

The Race of the Century

By Tracey E. Fern • Illustrated by Dick Gage

Yet instead of cooking their turkeys on that cold Thanksgiving morning, thousands of spectators lined a zigzagging 54-mile racecourse from Chicago to Evanston, Illinois, and back.



At 8:55 a.m., Judge C. F. Kimball shouted "Go!" J. Frank Duryea pressed the accelerator on his snorting, bucking, gasoline-powered contraption, and the first car race in America began.

There was a lot riding on this race. Inventors across the United States had been tinkering with horseless buggies. They knew that whoever came up with a reliable machine had a shot at being America's first automobile maker. But so far, no American had invented a machine that could compete with the German Benz.

In fact, most Americans had never seen a "horseless." And to those who had, it seemed impossible for one of these expensive, unreliable, slow, and ear-splittingly loud machines to ever replace the trusty horse.

Inventor J. Frank Duryea believed they could. His "motor wagon" had a two-cylinder engine, air-filled rubber tires, a braking system, and a lightweight body. Frank bragged that the motor wagon could beat any machine or animal on the road. The Chicago race was the perfect opportunity to prove it.

There were supposed to be 79 vehicles in the race sponsored by the Chicago Times Herald. But the weather was so dismal that only six contestants made it to the starting line. Duryea

was the first off. A few minutes later, a Benz entered by the De la Vergne Refrigerating Machine Company started the race. Next came a Benz sponsored by the R. H. Macy Company and then two electric vehicles. The sixth car, a Benz driven by Oscar Mueller, broke down at the starting line.

The vehicles headed west to Michigan Boulevard and then turned north toward Evanston. But the De la Vergne Benz couldn't handle the treacherous road conditions and had to drop out of the race.

Soon the two electric vehicles were in trouble, too. Their batteries didn't have enough power, and both of them conked out before they hit downtown Chicago. By now, Mueller had fixed his car. He roared off the starting line more than an hour late.

Meanwhile, Duryea's motor wagon and the Macy's Benz continued along Michigan Boulevard. Duryea was in the lead when trouble hit. The steering arm snapped and his vehicle careened out of control. Maneuvering to a stop, Duryea jumped into the slush and started tinkering, while his brother, who was following the race in a horse-drawn carriage, went to track down a blacksmith.

In the meantime, the driver of the Macy's Benz, Jerry O'Connor, decided to ride the streetcar rails to avoid the unsafe roads. The strategy worked for a while; O'Connor was coasting along at about ten miles per hour. Then the horse-drawn streetcar ahead of him came to a sudden stop. So did O'Connor: he slammed into the streetcar with a thud.

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Spectators wrestled the vehicle off the tracks. A few minutes later, O'Connor roared off again. And a few minutes after that, he passed Duryea, who was still waiting for the blacksmith to repair his steering arm.

O'Connor arrived at the race's first official rest station at 11:00 a.m. He stopped for a few minutes to add more oil and water to his car. Then he roared off. Twenty-two minutes later, Duryea flew past the rest station without stopping. Mueller finally cruised into the rest station an hour behind Duryea.

By the race's halfway point in Evanston, Duryea was inches off O'Connor's rear bumper. Then Duryea sped up. The crowd roared as he pulled ahead and headed south for the return trip to Chicago.

O'Connor was still only a few yards behind. But a sleigh full of spectators got in his way, and O'Connor crashed again. Once more, the crowd got his vehicle back on the road. But a few blocks later, O'Connor smashed into a carriage. This time his vehicle was badly damaged.

Duryea passed by the second rest station about 1:00 p.m. without slowing down. O'Connor limped into the station a few minutes later. He jumped out and spent 90 minutes patching up his car, then set off in pursuit.

But Duryea had made a wrong turn. He was miles off course. And to make matters worse, his ignition system was acting up. He pulled over for repairs, and an hour later finally got back in the race. He was still about 25 minutes ahead of O'Connor.

Duryea and O'Connor chugged along until 6:15 p.m., when O'Connor's motor stopped and he climbed out to make repairs.

A short while later, Mueller chugged past O'Connor. Now he was only about 30 minutes behind Duryea. Unfortunately, Mueller was exhausted from pushing his Benz through the snowdrifts, and he was suffering from exposure to the harsh weather conditions. He collapsed. There was no doctor available, so the umpire assigned to ride with Mueller, Charles Brady King, an automotive pioneer in his own right, changed places with Mueller and drove on.

By now, Duryea's motor wagon had pulled far ahead. Duryea sputtered through the now-silent streets. He crossed the finish line at 7:18 p.m. It had taken him 10 hours and 23 minutes to drive the 54-mile course.

Mueller's Benz, driven by King, finished about an hour later. Race officials helped revive Mueller.

O'Connor finally got his Benz working again the next day. He finished the race in third place, 24 hours after Duryea.

J. Frank Duryea's homemade American car had beaten all the competition. And it had beaten horses, too. "No horse on earth could have made those 54 miles through the slush and mud," said a reporter who had tried to follow the race in a two-horse wagon. The Chicago race proved that the days of the horse and buggy were numbered. In a few years, America was motoring.