

For the Record

Driving superlatives from *Guinness*.

It's a safe assumption that people have competed with each other ever since they discovered they could go faster on two legs than on all fours, for practical reasons as well as pride: he who could cover more ground could hunt or gather more food.

When men tired of racing on foot, they learned to train animals and raced on those. The fastest horse, or camel, or elephant, became a prized possession worth far more than run-of-the-herd types. And when warm beasts began to be replaced by cold steel ones, competition took on a whole new dimension.

The earliest mechanically propelled passenger vehicle, according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, was a French military steam tractor built in 1769 by Nicolas-Joseph Cugnot. It attained the breathtaking speed of two and a quarter mph. The first true internal-combustion-engine vehicle was Englishman Samuel Brown's 1826 atmospheric-gas-powered motor carriage. Brown claimed four horsepower from his *eighty-eight-liter*, two-cylinder engine.

But the world waited another three generations before the German Karl-Friedrich Benz demonstrated the first successful gasoline-powered car in 1885. It was a 560-pound three-wheeler and reached almost ten mph with a single-cylinder, four-stroke, 0.85-horsepower, 1.05-liter engine.

In the century since, man and his machines have progressed considerably. And we have never tired of competing against each other and against the clock, in ceaseless pursuit of fame, fortune, glory, and records. Records that cost lives. Records that exist only to be broken.

We routinely outrace sound in the

air and have traveled through space at incomprehensible speeds, but the fastest land-bound vehicle yet built barely brushed the sound barrier at Mach 1.0106 (about 740 mph) at California's Edwards Air Force Base on December 17, 1979. This unofficial, one-way-only record was achieved by the *Budweiser Rocket*, piloted by movie stunt man Stan Barrett and powered by a 48,000-horsepower rocket engine *plus* a 6,000-pound-thrust sidewinder missile. At something over Mach 0.95, the rear wheels lifted off the ground, leaving the single front wheel Barrett's only contact with Mother Earth—which may explain why he's a devoutly religious man.

The highest official speed ever attained by a jet-only car was Craig Breedlove's 613.995-mph run in *Spirit of America* on the Bonneville (Utah) Salt Flats in 1965. The record for a wheel-driven vehicle was set the year before by Britisher Malcolm Campbell's gas-turbine-powered *Bluebird*, which hit about 445 mph and averaged 429.311 through a flying 666 yards on the Lake Eyre salt flats in South Australia. Best for a piston-engined car was Robert Summers's 418.504-mph Bonneville run in *Goldenrod* in 1965. It was powered by four fuel-injected Chrysler "Hemi" engines totaling 2,400 horsepower.

The fastest racing car yet produced, according to *Guinness*, was the awesome Porsche 917/30 Can-Am car, powered by a turbocharged, 5.4-liter, 1,100-hp twelve-cylinder engine, in which Mark Donohue hit 257 mph on the Paul Ricard road-racing circuit in France. It also did 0-60 mph in 2.2 seconds, 0-100 in 4.3, and 0-200 in 12.6!

But the most powerful piston-en-

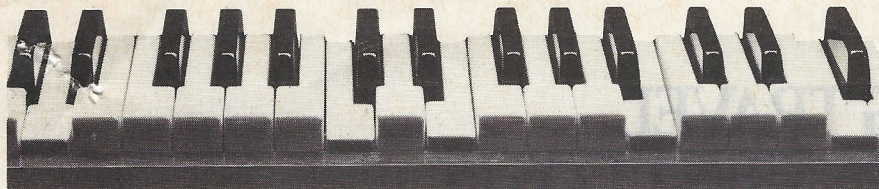
gine car ever built was *Quad A1*, designed and built in 1964 by Jim Lytle. A 160-inch-wheelbase, 5,860-pound drag racer, it was motivated by four 1,710-cubic-inch, 3,000-horsepower V-12 Allison aircraft engines, driven by eight wheels and tires (four on each axle) and dual six-disc clutch assemblies, and sprouted ninety-six spark plugs and ninety-six exhaust pipes. No word on its quarter-mile times—or whether Lytle's driver survived the trial run.

The record round-the-world run (26,514.23 miles through twenty-eight countries) is 102 days, 18 hours, 26 minutes, 54.7 seconds. It was completed between July 4 and October 15, 1976 (in conjunction with the U.S. Bicentennial), by racer Johnnie Parsons in a 1976 Pontiac Grand Prix from National Car Rental. Not only did National know about it, they sponsored the run. In the same event, Paula Murphy did 26,412.20 miles in about 105 days, 2½ hours, in a Pontiac Sunbird.

The longest known road trip was 167,770 miles through ninety-one countries by Saburo Ouchi of Tokyo, Japan—but it took him from December 2, 1969, to February 10, 1978. The longest *continuous* trip was made by Harry Coleman and Peggy Larson between August 20, 1976, and April 20, 1978—143,716 miles through 113 countries. Both records were set in VW Kombi campers.

Ah, but honors for the longest taxi ride go to Mrs. Ann Drache and Mrs. Nesta Sgro, who hired Hoboken, New Jersey, cabby Jack Keator to drive them 6,752 miles through fifteen U.S. states in September, 1976. The fare? About \$2,500.

The longest tow was recorded back in 1927, when crafty Canadians Frank J. Elliott and George A. Scott



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of Amherst, Nova Scotia, conned 168 passing motorists into towing their engineless Model T Ford 4,759 miles from Halifax, Nova Scotia, to Canada's West Coast. The prank took eighty-nine days and won them a thousand-dollar bet.

We've heard stories of rowdy race drivers running informal backwards competitions in rent-a-cars, but Charles Creighton and James Hargis of Maplewood, Missouri, drove their 1929 Ford Model A Roadster in reverse from New York City to Los Angeles (3,340 miles) between July 26 and August 13, 1930, *without ever stopping the engine*. Then they drove back to New York, again in reverse, arriving on September 5 and completing a total of 7,180 backwards miles in forty-two days. *Guinness* adds that the highest average speed attained for any backwards drive exceeding 500 miles was by one Gerald Hoagland, who drove a 1969 Chevrolet Impala 501 miles at an average speed of 28.41 mph at Che-mung Speed Drome, New York, in July, 1976.

The longest recorded skid marks on a public road, 950 feet, were left by a Jaguar that crashed on the M1 motorway near Luton, Bedfordshire, England on June 30, 1960. There's no mention of what the car ultimately hit or the fate of its occupants, but *Guinness* adds that the resulting lawsuit specified a speed "in excess of 100 mph" before the brakes were applied. The skid mark to end all skid marks, though, was left on the Bonneville Salt Flats by Breedlove's out-of-control *Spirit of America* land-speed-record car on October 15, 1964. It was more than six miles long!

Who knows what's next? Even as our personal transportation machines grow more practical and more fuel-efficient, our competitive spirits will drive us to further feats and further records. And whatever humans use to transport themselves in the distant future, there will always be adventurous souls finding ways to make their vehicles go farther and faster than the rest. ■

Detroit-based automobile writer Gary Witzenburg contributes a monthly column to this magazine.