

Long Island

Section 14



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When Gentlemen First Started Their Engines

100 Years Ago, the Vanderbilt Cup Race Ignited a Passion for Motor Sports

By NICK KURCZEWSKI

ON Oct. 8, 1904, William K. Vanderbilt Jr. turned 30 miles of public roads, mostly in Nassau County with a few miles in Queens, into a racecourse so that he and his tycoon friends could play with their new toys called automobiles. The Vanderbilt Cup, contested annually, quickly became America's most prestigious auto race, drawing an international field and crowds of 300,000.

A few years later, Vanderbilt even built his own road through Nassau and Suffolk to indulge his passion for the automobile.

To celebrate the 100th anniversary of the race and Vanderbilt's contributions to American motor sports, 50 vintage cars will cover much of the 1904 racecourse, which began and ended in Old Westbury. Starting at 10 a.m. today at Jericho Turnpike and Hitchcock Lane, the cars will head east on the

turnpike, then south on North Broadway through Hicksville and then west on Hempstead Turnpike. In 1904, the racers would have continued into Queens, but today the drivers will make a slight detour onto Plainfield Avenue in Floral Park, then back to Jericho Turnpike and the finish line.

As part of the celebration, 200 vehicles will be on display at the Suffolk County Vanderbilt Museum in Centerport, which is housed in the mansion that Vanderbilt used initially as his summer home. One of the stars will undoubtedly be a 1904 Pope-Toledo, a veteran of the first race.

"The Vanderbilt Cup," a Broadway play hugely popular during the race's heyday, will be presented at 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. and then at 10 a.m. on subsequent Sundays through November.

The celebration is a reminder that American motor sports got its unlikely start on Long Island. "The Vanderbilt Cup was the first major auto event in the U.S.," said Donald Davidson, the historian at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway Hall of Fame Museum. "There was nothing even close."

To put Vanderbilt's pioneering efforts in some context, consider that in 1904, the worldwide automobile industry was in its infancy. Only eight years earlier, in 1896, Frank and Charles Duryea had assembled 13 two-cylinder runabouts in Springfield, Mass., the first time multiple copies of a single automobile design had been built in the United States. Ransom E. Olds, another pioneer, had produced his first Oldsmobile in 1897, the first Cadillac had appeared in 1902, and the Buick and Ford companies had been incorporated only a year earlier, in 1903.

In the first decade of the 20th century, owning a car was a privilege reserved only for the wealthy, and Vanderbilt certainly qualified. He was a great-grandson of Cornelius Vanderbilt, the railroad tycoon. In 1904, Fords and Cadillacs cost \$750 to \$900, and Packards a whopping \$3,000. In contrast, the total annual income for many American families was less than \$1,000.

Automobiles of the era were difficult to drive and repair, and people who

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could afford a car often hired a chauffeur, who was expected to be able to manhandle the newfangled contraption and to keep it running. Engines were cantankerous, and breakdowns were frequent. So were flat tires. The roads of the day were often nothing more than rutted dirt cart tracks.

Driving those early automobiles took a fair amount of human muscle. Just starting the engine was a chore — the driver had to use a hand crank. And power steering was 50 years away.

Still, this did not dissuade early auto enthusiasts like Vanderbilt from indulging their passion. The seed for the idea of the Vanderbilt Cup was probably planted during Vanderbilt's own racing adventures. He had twice set the land speed record, the first time in 1902, when he drove a Mors at 76.08 miles per hour. Two years later, in 1904, he bettered Henry Ford's speed and pushed the record to just over 92 m.p.h., this time in a Mercedes.

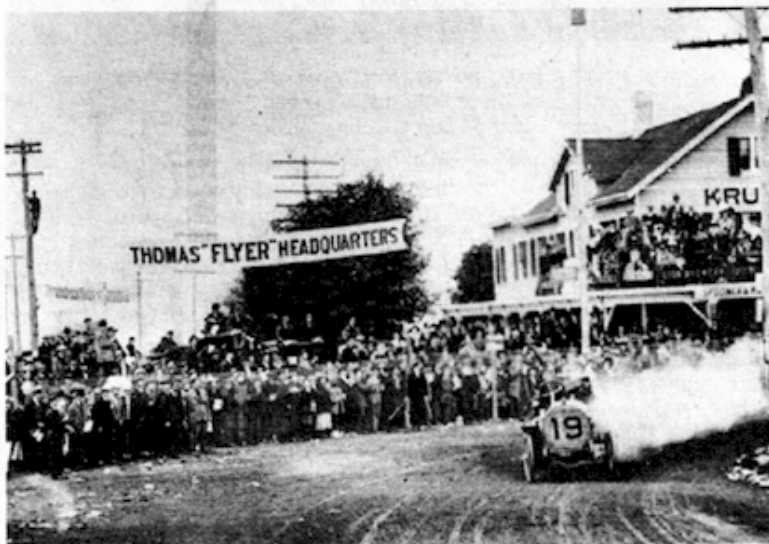
In the early 1900's, auto racing was dominated by European makes like Mercedes, Fiat, Darracq and Panhard. Vanderbilt questioned why American automakers were unable or unwilling to use their industrial clout to challenge the Europeans, and he set about founding an American auto race that would pit American makes against the best of Europe.

For most Long Islanders of the time, the idea of an automobile race brought equal amounts of excitement, panic and anger. Just before the first Vanderbilt Cup, The New York Times reported that Hempstead residents were furious because their rugs were being ruined. The dirt roads designated as part of the racecourse were covered with a layer of thick crude oil to keep the dust down, and the oily dirt got tracked indoors.

Just as the cars and drivers were assembling, E. M. Bennett of North Hempstead, the secretary of the People's Protective Association of Nassau County, unsuccessfully sought an injunction against the race. His lawyer, William H. Good, told the court: "These races will be of no economical or other advantage to Nassau County but are purely for the gratification of the aristocratic taste of persons who own automobiles and like to see how fast they can be run."

The course for the first Vanderbilt Cup race was arduous, covering 10 laps over 30 miles of road, some of it paved and some not. Eighteen cars entered, each carrying a driver and a mechanic.

Road conditions were diabolical. Rocks and ruts tore up wheel spokes and tires. Ditches and culverts were potentially lethal hazards for any car that veered off course.



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To further complicate matters, the course was often teeming with curious spectators. Contemporary reports estimated a crowd of 50,000 or more, and films of the race, which can be seen at the Vanderbilt Museum, show that a popular vantage point was the middle of the road. The crowds scrambled to get out of the way only moments before the cars came roaring past.

Despite the hazards, George Heath, an American, won the first Vanderbilt Cup in a French-built Panhard at an average speed of 52.2 m.p.h.

Vanderbilt hailed the competition as a great success. "I think the race will result beneficially for the future of American automobiling," he said to a Times reporter. "We have, I think, shown the automobile world that we can hold a big race in this country with safety to the contestants and to the spectators."

After that first Cup, America caught auto-racing fever. Racers and car companies from around the world began flocking to Long Island, and in 1906 crowds for the Vanderbilt Cup grew to 250,000 spectators. But the race was marred by the deaths of two spectators after Elliott Shepard lost control of his car and slammed

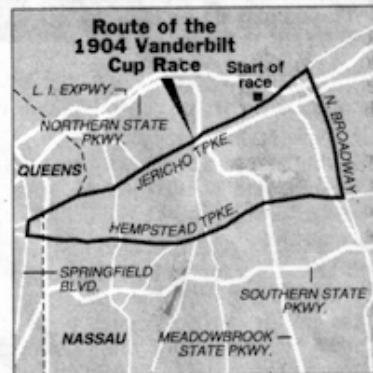
into a group of people at Krug's Corner in Mineola.

After that, concerns about crowd control led to the cancellation of the Vanderbilt Cup in 1907. But the crowds and cars returned the following year, and the Cup soared to new heights of popularity.

The 1908 race resulted in the first major racing victory for an American automobile. The winning vehicle, a Locomobile driven by 23-year-old George Robertson, was nicknamed "Old No. 16," from the large black starting number painted on its white hood. It was powered by a monstrous 16-liter four-cylinder engine, about eight times the displacement of today's small sedans.

The 1908 race was also the first time that 10 miles of Vanderbilt's privately built road, the Long Island Motor Parkway, was used as part of the racecourse. Vanderbilt had conceived of this private 45-mile highway, running from Flushing, Queens to Lake Ronkonkoma, as a quick and easy route for plutocrats of the Gold Coast era to get from New York City to their lavish Long Island estates.

And because the road was privately owned, Vanderbilt could skirt laws relating to public road use. There was no posted speed limit, and the



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Krug's Hotel, at Jericho Turnpike and Willis Avenue in Mineola, was a prime viewing spot. The corner looks quite a bit different now.

parkway's banked curves encouraged high-speed driving.

Financing was provided by wealthy homeowners who sought to increase their property values by touting access to a major roadway. Despite original plans to keep the parkway private, it was soon opened to the public for a \$2 toll. The 11 handsome tollhouses served as year-round residences for the toll collectors and their families. The only surviving tollhouse can be seen at 230 Seventh Street in Garden City, where it now serves as Chamber of Commerce offices.

Beverly Rae Kimes, the automotive historian and an expert on pre-World War II cars, said that Vanderbilt hoped that using the motor parkway for the race would make it safer for spectators and drivers alike. "William K. was described as a society swell but a bully good fellow," Ms. Kimes said. But she added that the parkway also allowed Vanderbilt "to continue to have high-speed fun with his motoring buddies."

It was the continuing crowd-control problems that finally brought an end to the running of the Vanderbilt Cup on Long Island. In the 1910 race, which drew 300,000 people, two mechanics and two spectators were killed, and 20 were injured.

But the American enthusiasm for motor sports — for fast cars and daring drivers, for the excitement and yes, the risks and the wrecks — had been kindled.

"The Vanderbilt Cup was the most exciting thing that happened on the Island since the Battle of Long Island during the Revolutionary War," Ms. Kimes said. "It introduced a whole lot of people to the automobile who didn't know anything about them. It also introduced Americans to the dangers of racing."

The race also pushed American automakers into competition on both the rack and the showroom floor with the best of Europe. And Vanderbilt's vision changed Long Island's roadways and the shape of the automotive world.