

# The Chicago Times-Herald Race of 1895

## America's First Automobile Competition

By Samantha Meece

The Chicago Times-Herald was hoping to promote this new automobile industry and sell more papers. Publisher Herman H. Kohlsaat announced "A Prize for Motors," with a \$5,000 purse for inventors who could construct "practicable, self-propelling road carriages". On Thanksgiving Day, November 28, 1895, in the midst of snow, wind, and skepticism, a small group of experimental machines set out on a journey that would change American transportation forever.

The Chicago Times-Herald Race is widely recognized as the first organized automobile competition in the United States. What began as a newspaper promotion quickly became a defining moment in the birth of the American automotive industry. The idea of the automobile was so new to Americans that there was no general term agreed upon to describe it, and the Chicago Times-Herald invited readers to coin a new word. Some of the terms considered were Horseless Carriage, Vehicle Motor, Automobile, Automobile Carriage, and Moto Cycle. On July 15, the Times-Herald declared "Moto Cycle" the winning term.

The paper initially planned a 90-mile race to Milwaukee for July 4, 1895, to take advantage of the crowds already gathered in the city. However, the date was pushed back when many competitors requested more time to complete their racing machines. Poor road conditions four months later forced a change. Instead, organizers settled on a 54-mile round trip from Chicago to Evanston and back. More than 80 inventors expressed interest. Many dropped out due to mechanical issues or had been stopped by authorities unfamiliar with motor vehicles.

With only six starters in brutal conditions after multiple delays, the race finally began on Thanksgiving morning. Conditions were harsh with nearly a foot of snow, strong winds, temperatures hovering in the 30s and roads clogged with mud, ice, and horse-drawn traffic.

The six vehicles that lined up on race day were feats of engineering. Four of the six competitors powered their vehicles with gasoline. Three of the four gasoline vehicles were built by German engineer Karl Benz, the namesake of modern-day Mercedes-Benz. One was sponsored by Hieronymus Mueller & Co. from Decatur, Illinois, the second by the De La Vergne Refrigerating Company, and the third by RH, Macy & Co., both of New York. The fourth gasoline-powered vehicle was the Duryea, made by the Duryea



**THE CHICAGO TIMES-HERALD MOTORCYCLE RACE.**

The first in America, Thanksgiving Day, November 28, 1895.

Motor Wagon Company based out of Massachusetts. The other two vehicles were electric and participated in the race not as serious contenders but instead to showcase the potential of electric drivetrains. The Morris and Salom Company from Philadelphia sponsored one, dubbed the Electrobat, while the other belonged to Chicagoan Harold Sturges, previously exhibited at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition.

The race began at 8:55 a.m. near Jackson Park. Almost immediately, the vehicles faced serious challenges. Engines stalled in the cold, drivers stopped frequently for repairs, snowdrifts blocked roads and horses spooked at the sight of the machines causing problems for the competitors.

Each vehicle carried an official observer, or "umpire," to ensure rules were followed—though

nearly every competitor violated at least one regulation. Progress was slow. What would take less than an hour today stretched into an all-day ordeal.

J. Frank Duryea claimed victory after more than 10 hours on the course, Duryea crossed the finish line first in his gasoline-powered Motor Wagon. His running time was 7 hours, 53 minutes. Total time: 10 hours, 23 minutes with an average speed 7 miles per hour.

Second place went to a Benz automobile driven by Oscar Mueller, who reportedly suffered from exposure during the race. Only these two vehicles completed the full course.

There was a dispute with the awards, the top prize being \$2000 for first place, \$1500 for second, \$1000 for third, and \$500 for fourth. That was a lot of money in 1895. Despite Dur-

yea's clear victory, the final results were not straightforward.

Race judges determined that all competitors had violated technical rules. As a result, prize money and honors were distributed based not only on finishing order but also on engineering merit. The decision reflected the experimental nature of early automobile development, where innovation mattered as much as performance.

This race was a turning point in transportation. Though modest in scale, the race had an outsized impact. The public's confidence grew. The event proved automobiles could function in real-world conditions. Industry expansion accelerated and the development of motor vehicles in the U.S. advanced rapidly. Commercial production began the following year. The Duryea

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