

Vive la Great Race

Story and photos by Larry Edsall



Alan Travis was at Barrett-Jackson's classic car auction in the early 1980s when he overheard someone talking about a new race for old cars, a race that would pay out \$100,000 in prize money and would follow a route from California's Knott's Berry Farm to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway.

Travis was more than intrigued. He found a 1936 Ford at the auction, bought the car, and started making plans to enter it in the race, the Great Race.

Travis enjoyed the experience, and he and his wife and navigator, Mary, not only became Great Race regulars, but winners, claiming first place one year in a 1916 Mitchell and another year in a 1910 Knox Raceabout.

Earlier this year, Alan and Mary Travis participated in a static car show, but already their thoughts were traveling at speed as they considered the next Great Race. Wearing period costumes, Alan Travis was polishing the brass on a 1907 Delaunay-Belleville Phaeton while Mary sat in the rear seat, studying literature about the route for the 2012 Great Race.

They had brought their rare French car, as well as a 1915 Harley-Davidson motorcycle and an historic 1878 Pope Columbia high-wheeler bicycle to the annual Motoring Thru Time show staged by the City of Phoenix Parks and Recreation Department in Heritage Square and Heritage & Science Park in downtown Phoenix, but their thoughts were miles and months away.

Alan Travis has been collecting classic vehicles since the early 1980s. He said he currently has four or five Brass Era cars such as the Delaunay-Belleville, "not more than 10" vintage motorcycles—although one, a 1912 Pierce-Arrow, is on loan for six months to the Smithsonian Institution—and a 1930 Studebaker President roadster.

Alan and Mary Travis of Phoenix (left) wear vintage costumes as they show several vehicles at the 2012 Motoring Thru Time gathering. Their 1907 Delaunay-Belleville Phaeton was the oldest four-wheeled vehicle on the grounds in Heritage Square, and it carried the oldest of all vehicles present—their 1878 Pope Columbia high-wheeled bicycle.

Delaunay-Belleville is a rare but historic brand. SA des Automobiles Delaunay-Belleville was established at St. Denis, Seine, in France in 1904 and built cars until 1948. Before cars, Belleville produced Dreadnaught boilers used on ships. The name changed and the company started building motorcars after Louis Delaunay, a naval engineer, married into the Belleville family. Delaunay-Belleville vehicles were among the best, and were owned by European royalty and heads of states.

However, Louis Delaunay died in 1912 and designer Marius Barbarou left. The company, now led by Delaunay's sons, continued, but never regained the acclaim of its pre-war production.

The Phaeton owned by the Trivises was imported from Australia by the acclaimed Harrah's museum, and was later sold to actor/racer Steve McQueen and then to McQueen's stuntman and motorcycle racing buddy Bud Ekins. Alan Travis bought the car from Ekins' estate.

Though he was polishing one French car, Travis' mind was on another, the 1907 Renault Grand Prix/Vanderbilt Racer he's preparing for the Great Race.

In 1906, a Renault won the first European Grand Prix race. American railroad magnate William K. Vanderbilt commissioned a dozen or so copies of that car so he and his wealthy friends could race them around their Long Island estates. Considered the first "supercar," the Renault's four-cylinder engines produced a then astounding 60 horsepower and were capable of speeds approaching 100 miles per hour.

Scheduled for this summer, the 2012 Great Race will start in Traverse City, Michigan, cross the Mackinac Bridge into Michigan's Upper Peninsula, then enter Ontario, Canada. The cars and contestants will return to the United States north of Watertown, New York, and travel through Pennsylvania and Ohio on their way to a finish at Greenfield Village at the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. ■

Among vehicles at the 2012 Motoring Thru Time show were (clockwise from top) a 1955 Buick Century Estate Wagon and trailer; a 1928 Studebaker sport coupe; a 1905 Motosacoshe 2-hp motorcycle with Peniel Swiss watch and inclinometer; a 1953 Packard Caribbean convertible; a 1938 Dodge pickup truck; and a 1940 Packard Super 8 convertible.

