

This Week in Saratoga County History

Glidden Auto Tour: Testing the Reliability of Early Automobiles

Submitted by Dave Waite October 9, 2024



Percy Pierce in #27, 1906 Glidden Tour detroitpubliclibrary.org

For the car enthusiast today, the term cross country rally recalls dust-covered cars testing skill and endurance by racing across endless landscapes of sand dunes and giant cacti. In the early days of automobiles, these contests were also held where the roads were poor, and the skills of drivers were pushed to the limit. Fortunately, the contestants did not have to travel the world to compete, as these early rallies were run on the bone-rattling roads of rural America.

One of the most well-known of these early contests was the Glidden Auto Tour, a public auto rally organized by the American Automobile Association to promote the reliability and practical use of this new form of transportation. The tour offered the public a chance to see automobiles as they passed through their communities driven in a safe and controlled manner. The maximum speed for the drivers in the Glidden Tour was twenty miles an hour on the open road and reduced to fifteen when they passed through residential areas. These speeds were verified at timed checkpoints and penalties were assessed against those who arrived ahead of the scheduled times.

Named for Charles Jasper Glidden, a telephone pioneer and automobile enthusiast, the first tour was held in 1904 to finish at the World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri. The rally that year had three starting points: Philadelphia, New York City, and Baltimore, which converged during the 1000-mile route to end

in St. Louis. Of the 77 automobiles that left the starting line, only 66 passed the checkered flag eighteen days later.

The 1905 Glidden Tour again started in New York City, with all the contestants following the same route that headed north into New Hampshire. Before each race, representatives of the Glidden Tour would drive the roads along the course of the rally and create a route book for the contestants to use during the tour.

As this rally was organized as a reliability test, the route included steep inclines, culminating with a visit to New Hampshire's White Mountains. The *Buffalo Courier* newspaper of July 30, 1905, gave this report on the climbing ability of these early automobiles:

Hills, which for years have been climbed only with a team of horses, including the Crawford Notch Hill with a 22 percent grade, the Hard Scrabble Hill near Bethlehem (NH) with a 25 percent grade, and the Saw Dust Hill near Chester with a grade of 28 percent at one point, were surmounted by car after car.

For 1906, the tour returned to the northeast, starting the sixteen-day race on July 12th in Buffalo, and heading west to Utica, into the Mohawk Valley, north to Saratoga, and then into the Eastern Adirondacks. In the days preceding the event, the organizers posted signs along the route to help the participants follow the course. In Fonda, a community along the Mohawk River ten miles west of Amsterdam, officials refused to allow the signs, and no details of food or facilities in Fonda that could assist the motorists were included in that year's tour packet.

The roads between Utica and Saratoga were described by the contestants as "vile," with the rough roads and thick dust churned up by the motor cars causing accidents that eliminated several entrants. Beyond Amsterdam the tour turned north, encountering a steep grade taking them away from the Mohawk River. When Crane's Hollow Road, the designated route for the tour was found to be so narrow that it would be impossible to pass disabled vehicles, the tour was rerouted to nearby Swart Hill Road. This thirty percent three-quarter mile grade was a challenge for some of these early autos, with the stronger autos assisting others to bring all the contestants to the summit. By mid-afternoon, the tour cars came down Ballston Avenue in Saratoga Springs and ended their day in front of the Grand Union Hotel. As no work was allowed on the vehicles after the final stop of the day, each was handed over to an official who took them to a secure garage. As the tour arrived in Saratoga on Saturday and Sunday was a rest day, the contestants had time to relax and enjoy the sights of Saratoga Springs.

From Saratoga the tour headed north to Glens Falls, then into the Adirondacks, first following a plank road to Caldwell on Lake George and then passing through Warrensburg to Chestertown. Continuing north, the tour skirted the western shore of Schroon Lake, finally rolling into Elizabethtown to end the day. The only excitement during their time in Elizabethtown occurred when two of the participants could not find a room for the night. The problem was solved when the local sheriff offered to house them in the jail. After their cell was opened the next morning, the men said that they slept well, even though they were locked up with a murderer and a wife-beater.

Fifty of the contestants made it to their final stop in Quebec. Thirteen of these were given a perfect score based on delays from breakdowns and the cost and time for repairs. To break this tie, the group voted and chose the first-place finisher from the previous year, Percy P. Pierce, as the winner. Percy was the son of Pierce-Arrow Motor Car owner George Norman Pierce, and of course, for the tour that year he drove one of his father's automobiles.

The White Mountains were again tackled during the 1906 tour, though this time with what could have been fatal results. Guy Vaughn, a champion of 24-hour auto races, lost control when he encountered a section of road in Crawford Notch that had been damaged by rain the night before and rolled his Sterns automobile. Though his machine was demolished, Vaughn escaped unharmed.

In 1907 the Glidden Tour again went through Glens Falls with a White Steamer auto acting as the pathfinder and pilot. The tour that year had started in New Hampshire with their final destination being Saratoga Springs. The 1908 Glidden Tour started in Buffalo and again ended in Saratoga. The last tour to go through New York State was held in 1911, going between Washington, D. C., and Ottawa, Canada. On their way north the tour passed through both Saratoga Springs and Glens Falls.

The final Glidden Tour was held in 1913, with the organizers acknowledging that the automobile had proven its value and reliability over the years of the competition. In recent years, the Vintage Motor Car Club has revived the Glidden Tours, with the 78th Revival Glidden Tour being held in September of 2024.

Sources: Illustration – detroitpubliclibrary.org

Wikipedia.org & the Vintage Car Club of America website at VCCA.org

Online newspaper archives at fultonhistory.com and nyshistoricnewspapers.org