

The Great Race of 1907 and the Missing Contal Tri-Car

On the 31st of January 1907 the French newspaper “le Matin” announced an amazing challenge asking readers “is there someone willing this coming summer to drive an automobile from Peking to Paris?” A 16,000-kilometer race, mostly in places where there were no paved roads, an unprecedented challenge. At first twenty-five crews came forward but the prohibitive cost of such an endeavor contributed to twenty would-be contestants withdrawal. Of the five contestants one was John de Bry’s grandfather Auguste Pons. Pons was from the Provence town of Draguignan, had married Marie Petronille Naso of Saluzzo, Italy, with whom he had two daughters, Alice (Lily) and Juliette, the eldest one would become the great opera singer Lily Pons. A man in love with automobiles and motorcycles Auguste had made a name for himself in the racing arena, he was handsome, daring, and an incorrigible optimist. At the time he was promoting a three-wheeler cyclecar made by Contal and after consulting the owners of the factory, Contal agreed to sponsor Pons’ participation.

Five contestants ended up making the final roll:

1. The 40-hp 4 cylinders Itala driven by Prince Scipione Borghese accompanied by the journalist Luigi Barzini and mechanics Ettore Guizzardi.
2. The 15-hp 4 cylinders Spýker, a Dutch car driven by Charles Godard along with Jean du Taillis, a major journalist for the Matin newspaper.
3. The 10-hp 2 cylinders De Dion-Bouton, a French car driven by Georges Cormier with Edgardo Longoni as passenger.
4. Another identical Dion-Bouton driven by Victor Collignon with Jean Bizac as mechnics.
5. The 6-hp 1 cylinder cyclecar Contal driven by Auguste Pons with Oscar Foucault as mechanics.



Figure 1 Auguste Pons

After a month delay and multiple diplomatic problems the race finally took off from Peking with great fanfare on Monday, June 10th.

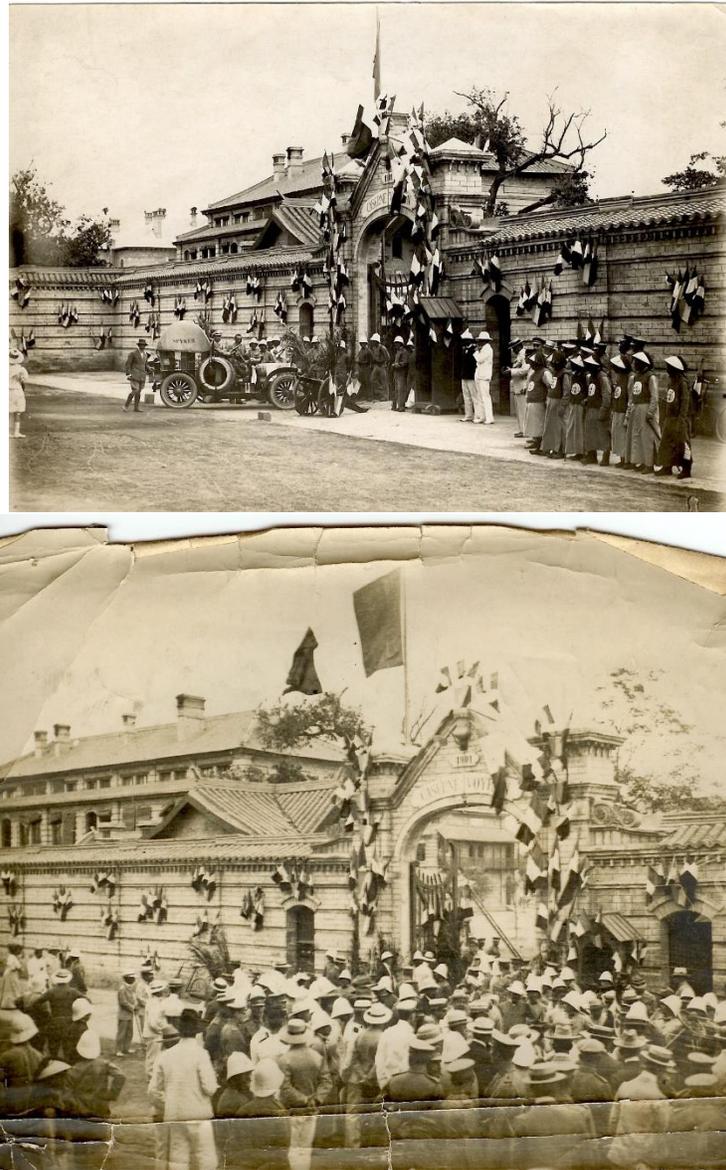


Figure 2 Caserne Voyron on June 10, 1907



Figure 3 The Contal at the star of the race, June 10, 1907

Pons and Foucault would get lost in the Gobi Desert between the 18 and the 20th of June somewhere southwest of Erenhot (Xilin Gol), Inner Mongolia, eventually running out of gas. Almost dying of thirst, after drinking the only bottle of champagne remaining offered by Mumm Champagne and the little water they had left, the pair was finally rescued by Mongol tribesmen on their horses, nursed back to health on camel milk, after which they made their way back to Kalgan (Zhangjiakou) where they eventually returned to France via train. The Contal is most probably still out there in the dry Mongolian Gobi desert.



Figure 4 - 5 The hard road of the Contal

John de Bry, proposes to retrace his grandfather's steps from Beijing (Peking) to just south of Xilin Gol (Erenhot). In Beijing he will look for the location of the Hotel de Pékin where Auguste Pons and the other contestants stayed for a month, he will also look for the French military barracks Voyron, an imposing complex that is probably still there. Traveling within sight of the Great Wall, he will make his way to Kalgan (Zhangjiakou) and then will try to find the path of the old Mandarins' Road and the camel track which was used by the contestants, including Pons and Foucault. The reason for choosing the camel track instead of the well-traveled Mandarins' Road was because the camel track was a hundred miles shorter to reach the holy city of Urga (Ulaanbaatar), now the capital and the largest city of Mongolia and the contestants agreed that it would be better for the cars, including Pons' Contal, and navigation across the Gobi would be easy since the telegraph line to Russia had been established six years earlier, so all the contestants had to do is follow the telegraph posts. The surface had not been broken by cart wheels. The drawback was that once they left the last hamlets behind and entered the Gobi Desert the camel track passed no habitation, no village, no source of food, and as far as they knew, no water either, yet they felt confident they could manage.

Speaking with local Mongol villagers, with the help of an interpreter, will be a key factor in locating the site of where Pons and Foucault abandoned the Contal. There must be some oral history of that event as Mongols had never seen automobiles before, someone must have heard the story from their grandparents, great-grandparents, or other local sources. This could be a very exciting adventure for viewers, most of them unfamiliar with the Great Race of 1907 and with this part of the world.



Figure 4 His original driver license was left with the Contal, so upon his return he obtained a new one.