



Brother Tom Cooper

Presented to Palestine Lodge No. 357 - May 2, 2019

Bro. Douglas Mooney, Historian

Worshipful Master,

I was recently looking through the 1905 Palestine Album. This hard bound book contains photos of early officer classes of the lodge, photos of individual members, the home addresses of our members, and an index of members arranged by profession.

The album gives evidence of the burgeoning automotive industry in Detroit. Brother Henry Ford, who joined while working for the Edison Illuminating Company, now gave his business address as the Piquette Avenue Ford Motor Company plant in Detroit, which Ford moved into after starting Model T production in leased space.

I visited the Piquette plant museum a few years back, and I was privileged to speak with a very knowledgeable docent. He talked about Detroit having a pretty robust buggy and wooden shipbuilding industry and how the investors in these declining companies looked to spend their capital on the young automotive industry.

It was a start-up culture in many ways, with automobile firms popping up and either taking root or folding. Brother Ford himself had some success with prototypes and racing and started a company called the Henry Ford Company. Ford eventually had a falling out with his investors and board. His backers did not like his focus on racing cars, and they also did not care for his specific vision for the automobile. He wanted to make one that was simple and affordable. His stockholders and financiers disagreed, they thought an automobile was a luxury item and that the target customer was affluent.

Ford left the Henry Ford Company and it was reorganized into the Cadillac Motor Car company, which fulfilled the vision of vehicles as an expensive status symbol for the rich. He received \$900 and plans for a racing car upon his departure.

The Henry Ford Company had been started with money Brother Ford won in a car race. Ford took his race car plans and started thinking about creating another venture. Naturally, he turned back to racing. He teamed up with a man named Tom Cooper to build an audacious racing car.

Tom Cooper, a native Detroiter, was also in our 1905 album and more well-known than Henry Ford when their paths crossed. He had started out working as a store clerk and raced bicycles on the side. In 1893 he became the state half-mile champion in Hamtramck. When famous cyclist Eddie Bald came to town, he beat him in a race. Cooper was offered a \$50 a week contract, and a bidding war between agents



ensued. He was soon making \$200 a week plus expenses, and was earning \$2000 to use a certain brand bicycle, \$1000 to use a certain saddle, and \$500 for using a special chain.

Cooper went on to set records at tracks across the country. In 1898 he was the American half-mile champion. In 1899, he won the Bicycle Championship of America.

As Cooper's wealth and taste for speed grew, his attention turned to the auto industry. In 1902, Brothers Ford and Cooper teamed up to build two racing cars, which were called Ford 999s. They were wood-framed, without any bodywork, and had a metal bar used for steering. The cars were powered by 1156 cu.in.(18.9 liter) straight four cylinder engines. Some sources indicate that neither Ford or Cooper actually wanted to drive the car, so they hired Barney Oldfield, another bicycle racer.

They entered the 1903 Manufacturers Challenge Cup race in Grosse Pointe against Alexander Winton, another automobile builder, and the man considered the best racing driver at the time. In the lead-up to the race, there was some difficulty starting the cars and Ford sold his stake in the project to Cooper and Oldfield, forfeiting any prize money but reserving the right to publicity.

Oldfield handily beat Winton in Grosse Pointe, securing national headlines. He continued racing the 999 across the country. He set a record by averaging a mile-a-minute in Indianapolis.

Ford used the publicity to launch the Ford Motor Company.

Cooper and Oldfield continued auto racing, Oldfield joining Winton's team and Cooper driving for himself. They barnstormed and competed at events across the country. Cooper then became a team manager for Matheson's racing efforts. They even staged a Broadway play about racing where they ran cars on rollers for a simulated race.

Cooper liked to tell a story about the time Matheson sent him to a hotel to demonstrate a model for Winston Churchill. Churchill sent down word that he was busy and Cooper would have to wait. Cooper eventually got tired, drove the car back to the garage, and returned on foot. He read a newspaper for a couple of hours. Eventually Churchill showed up. He asked if he was the chauffeur and where the car was. Cooper replied, "I don't know, who are you? My machine is in the garage." Churchill told him he was the author Winston Churchill, and then Cooper introduced himself. Churchill was astounded, "the bicycle racer?" he asked, "let's have a shake!"

On November 21, 1906, a headline in the Detroit Free Press read, "Tom Cooper Toys With Fate For Years, A Victim at Last." Cooper was in New York and had been riding in an automobile in Central Park with friends. They swerved to avoid a carriage coming around a bend in the road, only to hit a stationary vehicle. Their car overturned and he was mortally wounded at age 32.

[Brother Cooper is buried in Woodmere Cemetery.](#)

His [Ford 999 race car is on display in Brother Ford's museum in Dearborn.](#)

CHAMPION TOM COOPER

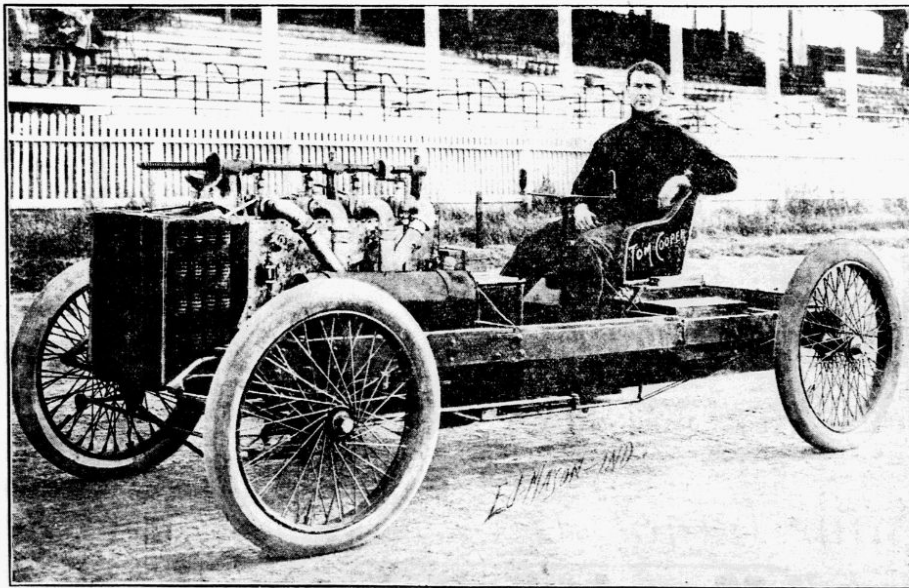
DETROIT BICYCLE RIDER HOLDS THE
AMERICAN TITLE.

WILL GO TO FRANCE NEXT YEAR AFTER
BIG GAME.

SUCCESS OF THE "OUTLAWS" PLEASING
TO THE CHAMPION.

"Tom Cooper, short distance champion of America" is the way the Detroit racing cyclist should be addressed now, as this year he not only won the one-mile and two-mile championship events, but scored more points than any other man in the country, and there is none to dispute his title. Cooper returned to his native city Wednesday after one of the most successful seasons he ever put in on the cycle tracks of the country, the most agreeable part of the campaign being the fat purses that were transferred from the pockets of the promoters to the bank account of the Detroit rider, his winning being almost as much as the rest of the "speed merchants" combined.

TOM COOPER WHO SET A NEW WORLD'S AUTOMOBILE RECORD



ABOVE IS THE MACHINE WHICH COOPER DROVE FIVE MILES IN 1:04, 1:04½, 1:03, 1:02 2-5 AND 1:03½ AT INDIANAPOLIS JUNE 20.