

On Friday, April 24, 1908 an event took place in Briarcliff Manor the like of which had never been seen in the village before and has not been seen since.

# The 1908 Briarcliff Trophy Race

# Some facts

- Course spanned much of Westchester County
- 32.4 mile circuit to be completed 8 times for a total of 259.2 miles (original plan scheduled 10 laps for a total of 324 miles).
- 22 entrants with vehicles from five countries: Austria, France Germany, Italy and the US.
- All cars were four-cylinder stock cars. 19 of them had four speeds while the Isolass had three speeds.
- All 22 entrants were men. June Cuneo the most prominent female racing driver was denied entry.
- 300,000 people watched the race throughout the county, and Briarcliff Manor had more than 100,000 visitors on that day.

# Why a car race?

- The Automobile was only about ten years old
- Manufacturers wanted to spur showcase traffic after 1907 depression
- They wanted to show that cars were not just toys for the wealthy
- And to prove that thoroughly tested vehicles could safely, comfortably and reliably carry passengers on a variety of surfaces (paved roads were rare at that time).

# Why Briarcliff Manor?

- Walter Law had founded Briarcliff Manor in 1902
- He wanted to showcase the village as a great place to live
- And to generate some publicity for his businesses
- He was President of the Upper Westchester Auto Club
- And he had the money and connections to make it happen

# Prizes

- A prize: \$10,000 dollars (Over \$300,000 today) for the winner.
- A several foot high custom built trophy
- Law presented the trophy himself



# The “Open Road”

- Ran on whatever surfaces local roads provided
- Through eight towns and villages
- Over a 30 plus mile route
- THE AUTOMOBILE called the Briarcliff course a “tortuous circuit of the crumpled-up paper type, with impossible bends and turns, each one with its pitfall of narrow, creaky bridge, or its menacing stone wall, and with scarcely a quarter mile straight, or a half dozen places where a competitor could safely be passed at speed,” nerve was as necessary as talent for the twenty-two participating drivers. From Gregg D. Merksamer: “Remembering the 1908 Briarcliff Trophy Race” ([https://www.vanderbiltcupraces.com/blog/article/gregg\\_d.\\_merksamer\\_remembering\\_the\\_1908\\_briarcliff\\_trophy\\_race](https://www.vanderbiltcupraces.com/blog/article/gregg_d._merksamer_remembering_the_1908_briarcliff_trophy_race)).

# It wasn't all smooth sailing

- Over a year to bring to fruition after much negotiation including many plans and counter plans
- Threats by a local Justice to shut it down if drivers didn't obey speed limits.
- A state engineer demanded that \$200 (about \$6,500) security be escrowed for each course mile
- Shameless promoters who charged \$25 (about \$800 today) for parking in fields when the average hourly wage rate was 22 cents (about \$7 today).



# Entrants (1)

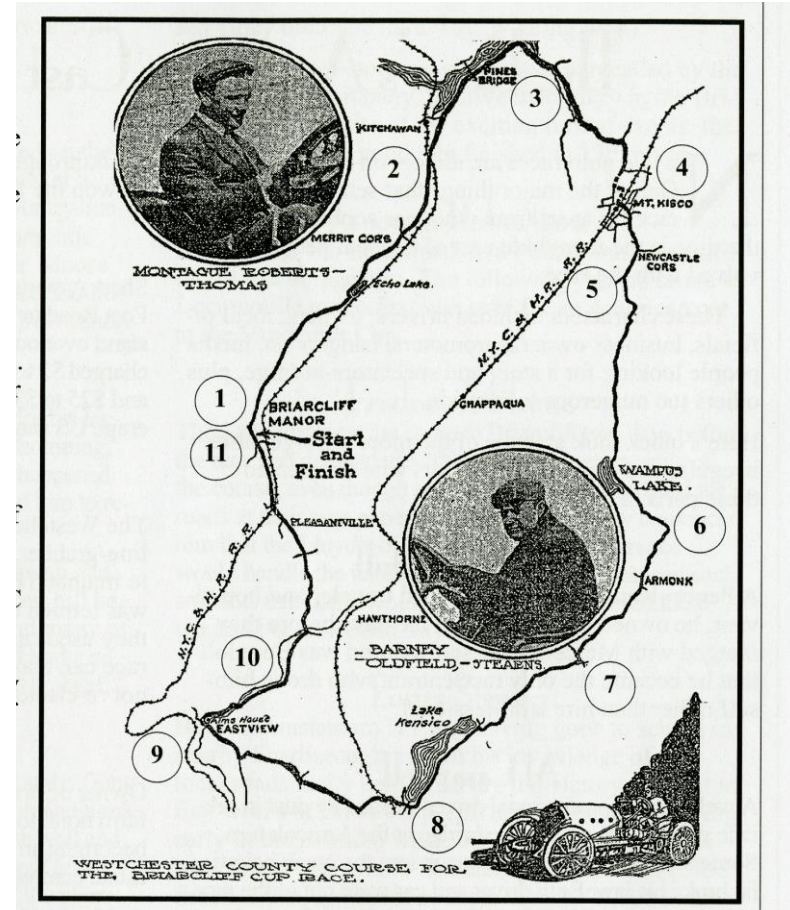
	Make	Entrant	Manufacturer	Driver
1	Bianchi	Percy Owen, Inc.	Italy	Paul Sartori
2	Fiat	Fiat Automobiles	Italy	Emmanuel Cedrino
3	Apperson	Bowman Automobile Co.	Kokomo, IN.	Herbert Lytle
4	Isotta	Isotta Fraschini	Italy	Lewis Strang
5	Stearns	Frank B. Stearns	Cleveland, OH.	Frank Leland
6	Fiat	Fiat Automobiles	Italy	Edwin H. Parker
7	Lozier	Lozier Motor Co.	Plattsburgh, NY.	Harry Michener
8	Stearns	Wyckoff, Church & Partridge	Cleveland, OH.	Guy Vaughn
9	Lozier	Lozier Motor Co.	Plattsburgh, NY.	Ralph Mulford
10	Maja (DMG)	John J. Brown	Austria	Daniel Murphy
11	Isotta	Isotta Fraschini	Italy	Al Poole

# Entrants (2)

	Make	Entrant	Manufacturer	Driver
12	Thomas	Harry S. Houpt	Buffalo, NY.	Montague Roberts
13	Stearns	Wyckoff, Church & Partridge	Cleveland, OH.	Barney Oldfield
14	Renault	Paul Lacroix	France	Maurice G. Bernin
15	Panhard	Panhard et Levassor	France	George Robertson
16	Hol-Tan Shawmut	Hol-Tan Company	New York, NY.	William M. Hilliard
17	Allen Kingston	Walter C. Allen	Kingston, NY	Ralph de Palma
18	Renault	Paul Lacroix	France	Julien Bloch
19	Isotta	Issota Fraschini	Italy	Hugh N. Harding
20	Benz	Louis J. Bergdoll	Germany	Louis J. Bergdoll
21	Simplex	Palmer & Singer Manufacturing	New Brunswick, NJ.	Morton J. Seymour
22	Simplex	Palmer & Singer	New Brunswick, NJ.	William Watson

# The Route

1. Briarcliff Start
2. Kitchawan Railroad Crossing
3. Pinesbridge
4. Mt. Kisco
5. Newcastle Corners
6. The Armonk Curve
7. Route 22 Kensico
8. Kensico Dam
9. Eastview
10. The Northern Route
11. Briarcliff Finish



# Tales from the Race

## 1. Briarcliff Start

- County sheriff assembled an amateur militia, which fought with unruly spectators.
- Race started at 5:07 am, 22 minutes late.
- Cars started at one minute intervals
- Because of the delay and thousands of spectators lining the route, the race was reduced from ten to eight laps



# Tales from the Race

## 2. Kitchawan Railroad Crossing

- Early Morning Fog
- Barney Oldfield narrowly missing hitting a train here. The train managed to stop, but its cow-catcher spread over the road. Oldfield gunned his engine and blasted over the cow-catcher at full speed.

## 3. Pinesbridge

- One of the prettiest parts of the route
- Near the New Croton Reservoir created by the building of the New Croton Dam in the previous year.
- Amazingly, even with several sharp turns and tight corners, nobody drove into the Reservoir.

# Tales from the Race

## 4. Mount Kisco

- Local government required that on entering Mount Kisco the racers be escorted by motorcycles along a 2.8 mile control zone with a speed limit of 20mph.

## 5. Newcastle Corners

- The Maximum speed of 75mph was achieved over this four-mile plus stretch.

## 6. The Armonk Curve

- While practicing two days before the race Al Campbell in his Allen-Kingston missed the curve, somersaulted the car into the creek and broke his jaw.

# Tales from the Race

## 7. Route 22-Kensico

- Another near straightaway

## 8. Kensico Dam

- The drivers passed over the top of the dam.

## 9. Eastview

- Site of the only serious crash.
- Fortunately, it damaged only machines not people
- On the first lap R.C. Watson's Simplex hit a phone pole and flipped over, badly bending his steering post
- Three hours later, after repairs, he drove off again and managed to complete five laps before time ran out.

# Tales from the Race

## 10. The Northern Route

- On country roads on what is now the Saw Mill River Parkway and Route 9A

## 11. Briarcliff Finish

- At 11:40am the winner got the checkered flag after covering the 256 mile course in five hours, 14 minutes and 13.5 seconds, with an average speed of 45.22 mph.
- He received a \$10,000 first place purse, and a silver trophy that can be seen at the Indianapolis Speedway Museum. He also received a \$1,000 bonus from his employer, John H. Tyson and cash prizes from companies making various components he used.
- 18 of the 22 entrants finished.



# Race Pictures (1)

The finish line is roughly 100 feet south of the present traffic light at Pleasantville and North State roads.





## Race Pictures (2)

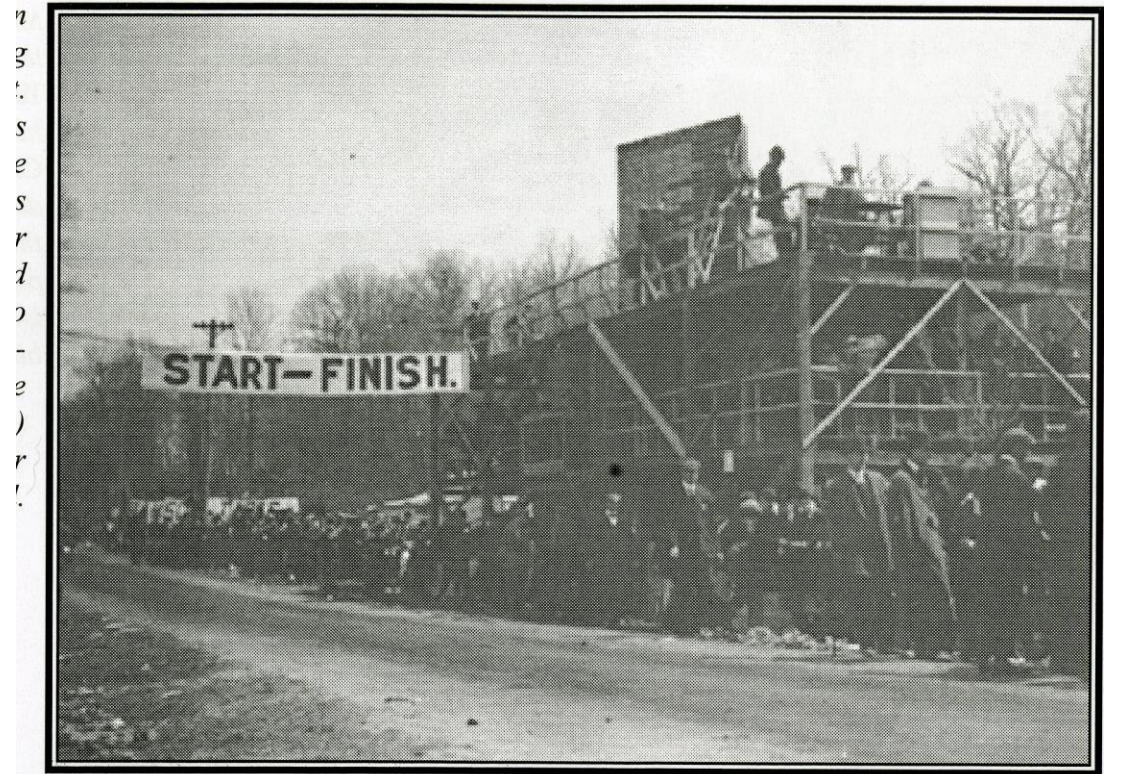
The big barn below the Briarcliff Lodge served as the garage for 1908 race entrants like R.C. Watson's #22 Simplex. It was only demolished in the early 2000s.





## Race Pictures (3)

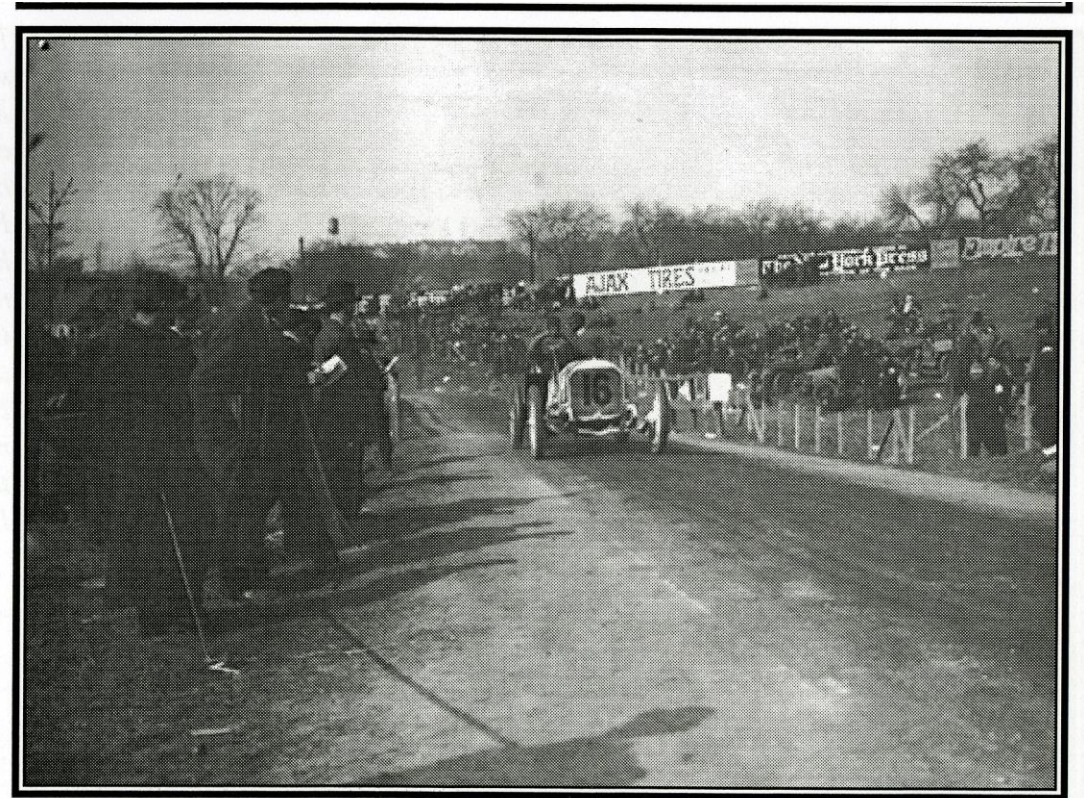
The Start-Finish line in Briarcliff Manor; looking towards the northeast. From here the racers headed out of the village on what is now known as North State Road, after which they took the Old Somerstown Turnpike to Merritt's Corners (basically NY 100 and the town of Millwood today) and the Croton Reservoir beyond.





## Race Pictures (4)

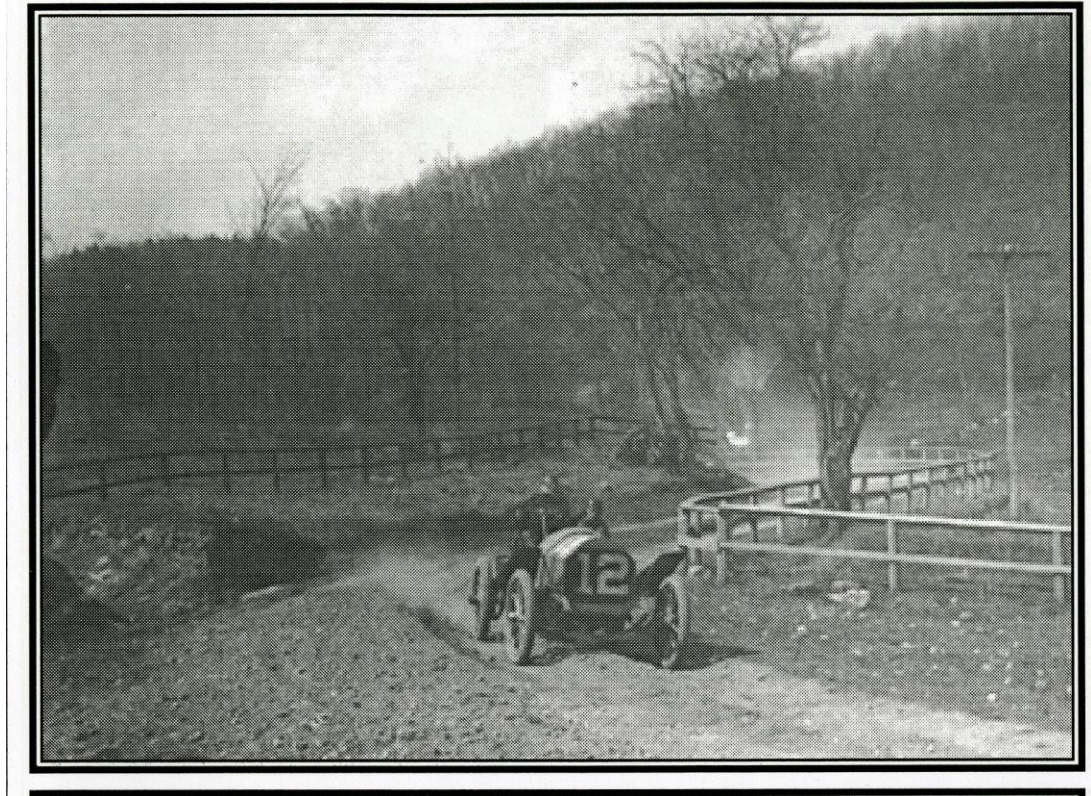
The Briarcliff Lodge looms in the background as William Hilliard's #16 Shawmut starts another lap. Though the Hol-Tan Co. had sent the car from Boston only three days before the start, Hilliard managed an 11<sup>th</sup> place finish out of 22 starters





## Race Pictures (5)

Montague Roberts was leading the epic New York-to-Paris Race when he was recalled from Cheyenne, Wyoming to drive the #12 Thomas in the 1908 Briarcliff Trophy. His 13<sup>th</sup> place finish wasn't one of his best.





## Race Pictures (6)

Though George Robertson would finish the April 24<sup>th</sup>, 1908 Briarcliff Trophy toward the back of the field in his French-built #15 Panhard, he would attain immortality the following October 24<sup>th</sup> after taking the “Old 16” Locomobile to an American car-maker’s first victory in the Vanderbilt Cup on Long Island.





## Race Pictures (7)

Judging from the relatively thick crowds and the Victorian house on the hill, this shot of M.J. Seymour's #21 Simplex on the 1908 Briarcliff Trophy may have been taken just northeast of the start-finish line on what is now North State Road. If so, the current corridor for 9A replaced the bridge in the center of this image.





## Race Pictures (8)

“Coal scuttle” hoods distinguished the two shaft-driven, 50-hp Renaults used by Maurice Bernin and Julian Bloch in the 1908 Briarcliff Trophy race. This photo was most likely taken at the bottom of the big hill at Eastview, which now intersects some of the busiest commuter high-ways in New York City’s northern suburbs.





## Race Pictures (9)

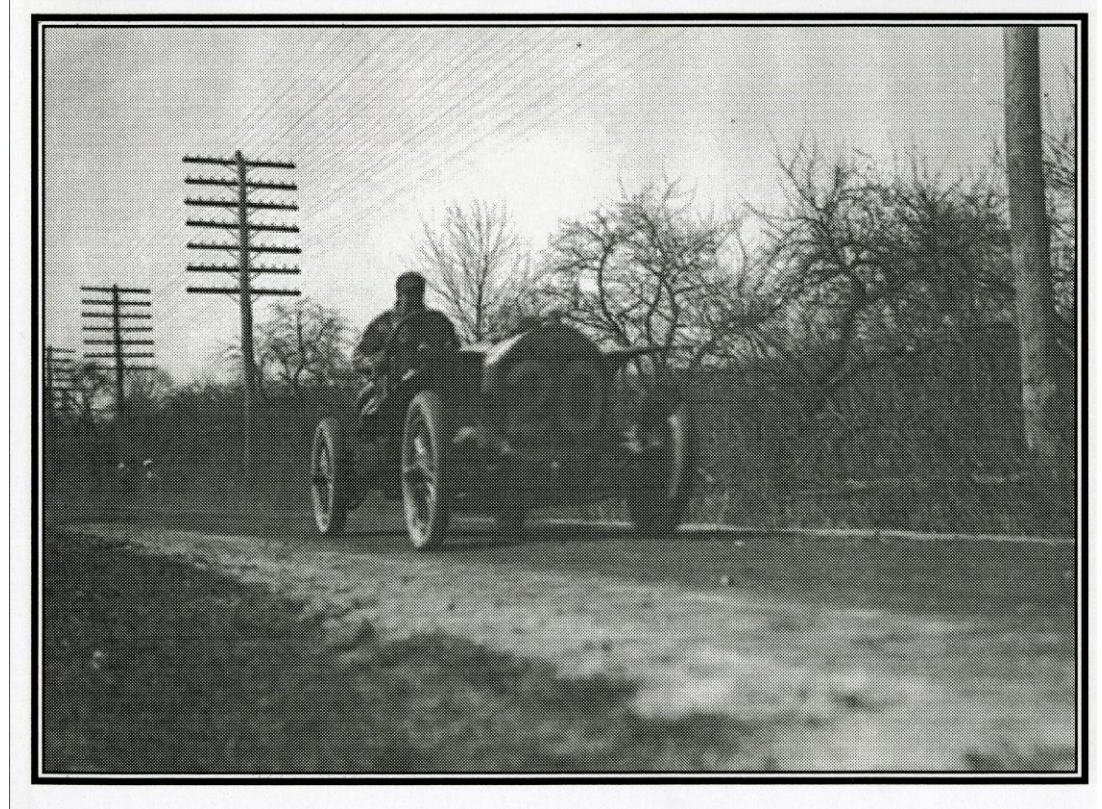
R.C. Watson's #22 Simplex travels on typically rough and twisting roads during the 1908 Briarcliff Trophy. Though it took three hours to repair the bent steering post after he hit a phone pole at Eastview and flipped over on the first lap, Watson was able to rejoin the race and complete five circuits by the finish.





# Race Pictures (10)

Louis J. Bergdoll's 50hp Benz goes for broke on one of the 1908 Briarcliff Trophy's few straight sections. The Pennsylvania millionaire was the only entrant driving his own car instead of hiring a professional.





# Race Pictures (11)

After tackling the twisty southern shore of the New Croton Reservoir, Barney Oldfields' #13 Stearns entered Mt. Kisco from the north and was escorted through 2.8 mile-long Control Zone with a 20mph limit making the Briarcliff's official mileage 29.6 miles per lap. Hugh Harding's #19 Isotta Fraschini follows close behind,





# Race Pictures (12)

Barney Oldfield may now be the best-known 1908 Briarcliff racer, but his Stearns certainly lived up to its #13 entry number's unlucky aura after a near collision with a train at Kitchawan and a clogged fuel line that left him stranded on the big hill beyond Valhalla. He nonetheless finished in 10<sup>th</sup> place out of 22 starters. Note here how his pit area was covered with planking to ensure a hard, smooth working surface.





# Race Pictures (13)

A blown right rear tire and three burned-out spark plugs costs Herb Lytle's #3 Apperson his second place position on the last half of the last lap. Back in Briarcliff, he nonetheless received a warm reception after finishing in fourth place with a time of five hours, 39 minutes and 15 and 2/3 seconds.





# Race Pictures (14)

- Some of the race viewing areas looked more like old-time movie drive-ins, but nearly 300,000 spectators lined the 30 mile course, some of them here all night in anticipation
- Briarcliff itself had about 100,000 visitors that day.



# Third Place: Guy Vaughn (Wyckoff, Church and Partridge in Stearns Car)



Second Place: Emmanuel Cedrino (Fiat Company, in Fiat Car)





# First Place: Lewis Strang (Isotta Fraschini, in Isotta Car)



- The prize, the Briarcliff Trophy valued at over \$10,000 (over \$300,000 today), was donated and presented by Briarcliff Manor founder [Walter W. Law](#).<sup>1</sup>
- The winner, Lewis Strang, practiced for five weeks in a six-cylinder Ford owned by John H. Tyson. The Isotta he used in the competition (also owned by Tyson) was only driven over the course twice before the race, and was otherwise locked and guarded in the owner's garage.<sup>1</sup> In the race, Strang took the lead on the first lap and never let go, thus winning the race and trophy. He had consistently made four of his laps in just over 38 minutes, with an elapsed time of 5 hours, 14 minutes, 13 and 1/5 seconds and a 45.22 mph average over 236.8 miles of actual racing. John Tyson claimed to have spent \$25,000 to win the trophy but gave Strang credit for the triumph. Strang received \$1,000, along with a \$5,000 bonus from Tyson. His mechanic received \$500 along with a bonus.

# More on Lewis Strang (1)



Ralph Mulford tells of a racing maneuver employed by Lewis Strang in winning the race. Whenever threatened with being overtaken, Strang's riding mechanic poured kerosene on the exposed exhaust pipes. The resultant clouds of smoke engulfed the pursuing car. With visibility at zero, its driver refrained from any attempt to pass. Actually, the records indicate that Strang had never been overtaken or even seriously threatened.

## More on Lewis Strang (2)



About 1 pm on Thursday, 20 July 1911, Strang crossed a bridge onto a newly built toll road near the town of Blue River, Wisconsin. A horse-drawn cart approached and Strang stopped his Case passenger car, to avoid frightening the horse. Strang's car stood 12 inches from the edge and suddenly the shoulder of the road began suddenly to crumble away and the Case rolled down the slope. The car fell sideways into a ditch and turned completely over. Strang, who was pinned under the car, was the only fatality in the accident. He was 26 years old.

So that was the end of road  
races in Briarcliff Manor

...Well, not quite...

# More races and a couple of motorcades

- On November 12, 1934, the Automobile Racing Club of America held another road race in Briarcliff Manor, but on a different course. It was the first amateur race in the United States, hosted by the wealthy Collier family of nearby Pocantico Hills. This 1934 race was won by Langdon Quimby, driving a Willys 77, in a time of two hours and seven minutes on the 100-mile (160 km) course. This time there was a female entrant: Mrs. Carle Conway of Scarborough.
- The race was held again on June 23, 1935; Quimby won again, four minutes faster than the previous year.
- In 1977, during Briarcliff Manor's 75th anniversary, 15 old racing cars participated in a motorcade around the 1934 race's route.
- In 2008, the village commemorated the first race's centennial in a parade featuring about 60 antique cars.

# THANK YOU

Please take a look at:

Our Website: <https://www.briarcliffhistory.org/>

Our Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/BriarcliffHistory>

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Or Visit us on the Lower Level of this building: 1 Library Road, Briarcliff  
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