

# THE BLACK BEAST

## A VINTAGE WARRIOR ROARS AGAIN

Story by Stuart Leuthner

Images: Howard Kroplick Collection

**N**ot long after the first automobiles appeared on American roads, everybody wanted to get in on the action. The majority of the early vehicles were created by flash-in-the-pan dreamers, but a few established manufacturers realized the horseless carriage could provide them with an opportunity to diversify their product line.

In 1901, eight locomotive builders merged to form the American Locomotive Company, usually referred to as Alco. For almost seventy years, Alco, with headquarters in Schenectady, New York, produced many of the world's most celebrated steam and diesel-electric locomotives. These included the New York Central's "Hudsons" and "Niagaras," the Union Pacific's epic "Big Boys" and the first successful road-switcher, the RS-1.

Alco purchased a license from the French car builder, Automobiles Berliet, in 1906. The company's founder, Marius Berliet, built his first car in 1895. When Alco signed the agreement with Berliet, production had reached 300 vehicles a year. The French company would ship the components to Providence, Rhode Island, where the cars were assembled in an Alco plant that previously manufactured locomotives. Aimed at an upscale market, the cars sold for \$5,000 to \$7,500.

In 1909, Alco ended its relationship with Berliet and began to produce cars under its own name. The basic Alco was a chain-driven machine, powered with a forty-horsepower, four-cylinder engine. A deluxe model with a six-cylinder engine rated at sixty horsepower was also available. Alco touted its cars with the slogan, "It stays new."

Pioneer car builders soon realized car sales were influenced by performance on the race track. Henry Ford is reported to have said, "Victory on Sunday means sales on Monday." Although Alco's management was originally not interested in racing, Harry Fortune Grant, one of the company's test drivers, convinced the Boston Alco agent C.F. Whitney to provide him with a car to race at a horse track in Readville, Massachusetts during the summer of 1907.

Grant, a stout fellow who "smiled a lot," nicknamed his car the "Bete Noir" — Black Beast. Powered with a six-cylinder engine producing 100 horsepower, the car's

modifications included removing leaves from the springs, moving the engine back seven inches, installing a larger fuel tank between two rudimentary bucket seats, and removing everything considered non-essential, including the body. Grant and his riding mechanic (known as a mechanic) Frank Lee not only won the five-mile and twenty-mile races, they managed to come in second in the fifty-mile race, despite having to stop and repair a blown tire.



The Alco navigates a turn during the 1909 Vanderbilt Cup. Driver Harry Grant and his mechanic Frank Lee are wearing face hoods to protect them from dust and flying stones.

A year later, Grant and Lee, now with company backing, were back at it, beating the likes of Lois Chevrolet, Ralph Mulford and Ray Harroun. Grant also posted the best time for gasoline cars at The Dead Horse Hill Climb held at Worcester, Massachusetts.

In 1909, the Black Beast was entered in the Vanderbilt Cup Race. Held on Long Island from 1904 to 1910, the races were organized by William K. Vanderbilt Jr., heir to a railroad fortune, yachtsman, aviator and race car driver. Vanderbilt hoped the competition, along with a Tiffany-designed, thirty-pound silver loving cup awarded

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Harry Grant and Frank Lee cross the finish line at the 1909 Vanderbilt Cup. Grant won the race with an average speed of 62.8 mile per hour for the 278.08 miles.

The Black Beast roars again. Howard Kreplik purchased the vintage Alco in 2008 and returned the car to the United States after fifteen years in France. On October 23 and 24, visitors to the Centennial celebration of the Vanderbilt Cup Races will have an opportunity to see the Black Beast in action.



to the winner, would encourage American automobile builders to challenge the superior vehicles being produced in Europe. The first three races, held on winding dirt roads in the center of Long Island, were won by French cars. The events attracted huge crowds — estimated to be upwards of 250,000 — and it was almost impossible to keep them off the course. When a spectator was killed during the 1906 race, future races on public roads appeared doomed.

Vanderbilt decided the answer was to create the first road built exclusively for the automobile. The paved parkway would not only be used for the race; it would provide an exclusive paved road for Willy K and well-heeled Long Islanders. As an additional benefit, the parkway would stimulate development in eastern Long Island. Construction of the Long Island Motor Parkway began in June, 1908. Completed in 1928, the toll road ran from Fresh Meadows, Queens to



Lake Ronkonkoma, a distance of forty-four miles. The construction of new public highways during the 1930s signaled the end of the toll road and, owing back taxes, the Motor Parkway was sold to New York State and closed in 1938.

When the Vanderbilt Cup resumed in 1908, only a nine-mile section of the Motor Parkway had been completed. An additional fourteen and a half miles of local roads made up the course. The crowd was jubilant when the race was won by a local hero, Long Island's George Robertson, driving an American-built Locomobile.

Grant, Lee and the Black Beast were among the fifteen entrants for the 1909 Vanderbilt Cup. Grant, taking advantage of accidents and the mechanical failures of other competitors, won the race with an average speed of 62.8 mph for the 278.08 miles. The only other car running at the end was Edward Parker's F.I.A.T., crossing the finish line five minutes and twelve seconds after the Black Beast. Alco's marketing department came up with a new line, "What lasts best, is best."

In the 1910 Vanderbilt Cup, Grant put on another steady performance, outlasting thirty-one starters to take the victory. The death of two mechanics and injuries suffered by several spectators, however, turned public opinion against the race. The press was especially outraged and a macabre editorial cartoon in the *New York World* depicted the Grim Reaper presenting the Vanderbilt Cup. When the entrants also agreed the race had become too dangerous, road racing ended on Long Island.

A year later, Grant drove the Alco in the first Indianapolis 500 Race, but was forced to retire on lap fifty-two when a bearing failed. After one last fling at the Elgin road race — Grant finished second — the Black Beast disappeared from the racing scene. Sponsored by other manufacturers, Grant continued to compete. The 1914 program for the Indianapolis 500 described him as "one of the big men of the racing game, both physically and mentally, he is a credit to the institution in every way..." In 1915, practicing for the Astor Cup at Brooklyn's Sheepshead Bay Speedway, Grant's Maxwell caught on fire. His mechanic managed to bail out safely, but Grant was badly burned and died ten days later.

Despite the Black Beast's victories on the track, Alco's performance in the showroom was dismal. In August of 1913, the *New York Times* reported, "Alco Makers Quit Automobile Field." Company president W.H. Marshall described the car business as "unprofitable." This turned out to be a gross understatement when it was later revealed Alco had lost an average of \$460 on every vehicle the company built. Historian Beverly Rae Kimes described Alco's major mistake as a marketing problem. "Locomotives are bought; automobiles must be sold." After the Providence plant closed in 1913, Alco could concentrate on what they did best — build locomotives.

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After the Black Beast was retired, little is known of the car until the 1930s, when it was discovered, along with several other Alco vehicles, in a barn in Cleveland. The Black Beast was purchased by collector Joe Loecy, Jr., who sold the car to vintage racer and historian Joel Finn in 1968. Although Finn described the car as "...pretty much a complete car, a rolling chassis with all the major mechanicals in place," it was a basket case and a three-year total restoration was undertaken by Tom Lester's shop, including the manufacture of missing or unrestorable parts.

In 1975, Finn sold the car to Bill Harrah, the Reno gambling tycoon who at one time owned almost 1,500 cars. After Harrah's death, his collection was pared down, and the Black Beast was owned by several European collectors, including Ed Hubbard who exhibited the car with his thirty-five Bentleys in a private museum at Radlett in Herfordshire, England.



The Alco plant in Providence, Rhode Island as it looks today. The building is in the process of being developed into a mixed-use retail and residential community.

In 2009, the Alco was purchased by Howard Kroplick and returned to the United States. Kroplick is the chairman emeritus of the Impact Communications Partners, a Manhattan-based medical communication company. A Long Island native, Kroplick is a leading authority on the Vanderbilt Races. In addition to writing two books, *Vanderbilt Cup Races of Long Island* and *The Long Island Motor Parkway*, Kroplick has an extensive collection of Vanderbilt Cup images and memorabilia, lectures extensively on the races and maintains an active website, [VanderbiltCupRaces.com](http://VanderbiltCupRaces.com).

In an interview, Kroplick was asked how he discov-

ered the Alco was for sale. "I've followed that car for years," Kroplick says. "For the last ten or fifteen years it was in France and owned by an architect. When it was offered on the Internet, I jumped on it. A Belgian dealer was selling the car for the architect and I flew to Brussels to inspect the car before finalizing the deal."

Since it had been more than forty years since the Black Beast had been initially restored, Kroplick commissioned Stu Laidlaw of Redding, Connecticut to refurbish the vehicle. "The car was in pretty good shape when we found it ... we did more conservation than restoration. Stu had the car for four months. He replaced the European engine parts with vintage American parts, changed the tires to grey-walls and made the car more drivable."

Since the restored Alco rolled out of Laidlaw's shop, Kroplick has entered the vehicle in several automotive events in the New York area. In 2009, the Black Beast was awarded "Most Outstanding Vintage Car Pre-1910" at the Greenwich Concours. That same year, the Alco won "First Place — Vintage Race Cars Pre-1960" at "Sunday at the Park," Lime Rock Park and also ran three hot laps on the Lime Rock course.

On October 23 and 24, 2010, the Seventh Annual Centennial Celebration of The Vanderbilt Races will be held at the Roosevelt Field Mall and the Cradle of Aviation Museum. The two-day event will include a Concours car show presented by the Long Island Sound Region of the Classic Car Club of America, demonstration runs by various race cars, a tour of a fragment of the original Motor Highway, a rare auto auction, a fashion show and an antique car parade. *Chronos* magazine's executive editor Bert Kalisher will be on hand to present automotive-inspired watches and clocks to event winners.

A stunning exhibit of Howard Kroplick's Vanderbilt Race photographs and memorabilia will be on display at the Cradle of Aviation Museum. Kroplick will also be demonstrating the Black Beast, in all its thundering, fire-breathing glory! Visitors will have the opportunity to see the same machine in action that thrilled racing fans a century ago. Anybody who has seen the Black Beast at speed will agree, it is an experience you will not soon forget.

If you would like more information about the Centennial Celebration of the Vanderbilt Cup Races, the executive director, Guy Frost, can be reached at 516-621-2745 or [GuyLFrost@optonline.net](mailto:GuyLFrost@optonline.net)