

“The Great Race”

“GO!” Major General Leonard Wood, chief of staff of the United States army, gave the command . . . The first automobile in the desperate San Diego-Phoenix race shot forward with a bound.

--San Diego Union, Oct. 27, 1912

In the early 1900s, Southern Californians reveled in auto road racing. One of the most popular events was the annual Los Angeles-Phoenix road race. As a test of fragile machines running on barely existent trails, nothing else compared to the annual run across the desert.

In October 1912, San Diegans cast envious eyes on Los Angeles as that city prepared for its fifth annual race. Why shouldn't such a race begin in San Diego, the civic boosters asked? After all, Phoenix was a straight shot from San Diego. A successful showing would also highlight San Diego as the logical terminus for the proposed national “Ocean-to-Ocean Highway,” stretching from Baltimore, Maryland to California.



Ed Fletcher

A committee led by San Diego businessman and road enthusiast Ed Fletcher proposed to challenge Los Angeles with its own race starting on the same date and time. Prize money was quickly raised—much of it from the city of Phoenix, which was delighted with the San Diego bid.

Official sanction for the event came from the American Automobile Association. The races would begin about the same time but the Los Angeles drivers would reach Arizona by way of San Bernardino and Indio before turning southeast to Yuma. The San Diego racers would go due east. Despite a detour north after El Centro to avoid several miles of sand hills, the southern path was at least a hundred miles shorter than the Los Angeles route. “We will beat the Los Angeles cars by a full twelve hours, at the very least,” boasted one San Diego driver.

For the most part, Los Angeles ignored the race preparations in San Diego. The *Times* barely acknowledged its southern neighbor. The Los Angeles *Examiner* was more enthusiastic and challenged Ed Fletcher to a separate “pathfinder” race between the two cities. Starting earlier in the day than the official entrants, the *Examiner* car would race to Phoenix via Blythe, ignoring Yuma. Fletcher, represented by the San Diego *Evening Tribune*, would follow the more direct route due east across the desert. When the Phoenix *Gazette* joined in as a co-sponsor of Fletcher, the car became the “Tribune-Gazette Pathfinder.”

The great race began on Saturday night, October 26. Enormous crowds filled the sidewalks and street as twenty-two growling race cars lined up on Fifth Street between D and C streets. At 10:15 p.m., the celebrity starter--Major General Leonard Wood, hero of the Spanish-American

War-- yelled "Go" and the first car "shot forward with a bound." At five minute intervals, the rest of the field started on their way—speeding up Fifth to University then east out of town on El Cajon Blvd.

Up north only twelve cars began the traditional "Los Angeles-Phoenix" version of the great race. According to the *Times*, "tens of thousands of frenzied men and women" gathered for the start in front of the Hollenbeck Hotel. At 11:00 p.m. the drivers began "the most sensational fight ever waged on the sand of the lonely desert" as they sped east toward Ontario then southeast into the desert.

The last two cars to start that night were the "outlaws." Running their own separate match race—unsanctioned by the AAA--were San Diego Mayor James Wadham and future mayor Percy J. Benbough. At 12:05 on Sunday morning, the big touring cars, each carrying three passengers besides the driver, set off toward Arizona for the "honor and glory" of San Diego.

One car was already well on the way to Phoenix. "Pathfinder" Ed Fletcher, driving a 20 horse power, air-cooled Franklin, had left early Saturday morning. Fletcher and his three companions decided to ignore the detour taken by the San Diego racers (north toward Niland to avoid the towering sand dunes east of El Centro) and risk the more direct path, straight through the sand to Yuma.

But first Fletcher had to drive through thirty miles of scrubby desert. "The Franklin did nobly," Fletcher recalled, but he found that eventually small twigs filled his engine and began popping through his cooling system. Fletcher stopped the car, lifted the hood and the twigs blazed. The men frantically threw sand on engine to stop the fire.

To negotiate the sand hills Fletcher reduced his tire pressure to 20 pounds. He had also prudently stationed a horse team in the area. When the car labored in the hub-deep sand, the six-horse team pulled his touring car four and half miles across the dunes.

It was dark by the time the pathfinder car reached the Colorado River, opposite Yuma. With the ferry boat gone for the night, Fletcher tried the railroad bridge. "We took that risk; used blankets and seats to keep [the rail spikes] from puncturing out tires—but we made it."

Fletcher's next obstacle was the weather. Heavy winds and rain beat down as they reached the Hassayampa River, flowing at flood stage but negotiable on another railroad bridge. Downed eucalyptus trees on the trail then slowed their progress. The men sawed through the trees and continued on. Outside of Phoenix the Agua Fria River was crossed by yet another convenient railroad bridge.

Fletcher finally drove into Phoenix--"exhausted but happy"--19 ½ hours after leaving San Diego. The competing Examiner pathfinder car never arrived. It had broken down in the desert near Blythe.

The next cars to appear in Phoenix were the "outlaws." Mayor Wadham pulled in at 5:40 a.m. on Monday morning. Percy Benbough arrived two hours later, bemoaning a delay stuck in the sand

but claiming a better running time than Wadham. The two men bickered over the result then agreed to call it a tie.

The official drivers from San Diego and Los Angeles—all delayed by a checkpoint in Yuma—began coming in that afternoon. Only seven San Diegans finished the hard race. D. C. Campbell, driving a Stevens-Duryea, was first with a running time of sixteen hours, 59 minutes.

Los Angeles' best finish was by Ralph Hamlin in eighteen hours, 45 minutes. The *Times* reported his victory with a stirring story of Hamlin's race. The *San Diego Union* proudly headlined its account with: **SAN DIEGO CAR BEATS LOS ANGELES.**



The “Pathfinder” car of Ed Fletcher (2nd from left). The three other men are Harry Taylor, Wilson Smith, and F. L. Hamilton. October 1912. *Special Collections, University of California, San Diego.*

From Richard W. Crawford, *San Diego Yesterday* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2013).