

History of the AAA Glidden® Tours

At the turn of the century, the automobile was struggling for acceptance. There were no paved highways between cities or maps of existing wagon roads. Automobiles were not dependable for trips of any length; and motoring laws and regulations reflected the general public's attitude that automobiles were toys of the idle rich and should be severely restricted if not totally banned.

Fortunately, throughout the country, there were small numbers of those who owned and believed in the automobile. Sharing a common interest, these stalwart individuals began forming motor clubs to combat the mounting number of unjust motoring laws and regulations being enacted against them and their automobiles and to fight for better roads. They also began producing their own hand-sketched maps and written route directions. The efforts of these clubs did indeed produce positive results at local and at state levels, but they did nothing to address motoring needs at the national level.

There were wide differences in the methods, quality and scope of road construction and maintenance between states as well as communities. Laws and regulations were so incomprehensible that only the most daring tourists would venture far from their own familiar areas. Adding to this dilemma, few clubs had the resources to produce even the sketchiest route description beyond 100 miles from their own headquarters; and those maps that were produced, more often than not, did not dovetail with neighboring club maps.

It became obvious to a few farsighted individuals within these clubs that if anything was to be done about these problems, it would be up to the local clubs to coordinate their efforts at the national level. That idea came to life on March 4, 1902 when representatives of nine clubs met in Chicago. At this two-day meeting a full slate of officers was elected, a board of directors appointed and two committees were formed; one to draw up a constitution and the second to delineate the scope and purpose of the new organization -- the American Automobile Association.

On April 2, 1902, the first official meeting of the new association took place at the club house of the Automobile Club of America in New York. At this meeting, the purposes of the new association were hammered out and officially defined as follows:

1. To secure rational legislation;
2. To formulate proper rules governing the use of the automobile;
3. To protect the interest of automobilists against unjust discrimination;
4. To maintain their lawful rights and privileges;
5. To encourage the use of the automobile and its development; and
6. To promote the "Good Roads" movement.

It is interesting to note that although the scope of AAA operations is ever expanding to meet the changing needs of its members, these six purposes still remain the top priority of the association's efforts.

Within a few short months, a great number of local clubs became affiliated with the newly formed AAA and many others were expressing their interest in joining the federation at a later date. To solidify its new position of national leadership, the AAA sought a major event that would involve local clubs and draw national attention to the possibility of cross-country motoring. It was at the AAA's December 8, 1902 meeting that a plan was conceived for a run through different parts of the country where a variety of road conditions would be encountered. It was also determined that the 1904 World's Fair at St. Louis, Missouri would be the destination. Letters were then sent to member clubs outlining the plan and asking for suggestions, cooperation, and participation.

The finalized plan turned out to be the largest event of its kind ever undertaken to this date. In essence, it would be a grand gathering of motoring tourists from all across the country. This would be a pleasure trip. There would be no rules or regulations except to go as you please, so there would be no winner. Starting at their local clubs and joining others along the way, tourists would travel in small groups and each would be allowed to stop and start whenever and wherever he wanted.

Three major routes were selected. The northern route would start from New York City, the central route from Philadelphia, and the southern from Baltimore. Also, minor routes would be taken by tourists from Minneapolis, Minnesota, Kansas City, Missouri, and Birmingham, Alabama. Other participants would join these groups along the routes. The New York group, consisting of 18 cars and considered the primary group, started out on the morning of July 25, 1904. At the same time, a group of five cars left Boston to join with the New York group in Albany, New York. Among the group from Boston was Charles J. Glidden driving a 24hp Napier and Percy Pierce driving his 24 hp Pierce Great Arrow. Officially, 77 cars participated in the run, of which 66 made it to St. Louis. However, it should be noted that along the routes, hundreds more joined the touring groups for a day or more. Among the official participants, 36 separate makes of automobiles were represented of which only four are still in production; Cadillac, Mercedes, Oldsmobile, and White (trucks). The 1,350 mile run from New York to St. Louis took 18 days and culminated August 12th with a grand parade through the city to the fair site, featuring the 66 finishers and 200 local cars. Historically, the car tour was probably the most successful, most highly publicized, and most significant the world would ever see.

There is no question that the key to the tour's success was the AAA which coordinated the plan, and the member clubs which executed the plan. Before the tour, these clubs provided the participants with maps and descriptions of the routes through their areas, along with local driving laws and licensing requirements. They sent out pilot cars to mark confusing turns in the route with confetti and encouraged local motorists to drive out and meet the touring groups and to accompany the groups out of town. The clubs arranged for letters of greeting from local officials, offered listings of local hotels, assisted in securing reservations, arranged for meals, and, in most instances, provided some form of entertainment. They also arranged for cars to be lodged overnight in a centralized location so they could be viewed by the public, and if repairs were needed, arranged for suitable overnight garage space.

To the reporters accompanying the groups, the trip was a major media event. Their stories of all the color, excitement, adventure, and local enthusiasm surrounding the trip were given front page coverage; and, for the moment, the automobile was the topic of conversation across America.

The significance of this press coverage was monumental. Collectively, the run covered more than 3,000 miles, which exposed the reporters to large sections of American roads and hundreds of different laws and regulations. State and local officials were embarrassed by the reports of deplorable roads or lack thereof and unreasonable laws and regulations. Even national officials were embarrassed over the fact that on the southern route, then called the National Highway Route, only two of the ten starters from Baltimore made it through the dangerous passes of the Cumberland Mountains and on to St. Louis. Moreover, all three levels of government officials were beginning to feel public pressure to correct these problems. But most important, Americans for the first time were looking at the automobile in a positive way and considering the possibility of it being a serious means of transportation. Allegorically speaking, the automobile had given a flirtatious wink and so began the great American romance with the car.

The overwhelming success of the run to St. Louis had generated such enthusiastic interest, especially among potential sponsors, that a second run was planned by AAA for the following year. This event would be open to all makes of automobiles; but instead of a run, it would be a Reliability and Endurance Tour with strict rules and a winner. This change was made to attract more sponsors among American auto makers who wanted to prove their products' marketability in a competitive test against the more favored European-made models.

Of all the sponsors, however, Charles J. Glidden, a wealthy New England industrialist and avid automobile supporter, became the most notable when he offered a \$2,000 trophy to the AAA to be competed for by the

touring cars. This was quite a prize for those days, and it was given great coverage by the press. Subsequently, as Glidden continued this offer, the AAA tours became known as the Glidden Tours.

Like the run to St. Louis, these tours were charted over mountains and rough roads and were considered the most grueling test for automobiles until the Indianapolis 500 began in 1911. As the tours continued, more and more of the automobile manufacturers became sponsors to take advantage of its possibilities for testing and advertising their products. And by 1908, the tour had assumed the character of an all-out contest for prestige among the manufacturers.

After the 1913 tour, it was felt that the purposes which had given rise to its birth had been fulfilled, and the activity ended. American-made cars had proven their reliability and ended European prestige by winning every tour. Good roads were now being built. Fair motoring laws were being enacted. And best of all, there was now one car for every 35 persons in the country as compared to one car for every 1,000 persons when the tours began.

Today, AAA is involved with the re-creation of the original tours, working with the Veteran Motor Car Club of America (VMCCA) and the Antique Auto Club of America (AACA). Now known as the Revival AAA Glidden Tour, this annual experience is one of the most prestigious touring events in American auto history.