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Chauffeur Buenaventura Compte and some of the cars he drove (1907-35)

During the early years of the twentieth century, chauffeur Buenaventura Compte (1878–1935) was in the service of distinguished Spanish families. Some of his exploits with his employers are described here, as well as some of the cars he drove.

With the advent of the motorcar at the beginning of the twentieth century, many wealthy Spanish families acquired one, not only for transport purposes, but also as a status symbol. These early automobiles were driven and looked after by professional drivers, so chauffeurs with good references were highly valued, as was the case of Buenaventura Compte. Some of his experiences with two Spanish families are described here, together with some of the cars he drove in the period 1907–35.

Buenaventura Compte was born in Castelló d'Empúries, a village in Girona province, very close to the Costa Brava in Catalonia. It is not known where he did his apprenticeship as a driver-mechanic, but in October 1907 he obtained his driving licence for petrol motorcars, the seventy-sixth such licence issued in Barcelona.

In that year he was taken on by Mr Manuel Garriga Roig (?1870–1942), a member of the well-known Garriga-Nogués family of bankers established in Barcelona. Manuel Garriga was a keen motorist, and member of the board of the *Real Automóvil Club de Barcelona* (RACB), nowadays called *Real Automóvil Club de Catalunya*, one of the biggest automobile clubs in Spain. Garriga was the chairman of RACB's Commission for the organisation of the *Copa Catalunya de Voitures* of 1908. It should be noted that the *Copa Catalunya* was the very first professional race to be held in Spain, following the tragic Paris-Madrid race of 1903, which did not cross the border due to the French government halting it in Bordeaux, because of many fatal accidents. Garriga took part in the 1908 *Copa Catalunya* as a private entrant, finishing ninth driving a Werner. Giousué Giuppone won that race at the wheel of a works Lion-Peugeot.

In 1907 Manuel Garriga acquired a two-bucket-seat Panhard & Levassor type U1 motorcar in France, which was registered there in 1906. Both owner and chauffeur drove the car to Barcelona by road, at one stage arriving at Vichy, a *station thermal à la mode* patronized by celebrities and the wealthy. The Panhard was locally re-bodied in Barcelona and registered B-55 (B for Barcelona). In October of that same year heavy floods badly affected some Catalonian villages. King Alfonso XIII visited the damaged places, accompanied by many personalities in a stream of cars, including Manuel Garriga and his chauffeur in the U1 Panhard. They also attended some lengthy town-to-town trials organised by the RACB. The car was sold in 1911 to a Mr Sebastián Torres, who kept it roadworthy until 1924.

In 1908 Manuel Garriga purchased another car, this time a big six-cylinder, 9.5-litre V-type Hotchkiss, registered B-360 in the same year. In Hotchkiss's agency in Barcelona was an important coachbuilder named Juan Reynés. He was a member of the RACB board and one of the founders of the Club. It is not known if the double phaeton-style body on the Hotchkiss was built in Reynés's workshops.



A period postcard depicting the Vilaseca castle

In November that year, the sports newspaper *El Mundo Deportivo* reported that Manuel Garriga and a fellow traveller named Salvador Andreu undertook a non-stop run from Paris to Barcelona with the 60hp Hotchkiss. Naturally, Buenaventura Compte would have been a member of the team, although no mention of him appears in the paper. Garriga and Andreu had intended doing the trip in a record time, but they took a wrong turn in Sens and were delayed. On that trip, Compte drove the car most of the time according to his family memoirs.

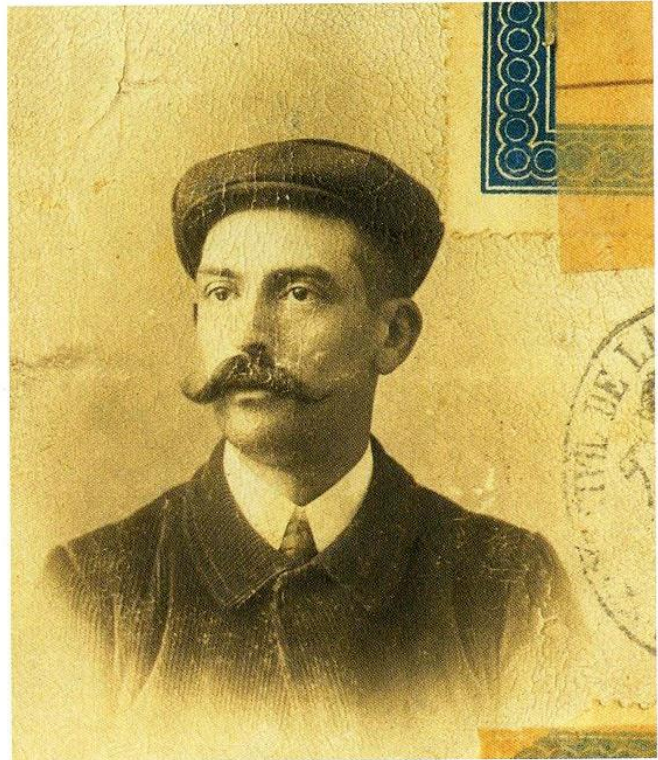
Buenaventura Compte left Manuel Garriga's family circa 1910 and was hired by Isidro M. de Sicart (1865–1929), the count of Sicart, who owned Vilaseca castle, a big property in Tarragona province. It would seem that the chauffeur duties of the new job were more sedate. By this time the count owned two cars, a 1908 Rochet-Schneider landaulet, registered B-318, and a 1910 double phaeton-bodied Packard 30UC type, one of the first batch of that make imported into Spain. In 1915, the count acquired a torpedo-bodied FIAT Tipo 5, which was then at the top of the FIAT range of cars. In 1920, a second Rochet-Schneider was bought, registered B-4277. This was followed in 1924 by a V8 Cadillac, registered B-16046. Then, in 1927, a Renault, with Barcelona's registration B-25008 was added to the count's fleet. It is not known whether all these cars were in Mr Sicart's garage at the same time, but probably not. In 1929, Compte announced his wish to retire, which was granted. He was presented with the

Renault by the count in gratitude for his loyal services. Shortly after, Isidro M. de Sicart died.

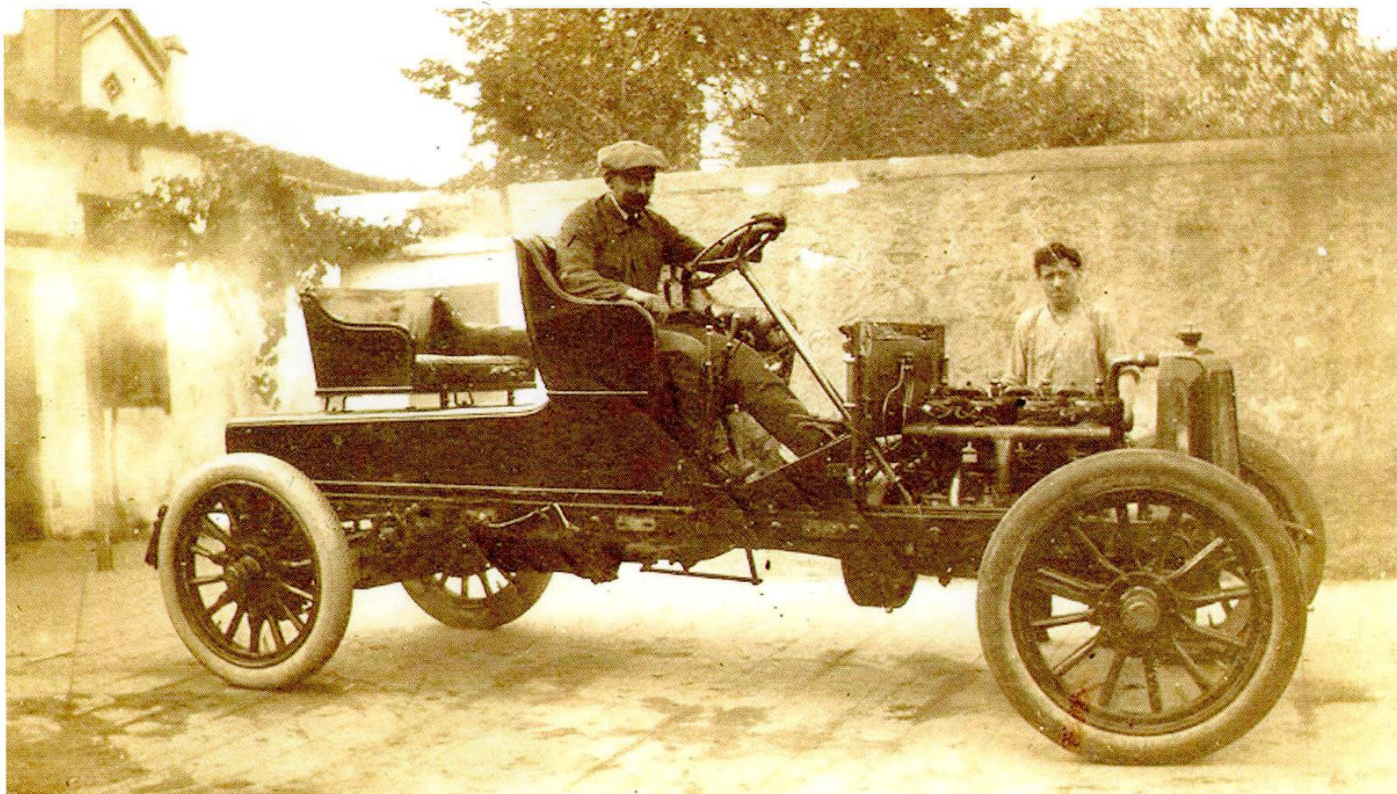
Licensed by the Barcelona's town council in May 1930, Compte became self-employed as a taxi owner-driver with the Renault. Unfortunately, the profits did not come up to expectations as the car's maintenance costs were high. For a couple of years or so, he then worked as a professional driver of luxury hire-cars, before turning to driving rolling chassis, mainly buses, to coachbuilders' workshops. This was very uncomfortable and arduous work as the driver was seated on a precarious bench bolted onto the chassis without any weather protection and at the mercy of the elements. On one of these trips, in Cadiz province, his vehicle was struck by lightning. For hours, Buenaventura Compte lay in a ditch, where he subsequently died. He was fifty-seven years old.

Acknowledgments

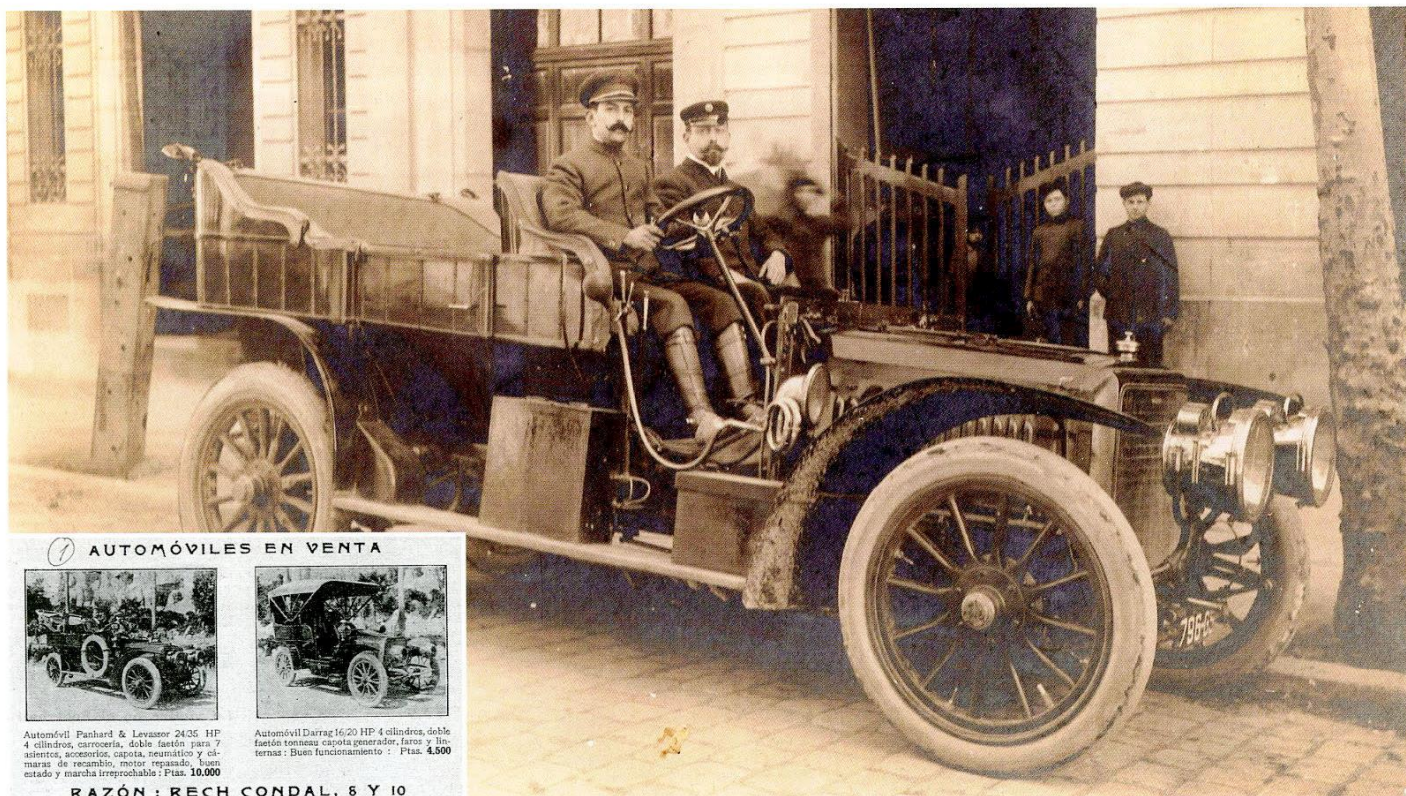
Most of the photographs come from the archives of the Compte family; personal data on Buenaventura Compte have been reported to the author by his grandson Joaquim Compte. With thanks to Agustí Marín for his observations on the FIAT Tipo 5, and to Laurent Friry and Bernard Vermeylen for their comments on the U1 Panhard. The author is very grateful to Sam Roberts for his significant assistance.



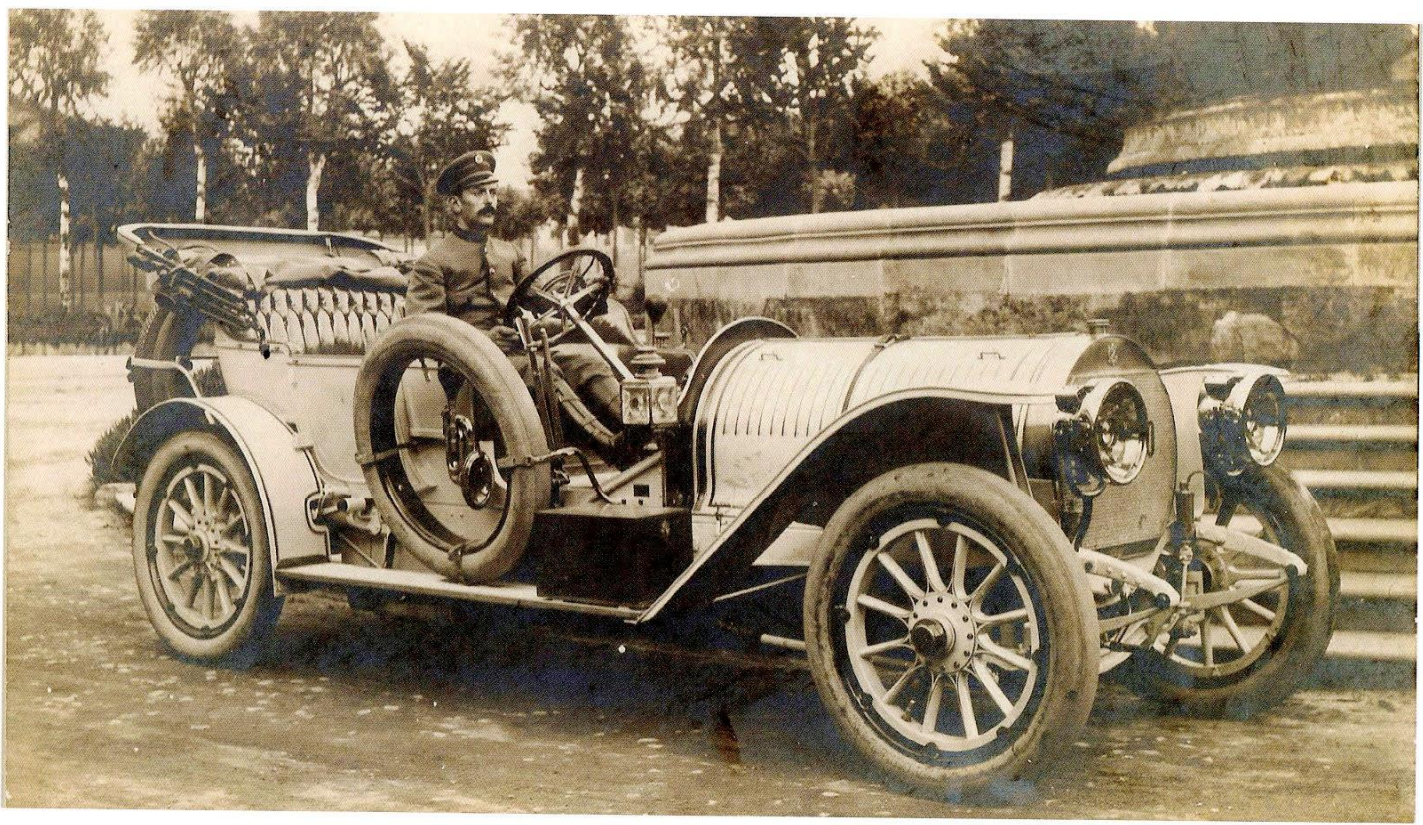
Left, an outline portrait of Buenaventura Compte, drawn in 1907 during a halt in the French Vichy thermal town, whilst driving the Panhard U1 to Barcelona. Above, a moustached 29-year-old Buenaventura Compte



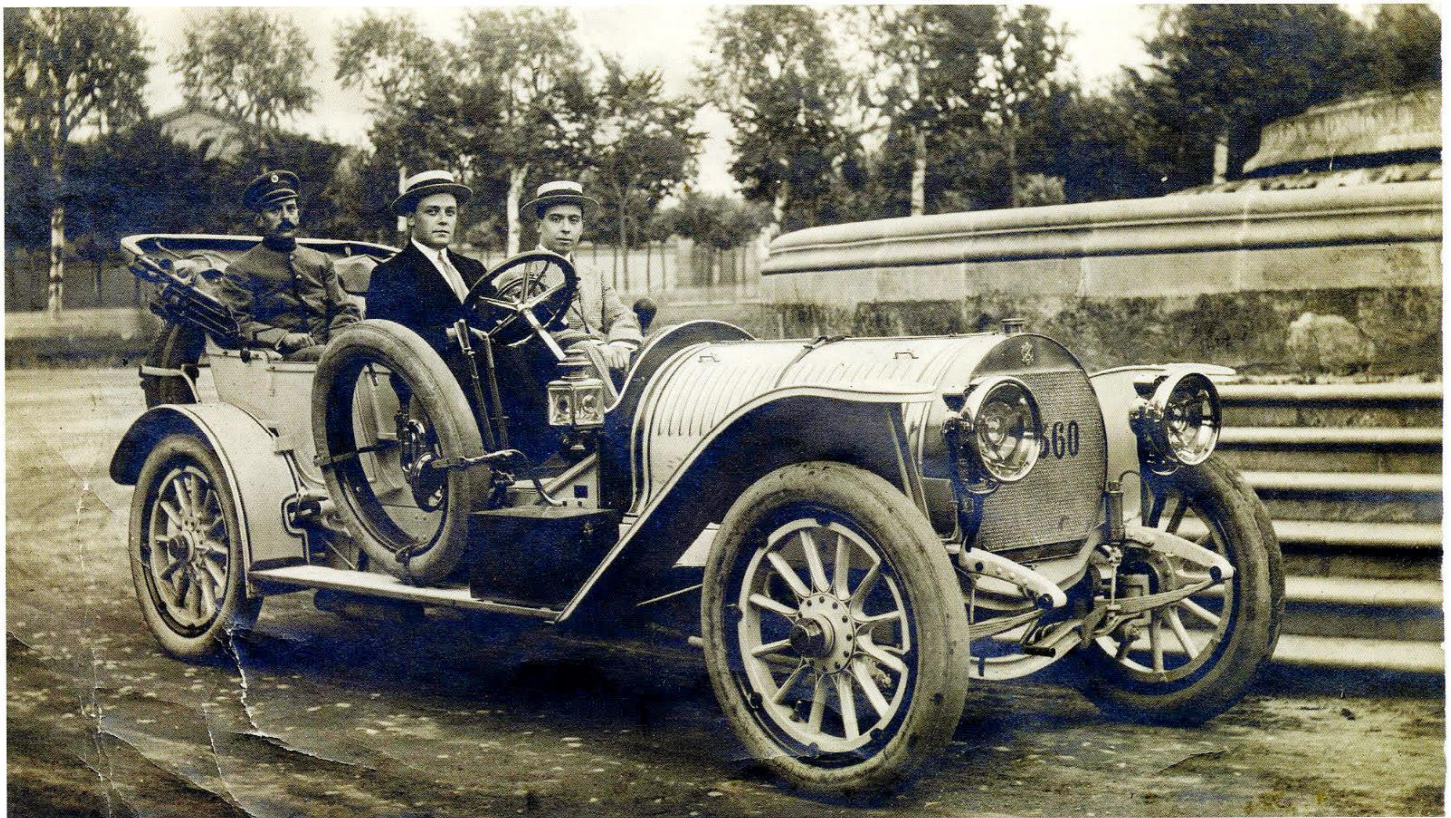
The U1 type Panhard rolling chassis on its arrival in Barcelona. Two variants of the four-cylinder Type U1 were listed in Panhard & Levassor's 1906 catalogue; one was quoted as a 24hp version with a 5313cc engine and another of 35hp with a 7360cc engine. Apart from the motor, the two models were nearly identical, both with chain drive. It is not known into which category B-55 fell. Rear wheels were provided with nail pullers



The U1 Panhard, with an unfinished new body, standing in front of F.S. Abadal's workshop. Abadal was an automobile agent and accessory supplier based in Barcelona. We do not know which of the reputable coachbuilders of that town constructed the second Panhard's body as Talleres F.S. Abadal only started in coach building activities in 1912. The car in the picture still wears the Paris 1906 registration 796 G5, but it was soon registered B-55 in Barcelona. Inset: The Panhard, as advertised for sale in the 1 June 1911 issue of the sports magazine *Stadium*. Mr Garriga asked 10,000 pesetas for the car (£367 at the exchange rate of the period; 27.24 pts/£); it was a large sum in 1911



Manuel Garriga's second road car, an impressive 1908 Hotchkiss Type V 40/50hp, the first six-cylinder car of that make, with a capacity of 9495cc and fitted with a propeller shaft rather than being chain driven. It was registered in Barcelona B-360 that same year. Mr Compte is at the wheel in the picture. Hydraulic shock absorbers are linked to the front springs; these were possibly after-sales accessories



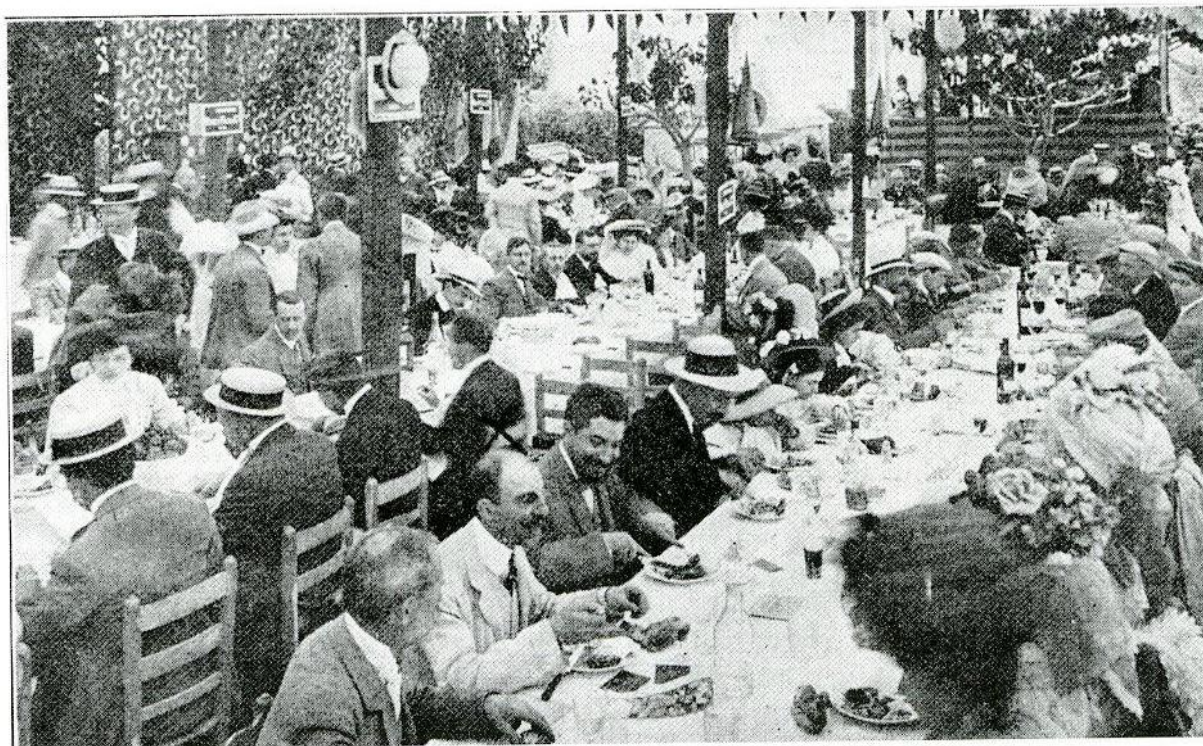
The big Hotchkiss in the same location, but this time the owner Manuel Garriga Roig is at the wheel; chauffeur Buenaventura Compte is seated at the rear. Photograph courtesy of Laurent Friry



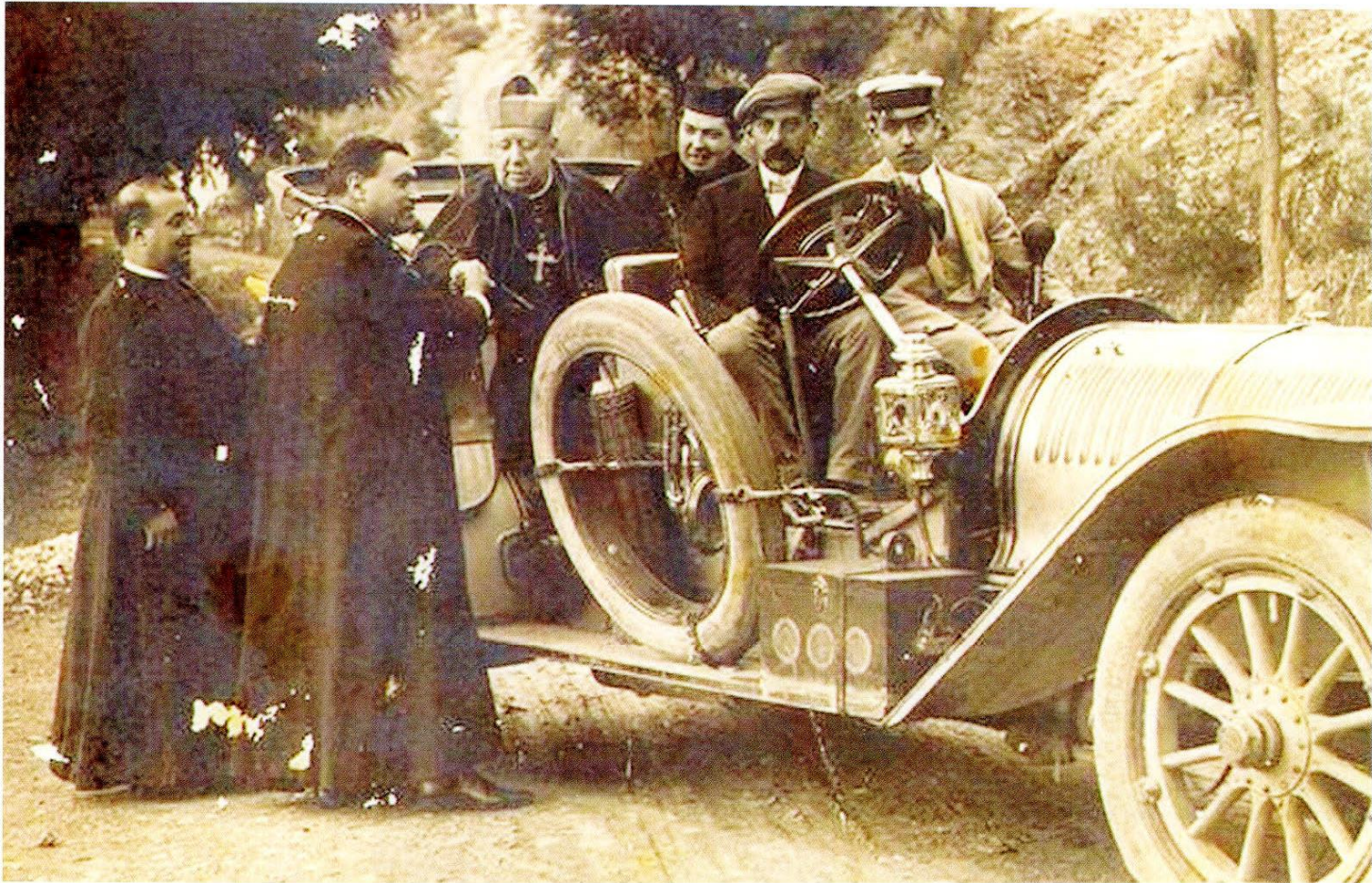
Manuel Garriga Roig, dressed in style, is behind the wheel of his Type V Hotchkiss (from *Programa Copa Catalunya*, 1909)



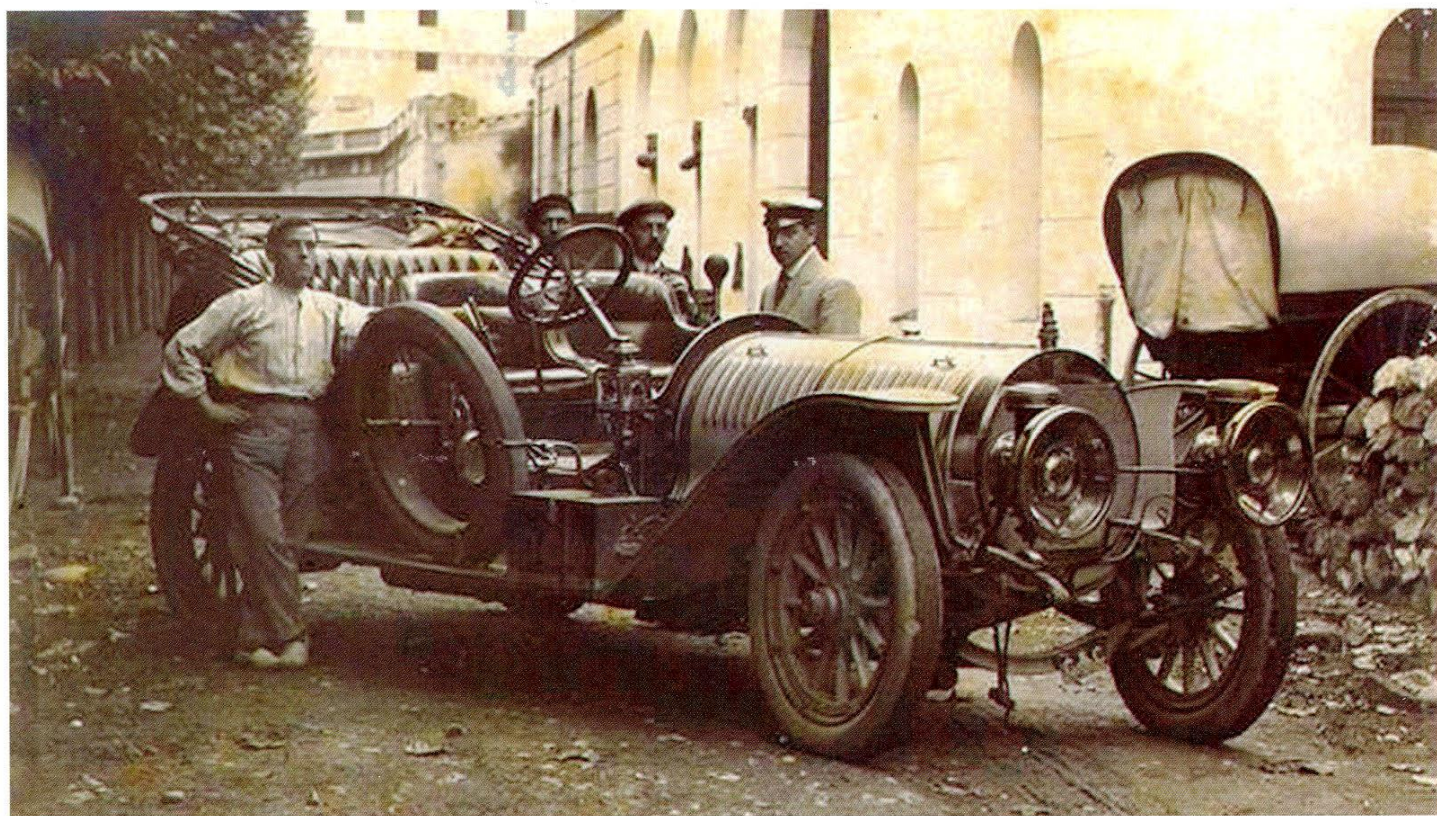
Garriga at speed driving his two-cylinder racing Werner (#10) in the first Copa Catalunya (1908). The cartoonist dressed Garriga with the same clothing he wore behind the wheel of his Type V Hotchkiss (see image, p. 80. From *Programa Copa Catalunya*, 1909)



A view of the open-air lunch for the crowds attending the first Copa Catalunya. Buenaventura Compte is in the light suit, second from front (from *La Actualidad*, 5 June 1908)



Chauffeur Compte drives a bishop and his secretary in the Hotchkiss



New big acetylene headlamps measuring 380mm in diameter were fitted to the Hotchkiss, prior to the non-stop Paris-Barcelona trial in 1908. With 12,000 candle power, those headlights were the most powerful of the French manufacturer BRC Alpha range