

The Savannah races were held on the streets of the city from 1910 to 1912.

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America was one the first countries out side of Europe to promote and support motor racing. We are talking about road racing not track that was to come a few years later with the construction of Indy. The Vanderbilt Cup Race was the pride of all the US racing events, and by the very nature of the benefactor this trophy was battled for on the streets of Long Island New York. The first official US race was in April 1900 and the highest speed recorded for that event was twenty five miles per hour. In Europe, especially France, open road races had been held for at least six years before this date but were considered dangerous by other countries like Britain after several French school children were killed watching a motor race and other interested citizens experienced the same fate in Germany. This type of situation resulted from the fact that the street course was never marshaled with any authority, spectators could and would venture into the center of the road to see the approaching cars. In the US it was strictly observed that the route would be policed by safety officials and of course volunteers from the newly created New York Automobile Club. The actual organization of these events was in the hands of two national groups, the American Automobile Association, and the Automobile Club of America.

The fist few years saw spectator control enforced without any serious incidents apart from a damaged cow or cart and a few bruised spectators trying to get as close as they could to the viewing line. By 1907 the average speed had significantly increased to an average of 60 miles an hour through the advance of engineering technology. Regretfully two spectators were killed and a driver seriously injured at the same time that public opinion was starting to turn against the races. The principle complaint was the use of public roads for practice runs by the contestants from early morning to dusk. The State Governor and the New York Chamber of Commerce did not see motor racing as be very helpful to the commercial success or the image of the Empire State. New and tough regulations were proposed and just to add fuel to the fire the relationship between the two national automobile organizations that were responsible for the races went sour.

In the fair city of Savannah the Mayor and a Mr. Frank Batty, the President of the Savannah Automobile Club lobbied race promoters and one of the national automobile organization to try and get the races transferred to the south. With considerable help from the local media, a couple of politicians and many supporters who could and did raise substantial amounts of money they succeeded and the first of a series of Auto Races were organized for March 1908. (It is interesting to note that in New York they would have been digging their cars out of winter storage on this date and this was not lost on the promoters who saw an extended race season.)

In order to attract the right level of competition the roads designated for these races were totally rebuilt. Curves were straighten, new surfaces were laid, trees removed and a host

of other improvements were undertaken. In order to help the costs for this work local Jail labor was used, quite a novel idea for that time and copied by other states well into the twenty century. In the March issue of the Savannah Morning News an article appeared stating that large flocks of striped birds, better known as chain gangs were busy rebuild the city highways. One of the rewards offered to the prisoners was to be allowed to watch the races over the summer, and they did. The Chamber of Commerce suggested to all its members that the first race day be considered a holiday in order that as many people as possible could enjoy and support the events.

Aware of the possible dangers both to drivers and spectators, twelve medical doctors were on hand and each one was provided with a car and supplies. Another precaution taken by the committee was to station 150 military guards along the route to provide assistance and make sure that no one ventured into the path of the cars.

Each driver was told that the city speed limits would be enforced by the local police, the limit was fifteen miles an hour however, how they were expected to enforce this speed was not explained as the vast majorities were on foot! The total course was 10 miles long and on the first day each car was required to complete 18 laps. The first two races took place on March 18th and were restricted to an engine size of not more than 375 cubic inches. On the 19th this was increased to a maximum of 575 cubic inches and the distance was increased to 360 miles for this event. This was deemed to be the principle attraction and carried the top prize, the Savannah Challenge Cup valued at \$1,800 (1908 dollars!) won by Louis Strang driving an Isotta-Franschini who completed the course in 6 hours and 21 minutes, that's an average of 55 miles per hour! To make sure that the competitors could change tires and obtain gasoline various stops were created with ample supplies of what ever was needed, at a price of course! These also served as a advertising medium for the manufacturers, however after the 1908 races these service points were guarded by the military as items tended to disappear over night especially when the stop was little more than a tent with tires stacked outside! In total the three winner's cups totaled four thousand dollars which in 1908 was almost a king's ransom! In order to keep down the dust part of the track/roads were oiled, a service that was not fully appreciated by certain drivers when their tires refused to keep the desired course especially on a corner. Just to add further problems the oil remained on the road long after the races were finished creating further problems to the local inhabitants. Mrs. Shapiro of New York was the co-driver for a Mr. Herbert Lytle, now recognized as the first woman to ride in an official race. There is not evidence that she actually did drive the car but a publicity picture after the race showed her behind the steering wheel. The promoters of the March events must have been pleased with the attendance and financial returns as they staged a second event in November 1908. No Long island snow to be concerned about in fact a special train was commissioned to bring race fans from New York to Savannah nick named the "Wall Street Special".

That same year the Automobile Club of America suggested that a special race be constructed with a winner's cup larger in value than the famous Vanderbilt Cup that carried a \$2500 price tag. This special race was to be run in Savannah in November and

was called the American Grand Prize Race. The value of the winner's cup was \$5,000! A staggering financial prize for the time.

Obviously there had to be at least two races if the event was to attract enough people so the International Light Car Race was created and this attracted quite a large entry. Like the Brooklands race track in England all cars were weighed based on the procedure applied to house racing. At Brooklands the drivers were required to wear colored shirts like a jockey but thank goodness this was never required in the US. To enter a Light car the vehicle could not weigh more than 950 pounds, there are not that many cars today that would qualify! After only a few months the Savannah races were becoming established as a national event with people attending from all over the country and even over seas.. The Italians fielded teams also the French. The future looked good for Southern Racing!

But towards the close of the year the Automobile Club of America and the American Automobile Association who had fallen out over the transfer of race events to Savannah returned to the conference table and decided that all future race events should return to Long Island. On hearing this news the City decided to demolish the grandstands specially built for well heeled spectators who came to watch the races.

The Savannah Automobile Club sent a delegation to New York to try and keep the scheduled 1910 races in the city understanding that their plans for 1909 were now yesterday's news. Fate can be a friend or a foe for most of us and the Savannah Automobile Club was no exception.. A during the 1909 Vanderbilt Race in New York a driver lost control and ran over a number of spectators, a sad event but a boost to the those trying to keep the races in the south. In 1910 three races were held in the city, the Savannah Trophy Race, the Tiedeman Trophy race and the Automobile Club of America Grand Prize Race.

However interest was fading as far as street racing was concerned, the new race tracks where people could watch the cars go by a dozen times while the promoters could collect money for every seat became the future of motor racing both in the US and Europe. However, the final race held in Savannah was certainly the most spectacular. In 1911 the famous Vanderbilt Cup Race took place on the streets of the city. Cars from all over the Europe attended, Fiats from Italy, Benz, and Lozier, Napier etc. Average speeds in excess of eighty miles an hours were achieved to the delight of the spectators. As late as 1997 attempts were made to get races back to the Savannah but they did not succeed. For three brief years this beautiful city of the south hosted the best in American racing, little remains today to remind us of this.

Geoff Wheatley

Postscript: Obviously I could only skip over the details of this southern period in American Automobile history. For those who wish to read more about these events I would suggest they obtain an excellent book by Dr J K Quattlebaum entitled The Great Savannah Races.