

# Candid Cameras

It's no surprise that the car AND The CAMERA found each other around the turn of the 20th Century. Both were evolving rapidly—the automobile becoming more and more sophisticated and photography less and less complicated.

by Charles B. Camp | Photographs courtesy of the Detroit Public Library National Automotive History Collection



**P**EOPLE CALLED THEM “THE FLASH IN THE PAN TWINS,” doubtless referring to the magnesium powder they sometimes ignited to illuminate their subjects. But Nathan Lazarnick and F. Ed Spooner were anything but flashes in the pan. From 1900 to the mid-1920s, they were two of the nation’s most prolific motorsports photographers. Their collections, taken together, offer an unparalleled view of early automotive competition.

**Editors paid well for pictures of wrecks, and photographers sometimes risked their lives to get them.**



**Contrast in styles. Spooner, left, in boots, goggles and kerchief, Lazarnick in suit, tie and jaunty cap.**

They recorded during “pathfinder” trips over roads that barely existed and covered the historic Glidden Tours from the front seat. Lazarnick stalked the sands of Ormond Beach and Spooner hovered along the roads of the Vanderbilt Cup. They chronicled the rise of the Indianapolis 500 and photographed countless track races and hill climbs. From Barney Oldfield and Ralph DePalma to the Thomas Flyer’s New York-to-Paris epic adventure, little escaped their notice.

“The automobile hypnotized me,” Lazarnick confessed in a 1924 memoir. “I became intensely interested in the horseless carriage.” It was a mechanical invention and a sport, a travel medium and “a wonderful industry” all rolled into one, he wrote.

Eventually, Lazarnick ended up with hundreds of thousands of images, including Spooner’s vast archives, which contained other cameramen’s work as well as his own. Today those photos are prized by historians and collectors and widely used online and in books

Today, smoke usually means trouble. In 1913, it was routine for racers like Louis Disbrow, shown at the Indy 500.

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and magazines.

“These folks have allowed us to see into the past,” says H. Donald Capps, Society of Automotive Historians president and a student of early motorsports. The collections brim with insights. Big things, such as the ever-present risk of disaster or death. And little things, such as the drudgery of changing tires and hoisting heavy gas cans to refuel.

But it isn't just the cars. “It is all the contextual information in the background—the people, the lay of the land—they show us how things actually were done. One picture really is worth a thousand words,” Capps says.

Mark Bowden, Special Collections Coordinator at the Detroit Public Library, which has tens of thousands of their images, agrees. In addition to documenting

the difficulties and delights of the early automobile, the photos are “pure Americana—an incredible view of America in the first 20 to 25 years of the 20th century.”

Though occasionally collaborators, Lazarnick and Spooner were essentially competitors, their styles and personalities differing widely. One had the eye of an artist, the other the instincts of a racer.

#### **The Artist**

Of the two, Lazarnick was the trained photographer. In 1891, he arrived at age 13 from Warsaw, then part of Russia. Despite having only a fourth grade education, he studied art at the Cooper Union in New York City. He then apprenticed with a professional photographer before going to work as a free-lancer for several newspapers

and magazines.

He photographed Teddy Roosevelt, women's suffragists and the San Francisco earthquake for *Harper's Weekly* over the years. But cars were his passion. He documented the first auto show in 1900 at New York's Madison Square Garden. He shot pictures of such racing pioneers as Alexander Winton and his Bullet cars, Henry Ford in the famous No. 999 and William K. Vanderbilt Jr. at one of the nation's first hill climbs. He covered every speed trial on Ormond Beach from 1904 on.

Indeed, he was treated royally there—literally. Unable to get a room one year, he seemed doomed to sleep on the beach until friends convinced a gullible desk clerk that the mustachioed gentleman in his lobby was none other than “Prince Lazarnick of the Austria-Hungary Empire.” Suddenly “The Prince” had a first-class suite and a nickname that lasted his lifetime.

Consistently well-groomed and nattily attired, the European-born *artiste* moved



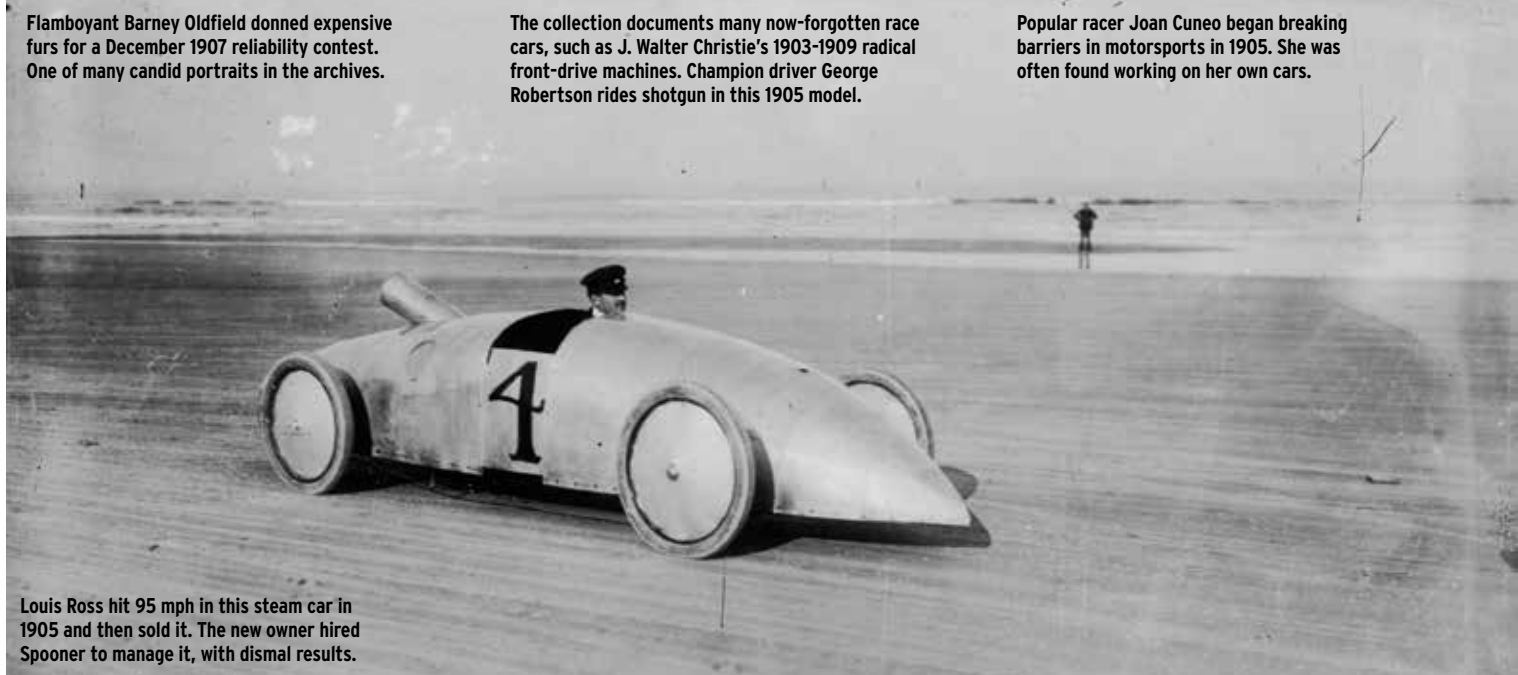
**Famboyant Barney Oldfield donned expensive furs for a December 1907 reliability contest. One of many candid portraits in the archives.**



**The collection documents many now-forgotten race cars, such as J. Walter Christie's 1903-1909 radical front-drive machines. Champion driver George Robertson rides shotgun in this 1905 model.**



**Popular racer Joan Cuneo began breaking barriers in motorsports in 1905. She was often found working on her own cars.**



**Louis Ross hit 95 mph in this steam car in 1905 and then sold it. The new owner hired Spooner to manage it, with dismal results.**

easily in the social circles of wealthy early motorists.

He helped plan every Glidden Tour from 1905 to 1913. Months before the 1,000-mile to 4,000-mile endurance contests, he would set out as a pathfinder, helping scout the route and photographing key sites and landmarks.

He did the same for other events, too, often carrying coils of rope, a block-and-tackle, crowbars and axes to cope with everything from seas of mud and freak blizzards to fallen trees and mechanical breakdowns. In 1905, in the wilds of Maine, he and some companions narrowly escaped a forest fire with “an exciting dash through smoke and sparks that more than once threatened our safety,” he later wrote.

### The Racer

By contrast, F. Ed Spooner (Frank Edward) came from the rowdy world of bicycle racing, a leading sport in the late 1800s.

He set a world long-distance record in 1892, pedaling 375 miles in 24 hours—the last 25 in a semi-conscious state. Helpers doused him with water while his coach swore at him from the sidelines to keep him awake.

He wrote bike-racing columns for magazines and newspapers, and later sold bicycles, promoted races and managed professional riders. Outgoing and outspoken, he battled the sport’s regulators and was frequently embroiled in controversies.

“On cycling matters there is no better authority in the country,” the *Minneapolis Journal* declared in 1895. “A pleasing man to greet and an incessant talker, but not tiring. He is full of anecdotes.”

Like scores of bike racers, Spooner was drawn to car racing around the turn of the century. In 1903 he tried, unsuccessfully, to promote a race in Baltimore, extolling the new sport’s “grand struggles” and “nervy

drivers” to skeptical civic leaders.

Two years later, he took another stab at becoming a player. Steam-car developer Louis Ross beat some of the best cars in the country at Ormond Beach with an odd-looking machine dubbed the “Tea Kettle.” A wealthy New York horseplayer bought it for \$500 and hired Spooner to manage it and Joe Nelson, a top bike racer who Spooner represented, to drive it in the coming season.

In their debut that May at the Brighton Beach track on Coney Island, Nelson crashed on his first exhibition lap, ending any hope that Spooner had of becoming a racing impresario.

That same year Spooner teamed up with a bike-racing chum, Charles Wells, to form Spooner and Wells Inc. in New York City. Over the next two decades, their company would become a leading source of motorsports photos. They even represented Lazarnick on occasion.



Legendary American racing patron, William K. Vanderbilt Jr., won the 1903 Eagle Rock hill climb, one of nation’s first, in this Mors.

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### All In A Day's Work

Editors paid well for pictures of wrecks, and photographers sometimes risked their lives to get them. A former athlete, Spooner was known for dashing to the scene between speeding cars, lugging his boxy camera.

"Your cameraman is also cold-blooded. He does not stop for pity because men may be lying dead around him," he once explained. "It is the picture that he is after, and once that is taken he is ready for the next."

Spooner in 1904 entered an Oldsmobile Tonneau in the country's first major endurance run, from New York City to St. Louis. Fifty years later, his co-driver Dwight Huss recounted for *Life* magazine his memories of the person he called "the greatest newspaperman who ever lived."

"I'd lie in bed trying to get some sleep and

Spooner would be pounding the typewriter beside my ear," Huss recalled. "Every 20 minutes, regular as clockwork, there would be a knock on the door and there would be a waiter with another highball for Ed."

Spooner's well-deserved nickname was "On-The-Spot." During the first Glidden Tour in 1905, when eight automotive pioneers were famously arrested in a Massachusetts speed trap, he was riding with one of them. The next year, he was among those arrested in an upstate New York trap, and was fined \$5 for using foul language.

In the 1907 and 1909 tours, he escaped serious injury while riding in cars that overturned.

Like Lazarnick, Spooner could mingle with motoring's elite but was more at home in his duster or hobnobbing with

prominent athletes. His son began racing bikes as "Little Spot" at age five, and later became an automotive writer. Spooner doted on his young daughter, photographing her in race cars while she was still a toddler.

Spooner made news himself in 1909 while pathfinding for a Denver-to-Mexico City endurance contest. A car carrying him, racer Billy Knipper and two other men sank hopelessly into quicksand in a desolate stretch of northern Mexico. While the others set out on foot to find help, Knipper and Spooner hid from the desert sun for two days under a makeshift tent, surviving on pea soup and rusty radiator water.

"Death by starvation and thirst was in sight and no help at hand," Spooner later wrote in the *El Paso Times*. Nonetheless, he continued to take photos, including shots of Knipper draining the radiator and preparing soup.

### Two Collections Merge

Over the next few years, Spooner spent less



Spooner and Lazarnick traveled to races far and wide. Here C.A. Englebeck's Stoddard-Dayton roars through rural Lowell, Indiana, in 1909.

time with his camera and more with his typewriter. The *Detroit Free Press* made him auto editor in 1909, a job he kept for 11 years. In 1915, he bought a stake in *Motor West*, a California-based auto magazine. He took on public relations jobs and organized trade shows in addition to remaining co-owner of Spooner and Wells.

Then in August 1925, a freak accident upended Spooner's world, ultimately putting two decades of his photos into Lazarnick's hands. He and Charles Wells were in a car that caught fire at Spooner's summer home on Baltusrol Mountain in New Jersey. When Wells tried to push it away from a puddle of gasoline, it rolled over him, killing him.

Spooner was devastated. Besides being his business partner, Wells was a close friend who had lived with the Spooner family for more than 20 years.

Three months later, Spooner sold

Spooner and Wells to Lazarnick, boosting Lazarnick's total automotive collection to an estimated 500,000 images. Spooner then retreated to his bucolic mountainside to grow dahlias, a longtime hobby. There, he developed prize-winning strains of the large, colorful flowers and for a decade put on huge shows that drew visitors and dahlia growers from around the world.

He died of cancer in 1936 at age 68.

Lazarnick also quit the nomadic life of a motorsports photographer in the 1920s

in favor of sophisticated commercial and studio work.

His compositions appeared regularly in leading magazines such as *McCall's*, *Good Housekeeping* and *Redbook*.

In 1934, he was among 50 photographers—some world-famous—honored at a major advertising art exhibition at Rockefeller Center in New York. Today, Harvard University holds some of his memorable images in its art collection. Lazarnick died in 1955 at age 76. 📷

### The Photos

*The photos in this article are among the 35,000 digitized and searchable Lazarnick and Spooner and Wells images in the Detroit Public Library's National Automotive History Collection ([digitalcollections.detroitpubliclibrary.org](http://digitalcollections.detroitpubliclibrary.org)). The Eastman Museum in Rochester, New York, has more than 2,000 other Lazarnick images ([eastman.org/collections-online](http://eastman.org/collections-online)). The Library of Congress also has a handful. (search "spooner & wells" at [loc.gov/photos](http://loc.gov/photos)). And historian and Vanderbilt Cup expert Howard Kroplick displays many from both men on his comprehensive website ([vanderbiltcupraces.com](http://vanderbiltcupraces.com)).*



Thrown from this Pierce Great Arrow in 1907, Spooner helped rescue two fellow passengers but lost a prized \$200 camera.



The past and future of wheeled transportation meet in this powerful Lazarnick image from the 1904 Eagle Rock Hill Climb.



Flash powder let early cameramen work both day and night. Ralph Mulford won this 1909 Coney Island 24-hour race in the No. 3 Lozier.



Lazarnick's trained eye turned this tire change by Fiat driver Felice Nazzaro and his mechanic into an image worthy of an art gallery.