

# Autos Timed Lancaster On 1911 'Reliability' Run

March 5 1989

By LOUISE PETTUS

On May 11, 1911, an excited Lancaster crowd wildly cheered a 40-car caravan that rolled into town as a part of what was advertised as the Savannah Auto Club's Good Roads Reliability Run. The endurance race from Savannah to Charlotte passed through Columbia, Camden and Lancaster on what is now U.S. 521 but was then referred to as the National Highway.

The light-weight cars made good time from Columbia to Camden, first on stone macadam road and then in Kershaw County on a sand-clay road. A sand-clay road program sponsored by the State Good Roads Association was first experimented with in 1898 when a three-mile strip near Winnsboro was laid out and inspected yearly. It was found that the road would last about five years with few repairs. In the next dozen years the idea spread widely over the state.

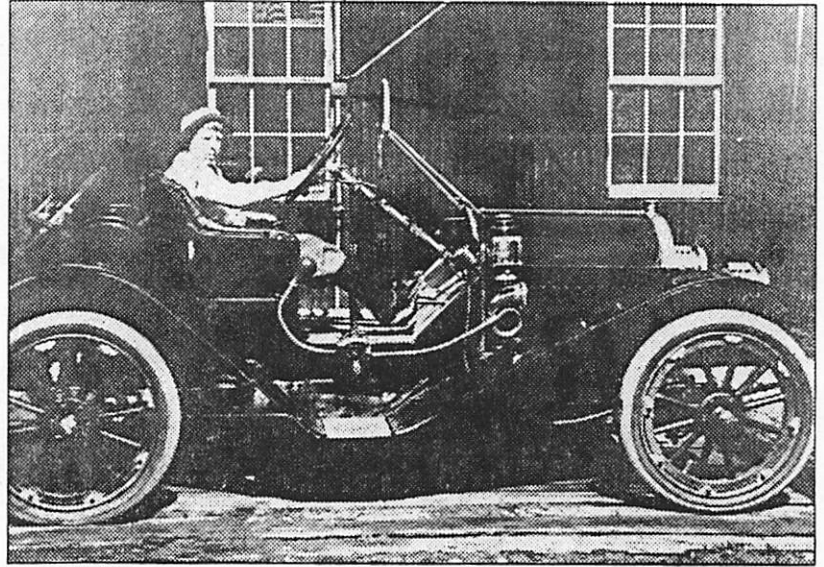


Pettus

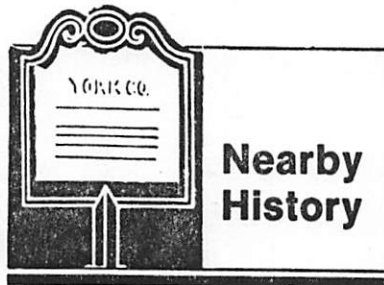
The motorists, or "automobilists" as they were called, were especially enthusiastic about a newly constructed sand-clay road between Camden and Kershaw, which they termed "magnificent." Some of the automobiles hit an unbelievable 45-50 mph, but the average speed was a little under 30 mph. The endurance race was not supposed to be a speed race (to drive from Savannah to Charlotte was considered feat enough!) but some of the drivers could not resist the temptation. Every car that left Columbia made it into Lancaster.

Lancaster declared a half holiday to welcome the drivers. Mayor W.T. Gregory made a welcoming speech and Col. Leroy Springs, president and owner of the Lancaster Cotton Mills, spread huge picnic tables on the grounds of his downtown home and opened the house for their convenience. A number of Charlotte newspapermen were in Lancaster to cover the run.

The Colonel, who always used a chauffeur, had several cars, his favorite being a huge Winton. His 15-year-old son, Elliott, owned a Hudson that he twice tore down



Elliott Springs and his first car, a 1910 Hudson. Springs, the future head of Springs Cotton Mills, was a lifelong enthusiast and collector of unusual automobiles.



completely and then put back together without a missing piece. One of Elliott Springs's first short stories was titled "Adventures for an Automobilist."

After enjoying Colonel Springs's club luncheon and liquid drinks "both prohibition and regulation," the drivers were ready for the last 40-mile stretch from Lancaster to Charlotte. It was hot and dusty but the roads were described as "fast." One of the drivers, W.C. Mahoney, took one turn a little too fast and drove his car through a farmer's cotton patch, but managed to get the car back on the highway.

Quite a number of Lancaster citizens decided to join the run to Charlotte with their cars just for the sport of the thing. The regular drivers were competing for various trophies, depending upon the weight of the car and the horse power as well as the record-keeping skills of the drivers. At Lancaster, some drivers told reporters they had compiled perfect scores, but other drivers said they would contest this — that some had not complied with the rules of the run.

Very high hills were encoun-

tered at several spots between Lancaster and Charlotte. The autos were forced to slow to the extent that people living in the area were able to walk up the hills keeping pace with the cars. Small boys delighted in swinging on the sides of the struggling vehicles, much to the annoyance of the drivers who were striving for every ounce of "push" they could muster.

When the N.C. line was reached, the cars found a rock-bedded highway, the "far-famed macadam of Mecklenburg." At this point, with the goal not far away, some of the drivers dashed at top speed through the hamlet of Pineville with several cars reaching 55 mph.

They had left Columbia at 10:30 in the morning, paused an hour and a half in Lancaster and still managed to arrive in Charlotte before dark!

The story of the Savannah Auto Club's Good Roads Reliability Run got nationwide coverage and, more important, got favorable publicity for the newer techniques of road construction.

The demand for better roads eventually led the state to abandon the old system whereby counties were responsible for 100% of the upkeep of roads. State acceptance of the responsibility for keeping up roads "paved the way" for the establishment of a state highway department with trained engineers.

Louise Pettus is a history professor at Winthrop College.