

AUTOMOBILE RACES!

NASSAU COUNTY HIGHWAYS!!!

FIRST INTERNATIONAL ROAD RACE

THE WILLIAM K. VANDERBILT, JR., CUP

Will be held over the superb macadam highways of Nassau County on

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 8, 1904

The Distance Will be Between 250 and 300 Miles, and Will Start at Westbury, at About Daylight.

The Board of Supervisors of Nassau County having set apart the following roads, between the hours of 5 A. M. and 3 P. M., all persons, whether on foot, mounted, or driving horse or mechanically propelled vehicles are warned against using the same, and to follow the instructions of the local officers who will be stationed at short intervals along the route, which is as follows: Jericho Turnpike, Queens to Jericho; Oyster Bay-Massapequa Road, Jericho to Plain Edge; Plain Edge Road (Bethpage Road), Plain Edge to Hempstead; Fulton St., through Hempstead, to Hempstead-Jamaica Road, Hempstead to Queens.

NOTICE:

Automobiles will reduce speed through Hicksville, allowing 3 minutes to pass through, and they will require 6 minutes to pass through Hempstead.

Residents along the above route are cautioned against allowing domestic animals or fowls to be at large during the above race; and are further cautioned against allowing children, unattended, to make use of these highways.

1. If you are careful, there is no danger.
2. Don't cross a street until you are sure that no automobile is approaching. Look each way.
3. Chain your dogs, and lock up your fowls.
4. Don't crowd out onto the highway, you will see as much if you remain in close to the sidewalk, back of the curb-line.
5. Positively no postponement of this Race on account of weather.

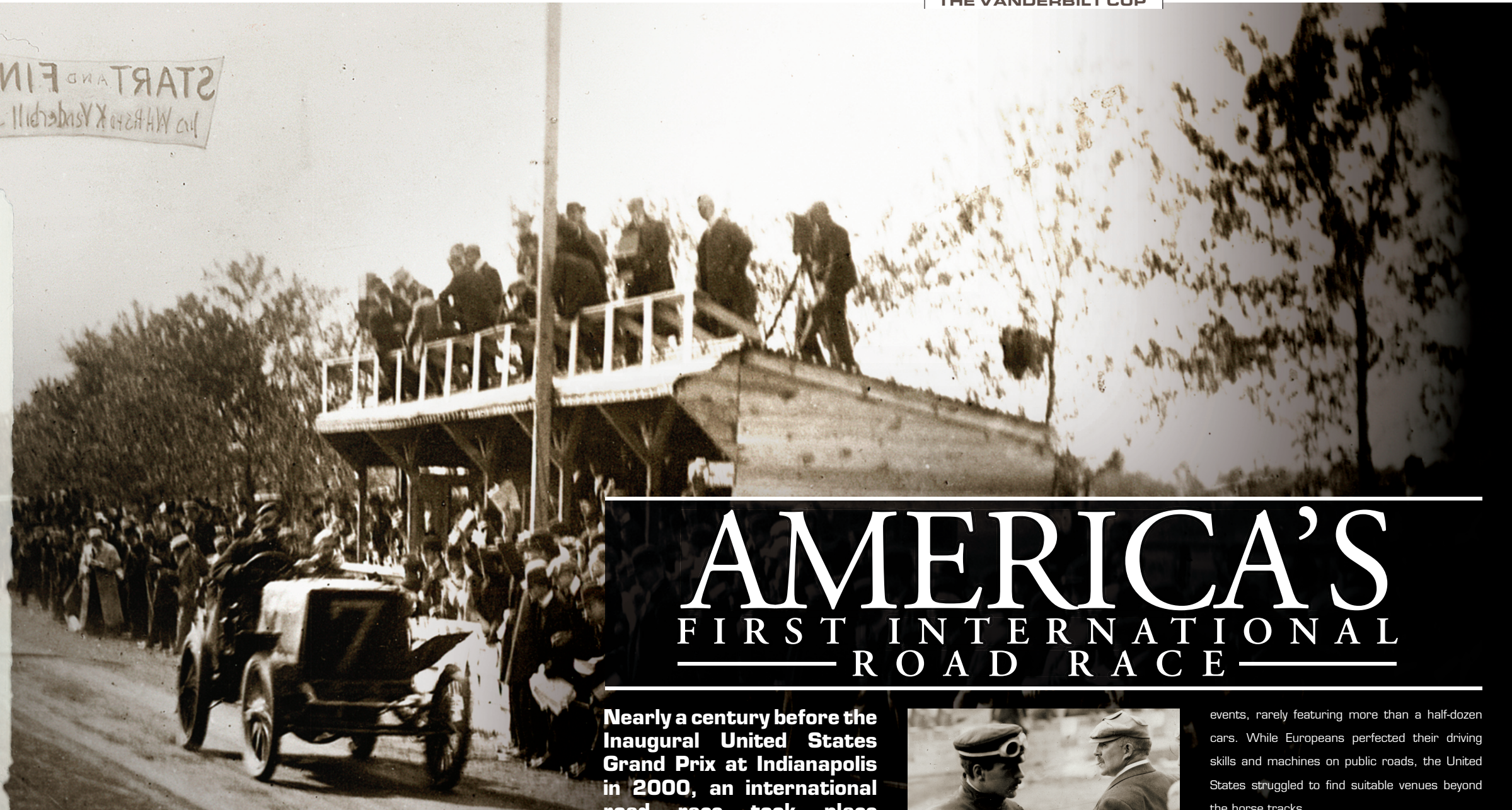
REMEMBER
SATURDAY, OCTOBER 8, 1904
FROM 5 A. M. TO 3 P. M.

AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION

THE LONG ISLAND OLD CAR CLUB, INC. IS COMMEMORATING THE 50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE ABOVE RACE BY RERUNNING ANTIQUE AUTOMOBILES OVER THE ORIGINAL COURSE ON OCTOBER 9, 1954, STARTING AT 10 A. M.

THE EVENT: Thirty-two miles of Nassau County Highways provided the setting for a true test of man and machine. Winner George Heath (right) took the Cup by a difference of only one minute, 28 seconds, the closest finish for an international road race at that point.

Photos courtesy of National Automotive History Collection - Detroit Public Library
Poster from 1904 Vanderbilt Cup Race courtesy of Suffolk County Vanderbilt Museum



AMERICA'S FIRST INTERNATIONAL ROAD RACE

Nearly a century before the Inaugural United States Grand Prix at Indianapolis in 2000, an international road race took place across a stretch of Long Island. It was America's first international road race, the Vanderbilt Cup.

By Mark Dill

With the fury of a hornet's nest, the start of the United States Grand Prix rivets the attention of the largest crowd in Formula One and unleashes the most technically-advanced race cars on the planet. Only the explosion of engines totaling several thousand horsepower eclipses the roar that erupts from a colorful sea of enthusiasts as they cheer the world's most elite road racers. Fans unfurl giant flags and banners from their seats in the state-of-the-art facility that is the Indianapolis Motor Speedway. While 2004 marks the fifth edi-



THE ORGANIZERS: William K. Vanderbilt, Jr., millionaire scion of one of the wealthiest families in America is pictured at left. Vanderbilt was the benefactor of the race that carried his name. H.W. Whipple, president of the American Automobile Association (AAA), who sanctioned the event, is pictured at right.

tion of this great event at Indianapolis, October 8 will mark the 100th anniversary of America's first international road race.

A century ago, the sport was struggling to define itself. America, unlike Europe, had but a few hundred miles of paved roads in the entire country. American auto racing pioneers gravitated to hippodromes for race meets of five and ten-mile

events, rarely featuring more than a half-dozen cars. While Europeans perfected their driving skills and machines on public roads, the United States struggled to find suitable venues beyond the horse tracks.

William Kissam Vanderbilt, Jr., millionaire scion of one of America's wealthiest families, took up the challenge of assembling an international road race that could rival those in Europe. Among his goals, according to Florence Ogg, Director of Archives and Collections at the Vanderbilt Museum, were improved roads and a stronger American automotive industry. Vanderbilt was the archetypal gentleman racer of his time. In January 1904, at age 25, he set the world's land speed record with a 39-second mile on billiard table-smooth, packed sands just north of Daytona Beach. Two years earlier, he finished third in Belgium's big road race against the best the world had to offer. Known as "Willie K," he decided not to compete in the Vanderbilt Cup, but to take on the daunting task of organizing it.





THE CROWDS: Crowd control was an oxymoron at the first Vanderbilt Cup race. People lined the course like a retaining wall or wandered out onto the running surface.

Vanderbilt, working with the American Automobile Association (AAA), charted a triangular, 32.5-mile course on New York's Long Island that sliced through villages and spanned long sections of countryside. The course was three long stretches of relatively straight road, connected by three sharp turns. The Massapequa Road was the shortest link, at six miles, and passed by the homes and small businesses in a hamlet known as Central Park and the village of Hicksville. The Jericho Turnpike was a 12.5-mile stretch that led to Queens and the nearby Belmont race course, which was under construction at the time. The longest stretch was 14 miles in length, and cut through another village, Hempstead. Between villages there was open prairie, cabbage farms and huge shade trees. The entire course was a macadamized, or crushed stone, surface and to settle dust, it was oiled at a cost of \$5,000 with 90,000 gallons of raw petroleum. Oil puddles splashed a sticky mud mix onto the cars and drivers. But it also helped them identify the right path instead of mistakenly chasing down adjoining roads.

While these roads were some of the best in America at the time, they presented numerous hazards. A two-mile stretch had to be rebuilt, which required rollers to crush stones and "season" the surface. This produced large, sharp stones that were hard on tires. There were giant holes, some as much as five feet in diameter, and drivers had no choice but to steer around them. Most peculiar of all, train tracks intersected the course at five points, and special procedures were worked out to manage cross traffic. Flagmen waved warnings and cars were required to slow down to 10 miles per hour 200 yards from the crossing. They also had to come to a complete stop before proceeding across the

rails. The trains were on special alert to slow to four miles per hour when approaching the inter-sections. During the race, German driver Wilhelm Werner approached a crossing too quickly, and damaged his gears stopping to avoid a collision with a train. Already critical of the course and American management, it did nothing to improve his opinion of the event.

The use of public roads produced a cry of protest from local farmers, who had little interest in automobiles, the toys of the rich. A protest attracted 238 signatures and was delivered to the Nassau County board of supervisors a little more than a week before the event. While the protest was disallowed, it is evidence of a kind of class warfare that hovered over the sport. Automobile ownership was a distinguishing characteristic of the upper class, and was a symbol of wealth that caused resentment among those less privileged. During the race, several cars suffered tire punctures near the turn at Jericho, and there were reports that farmers had strewn nails and glass on the course.

The privilege of social class was reflected in the lineup of 18 drivers. Several had little or no racing experience, including Americans William Wallace, George Arents, Jr., and Frank Croker, the son of Tammany Hall boss Richard Croker. Much of the East Coast racing establishment saw the sport as the purview of gentlemen, and viewed professionalism as a condition of common men. They drove their cars themselves, or assigned the duty to their personal chauffeurs. *Motor Age*, in its coverage of the race, bemoaned the absence of track racing professionals Barney Oldfield and Carl Fisher, whom they deemed the equal of the Europeans. Fisher would later found the Indianapolis Motor Speedway in 1909.

Despite the emphasis on gentlemen of wealth, there was some real driving talent in the field. None stood larger than the race's six foot, two-inch victor, American born Parisian, George Heath. At 42, he was at the peak of his powers. He had driven in most of the town-to-town classic races of the day, such as Paris to Madrid, and



THE WINNER: Race winner George Heath stands beside his winning French Panhard. Heath was born in America, but lived in Paris.



THE COURSE: The first Vanderbilt Cup ran on public roads forming a triangle on Long Island, New York. The course sliced a path through hamlets and villages including Queens, Jericho and Central Park.

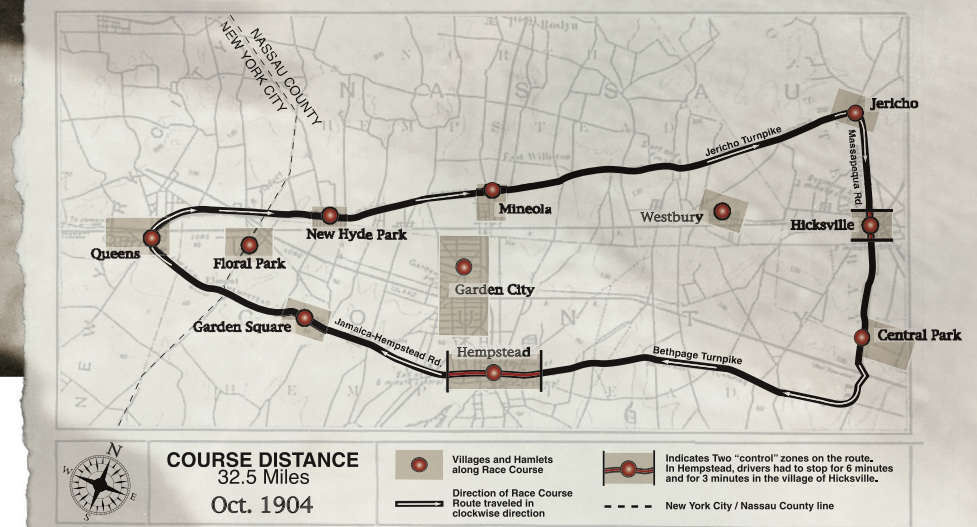
was regarded as more European than American. Frenchman Albert Clement, a full 20 years Heath's junior, was a crowd favorite for his daring and youthful enthusiasm. Clement briefly led the contest after a lengthy tire change for Heath, but the expatriate recovered for the win. American Herb Lytle was the only driver to compete in both the first Vanderbilt Cup and the inaugural Indianapolis 500.

The Europeans not only held an edge in driving experience, but their cars were superior to those of the Americans as well. Marques familiar to this day: Mercedes, Fiat and Renault were among the strongest in the field, each boasting 90 horsepower. Heath's winning Panhard was

equally powerful, one of three in the field, with the largest engines at 15.4 liters. By contrast, two of the American entries, Lytle's Pope-Toledo, and the Packard "Gray Wolf," driven by its designer, Charles Schmidt, were lightweight, and only had 24 horsepower and engines of 5.7 and 4.5 liters, respectively. These two machines enjoyed surprising success, finishing third and fourth, after attrition took its toll over the race's 284.4 miles.

The race, although clearly a precursor to Grand Prix, was managed more like a road rally than a Formula One contest. It started at six o'clock in the morning, with drivers departing from the start line one at a time, at two-minute intervals. There were two control points on the course, one at Hempstead, and the other at Hicksville. Officials

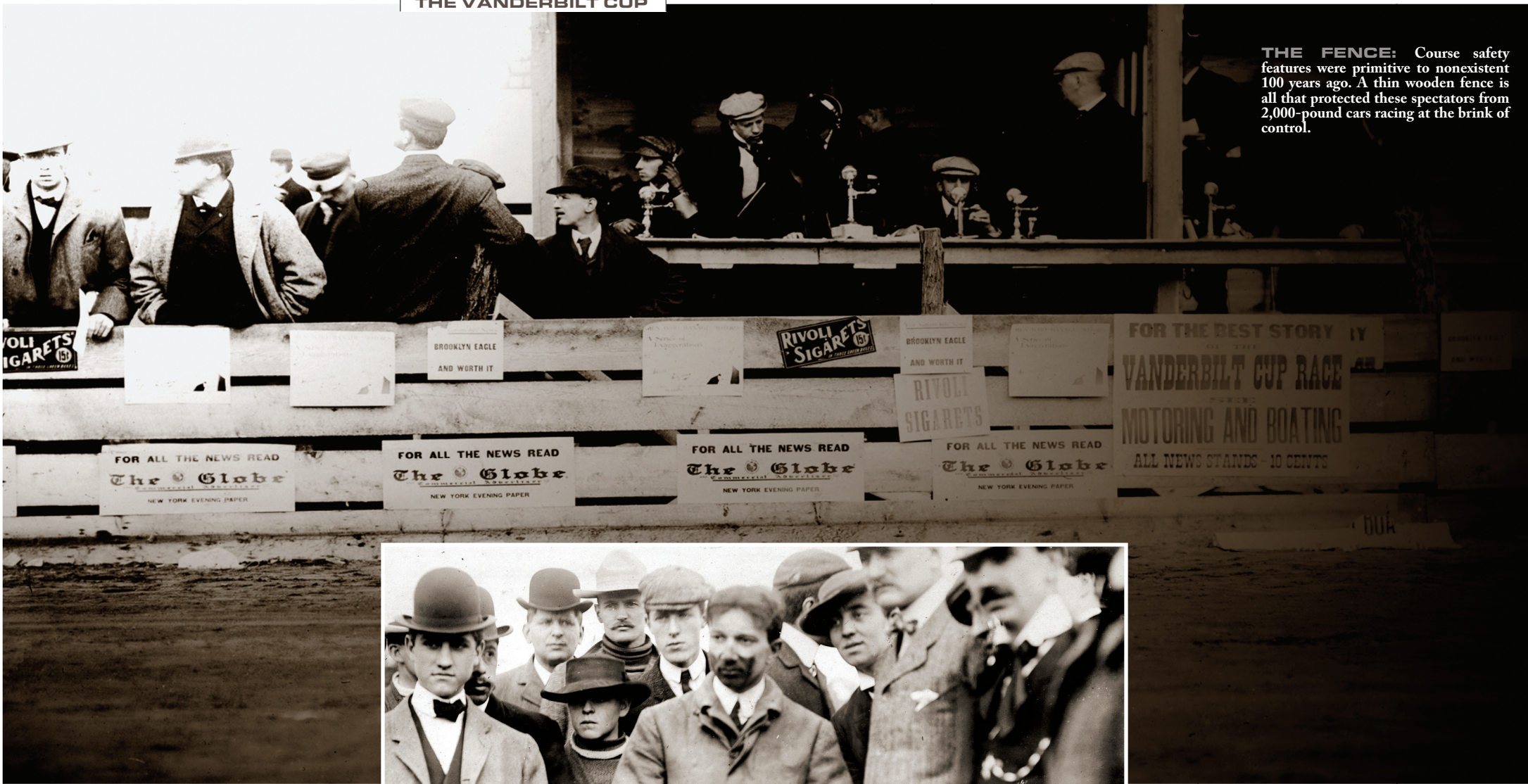
Map of William K. Vanderbilt Jr. Cup Race Course In New York City and Nassau County, Long Island



were stationed at both. The cars were brought to a stop at these points largely for safety reasons. These spots were near major railroad crossings and population centers, which created great concentrations of spectators, who stood unprotected at the edge of the road. Each car carried a brass box affixed to its side, and time cards that recorded when they entered and left control were dropped in them. Each lap, all the cars stopped for at least six minutes at Hempstead, and three at Hicksville. This accounted for the fact that while Heath's winning time was five hours and twenty-six minutes, the event required seven

hours and nine minutes to complete. The control points presented challenges to accurate timing of the race, and the Boston Chronograph Club was called in to handle the complex situation. All the timing was done with hand held stopwatches.

In addition to the control points, tire companies and manufacturers had repair stations at various points around the course, mostly clustered at corners. Signs helped the drivers identify these stations, which were effectively their pit positions. The men at these points were dressed in sweaters of a distinctive hue to designate the



THE FENCE: Course safety features were primitive to nonexistent 100 years ago. A thin wooden fence is all that protected these spectators from 2,000-pound cars racing at the brink of control.



THE CHALLENGER: French driver Albert Clement is surrounded by some of the people that poured onto the track moments after he completed the race.

company they represented. The quality of service at these stations was uneven. Some companies had required their workers practice; others just winged it. Winner Heath became so frustrated at the fumbling over a tire change, he jumped out of the car and did the work himself.

"The workmen at the tire station," Heath said to *Motor Age*, "were making a sorry job of it after I wasted a quarter hour waiting for them. I began to get a bit alarmed and jumped in and finished the repairs myself."

Action from around the track was coordinated through a dedicated phone system that was connected by a network of 500 miles of wire. The control points phoned the central judges' stand near the start-finish line every time a car left their area. The arrival and departure times were recorded and all the information was consolidated into a master record. When Vanderbilt, who stationed himself at the central judges'

stand, received word of the only fatal accident within ten minutes of it happening, everyone was impressed with the state-of-the art communication technology.

The accident occurred on the second lap when George Arents, too impatient to stop for repairs, tried to make the turn in Queens with a flat tire and one of his front wheels buckled. His 2,000-pound Mercedes rolled over on him and his riding mechanic, Carl Mensel. Mensel died of head injuries on the scene. Arents was critically injured, but eventually recovered.

Crowds of people swarmed around the wrecked

car, and police resorted to using their clubs across the backs and legs of people to clear the roadway for other approaching racers. This was a persistent problem throughout the race. As cars approached the starting line, people crowded the course and converged as they passed. Between the appearance of cars, people crossed and re-crossed the road. Spectators walked the course for its entire length, and jumped aside as cars passed. This was part of what Vanderbilt relied on. When questioned about crowd control before the race, Vanderbilt

capacity, with extra beds shoved into rooms to accommodate numerous guests. Other people slept in open fields, and trains stepped up their service from New York to the area as still others flocked into Long Island.

The race did not disappoint those who came. It started on schedule, nearly an hour before dawn, at six o'clock when A.L. Campbell departed the start line in a 60-horsepower Mercedes. Within minutes, Fernand Gabriel in an 80-horsepower De Dietrich, who led the first lap, passed him. This first circuit produced a lot of passing, as faster cars made their way through the field. The starting order had been determined by the luck of a draw. Heath, who started seventh, passed three cars to run fourth. George Teste, in a Panhard team car to, soared forward from fourteenth to eighth position, and recorded the race's fastest lap at 71 miles per hour.

Heath took the lead on lap three, with Gabriel second. By lap four, Heath was a full eight minutes ahead with the field deteriorating behind him. Four cars, including those of Croker and Campbell, suffered tire failure and incurred lengthy delays. Gabriel's engine began to falter, and Teste suffered clutch failure. The springs of Edward Hawley's Mercedes gave way, putting him out of contention.

The first of two controversies occurred when Paul Sartori, who ironically was driving for Vanderbilt's cousin Alfred, got a late start. Eager to get underway, he made a flying start instead of dutifully reporting to the starting line for an official send-off. At the first control point he was informed that he needed to report to the starting line and do his getaway properly. He refused, and was disqualified. The ruling was later reversed, but the team declined to continue running because all hope of winning was lost.

Heath continued to pull away, while Gabriel endured a huge delay for tire repair. Young Albert Clement crept into contention, moving into second place by the halfway point. Soon after, Heath had his tire problems and his lead vanished. Despite this setback, Heath assumed he still enjoyed a wide margin and cut his speed to less than 50 miles per hour. Clement not only closed fast, but

took the lead and extended it to a two-minute advantage. But on lap eight a disagreement in the Hempstead control point set the stage for a protest after the race. Clement added oil to his motor, which was prohibited by race rules when in the control zones. His time was readjusted, costing him precious minutes.

Still, on lap nine of ten, Clement led by about one minute. Urged on by the Panhard team, Heath poured on the speed. Heath crossed the finish line well ahead of Clement, but mystery remained because he had started the race in seventh, while the younger driver was twelfth, a difference of ten minutes. If Clement were less than ten minutes behind, he would be crowned the winner. Clement arrived nearly eleven and a half minutes later, producing the closest finish in international road racing up to that time, a difference of one minute, 28 seconds.

The crowd immediately swarmed the course, and many who had arrived in cars, drove out onto the road despite the fact that five more racers were still running. Officials along the course waved off three competitors, while the third and fourth place underpowered entries of Lytle and Schmidt slowly moved through the throng to the judge's stand one lap down from the winner. There was a commotion around Clement, who was followed by dozens of men as he walked determinedly to the judges' stand to lodge a protest. The final decision was left to Vanderbilt, who announced later that evening the original result was final and George Heath had won his cup.

The \$800 cup, designed by Tiffany, made of silver and standing 31 inches high, was the big prize of the gathering of gentlemen owners, car companies and their chauffeurs. It currently resides in the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. There were 11 editions of the original Vanderbilt Cup, with the final running in 1916. Struggles with crowd control, World War I and America's focus on speedways ended the run of William K. Vanderbilt's great race. The Suffolk County Vanderbilt Museum in Centerport, New York already has a series of events underway to commemorate the first running of the Vanderbilt Cup, which will culminate with a vintage car competition in Garden City, New York in early October.