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New York to Paris – The Prelude



By Kelly R. Williams

In George Schuster's extraordinary memoir of the 1908 New York-to-Paris race, *The Longest Auto Race*, he mentions that he had left Buffalo on January 30 and was still on the road in Providence, Rhode Island, on February 11. Perhaps his modesty prevented him from providing any details of that trip away from home. In reality, it was one of the most remarkable winter automobile journeys that had been made to that date. The appearance of this photo in a trove of glass negatives has led to a renewed understanding of that expedition.

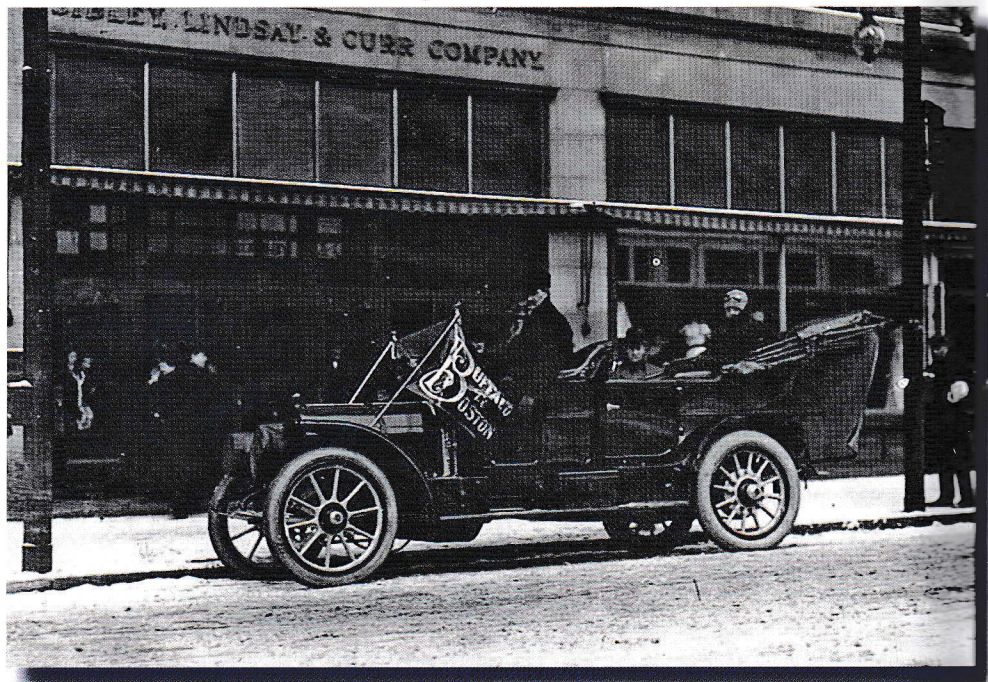
On August 9 and 10, 1907, Montague Roberts drove a Thomas Model 35 Speedway Flyer for 24 hours (by himself) at New York's Brighton Beach track. He set a new record of 997 miles covered in that period. On November 25, 1907, the French newspaper *Le Matin* announced the running of a great race around the world, from New York to Paris, starting the following February. E. R. Thomas was "considering the advisability of competing" as early as December 24. By January 20, 1908, a Thomas was in the group of four American entries. (When race day came, the other three did not appear.) E. R. planned to use the Speedway Flyer that Roberts raced at Brighton, with modifications appropriate to such an extreme effort.

Thomas realized that he could get some advance knowledge of what it was going to take to run through the countryside in February. In fact, he could check on some of the very roads that were part of the race route.

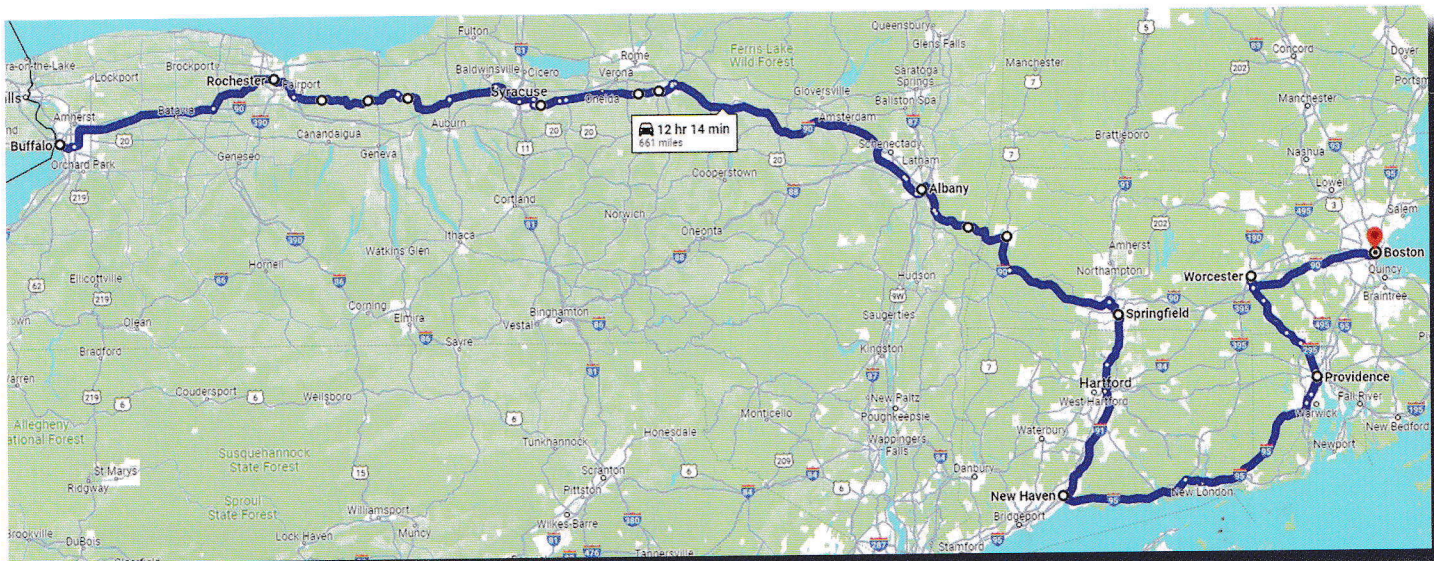
George Schuster, F. J. Clark, and the 1908 Thomas Model F. (Courtesy of the National Automobile Museum (NAM))

A winter endurance run was decided upon, with a route from Buffalo to Boston.

A brand-new 60-hp 1908 Model F was selected for the run. This car's engine had a slightly smaller cylinder bore than the 70-hp Speedway Flyer. "Buffalo to Boston" pennants adorned the sides, and a huge banner describing the trip was hung from the rear. There were no modifications other than "an extra supply of gasoline." Along the way, Schuster and Clark named the car "Peary" after the Arctic explorer.



A photograph taken by Frank Wahl, January 30, 1908. Frank may have been an associate of E.R. Thomas. (Courtesy of Timothy Wahl)



The planned 663-mile route.

On Thursday, January 30, at 8:30 a.m., George Schuster, head production inspector and the primary driver climbed aboard. Mason B. Hatch, sales manager, and F. J. Clark, of the advertising department accompanied George.

Their planned route was to take them across New York, into Connecticut, down to New Haven, east to Providence, Rhode Island, and winding up in Boston in a week. Several purposes of this trip reported by newspapers included checking out the New York to Paris route, learning about winter driving, and allowing Schuster to find improvements to the car's design. Some even thought this was the actual car that would run to Paris. The banner on the rear of the car provided some explanation for onlookers. Unfortunately, there are no known photographs of the vehicle from the rear.

Shortly after Schuster, Hatch, and Clark left Buffalo, new snow started to fall. Before the three men reached Rochester in mid-morning, 72 miles, the three men encountered mountainous drifts, so they pushed through by repeatedly backing up and ramming into the snow. They spruced up the car for public viewing after they arrived, as the photo at the beginning of the article shows them in Rochester.

They departed from Rochester late in the day and headed for Syracuse, 90 miles east. At one point, there was a bridge out, and they had to slip down the bank, cross the river on the ice, and climb a 45-degree slope on the other side to get back to the road. They were keen to reach Syracuse on the scheduled day because they pushed on long into the night. When they arrived, driver Clark's hands had to be pried from the wheel, and Hatch's nose was severely frostbitten. He needed medical observation for several hours.

On Day 2, Friday, they waited for the sun to be well up and left Syracuse at 2:32 p.m. for the 52-mile run to Utica. They arrived at 3:48 p.m. On the way, they stopped to pull a load of hay out of a drift, had to ford a stream, and faced the obvious

wintery road conditions. Even so, they had beaten the previous record for that run by 11 minutes.

While in Utica, frostbite victim (and desk jockey) Hatch told Schuster and Clark that he had suddenly been recalled to Buffalo. They left the car overnight in the garage of the local Thomas agent, the Utica Motor Car Company.

The others never saw this telegram, nor did they learn the exact nature of its contents. At any rate, Mr. Hatch went back to Buffalo in a warm, well lighted Pullman.

The reference to Hatch's frostbite in the Hartford Courant, on February 5, 1908.

Day 3, Saturday, February 1, found Schuster and Clark departing Utica for the 93-mile run to Albany. They had to cross another river on ice and destroyed a tire on a jagged rock in the road. They had planned to push eastward that afternoon, but reports of snowstorms led them to stay overnight in Albany.

A significant event in the New York to Paris race story happened on this day. Montague Roberts entered the Brighton Beach 24-hour car in the Briarcliff Trophy Race, to be held in April. It turned out that this car was his personal property, having been presented to him by New York dealer Harry S. Houpt as a reward for his racing skill and success. (Roberts kept the steering wheel of this car, and it eventually made its way into a permanent trophy of the Antique Automobile Club of America.) To be available for Briarcliff, the car could not be committed to the lengthy round-the-world race.

Suddenly, E. R. Thomas found himself without a car for New York to Paris. That very day, the Buffalo-to-Boston route changed. After the Hartford stop, the team would double back to Manhattan and meet with E. R. and Roberts at Houpt's dealership. (Haupt himself had been in Albuquerque since November 19, before the race was announced.)

By Day 4, Sunday, February 2, they were back to bucking drifts near Lebanon, New York, and down to only two shovelers. By the time they finished the short 37-mile run to Pittsfield, Massachusetts, their radiator was damaged. That was repaired, but when they were about ready to leave, they discovered some other issues. Because of the snow-drifted road conditions that lay ahead, they decided to stay overnight in Pittsfield.

Bright and early on day 5, Monday, February 3, Schuster and Clark pointed the repaired Model F east again toward Springfield. Though it only took 52 miles of driving, this was the most exciting day of the journey. They perversely chose the most challenging route and decided to go over Becket Mountain by taking a path called Jacob's Ladder. This dirt road shot straight up the side of the mountain at a 22% grade. Even in the best of conditions, it was a challenge, with deep ditches and uneven surfaces ready to snare drivers.

In Huntington, New York, where the trolleys were immovable because of snow, they picked up a local named Howard Russell and took him into Springfield, Massachusetts. It took them 6 hours to cover those 52 miles, and they must have felt exultant when they arrived at Springfield that afternoon. They put up at the Clark Automobile Company for the night.

On Day 6, Tuesday, February 4, Schuster and Clark left Springfield and headed south. They covered the 30 miles to Hartford in 45 minutes. It would be hard to equal that feat today without using the limited-access highway.



Motor Age, February 13, 1908, details the Thomas' struggle in the deep snow.



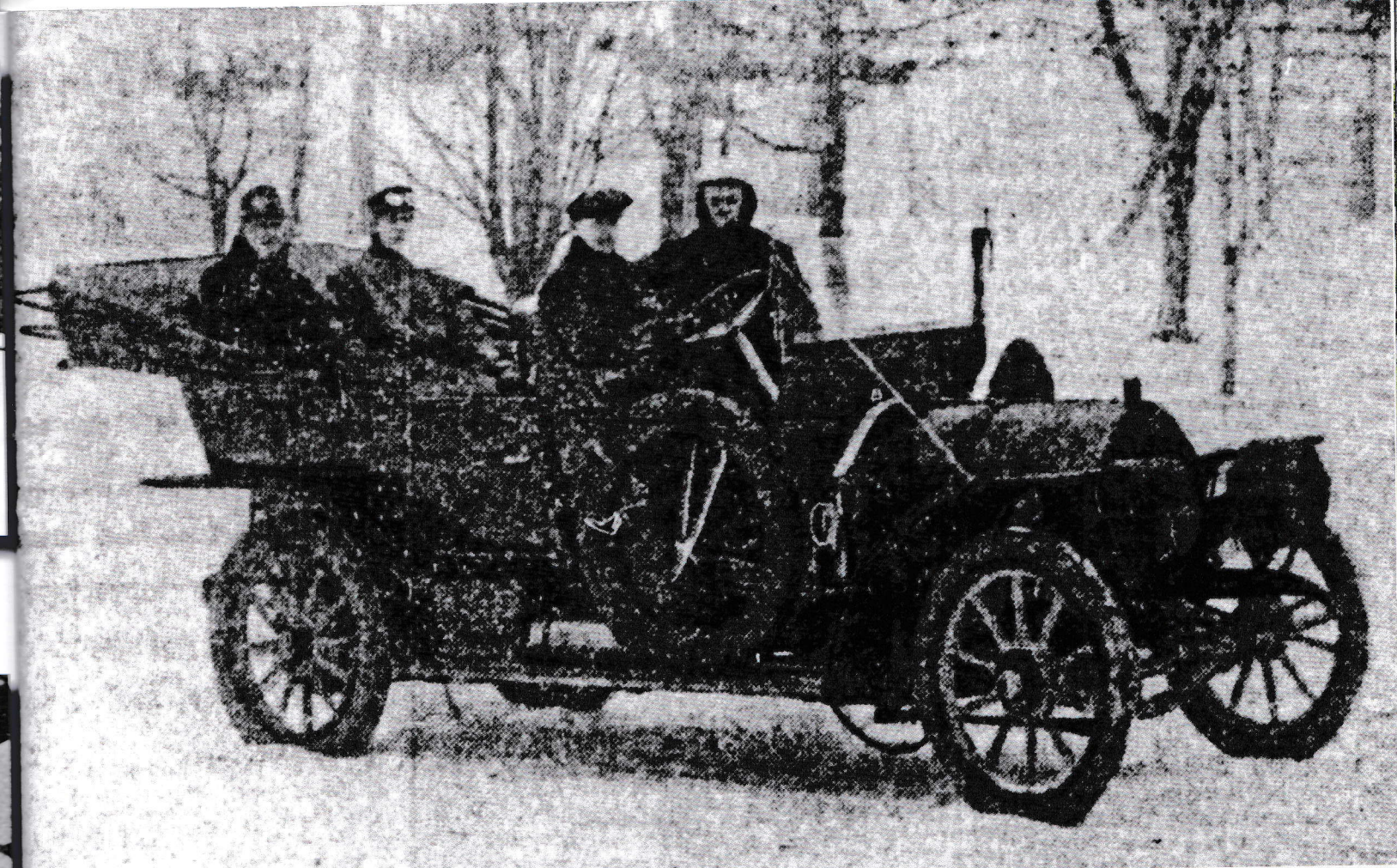
A THOMAS FLYER CLIMBING JACOB'S LADDER

Automobile Topics, February 29, 1908, included a photograph of the Thomas climbing Jacob's Ladder. It was the first time this road had been driven in February.

After warming up for a few hours in Hartford, Connecticut, the team made quick work of the next 38 miles south to New Haven. There may have been a bit of a celebration at dinner, as that day was Schuster's 35th birthday.

Day 7, Wednesday, February 5, was the day the team left the original route. Instead of heading east along the coast to Providence, Rhode Island, the team turned west. In 2 ½ hours, they had covered the 80 miles to Harry Houpt's dealership at 63rd and Broadway in Manhattan.

Advertising literature promoting Harry Houpt's Manhattan dealership. E.R. Thomas is in the upper left corner and Harry Houpt is in the upper right.



A photograph of the Buffalo to Boston Thomas appearing in the *Hartford Courant*, on February 5, 1908.

One can imagine some intense discussion about what Schuster and Clark had already encountered, the loss of the use of Roberts' car for the race, and the potential suitability of the Model F as the round-the-world candidate. It is likely that Schuster's experience of the past week, and his intimate knowledge of the state of the product as head inspector had left him uneasy about sending this new model into such a demanding situation. He may have suggested that they stick with the original plan of using a Speedway Flyer, which was not only a proven design but also the most powerful engine the company had available.

Schuster's memoir recalls a conversation with Roberts at Houpt's in New York. He has it dated Saturday, February 8.

The time to locate an alternate car was nerve-wrackingly short. The Paris racers were leaving New York on the morning of February 12. It's possible that E. R. became discouraged and considered dropping out of the race entirely. There are stories of others having to convince him to participate.

Though Thomas introduced it in May 1907, the balanced design, light weight, and extreme power of the Model 35 Speedway Flyer had kept it in high demand, and the model was still in production. It was a true "muscle car" long before

that phrase came into being. Before long, E. R. set about trying to find a new one available. He canvassed dealers and begged them to release one that had already been allocated to them. Eventually, he convinced the Whitten-Gilmore Agency of Boston, incidentally the final destination for the Buffalo to Boston Run, to give up a Speedway Flyer that was headed their way. It was intercepted at the end of the line, and hurried preparation began.

The positive side of this crunch was that its outcome enabled the E. R. Thomas Company to truthfully state that their entry, and eventual round-the-world champion, was a stock car. (At least until it reached Buffalo—but that's another story.)

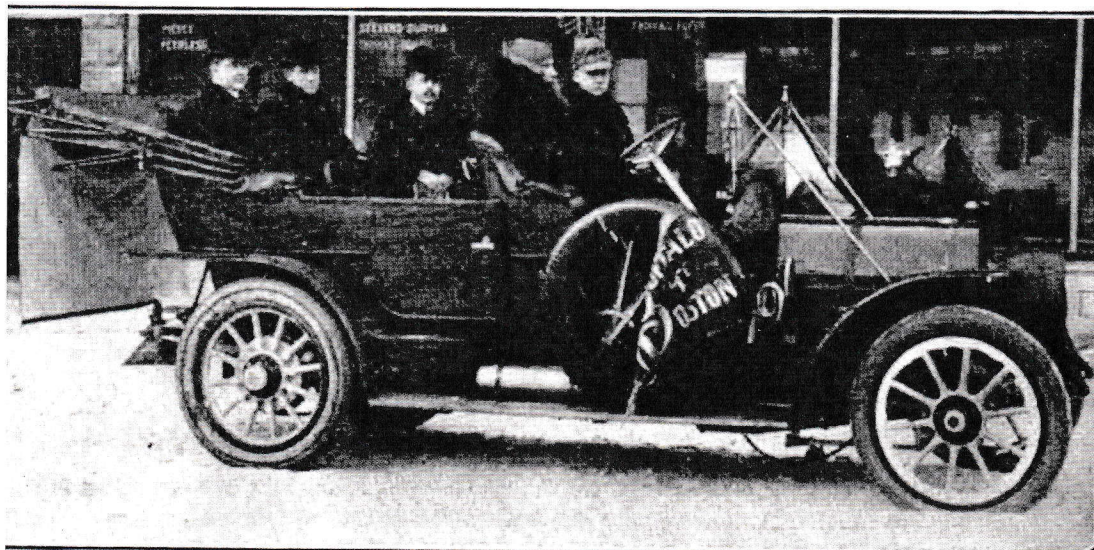
After the New York negotiation was completed, Schuster and Clark jumped back into the Model F on Thursday, February 6, and started retracing their path. Now, they had a new teammate—A. H. Dorsey, head of Thomas sales, or "chief of the hot air department," as one paper had it. The 80 miles back to New Haven were apparently accomplished without incident.

On Day 8, February 7, the trio pounded up the road to Providence. The annual car show week just finished, and they wanted to arrive before it closed. The 123 miles went smoothly—perhaps they were helped by a west wind.

By Saturday, February 8, they headed back north on their original route. The large southward semicircle between Pittsfield and Worcester had brought them to several big cities. Clark, Dorsey, and Schuster had opportunities to visit dealers, conduct public relations, and perform tech support. The location of this picture has not yet been identified, but the car is parked in front of an agent for Peerless, Stevens-Duryea, and Thomas Flyer. The car's large banner is clearly visible, and it appears to be Schuster in the driver's seat.

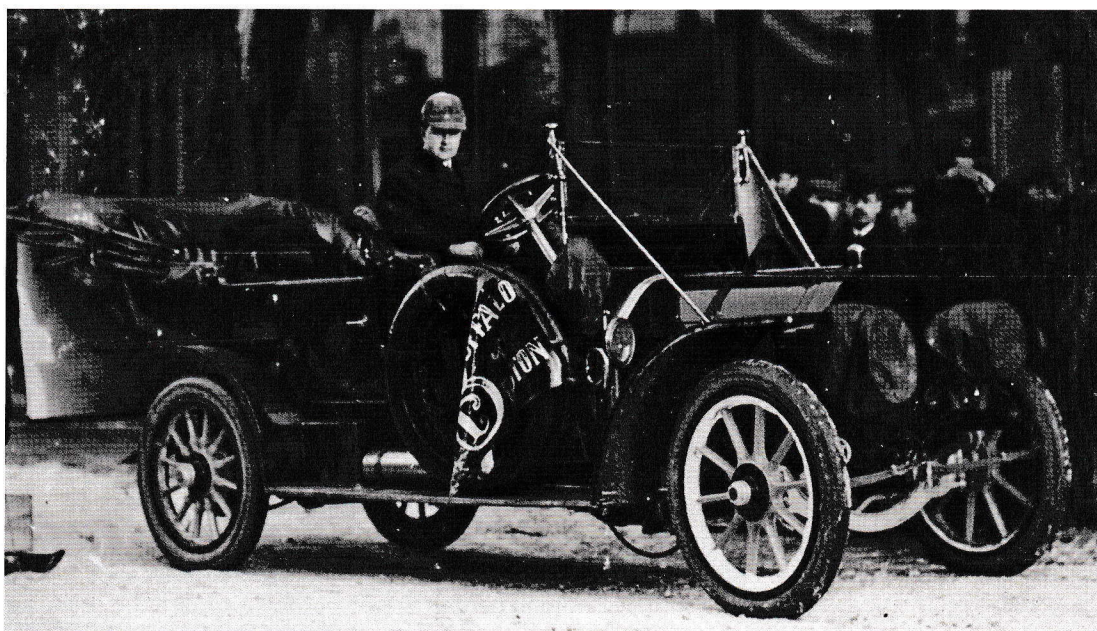
On Day 9, the final day of the project, they headed a little northwest to Worcester and then to Boston. Old Man Winter got in one last laugh as the wind and snow between Worcester and Boston were bitterly strong. Finally, in Boston, they gratefully tottered into Whitten-Gilmore's cozy showroom, where E. R. Thomas waited to greet them. He did not stay long and hurried back to Buffalo. The preparation of the racer had to be accomplished in a few short hours.

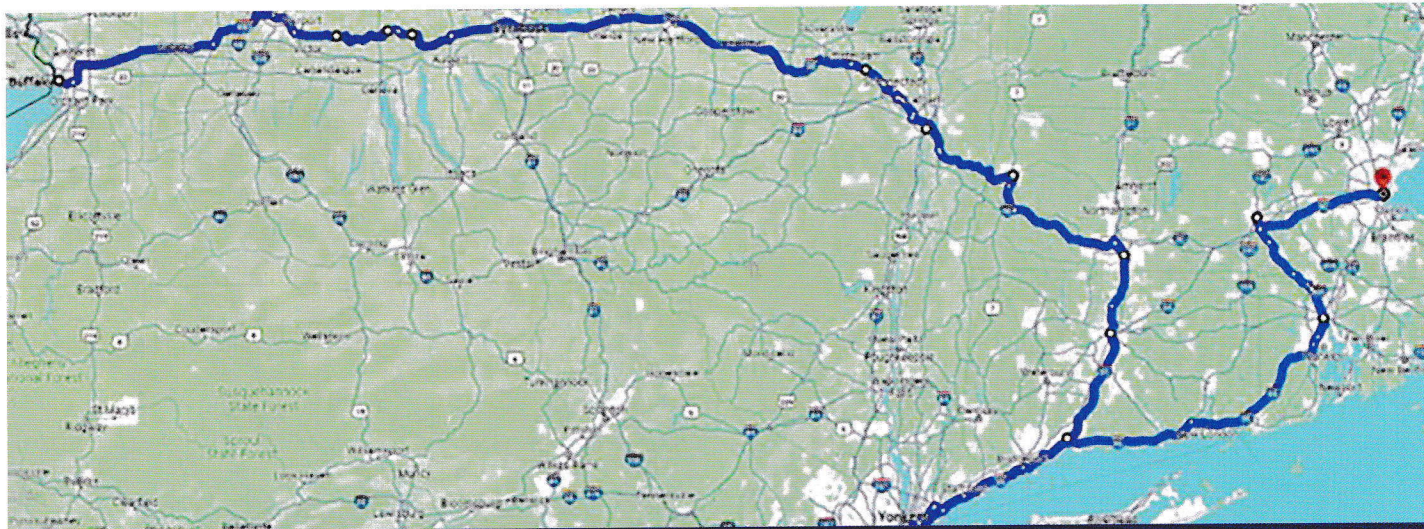
After a well-earned break in Boston, the team and car returned home. Initially, they retraced their route. The morning of February 11, 1908, found them back in Providence at the Davis Auto Company, the local Thomas agent. It was exactly one day before that epic, months-long, round-the-world race was to start in Times Square. As they relaxed and swapped stories, the telephone rang. The receptionist looked quizzically over at George Schuster and said, "It's for you." Within a few hours, Schuster was on a train bound for Manhattan to join the racer just as it was leaving the following morning. He had left home on January 30 and would not see his family again until August 15.



*From The Automobile,
March 19, 1908.*

This photo from the National Automobile Museum is also unidentified, but it could have been taken at about the same time as the above one. Notice the driver.





The actual route of 823 miles was significantly longer than the planned route.

These were tough men. Over 800 miles in the depth of a New England winter, with the windshield always folded to reduce wind resistance, is an achievement that is hard to imagine taking on these days. For George Schuster, immediately following that experience with weeks of bitter cold, fighting snow, and months of extreme conditions and mechanical challenges, the accomplishment is nothing short of astonishing.

Except for some of the pictures and the citations from *The Longest Auto Race*, I obtained all of the information in this article from 1907-1908 newspapers and automobile publications. I discovered these articles in the Thomas company clipping files, preserved at the National Automobile Museum, and in online archives.

(Photos courtesy of Kelly R. Williams)



Somewhere along the Buffalo to Boston route in frigid conditions. (Photo courtesy of the National Automobile Museum)