to stick to the road—which Schuster did, and Koeppen did not.

Eventually, word reached Schuster that Koeppen was riding the rails. So the American car mounted the tracks as well—where the constant jarring and shaking wrecked its transmission. Repairs took 16 days. Even then, the Thomas twice caught up with the Protos at ferry crossings—and twice Koeppen managed to get across alone and leave the Thomas behind.

On July 23, the Protos arrived first in Berlin; Koeppen enjoyed a brief victory celebration and then drove on for Paris. When Schuster followed four days later, jubilant Berliners told him he had already lost. Disappointed but not discouraged, Schuster decided that he would finish the race anyway, driving proudly into Paris with the Stars and Stripes flying from his transom.

He could not have known that he had, in fact, already won. Whether it was Koeppen's marginal sportsmanship that *Le Matin* found unacceptable, or the very thought—*sacre bleu!*—of a German victory, the sanctioning committee had again juggled the rules. They devised a point system that scored the Thomas higher for having traveled more miles on the specified route. When Koeppen sped into Paris on Sunday night, July 27, he was barely acknowledged by the French Automobile Club. Three days later, cheering crowds welcomed George Schuster and the Thomas. (The Zust, officially withdrawn from the race, trundled in several weeks later.)

Wrote Maurice Hendry in 1970: "After seven or more decades of every conceivable and inconceivable kind of automobile competition, it is still the greatest automotive contest ever staged. In 169 days, a handful of men and machines clawed their way across three continents, deliberately selecting the worst time of year and the worst possible route. It is at least questionable whether even polar explorers of this period invited greater hardships and risks."

They had traveled 21,000 miles, more than twice the distance of the Peking-to-Paris competitors. Upon arriving back in New York, Schuster told reporters that "none of us would undertake it again for anything in the world."

quality. But Schuster remained unsatisfied and left Buffalo, settling for a post as service manager with the Thomas distributor in Boston. Shortly after that the cars came streaming back for warranty work, and several major dealers deserted, including New York representative Harry Houpt.

Having spent heavily to develop the new models and to expand production capacity, Thomas began to bleed red. Nervous bankers pressured management for better results, and key managers responded with their resignations. Even 60-year-old E.R. Thomas decided to "retire" while he was still ahead, selling the passenger-car side of the business (he retained the rights to manufacture Thomas taxis, which he did for several years) to New York banker Eugene Meyer.

Meyer quickly appointed his own executive tribe, headed by former Packard sales chief E.P. Chalfont as president. Chalfont in turn brought in other ex-Packard men and attacked the quality problem in earnest, focusing on a more refined and powerful Model M called the MC. The smaller models were abandoned completely, while the big K, still with chain drive, remained available only on special order. By 1912 Thomas had developed an elaborate inspection procedure that included a 200-mile road test, after which each car received new wheels and tires! But by then it was too late. Thomas finished 1912 with just 350 cars sold and a declaration of bankruptcy.

Tight fitting bucket seat.

Ignition control on wheel.

With the company in receivership, production limped on. An electric starter was added for 1913, and a single prototype 1914 model completed. It was sold, along with everything else, in a March 1913 auction. The company's assets were still listed at $1.7 million, against liabilities that totaled a little less than $1 million. The factory parts inventory alone was valued at half a million dollars. The whole lot went for a fraction of that, to C.A. Finnegan of the Empire Smelting Company in Depew, New York.

A genuine Thomas enthusiast, Finnegan issued catalogs through 1916, and may have built a handful of cars as late as 1919. It was a long, drawn-out denouement for a story that had in fact reached its climax years before and miles away, one triumphant day in July, when four exhausted but undefeated adventurers had hoisted their flag high and rolled at last into the exuberant streets of Paris.

THOMAS TUNES

Most of Ross Myers's cars are veteran Trans Am racers. "My goal has been to have the best collection of Ford Mustang race cars from the sixties," he told us. "I have the '66 national B-Production champion, the R-Model driven by Walt Hane; and the first T/A car that ever won points for Ford. Then I have a '69 and a '70." His black-and-gold '69 fastback was built by Car Craft. Ross also owns the Number-16 Mercury Cougar that scored second in the '67 Trans Am point total for Dan Gurney, and then won the '68 NASCAR Baby Grand series for Cale Yarborough. He races them all with the Sportscar Vintage Racing Association (SVRA).

The Mustangs and the Cougar now reside in a tile-floored outbuilding behind Ross Myers's eastern Pennsylvania home. Parked incongruously in their midst is the 1909 Thomas Flyer. "I actually started out in antique cars," Ross explained. "My father was into antique cars, and I got hooked on them. But I wanted to do more than show my cars—so racing was a natural thing.

"But I've always wanted a Thomas Flyer. When I was a kid, there was a very successful man in Reading named Mahlon Patton, who used to bring his Thomas Flyer to my father's old-car picnics. So it's always been a 12-year-old's dream of mine to own one."

According to former owner Don Meyer, it has more of its original parts—including the lamps and fenders—than any other Thomas Flyer in the world. Even the original owner's manual is still with the car.

"It's a remarkably original car," confirmed Rob Robinson, of Robinson Restorations in Schwenksville, Pennsylvania. "It does have its original fenders and the lamps appear to be original. It even has its original Atwater-Kent distributor, and it's still working!"

Owner Ross Myer cranks 'er up.

Rob believes that the Myers Thomas was restored in the sixties. He and his father, Bob Robinson, have "done minor mechanical work to it" since then. To improve the Model L's marginal performance, they substituted a 1920s-era industrial carburetor and modified the valve seats and exhaust ports for better breathing. According to Bob, "it's a delightful car to drive, it steers nice, it shifts nice. But it's not loaded with power like the big Thomases."

Harold Coker, of Coker Tire in Chattanooga, Tennessee, owns five Thomases, including a single-cylinder '03, a New-York-to-Paris-type 50-60-horsepower four, a 1910 Model L 6-40 Flyabout, and a big, chain-drive Model K 6-70, also from 1910. "I fell in love with them at the AACA national meet in Altoona, Pennsylvania, in 1960 or '61," Harold remembered. "Mahlon Patton had a big, green 6-70 Flyabout there, and I had never seen anything that big, or with that much brass. And that was it for me; it was love at first sight.

"My wife's maiden name is Thomas, and that didn't hurt anything, either."

Since Harold owns such a variety of Thomases, we could think of no one better to ask whether or not the Model L deserved the harsh rap that George Schuster gave it. He deferred that Schuster "had driven Thomases more than I have, and certainly driven them farther, and had more experience with them than anybody." The powerful and impressive 6-70 is Harold's own favorite Thomas, probably his favorite car. It will also command twice as much or more than an L on the market, although Thomas insiders are reluctant to release actual dollar values for any of their cars.

Of approximately 7,000 cars manufactured by Thomas between 1903 and 1919, it's difficult to say how many survive. The Harrah's Collection, at its peak in the 1970s, housed twelve, thought then to be about half of the world's supply. (The New-York-to-Paris car is still there.) A few more have surfaced since then, however, and the roster of the Horseless Carriage Club of America now lists twelve Model L's alone, and another twelve Model K's. And a pair of 6-90's have surfaced, a previously unknown model, similar to a K 6-70 but featuring a longer piston stroke.

That's still a small supply but, as Harold pointed out, "there aren't that many brass-car guys in the world. You don't see many people willing to pay the price that they demand."