

# Coast to Coast: The Transcontinental Auto Race of 1909

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The Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition of 1909 officially began at noon Seattle time on June 1, 1909. When President William Howard Taft flashed a signal on a golden telegraph key in the East Room of the White House, the exposition gates swung open in Seattle. At the very same moment an estimated crowd of 20,000 people in downtown New York City saw Mayor George B. McClellan fire one shot in the air from a golden pistol, marking the start of the first official automobile race from ocean to ocean.

The 1909 race, inspired by the famed 1908 New York to Paris race which had generated enormous publicity, provides an unusual window into the history of the relationship between the automobile industry and the sport of automobile racing. Besides being the first official trans-continental automobile race in the United States, the 1909 race to Seattle also helped to launch the spectacular

career of the world's most popular car: Henry Ford's Model T. The ties between sales and sports, which are so prominent in both amateur and professional athletics today, are clearly evident in the story of the 1909 trans-continental auto race.

After the race was first announced in the spring of 1909, opposition arose from the Manufacturers' Contest Association, a self-appointed industry watchdog of sporting events. Sensitive to the charge that the auto industry endangered the lives of innocent people by encouraging reckless driving, the MCA unanimously refused to sanction the event. They stated they could not approve a race of any kind on public roads which would force drivers to violate local speed limits,

Seattle backers of the race answered with the claim that the Ocean to Ocean drive was not a race, but a "contest." Later the Seattle organizers agreed to divide the "contest" into two events: a speed-controlled endurance run from New York to St. Louis, and a high speed race from St. Louis to Seattle. They believed that western roads were so bad, and the speed limits were so high anyway, that "speed law violations" would be impossible west of the Mississippi.

Due to the controversy, only six vehicles entered the race, two of which were Model T Fords. Henry Ford had built his company on the solid reputation he had earned on the racetrack. Though he had announced in 1907 that his firm would not race again until the industry agreed to limit the size and speed of race cars, he saw the Seattle contest as an ideal opportunity to promote his new lightweight touring car.

The two Ford cars led most of the way, thanks to a clear advantage they enjoyed over the competition. Unlike the other vehicles in the race—an Acme, Shawmut, Itala, and Stearns—the Fords had a nationwide network of dealers at their service, which served as guides and pit-crews all the way to Seattle.

Ford No. 2 reached Seattle first on June 23, 1909, and the victory became a cornerstone of the marketing campaign for the Model T, proof of the superiority of Ford's durable but lightweight and inexpensive new car. In the wake of the massive publicity about the Ford victory, comparatively few people ever learned that about five months after the race, the winning Ford car was disqualified for illegally changing its engine, and the second place Shawmut was quietly declared to be the winner.

Despite the fact that both Fords were ultimately disqualified—earlier the other Ford car had been declared ineligible for changing an axle—the race was an unqualified promotional success for Ford. The public relations victory was so complete that in 1959, on the 50th anniversary of the 1909 race, the Ford Motor Company commemorated its "victory" with a re-enactment of the race to Seattle.