

Thomas Homecoming IN BUFFALO



The E.R. Thomas Motor Co.'s plant at 1200 Niagara Street on Buffalo's north end — shown behind the 1907 Thomas Flyer that won the 1908 New York-to-Paris Race — was originally built in 1901-1902 on a parcel also bordered by West Ferry Avenue and Breckenridge Street. Sidney H. Woodruff is the architect credited for the façade's handsomely arched windows, while the three-story reinforced concrete factory buildings behind date from 1905-1909. Rich Products Corp., a frozen food concern best known for Coffee Rich non-dairy creamer, has occupied the plant since 2006. The word "SHAWMUT" on the 1907 Thomas's port-side running board toolbox curves as it would owing to the fact it was applied with a stencil used for life preservers. This stenciling immortalizes the steamship that transported this historic car across the Pacific Ocean from Seattle to Yokohama 115 years ago.

Thomases reunite at old factory in the 'Nickel City'

STORY AND PHOTOS BY GREGG D. MERKSAMER



2023 Thomas Flyer Week memorably kicked off with a misty July 25 morning photo shoot at Niagara Falls State Park, where participating cars such as Richard & Marcia King's 1908 Model F 4-60 Tourabout from Redding, Conn., were specially permitted to drive up the pedestrian path to Goat Island's Terrapin Point overlook. (Paul Pasquarello photo)

Though it can be posited Pierce-Arrow was Buffalo, N.Y.'s "greatest" car and truck maker, thanks to the prestige and quality of its offerings — and the fact it stayed in the business from 1901 through 1938 — Thomas is surely a more familiar make to most folk, despite it being active less than 15 years (from 1902-forward). This is almost entirely due to how one of Edwin Ross "E.R."



1905 was the first year Thomas catalogued four-cylinder Flyers in 40- and 50-hp variants on 106-, 110- or 114-inch wheelbases, plus a special-order 60-hp "six" using a 124-inch wheelbase. This unwieldy range was quickly rationalized so all 1906 Thomases teamed 118-inch wheelbases with 50-hp T-head fours displacing 522 cubic inches owing to their "square" 5-1/2-inch bore and stroke. Thomas Flyer Week in Buffalo enthusiastically welcomed this still largely-original 1906 Model XXXI seven-passenger Tourer William Harrah once acquired from Oklahoma collector John Krittenbrink around 1962. The father-and-son Two Generations Collection treasured it from 1986 until it fetched \$841,000 (including buyers' premium) at Bonhams' April 29, 2023, Rhode Island sale.



A second 1903 Thomas Model 18 was shown inside the Buffalo Transportation Pierce-Arrow Museum by Mike Hogan on behalf of Ronald & Sandra Hansen's Valencia, Calif.-based collection. Its single-cylinder engine is situated under the rear entrance "King of Belgium"-style tonneau and the "hood" up front conceals the water and fuel tanks. Other interesting details included a Thomas-branded gearshift lever and a wicker golf bag filled with period-appropriate clubs fortuitously found at a Monterey five-and-dime the day before the car's post-restoration debut at the 2015 Pebble Beach Concours.

Thomas' fittingly named Flyers won the 1908 New York-to-Paris Race that still strikes many as the greatest automotive adventure ever undertaken.

Much credit for Thomas' victory in that historic contest deservedly goes to the company's chief test driver, George Nicholas Schuster, Sr., who was dispatched to the Great Race's Times Square start with just a day's advance

notice. Schuster would end up the only person who remained in the car all the way to the Eiffel Tower. The myriad weather, terrain, logistical and repair-related challenges surmounted by Schuster and a succession of equally intrepid and resourceful teammates while covering 13,341 often road-less miles on land (and another 8,659 miles by sea) in 169 days were, accordingly, always close to mind

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Minimal "Tourabout" bodywork sporting four bucket seats suggested Dave & Patty Peeler's 1911 Thomas Flyer KC 6-70 from North Carolina was the fastest car at the brand's 2023 Buffalo homecoming. While KC models still employed somewhat passé dual chains, they improved upon the 1910 K models by boosting the six-cylinder engine's displacement to 856 cubic inches for a 90-hp rating and replacing the previous Atwater Kent spark ignition with a distributor. This dashing ride resided in the Henry Ford Museum from 1939 through 1968, after which it was acquired and partly restored by the Harrah Collection. The flawless work completed by Vintage Cars and Justice Restorations following the Peeler's' 2019 purchase compelled the AACA to dub this Thomas a 2023 Zenith Award Nominee.

Peter Stifel's dark-green 1910 Thomas M 6-40 seven-passenger tourer from Easton, Md. (its year-of-manufacture West Virginia plates recall a previous family residence in Wheeling) backs into a space beside the Concord Mercantile and Heritage Building, which shows Springville, N.Y., visitors what an 1890s general store was like. Peter said his Thomas "was purchased as a bucket of rust by my father, William, about 1955 and restored by Ralph Buckley in New Jersey," after which "it did four or five Glidden Tours around Ohio and New England in the 1950s and '60s."



The Thomases' final Springville, N.Y., stop on Thursday, July 27, was George Schuster's one-time home at 43 East Avenue, where Jeff Mahl received a thumbs-up from the people riding past his Great-gramp's Victorian home aboard Corky Coker's 1909 Model K 6-70 Flyabout. The subsequent drive down NY-39 to admire Dan Gematt's car collection saw the Flyers clocked by police radar and presented with a ceremonial ticket re-certifying their still-impressive speed.



from July 24-30, 2023. That's when Thomas Flyer Week was celebrated in Buffalo, its environs and Schuster's longtime home town of Springville, N.Y.

It was most fortuitous that Schuster lived until the ripe old age of 99 before passing away July 4, 1972, as his globe-

spanning recollections of the 1908 New York-to-Paris Race thoroughly regaled his great-grandson, Jeff Mahl.

"Great-gramp was telling me far more interesting stories on our front porch swing than I could hear while watching 'Gunsmoke' or 'Perry Mason' on TV," Mahl said. This ulti-



The 2023 Thomas Homecoming had Russ and Chris Holden take delivery of a 1903 Thomas Model 18 (left) that they acquired in St. Louis, Mo., to ensure their 1902 Model 17 (right) had a shipping container "roomie" for its long trip home to Australia. Buffalo Transportation Museum founder Jim Sandoro recalled he'd actually owned parts of this acquisition at one time, paying just \$40 to purchase its hood at Hershey back in the 1960s! "The gearbox is not happy, but it'll get through the rest of today," Russell asserted after Friday's trip to Thomas' old Niagara Street factory, noting "Our first time driving it was Tuesday." Though 1903 Thomas ads often stressed the simplicity of its single-cylinder motors, the company went to three cylinders in 1904 with the first Thomas model to bear the now-iconic "Flyer" name.

mately compelled Mahl to start sharing the stories *as* George Schuster through first-person presentations at concours events and other old-car gatherings where he takes his audiences back to 1908 by donning his ancestor's duster coat and driving cap while brandishing the actual 45-star American flag presented to the Thomas team at the start of the race. This correspondent has noted that Mahl's presentation is regularly updated with new anecdotes that are also compelling reading in his 1992 book "The Great Automobile Race" and his just-published, even-more-detailed chronicle "The Man and Car that Circled the Globe," co-authored with Bob Sblendorio and John Taibi. Much of this material is also posted online at www.TheGreatAutoRace.com.

Thomas Flyer Week saw Mahl tell his Great-gramp's "story not as me" to three different enthusiast gatherings. Meanwhile, the attendees' cars were safely stored and, in several cases, exhibited at Jim Sandoro's Buffalo Transportation Pierce-Arrow Museum at the intersection of Seneca Street (NY-16) and Michigan Avenue. The museum was loaned the actual New York-to-Paris Thomas Flyer by the National Automobile Museum of Reno, Nev., for a special 100-day display lasting from May 1 through Aug. 6. Though a couple of registrants had to shorten or abort their trip owing to mechanical troubles, nearly 20 Thomas cars out of the 52 or 53 known to survive worldwide ultimately made it to The Nickel City. The homecoming's

oldest car — and the oldest Thomas surviving anywhere — was a first-year 1902 Model 17 shipped all the way from Mudgee, New South Wales, Australia, by Russell and Chris Holden. It was equally remarkable to contemplate how less than a decade separated its rear-mounted, single-cylinder, 8-hp 125-cid engine from the 784- and 856-cube inline sixes making 70 to 90 hp in the 1909-'11 "K" and "KC" models respectively brought from Georgia, Tennessee, South Carolina and nearby Angola, N.Y., by Jeff Chattin, Corky Coker, David Peeler and Dan Gernatt!

The largest-ever, all-Thomas car show held on Sunday, July 30, was a fitting "capper" to an entire week of tours that were memorably kicked off by a Tuesday morning photo shoot at

A 468-cubic-inch six — smaller than the 784- and 856-cubic-inch blocks found in the biggest Thomases — ensured Donnie & Renee Gould's medium-green 1910 Thomas Model M 6-40 Flyabout from Stuart, Fla., easily tackled Brewer's Hill, where just-completed Thomases from the company's adjacent Niagara Street factory were originally road-tested. The West Ferry Street Bascule Bridge spanning the Black Rock Canal channel in the background features a huge concrete counterweight and was built 1913-'14 to replace an earlier swing bridge at the same site.





The oldest surviving Thomas is this first-year 1902 Model 17 brought all the way from Mudgee, New South Wales, Australia, by Russell and Chris Holden (no relation to the GM marque). It took 56 days to ship it across the Pacific to Long Beach, Calif., from where it was trucked to Buffalo. This all cost “lots,” Russell confirmed (with a figure we won’t print), “but it was absolutely worth it — we wouldn’t have missed it for the world.” The 17’s original selling price of \$1,250 positioned it as a step up from other single-cylinder cars such as a \$650 curved-dash Oldsmobile or \$750 Cadillac Model A. The Holdens’ frequently toured example was reputedly bought off the floor at New York City’s January 1903 auto show in Madison Square Garden by a Mississippi couple, and wound up “Down Under” after a dealer named Thomas took delight in seeing his name on the hubcaps.

Niagara Falls. There, participants could drive a pedestrian path to Goat Island’s Terrapin Point overlook one hour in advance of the park’s normal public opening. Corky Coker crowed afterwards that big six-cylinder Thomases such as his 1909 Model K 6-70 Flyabout “managed 60-plus down I-190” on the return drive to Buffalo.

Subsequently visited historic sites included the dramatically cantilevered 1905 house Frank Lloyd Wright designed for self-made soap and mail-order millionaire Darwin D. Martin; the Delaware Avenue mansion where 26th U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt was sworn in after William McKinley’s fatal 1901 wounding by anarchist Leon Czolgosz at Buffalo’s Pan-American Exposition; the Buffalo History Museum exhibiting both a first-year 1901 Pierce Motorette and the nickel-plated .32 caliber revolver Czolgosz used to shoot McKinley; and the Roycoft Campus that became the birthplace of America’s Arts & Crafts Movement at the end of the 19th Century (its founder, Elbert Hubbard, sadly perished during the May 7, 1915, sinking of the *Lusitania* by a German U-boat).

The 2023 Thomas Homecoming’s most emotionally moving affair, nonetheless, was Thursday’s 30-mile trip down south-bound State Highway 240 to George Schuster’s longtime home in Springville (which bills itself as “The Center of Western New York”). Springville hosted formally proclaimed Thomas Flyer Day ceremonies were co-sponsored by the Concord Historical Society, Gernatt Asphalt Products and the Springville Volunteer Fire Company. Prior to a 1908-style turkey luncheon at the latter’s headquarters, the Thomas owners and townspeople crossed Main Street to visit George Schuster’s grave in Maplewood Cemetery and honor him with speeches and an extremely loud, applause-garnering musket volley by the Fiddler’s Green Militia bearing Springville’s pre-1830 name.

“This is really to honor a very humble guy who was sent on an impossible mission, but there was no hesitation on his part,” Mahl said of his Great-gramp, adding, “he’s held the off-road endurance record for 115 years and I think he’s going to hold it for another 115 years.”

The 1908 Great Race, he continued more seriously, “changed the perception in millions of people from horse,

buggy or locomotive” by proving “cars could be driven cross-country and around the world.”

Springville’s Mayor Timothy Michaels declared, “Schuster’s can-do spirit represents what drove America at the start of the 20th Century,” while John Baronich of the Fiddler’s Green Militia deemed New York to Paris “one of the greatest adventures of modern and ancient times. Schuster and his fellow competitors had no clue what lay in store for them — and George had just two days to prepare for the journey, unlike most adventurers!”

Friday’s itinerary highlight was a photo shoot in front of the former Thomas factory still situated at 1200 Niagara Street, about a half-mile north of the Peace Bridge linking Buffalo to Fort Erie, Ontario. The New York-to-Paris Flyer was even trucked from the Buffalo Transportation Pierce-Arrow Museum so the other Thomas cars could be posed behind it on the street, after which they all took a run up Brewer Hill beside the plant, just as they’d done when they were originally built. One of the delighted witnesses of these scenes was National Automobile Museum President Phil MacDougall, who said, “I’m actually just sitting here enjoying the moment, watching everybody else. I wouldn’t have sent (The New York-to-Paris Thomas Flyer) here, except so many people nowadays don’t realize the historical significance of what this car did.”

Another proud observer of the Thomas factory photo session was Jeff Mahl’s niece, Erika Jonasch, a teacher from downstate Pleasant Valley, N.Y., who recalled when participants in her uncle’s 2011 World Race from New York City to Paris stopped at the Hyde Park, N.Y., elementary school where she once taught fifth-grade social studies.

“It’s an honor to witness living history and celebrate the American spirit and ingenuity of my great-great grandfather, George Schuster,” Jonasch said. “This should be taught in social studies textbooks nationwide. My mom (Jeff’s sister, Jennifer Burkhalter) says it’s already part of the Arizona curriculum.” Also on hand was Erika’s seven-and-a-half-year-old son, Jack Jonasch, whom Jeff confidently expects will “be the one to continue telling people about his Great-great-great-gramp long after we’re gone.” **OC**