Kastner, Charles B. *Race Across America: Eddie Gardner and the Great Bunion Derbies*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2020. Xv + 319 pp. Maps, illustrations, appendices, endnotes, bibliography.

Reviewed by Duncan Jamieson, Ashland University

Racism has been a constant in American society for four hundred one years. In 1619 twenty Africans were sold into slavery in Jamestown, Virginia Colony. In 1903 the civil rights activist W. E. B. DuBois (1868-1963) wrote *Souls of Black Folk*, a classic in race relations. Unlike his more moderate contemporary, Booker T. Washington, DuBois demanded equality across the board, bringing the lie to the belief that African Americans were intellectually and/or physically inferior to Caucasians. The African American, Eddie “The Sheik” Gardner (1897-1966), along with many others, proved DuBois to be right with their participation in the 1928 (Los Angeles to New York City) and 1929 (New York City to Los Angeles) Bunion Derbies, officially the Transcontinental Foot Race Across America.

*Race Across America* is an interesting, stride by stride accounting of the epic run organized by promoter (huckster?) Charley Pyle. Perhaps if I were a long-distance runner, rather than a long-distance bicyclist, my thoughts, and therefore this review, might be different. This is a good book, interesting and well worth the read. However, it is not, as the blurb at the bottom of the front cover touts, “a truly epic book!” But then the blurb is written by the winner of the 1992 Trans America Foot **Race** rather than a participant in the 1991 Pedal for Power, the Trans America Bicycle **Tour**. Kastner has previously written a book about the 1928 race, published by the University of New Mexico Press (2007) and a book about the 1929 race, published by Syracuse University Press (2014). Kastner is a long-distance runner himself, beginning with cross country in high school. He has run twenty-five marathons and one ultramarathon, accomplishments which give him a firsthand knowledge of his subject, backing that up with an advanced degree in history. Kastner is a Seattle based writer, which gives him a geographic connection to Eddie Gardner, who lived and raced most of his life in Seattle.

Medical science was barely out of its infancy in 1928, the year of the first bunion derby, and the year that Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin, the first true antibiotic. Sport science was equally primitive, with both the medical professionals and the sports world conflicted about the value or harm of long-distance running. Running equipment consisted of shorts, t-shirts and sneakers. Many of the 199 runners who registered in 1928 with the hope of winning the $25,000 first place prize (equivalent to $630,000 I today’s dollars), had little or nothing in the way of support, relying on the generosity of spectators or residents in the towns where they spent their nights. The youngest runner, a fifteen-year old African American, had his family following him in a beat-up automobile. No one had anything like the support teams that exist today. For the first race, with no rest days the finishers covered 3,442 miles in eighty-four days, averaging 40.7 miles a day. The first day was the shortest at 16 miles, while the longest came near the end when the bunioneers covered 74.8 miles. In 1929, veterans of 1928 and novices ran 3,554 miles in seventy-eight days, averaging 45.5 miles a day, ranging from a short day of 21 miles to the longest at 78.5 miles.

In the west they ran along the “Mother Road,” U. S. 66, which was not completely paved. Roads in the east generally had paved surfaces. On unpaved roads in dry conditions the dust clogged the lungs; during rainstorms, the men ran through ankle deep mud that clung to and weighted down their shoes. On the other hand, hard paved surfaces increased injuries from the relentless pounding. Both races stepped off in April, so runners experienced the extremes of weather. They ran across the Mohave Desert in blazing sun and heat, but then froze in the mountains with snow, freezing rain and sleet. Fierce headwinds did not deter the committed, though the long miles, steep altitude gains and incredible weather thinned the ranks, especially among those with no chance of prize money. Still many of the competitors continued to slog along for the glory of winning. Many ran day after day with painful and debilitating injuries.

The most interesting and yet problematic part of the book is the focus on several individual runners. I’ll admit I didn’t know anything about Eddie Gardner or the two transcontinental foot races but based on the subtitle I assumed he was the star of the show. Spoiler alert—he didn’t win in 1928. He was near the front and had won some stages, but there wasn’t any consistency. He finished eighth. Then when he came back to run in 1929, I assumed this would be the one. A second spoiler alert—he didn’t win in 1929 either. In 1929 he didn’t finish, dropping out due to a leg injury while running on a gravel road. He ran several more stages, but the thirty-fifth day, the 73.4-mile stage to Muskogee, Oklahoma, finished his race. Still, he ran nearly 1,500 miles at a nine and one-half minute mile pace. Throughout both races Kastner focused on Gardner, his times, his stage finishes, including his many firsts and his overall standing. In both races while most of the time was north of the Mason Dixon they did run through the southern states of Texas, Oklahoma and Missouri where racism was rampant. Gardner received all sorts of death threats, likely aimed at the other African American runners as well. The most bizarre was a man riding a mule who followed Gardner for miles, with a shotgun pointed at his back, threatening to shoot him if he passed a white runner. Unnerved, Gardner lost places and time on the front runners until he determined it was time to take a stand for equality. Though he never suffered any physical harm, the threats led to mental anguish, which was enough to put him off his pace, creating an unrecoverable loss.

Andy Payne won the 1928 race with an average pace of 10:03 minutes per mile for 3422.3 miles. Payne won while Johnny Salo came in second. In addition to second place prize money he won a job as a Passaic, New Jersey police patrolman. Salo won the 1929 race, averaging 8:53 minutes per mile. Unfortunately, Charley Pyle had no money to pay the promised $25,000, leaving Salo with nothing more than the sense of accomplishment.

The youngest runner in the 1928 derby was fifteen-year-old African American Tobie Cotton, who left school to cross the country afoot, with the hope of winning enough money to raise his family from poverty. With his family as his support team following in their used, beat-up auto, he finished the race out of the money, but the people of Harlem were so impressed at his accomplishment they bought the family a new car to drive home. At the time of this publication Cotton continues to be the youngest runner to cross the country.

There are multiple stories like this that are a part of *Race Across America*. The race organizer, Charlie Pyle and his second in command, football legend Red Grange, along with the covey of runners who might be known to aficionados, Pete Gavuzzi, Phillip Granville from the British West Indies, Mike Joyce, Arthur Newton, Smiling Sammy Robinson, Arne Souminen, Guisto Umek and Olli Wanttinen are only a sampling.

If you have no knowledge of Kastner’s first two books on the Bunion Derbies, this you will find interesting. I don’t know if it was the author or the publicity department at the press that determined the subtitle, but it seems a bit disingenuous to me, as Eddie Gardner is not really the focal point. The other runners receive a great deal of credit as does Charlie Pyle and the carnival he planned to entertain the locals at each night’s stop, and how Red Grange fit into the mix. Finally, a more even split between the two races would be welcome, as 1929 clearly gets short shrift.