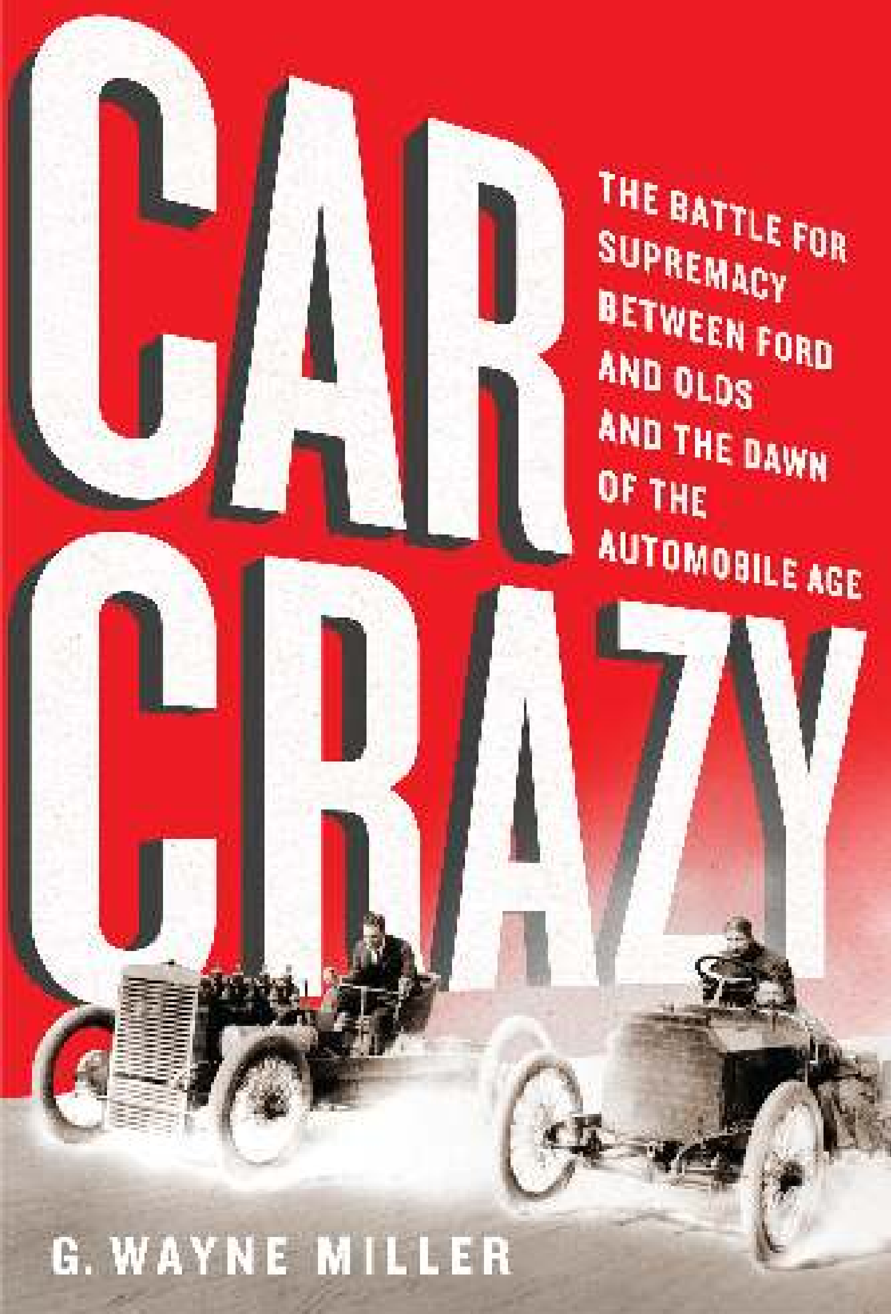
CAR CRAZY
THE BATTLE FOR SUPREMACY BETWEEN FORD AND OLDS AND THE DAWN OF THE AUTOMOBILE AGE
G. WAYNE MILLER

CAR CRAZY

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To my late mother-in-law, Daisy Gabrielle, a woman of great kindness, courage, and wisdom. Daisy was filled with humor and grace. Being with her was always magical.

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Cast of Characters

THE CARMAKERS

Karl Friedrich Benz, German engineer, inventor, and manufacturer

Roy D. Chapin, Oldsmobile sales chief and test driver; founder of Hudson Motor Car Company

James J. Couzens, Ford Motor Company secretary

William Crapo "Billy" Durant, creator of General Motors

Charles E. and J. Frank Duryea, builders of the first US production car

Henry Ford, founder of Ford Motor Company

Edward S. "Spider" Huff, Ford's brilliant but bedeviled leading engineer

Émile Levassor, founder of French pioneer auto company Panhard et Levassor

Alexander Y. Malcomson, early partner of Henry Ford

Ransom Eli Olds, founder of Oldsmobile

Frederic L. Smith, secretary-treasurer of Oldsmobile

THE DRIVERS

Tom Cooper, a winner on the track who died in a midnight race through Central Park

Dwight B. Huss, one of two men who competed in history's first race across the continent

Webb Jay, whose racing career ended when he crashed his steam car, "Whistling Billy"

Ernest D. Keeler, a young racing star who died in a crash three days after Cooper

Percy F. Megargel, a writer and romantic who raced Huss from Manhattan to Oregon, then made the first winter and double-continental crossing, from New York to the West Coast and back

Barney Oldfield, greatest race-car driver of the early era . . . and maybe ever

THE MECHANICS

David F. Fassett, rode with Megargel on the winter crossing

Barton Stanchfield, rode with Megargel during the cross-continent race

Milford Wigle, rode with Huss during the cross-continent race

THE PATENT PLAYERS

Frederick P. Fish, president of AT&T and lawyer for the anti-Ford side

Charles M. Hough, judge who decided the Selden suit

Walter C. Noyes, judge who decided the Selden suit on appeal

George B. Selden, who claimed in a US patent to have invented the automobile

Ralzemond B. Parker, battled-hardened lawyer hired to defend Ford in the Selden suit

THE GOOD ROADS EVANGELISTS

James W. Abbott, official with the Federal Highway Administration's precursor agency

Albert Augustus Pope, bicycle- and carmaking magnate

Isaac B. Potter, editor, engineer, and lawyer

Roy Stone, first head of the US Office of Road Inquiry

THE SCOUNDRELS

Lone John, a lunatic Wyoming shepherd

Big Nose George Parrott, an outlaw who met a most bizarre fate

The Road Hog, any of various anti-car farmers

The ruffians, lads, and men in New York who stoned “evil” motorists

Edward R. Thomas, wealthy Manhattan heir and murderous driver

Introduction

Since my first car, an old black Ford sedan that I drove in high school, I have owned more than ten automobiles. That qualifies me as a motorist, but until this book, I was not alone in believing the US car industry essentially began with Henry Ford's Model T, introduced in 1908. I thought that iconic vehicle and a few others made by a handful of fellow manufacturers began the profound transformation of American society that has culminated in our way of life today.

The Model T indeed was revolutionary—but it wasn't first. Oldsmobile founder Ransom Eli Olds built his first car, a three-wheeled thing steered with a tiller and powered by a steam engine, in 1887. The first US vehicle intended for sale was demonstrated in 1893, in Springfield, Massachusetts. Ford drove the first automobile he made, a boxlike contraption on big bicycle tires, through the streets of Detroit in 1896. Many others in America and Europe, where the auto industry really began, were also building cars—or planning to. Then, between 1900 and 1908, more than five hundred domestic carmakers went into business. Competition was brutal. The vast majority of firms failed. And a colorful cast of characters abounded: heroes, villains, schemers, and visionaries—the people who imagined a wondrous future with the automobile. That future, as we know today, was both blessing and curse.

By the dawn of what would be called the American Century, the car was already causing unprecedented turmoil—and it intensified during that first decade of the 1900s, the period I primarily chronicle in this book. Car enthusiasts battled car-haters in courts, in legislatures, and on the roads. Farmers, spooked by the evil new machines, defended their terrified

horses—sometimes with shotguns and threats of murder. Motorists ridiculed the horse as filthy and useless, and the old-fashioned farmer as ignorant. Rowdies stoned Gilded Age aristocrats as they flaunted their high-priced imports on the streets of Manhattan. The police chase, the hit-and-run, and the fatal accident became staples of a dramatic new journalistic genre.

The car wars—between one manufacturer and another; one driver and another; between pedestrian and horse and machine; between bucolic past and engine-powered future—played out in the trade journals and the general-circulation newspapers, in the countryside and in urban centers, in most states and in many cities, especially New York City, the early heart of the car market and the nation's media capital, then as now.

These battles were personified in one of the longest and most expensive lawsuits in the history of American business: the Selden patent case, which pitted Ford against the cutthroat executive Frederic L. Smith, who took over Oldsmobile in 1904. That story is a central narrative of this book.

And the car wars deeply involved the three main companies whose stories are told in *Car Crazy*: Oldsmobile, the most successful US car manufacturer of the early era; Buick, which became General Motors (GM), thanks to William C. Durant, one of the most creative and daring, if now largely forgotten, figures in automotive history; and Ford Motor Company, built by an obsessed genius who rose from humble beginnings to industry dominance and great personal wealth.

The roots of *Car Crazy* lie in the season I spent following NASCAR's premiere racing series embedded in legendary Jack Roush's Ford racing team, now Roush Fenway Racing, for my 2002 book *Men and Speed*. At some point, I learned about a storied race between two automobiles from Manhattan to Portland, Oregon—in 1905.

The cars were two-seat Curved Dash vehicles, built without sides, roof, or windshield, and steered with a tiller, not a steering wheel. Their gas engines generated 7 horsepower, roughly equivalent to a lawn mower today. They had a top speed of about 20 miles per hour. Although many thor-

oughfares in major cities were paved, beyond them there were few hard-surfaced roads or streets in the vast American landscape these cars had traveled across, particularly in the West, and rain turned the trails and stagecoach routes to nearly impassable mud. Maps were scarce. So was gasoline.

Years later, as I began to contemplate writing this book, I wondered how this race—conducted years before I thought there even was an American car industry—had come to pass. Who were the drivers, and how did their primitive cars manage to make the distance? As I looked deeper into the competition, it became clear just how crazy the idea had been. But what also began to come into focus was a fascinating, largely untold story of the earliest years of the automobile industry, and the beginning of a technological, social, and cultural upheaval that would fundamentally change America and the lives of its people.

I hope you enjoy the ride!

G. WAYNE MILLER
Providence, Rhode Island

1

FASTEST MAN ON EARTH

THE 999 AND ARROW

It was a time when sane people did crazy things.

Henry Ford was one of those people.

On January 9, 1904, on the shore of frozen Anchor Bay, Lake St. Clair, some thirty miles northeast of Detroit, he vowed to be the first person to drive 100 miles per hour. The possibility that he might spin out of control and be killed as he roared across the ice did not deter him.

It did, however, attract a crowd.

Ford had deliberately scheduled his attempt for a Saturday, when kindly employers gave their workers the afternoon off. Then he'd created publicity that had filled the Detroit papers all week, mesmerizing a city that had already begun to thrum with the business of motors.

A brilliant inventor and engineer, Ford was also a skilled marketer. He knew that machine-powered speed excited many people unlike anything before—and that word of the latest spectacle sent consumers to dealers, where they could buy an automobile of their own. He knew also that cars angered and alienated other people—the horse-bound traditionalists—but with time, he believed, almost everyone would come around.

"Henry Ford of the Ford Motor Works of Detroit will attempt to lower the Worlds Record," read the handbills Ford had arranged to be posted. "The race will be over a four-mile straight track on the ice opposite The Hotel Chesterfield. The snow will be cleared from the ice and the track will be sanded. The races will start at 2 o'clock and continue until Mr. Ford lowers the world's record. He proposes to make a mile in 36 seconds."

That would greatly eclipse the existing auto record of 84.732 miles per hour, set in 1903. It conceivably would be faster than anyone had ever moved.

The claimed land speed record was 112.5 miles per hour by the crew of a locomotive on May 10, 1893, on a stretch of Cornelius Vanderbilt's mighty New York Central Railroad, but in this era so rife with tall tales, doubt existed that the train, the 999, had really traveled faster than about 90 miles per hour. Nonetheless, the train had generated international headlines—and Ford, hoping to capitalize on its enduring fame, named one of the two identical race cars that he built after it. Like that sixty-two-ton locomotive, Ford's 999 racer and its twin, Arrow—the machine that Ford had brought to frozen Lake St. Clair—were essentially monster motors on wheels, producing as much as 80 horsepower, ten or more times the power of many stock models—"built to speed, and speed alone," wrote the *Automobile and Motor Review*.

Many in the crowd knew about Ford, this slightly built forty-year-old man with the piercing gray eyes, prominent nose, and long, thin hands who seemed always to have a sly grin on his lips. He had been building and driving horseless carriages around Detroit since 1896, when American-built cars were little more than a dream, and had founded and then left two other companies before incorporating a third, the Ford Motor Company, on June 16, 1903.

Son of a farmer, raised on a farm outside Detroit, Ford should have been destined to till the land, like so many of his nineteenth-century peers. But even as a young child, his father's tools fascinated him more than

horses or fields, and by the time he turned teenager, machines had become his obsession. At first it was unpowered machines, the watches and clocks he taught himself to take apart and repair. And then, not long after, he saw his first steam engine. The operator took the time to explain its mechanizations to the boy. And thus was Ford's true destiny revealed to him.

Many in the shivering crowd also already knew about Ford's race cars from the man who had steered several of them to national headlines: Barney Oldfield, the greatest American race car driver of the early era, a man even more daring than Ford. A champion bicyclist at age sixteen, Oldfield had never driven a motor vehicle of any kind until Ford, seeking publicity for his second attempt at an auto company, asked him to race the 999 in a competition. At the time, Ford himself was leery of driving it, except on the test track. Saying he would try anything once, Oldfield, twenty-four, agreed. Ford entered the 999 in the October 1902 Manufacturer's Challenge Cup at Detroit's Grosse Pointe Blue Ribbon Track, venerable home of harness racing, and set about acquainting Oldfield with the car's quirky features.

"It took us only a week to teach him to drive," Ford later recalled. "The man did not know what fear was. All that he had to learn was how to control the monster." Meaning specifically, how to gun it through corners without rolling over.

"The steering wheel had not yet been thought of," Ford recalled. "On this one, I put a two-handed tiller, for holding the car in line required all the strength of a strong man."

While Ford was cranking the 999 to life, Oldfield said: "Well, this chariot may kill me, but they will say afterward that I was going like hell when she took me over the bank."

He did go like hell, winning that October 1902 race against the already legendary automaker and racer Alexander Winton, who until then was thought to be invincible.

In the summer of 1903, Oldfield drove Ford's Arrow to world records at Midwest fairgrounds and then on July 25, at a track in Yonkers, New York. A few weeks later, he raced again at Grosse Pointe. He had just passed the leader when a tire exploded and Arrow plowed into a fence,

killing a spectator from Ohio. Oldfield, a newspaper reported, "escaped by a miracle, as his machine was reduced to a mass of tangled iron and wood. That more people were not killed or maimed is a cause for wonder." Cocky and gifted, a man who loved women as much as machines, Oldfield would maim and kill many more before the end of his career.

As Oldfield recovered from his injuries, the repaired Arrow took the starting flag in Milwaukee a week after the luckless Ohio man's death. Promising young racer Frank Day was at the tiller. But the Arrow proved too much to manage, and he spun out. Ford's racer rolled end over end, landing "on the unfortunate chauffeur, grinding him into the ground, an unrecognizable mess," a paper reported.

For those who did not share autoists' enthusiasm—and there were many who did not, influential politicians, judges, and editorialists among them—Day's death was new cause for condemnation.

"We saw the young man who rode to his death on the day preceding the fatality," the *Wisconsin State Journal* opined. "A cleaner, fresher youth never delighted his parents' eyes. The wind tousled his abundant hair on his clear forehead as he whirled about the track; determination and enthusiasm were in his eyes; the cheers of the impassioned mob impelled him as soldiers go to certain death under martial music."

And then, an unrecognizable mess.

"We are not wholesome enough to enjoy the triumphs of the soil and noble horses and royal-blooded cattle," the *State Journal* proclaimed. "The incident is a disgrace."

For Ford, it was a disquieting but momentary setback. Back in Michigan, he rebuilt Arrow once again. He had further use for its awesome power.

Pure speed was not the only lure for the spectators in their gloves and fur-trimmed coats at Lake St. Clair on that January day in 1904. In the first half-decade of what would be called the American Century, railroads, ships, bicycles, horses, and horse-drawn vehicles still transported most people and goods, but the country was witnessing an astonishing proliferation of horseless carriage manufacturers and models. Every new entry

Barney Oldfield, left, and Ford with the 999.
From the Collections of The Henry Ford.

seemed to generate buzz. Whether you liked cars or hated them, lived in a city where they swarmed the streets or in the country where they were rarely, if ever, seen, you could hardly get through a day without talking about them.

Carmaking had started in earnest in America just a decade before, with bicycle maker Charles E. Duryea, thirty-one, in partnership with his twenty-four-year-old mechanic brother, J. Frank—the first Americans to publicly declare their intention of creating a commercial enterprise from building and selling cars, contraptions most folks at the time thought were cobbled together by men possessing more free time than common sense. In September 1893 in Springfield, Massachusetts, Frank completed construction of a vehicle that married a custom-built single-cylinder gasoline motor to a horse-drawn phaeton buggy purchased secondhand for $70.

Shortly before he road-tested the car, Frank granted an interview to the *Springfield Evening Union*, which published a story on September 16, 1893, under the headline:

NO USE FOR HORSES
Springfield Mechanics Devise a New Mode of Travel
Ingenious Wagon Being Made in This City
For Which the Makers Claim Great Things

"A new motor carriage when, if the preliminary tests prove successful as expected, will revolutionize the mode of travel on highways, and do away with the horse as a means of transportation, is being made in this city," the reporter wrote. "It is quite probable that within a short period of time one may be able to see an ordinary carriage in almost every respect running along the streets or climbing country hills without visible means of propulsion."

Frank was more than a good pitchman. The car he had built with his brother's help and the support of lone financial backer Erwin F. Markham, a nurse who had invested $1,000 in the Duryeas, did indeed succeed its first time on the road. On the afternoon of September 20, the vehicle was hauled by horse from Frank's machine shop to a friend's yard on the outskirts of the city. The next morning, Frank took a streetcar out to the neighborhood. As he rode, he fantasized that "once well started on the open road, the machine would roll along sweetly for at least a mile or two. . . . With this pleasant thought in mind, I enthusiastically pushed the car from under the apple tree."

Frank started the engine and his car chugged onto Spruce Street. "America's first gasoline automobile had now appeared," he would recall. "It had done what it was designed and built to do, in that it carried the driver on the road and had been steered in the direction the driver wished to go."

The car only traveled about one hundred feet before stalling—but it restarted quickly, and each time again after successive stallings, providing sufficient encouragement for the Duryeas to continue. By March 1895, they had a smoother-operating machine that successfully completed an

eighteen-mile round trip to Westfield, Massachusetts, along rough, steep, horse-ravaged roads—a feat that suggested the brothers really were onto something. On September 21, 1895, they incorporated the Duryea Motor Wagon Company.

"Those who have taken the pains to search below the surface for the great tendencies of the age know that a giant industry is struggling into being," wrote the editor of the *Horseless Age*, America's second automobile journal, in its inaugural issue, published in November 1895. "It is often said that a civilization may be measured by its facilities of Locomotion. If this is true, as seems abundantly proved by present facts and the testimony of History, the New Civilization that is rolling in with the Horseless Carriage will be Higher Civilization than the one that you enjoy."

Like the *Horseless Age*'s editor, the growing ranks of motorists saw the car as the future; along with the locomotive, the telegram, photography, and electricity, it was a technology that would move mankind valiantly forward. They envisioned a day when a motorist could comfortably drive from East Coast to West and all points between, when everyone could, and would, own a car.

This vision of the future seemed fairly delusional to the naysayers, whose numbers grew as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth. They viewed the gas- or steam-powered car, by whatever name, as a loud, dangerous, and polluting fiend that threatened the social fabric—an enemy of God-fearing people and noble horses. They dismissed the car, however propelled, as a fad soon to fade. Common sense alone told you it couldn't last.

In those early days, most cars were so finicky that repair kits were included as standard features and wealthy owners hired mechanics to ride with them. Many cars had no cabins, roofs, headlamps, or doors. They could explode or burst into flame for no apparent reason. "As gasoline tanks and leads sometimes leak and the fluid more rarely becomes ignited," the *Automobile*, a leading weekly, wrote, "it is a wise precaution on the part of the automobilist to carry a fire extinguisher in the car for such

sample content of Car Crazy: The Battle for Supremacy between Ford and Olds and the Dawn of the Automobile Age

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