

## Historic Road Racing in Milwaukee: the 1912 Vanderbilt Cup and Related Road Races

by John B. Haydon

In the early part of the 20th century, the American public became "auto-crazed." They were excited about the new means of transportation and many manufacturers fanned their interest by using automobile racing as a significant way to showcase their products. As the saying went, "Win on Sunday and Sell on Monday!"

Two premier annual road course races, the Vanderbilt Cup race and the American Grand Prize (or sometimes, the Grand Prix) race, became the most celebrated and prestigious. Many considered the Vanderbilt Cup races to be the greatest sporting events of their day, 1904 to 1916, and these races were the first international automobile road races held in the United States, garnering considerable interest and huge crowds.

### Vanderbilt Cup Race

The Vanderbilt Cup race was first run on Long Island, New York, in 1904 and the Grand Prize race (later changed to the Grand Prix) was first run in Savannah, Georgia, in 1908. These two events were held in combination beginning in 1911 at Savannah and similarly were held in combination in five of the six years, 1911 through 1916 (there was no Vanderbilt Cup race in 1913). World War I caused the suspension of professional automobile racing in the United States until the war's end and, after the war, America's focus turned to oval racing for many years.

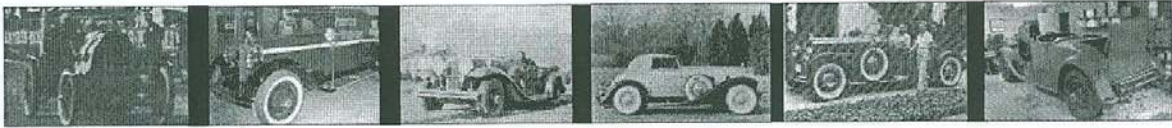
After the 1911 events, the Savannah city fathers concluded that the races on their streets, with the attendant huge crowds, were no longer practical. The business leaders of Milwaukee sought and obtained from the sanctioning bodies, the rights to hold the combined races in Milwaukee in 1912, on September 17-21. This

would be the first time these races had been held away from the east coast. The two rival sanctioning bodies, with differing rules, were the American Automobile Association (which sanctioned the Vanderbilt Cup race, based on American rules) and the younger Automobile Club of America (which sanctioned the Grand Prize race, based on European rules). In conjunction with these two major races, two support races were run for cars with smaller displacement engines, referred to as the "small car events" or "light car races."

In 1912, a major change was made in the Vanderbilt Cup rules. Previously, the entrants were restricted to cars in stock condition, but in 1912 that restriction was lifted to allow the cars to be modified for racing with the primary limitation being the size of the engine. Some viewed this as an attempt to give the American cars an advantage over their European counterparts.

The Milwaukee series of races was promoted heavily by the Milwaukee Automobile Dealers Association, with the support from the City of Milwaukee, the Merchants and Manufacturers Association and the Citizen's Business League. In addition, important leaders of business were involved, including Gen. Otto Falk and Col. Gustave Pabst. The promoters planned major events for the occasion, including formal opening proceedings to be attended by Wisconsin Governor Francis McGovern and Milwaukee Mayor Gerhard Bading. September 17 was designated as "Milwaukee Day," which would include a gala reception for these and other dignitaries and leading Milwaukee citizens. The races themselves were, of course, the featured events which often were promoted as Milwaukee's three-day "Speed Carnival" or "Milwaukee Speed Week."

It was reported that the Milwaukee 7.88 mile road racing circuit was improved at a cost of more than \$25,000. Such improvements included a large grandstand, racing pits and the officials' stand. The road



course was run on "city streets," albeit apparently unpaved country roads, in the Township of Wauwatosa, at that time a primarily farming area northwest of the city.

The racecourse was approximately parallelogram-shaped. The start-finish line was located on Burleigh Street, with the main grandstand and pit area on the south side of the road and the officials' stand (and press tower) on the north side of the road. The start-finish line was situated approximately one-third mile west of the intersection of Burleigh and North Fond du Lac Road (now North Fond du Lac Avenue).

The race was run in a counter-clockwise direction, with the cars proceeding east from the start-finish line on Burleigh, then north on a curve which is likely now approximately 36th Street to Fond du Lac Road. This corner at Burleigh-36th-Fond du Lac was sometimes referred to as the "Hairpin Turn" or "City Limits Turn." The course then continued north on the three-mile Fond du Lac straightaway to the intersection with Town Line Road (now Hampton Avenue) and then west on Town Line. This intersection was referred to as the "Town Line Turn" or simply, "Town Line."

The race cars would then continue west on Town Line to just before the intersection with South Fond du Lac Road (now known as Appleton Avenue) and turn south on approximately what would become 82nd Street (if that street extended to present-day Hampton Avenue) to South Fond du Lac. This turn was known as the "Sommerville Turn," named for the small community located just west of the intersection (this turn is also sometimes referred to as the "Hairpin.")

The stretch on South Fond du Lac was expected to be the fastest straightaway on the course, where the cars were expected to hit their maximum speeds. The course continued south on South Fond du Lac from the Sommerville Turn to the intersection with Burleigh Street, where two cemeteries were located, Holy Cross Cemetery to the west and Wanderers Rest Cemetery to the east.

This corner was variously known as the "Dead Man's Turn," the "Graveyard Turn" or, less morbidly, the "Cemetery Turn." The race cars would then proceed east on Burleigh to the start-finish line. The course officially measured 7.88 miles; using a modern odometer and driving the current city streets, the route measured 7.9 miles.

William K. Vanderbilt, Jr., the donor of the Vanderbilt Cup and Chairman of the Contest Committee of the Automobile Club of America, sent his representative to inspect the course and the facilities for the anticipated large crowds of spectators. He pronounced the course "both speedy and safe" and that its "wide curves will permit a great speed without adding to the danger materially."

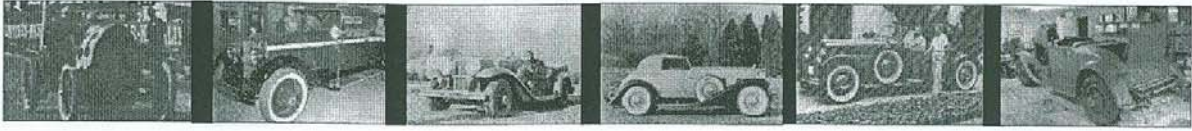
The four races to be run were known by the trophies to be awarded: the Vanderbilt Cup, the Grand Prize, the Wisconsin Motor Challenge Trophy and the Pabst Cup. Charles H. John, President of the Wisconsin Motor Manufacturing Company (which made the engines for Stutz automobiles), was the donor of the Wisconsin Motor Challenge Trophy and Col. Gustave Pabst, President of Pabst Brewing Company, was the donor of the Pabst Cup. The Pabst Cup was also referred to as the "Pabst Blue Ribbon Trophy."

The major differences between the four races related to their length and permitted engine displacement. Certainly the races also differed in the size of the "purse" for each. The following summarizes the primary differences based on the rules set by the sanctioning bodies:

Grand Prize, for cars with engines of unlimited displacement; race length of 52 laps (about 410 miles).

Vanderbilt Cup, for cars with engines from 301 cu. in. to 600 cu. in. displacement; race length of 38 laps (about 300 miles).

Pabst Cup, for cars with engines from 231 cu. in. to 300 cu. in. displacement; race length of 28 laps (about 220 miles).



Wisconsin Motor Challenge Trophy, for cars with engines from 161 cu. in. to 230 cu. in. displacement; race length of 22 laps (about 173 miles).

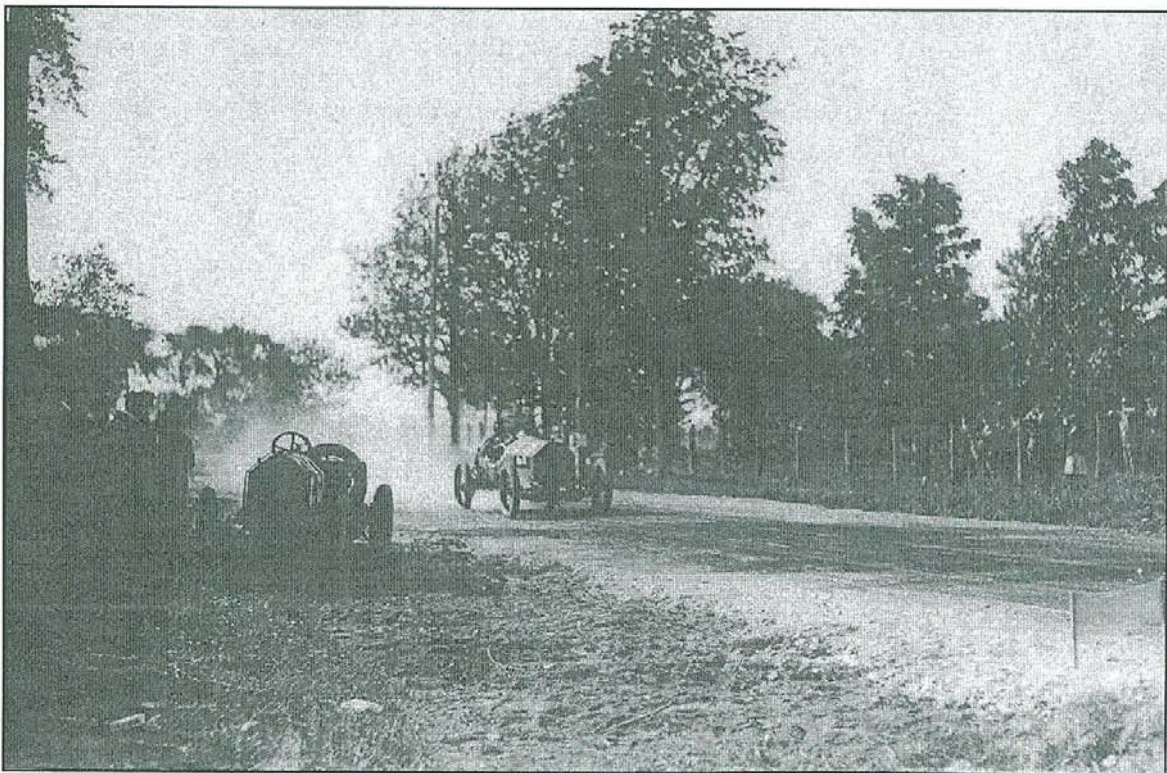
Although originally scheduled for September 17-21, 1912, severe weather, including torrential rains, and the resulting poor condition of the course caused a postponement and the races were eventually held in October. Many drivers and teams remained critical of the condition of the course in view of its pocked condition (some referred to the conditions as “deplorable,” which may have over-stated the case).

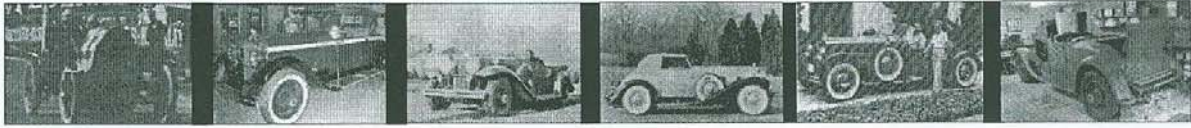
The Vanderbilt Cup race was run on Wednesday, October 2, with the two “smaller car races” run on Thursday, October 3. The Grand Prize race was run on Saturday, October 5. A number of Milwaukee firms granted time off for their employees to attend the exciting racing events. Some employers even paid the cost of admission for their employees.

With respect to attendance at the Vanderbilt Cup Race, a headline in the October 3rd “Extra” edition of the Milwaukee Journal stated: “Sixty Thousand People Pay for Admission to Course and Nearly as Many More Watch from Various Vantage Points.” Even allowing for some puffing, it is clear that the crowd of spectators was very large. Harry Nelson, the lone Milwaukee driver, in a Lozier, was naturally a crowd favorite.

Italian-American driving ace Ralph DePalma won the Vanderbilt Cup race in a Mercedes, despite trailing Teddy Tetzlaff for most of the race. Tetzlaff, the “Pacific coast speed wonder,” had built up a command-

*Gil Anderson in the Stutz passing Teddy Tetzlaff in the Fiat. Wisconsin Historical Society, photo by Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Image Number WHI-MJS-55658*





ing lead after starting last in his Fiat. He ran up through the field and took the lead on the ninth lap. Pit stops and pit mishaps played an important role in the race, including a costly pit stop by DePalma. The rear of his car fell to the ground when a jack failed during a tire change, costing him nearly five minutes.

Tetzlaff eventually lapped the field, but the driveshaft on his very fast Fiat failed on lap 26, forcing him out of the race. The lead then passed to DePalma in his Mercedes and a fiercely contested duel ensued with Englishman Hughie Hughes. DePalma held off the strong challenge of Hughes in his much smaller displacement Mercer (309 cu. in. vs. 590 cu. in.), to take the win. DePalma went on to become the 1912 National Champion and was generally recognized as the "Driver of the Decade."

DePalma ran the first lap in 6 minutes, 57 seconds (68mph). The fastest lap of the race was set by Tetzlaff in the Fiat at 6:15 (76 mph). For comparison, in the Grand Prize race, Bruce-Brown in his big-engine Fiat, ran practice laps timed at 5:55 (80 mph). DePalma completed the 38 laps in an overall time of 4 hours, 20 minutes, 31.54 seconds, for an average speed of 68.962mph.

Under the American Automobile Association rules, the starting order for the cars in the Vanderbilt Cup race was determined by lot and the car numbers were assigned accordingly. Further, at the start, the cars were released every thirty seconds and the finishing placements were ultimately determined by the car's over-all time required to complete the race. Accurate timing was facilitated by a new timing machine invented by Arthur and Charles Warner of Beloit, Wisconsin. The Warner electric auto-timing device was triggered whenever a car ran over a trip wire strung across the start-finish line. The device recorded the result on a paper tape; the car number was recorded manually on the tape by an operator.

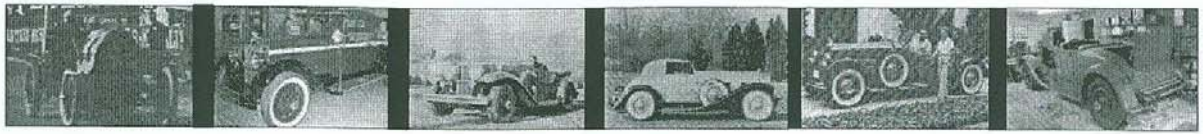
The table at the bottom of this page lists the entrants in the Vanderbilt Cup race in the order of their respective car numbers, with make of car, engine displacement and finishing position indicated:

A ninth entrant, Eddie Pullen, was to drive a second Mercer. Unfortunately, his car was disqualified because his engine's displacement was too small, by one cubic inch! Pullen instead served as the "mechanical" (the riding mechanic) for Hughie Hughes in his Mercer.

Some sources refer to these 1912 races as the "ill-fated Milwaukee races." This is presumably due to the tragic death of the previous year's Grand Prize winner,

<u>Car No.</u>	<u>Driver</u>	<u>Make of Car</u>	<u>Displacement</u>	<u>Finish</u>
22	Ralph DePalma	Mercedes	590 c.i.	First
23	Hughie Hughes	Mercer	309 c.i.	Second
24	Ralph Mulford	Knox	597 c.i.	DNF*
25	Harry Nelson	Lozier	544 c.i.	DNF*
26	Spencer Wishart	Mercedes	590 c.i.	Third
27	Gil Anderson	Stutz/Wisconsin	389 c.i.	Fourth
28	George Clark	Mercedes	590 c.i.	Fifth
29	Teddy Tetzlaff	Fiat	589 c.i.	DNF*

\*DNF = Did Not Finish



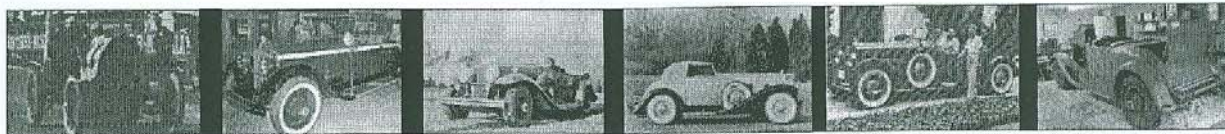
David Bruce-Brown, and his mechanic during the Grand Prize race practice session held on Tuesday, October 1. One of the tires on Bruce-Brown's Fiat failed, his car rolled and both he and his riding mechanic were killed, which naturally cast a pall over the proceedings. In all events, Milwaukee did not obtain the Vanderbilt Cup and Grand Prize races for 1913 and, in fact, no Vanderbilt Cup race was held that year. It resumed in Santa Monica, California in 1914, where DePalma won again in a Mercedes. It remained in California for the years 1914-16 (held in Santa Monica in 1914 and '16 and in San Francisco in 1915). The Vanderbilt Cup was last awarded at the final Vanderbilt Cup race held in 1916 in Santa Monica.

*Start of the Grand Prize Race. Wisconsin Historical Society, photo by Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Image Number WHi-MJS-33376*

### American Grand Prize Race

The entrants for Milwaukee's Grand Prize race, which was held on Saturday, October 5, included many famous and successful drivers. A significant incentive was the impressive \$10,000 purse (in addition to contingency money) – this race was billed as “the richest road race ever held.” In addition to DePalma, Barney Oldfield, who finished fourth in a Fiat, and other leading drivers entered, such as Joe Horan, Bob Burman, Erwin Bergdoll, as well as famous amateurs David Bruce-Brown, and Caleb Bragg. Other than Harry Nelson, all the drivers who ran the Vanderbilt Cup race also entered the Grand Prize race. Harry Nelson's Lozier was driven in the Grand Prize race by Louis Fontaine, another local driver, who had been his mechanic (riding mechanic) in the Vanderbilt Cup race. European cars dominated the numbers, with three Fiats, three





Benzes and three Mercedes. Only four American cars were entered, a Lozier, a Mercer, a Knox and a Stutz.

The Grand Prize race was won by Caleb Bragg in a gargantuan S.74 Fiat (862 cu. in.), with Erwin Bergdoll in a similarly big-engine Benz (928 cu. in.) coming in second. Gil Anderson, in the Stutz (328 cu. in.), finished a surprising (in view of its small-size engine) third, less than 30 seconds behind the second place Benz.

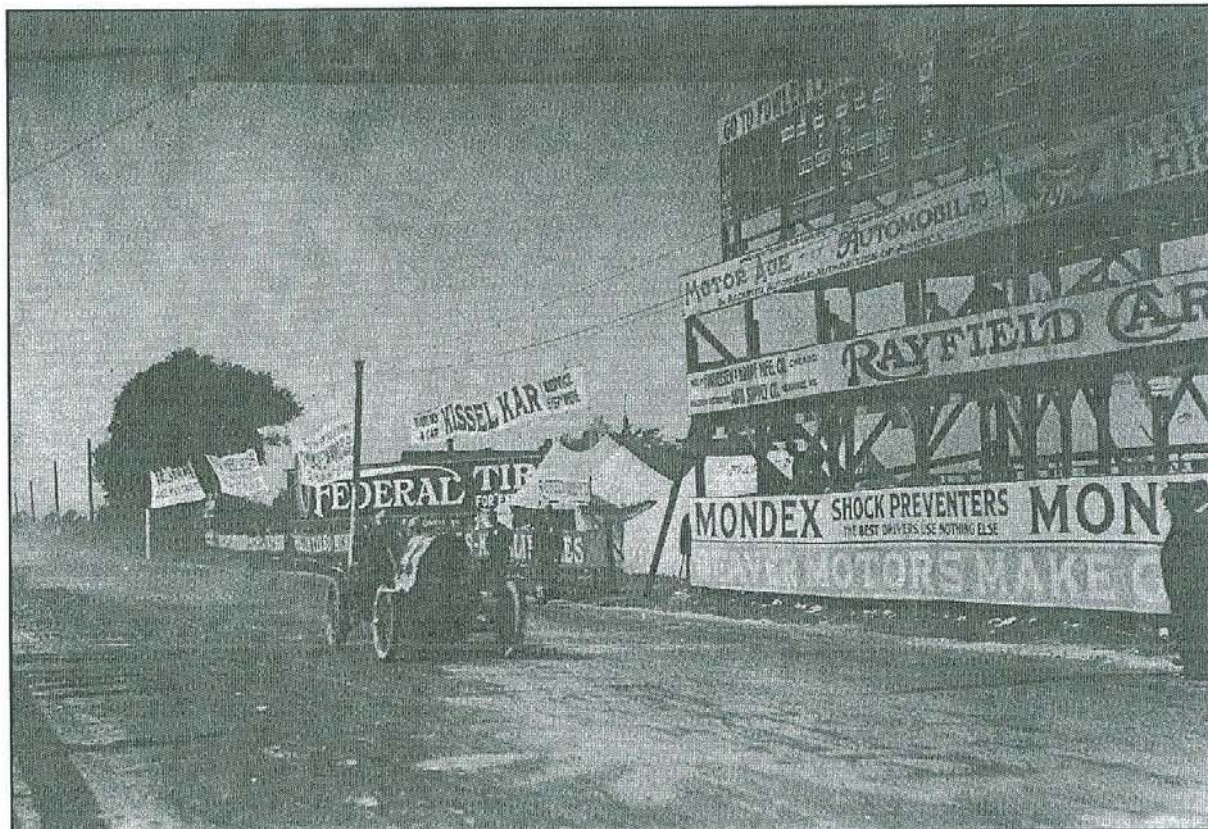
Ralph DePalma's mishap in the Grand Prize race also possibly contributed to the "ill-fated" moniker for the Milwaukee races. DePalma suffered serious, nearly life-threatening, injuries when his Mercedes catapulted off the road after his right front wheel touched Bragg's left rear wheel as DePalma tried to pass him on the

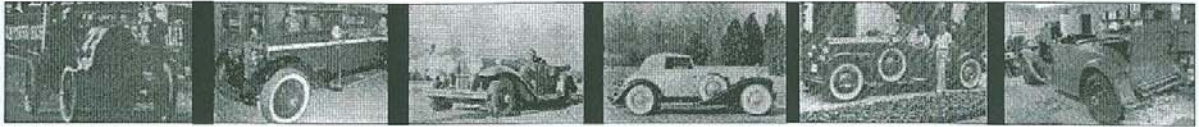
*Teddy Tetzlaff in Fiat at Grand Prize Race Start/Finish Line. Wisconsin Historical Society, photo by Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. Image Number WHI-MJS-55658*

last lap. DePalma was taken to Milwaukee's old Trinity Hospital at 9th and Wells Streets, where he was kept for over a month before being released.

### Support Races

The famous Duesenberg brothers, Augie and Fred, had formed a racing team only a few months earlier to race two Mason race cars, powered by their recently developed revolutionary horizontal-valve rocker arm engine. They entered two Mason cars in the two "small car events" on Thursday, October 3. Harry Endicott drove in the Wisconsin Motor Challenge Trophy race for cars with engines under 230 cu. in. displacement and Mortimer Roberts drove in the Pabst Cup race for cars with engines between 231 and 600 cu. in. displacement. The fledgling Duesenberg team was extremely successful at Milwaukee. Each of their cars won their respective races, despite the fact that this was only the second event they had entered (the first were the Elgin races in August).





### More Transportation History Written

In addition to the historic automobile racing and the use of the Warner automatic electric timing device, history was made in at least one other field at the 1912 Milwaukee races. This is reported to have been the first time an automobile race was successfully photographed from the air. The man who coordinated this effort was news reporter George E. Pulford, known as "Tip Wright." Pulford, considered an expert in sports reporting, was stationed in Chicago and was assigned to cover the races by the News Enterprise Association. He arranged a flight for photographer Hugo Wagner in a Wright biplane, piloted by "the boy aviator" Farnum Fish.

Taking news pictures from airplanes had been tried many times but not successfully until Wagner's efforts in photographing the San Francisco earthquake in 1906. (Note that the biplane appears overhead in the accompanying picture of the cars lining up for the start of the Grand Prix race.) Wagner took both still pictures and motion pictures from the air. It is assumed that some of the pictures which appeared in the press reports of the races were taken by Hugo Wagner, but thus far the author has not found any pictures which appear to have been taken from an airplane. How interesting it

would be to find them, including the motion pictures!

When one ponders professional racing in the early years in Milwaukee, one thinks about races at the Milwaukee Mile at the Wisconsin State Fair Park, which held its first race in 1903. However, in view of the significant Vanderbilt Cup/Grand Prize races held here in 1912, Milwaukee also must be considered among the pioneers in international automobile road racing.

Full-width large advertisement appearing in the Milwaukee Sentinel of Sunday, October 6, 1912 (it occupied the top half of the page; the size of print, boldness, etc. were more exaggerated than the following; for example, "The Sturdy Stutz" took up most of the width of the page):

## The Sturdy Stutz

### The Only American Car to Finish in the Grand Prix

### The Only Single Entry to Finish

Gil Anderson in the Grand Prix Race on Saturday Piloted the STUTZ into  
Third Place Within 31 Seconds of Second Place

Gil Anderson in the Vanderbilt on Wednesday Finished in Fourth Place

Not only was the Stutz the only American Car entered in the Grand Prix to finish  
the race, but the Stutz is the only American car of its rated horsepower  
that has ever finished the Grand Prix in first, second or third position.

Six Cylinder, Six Passenger, \$2,300

Four Cylinder Roadster, \$2,000

1913 Stutz Models now on Exhibition at our Salesrooms

Geo W. Browne, Automobiles, Inc. 458-60 Milwaukee Street

**Overland**

**Stutz**

*Ed's Note: The only six cylinder, six passenger Stutz known to exist is the 1914 Series 4E Touring beautifully restored by Owner Drew Lewis (No. 539) of Lederach, PA. Interesting that Bearcat was not mentioned.*