

Are We There Yet?

By Carl Worstell

The University of Pennsylvania School of Engineering is extremely proud of alum Ralph Teetor. Teetor and his cousin built this automobile in 1902. A [New York Herald](#) article with the above image failed to mention that Ralph was blind.

"Are we there yet?" Surely you have heard this question from one of your kids in the back seat. On a long trip this is usually asked repeatedly, and you are already tired from driving. To make this annoyance less, and to help make long trips less tiring, modern cars have cruise control. Set the cruise control on, turn up the radio, and relax a bit.

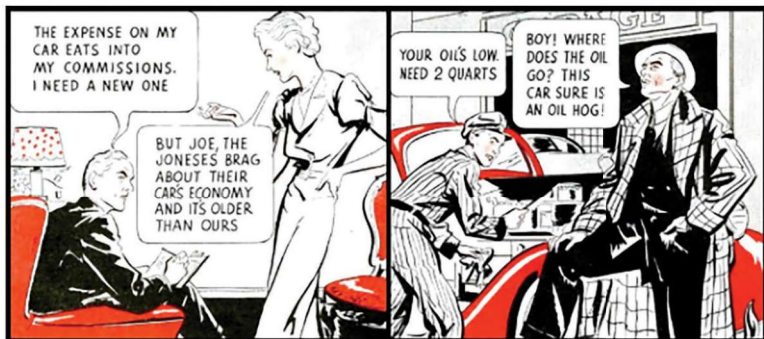
Modern cruise control was invented by Ralph Teetor in 1948. Born in 1890, Teetor grew up in a family that owned several manufacturing businesses ranging from building bicycles to building automobile engines. At five years old, Teetor became blind from a condition called sympathetic ophthalmia, in which trauma to one eye induces damage to the other, rendering one completely blind. In Ralph's case, an accident with a knife blinded him in one eye. Teetor, however, quickly honed his other senses. He learned to navigate his birthplace of Hagerstown, Indiana, on his own. He could sense building corners by detecting the echo made by his metal-tipped shoes, counting steps between known landmarks, and avoiding traffic issues by smelling the horses and hearing the cars

that were coming down the street.

Encouraged by family, Ralph routinely broke barriers. He decided to become an engineer in an era when many colleges refused to even consider his application. One of Ralph's cousins was an economics graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. This cousin persuaded Penn's engineering dean to admit him to the school's mechanical engineering program. Ralph only needed a little assistance in reading textbooks and writing assignments. One comment was that successful engineers think in images and Teetor had this kind of thinking.

Following graduation, Teetor returned home and became the lead engineer for the Perfect Circle Piston Ring Company started by his father and three uncles. Ralph eventually became its president. He depended on his patent attorney, friend, and frequent chauffeur Harry Lindsey to shuttle him around. Ralph found Harry's jerky accelerator foot bothersome.





According to sources, Teetor worked with the Piston Ring Company from 1919 to 1964. Ralph oversaw the engineering division as director and vice president. He was company president 1946 to 1957 and remained on the board of directors until 1964. The company's name changed to Perfect Circle Piston Ring during the 1920s. The Dana Corporation purchased the business in 1963. Clockwise from the upper left: A 1937 Perfect Piston Ring Company ad formatted as a comic strip. This 1929 Perfect Circle ad appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*. A vintage "Doctor of Motors" piston box.

Just DRIVE

Perfect Circles

Will take good care of your motor

Oil-Regulating Type 60c
PAT. MAY 2, 1923

Compression Type 30c

Zooming—full-throting power is possible only with maximum compression... for compression is the source of all your motor's power... Tell your repairman you want Perfect Circle Compression rings installed along with Perfect Circle Oil-Regulating rings. They always make possible high compression, and stop blow-by (leakage of explosion gases past inferior worn-out piston rings).

YOU CAN sit back... and just drive... mile after mile after mile... and know all's well with your motor if it's PERFECT CIRCLE-equipped.

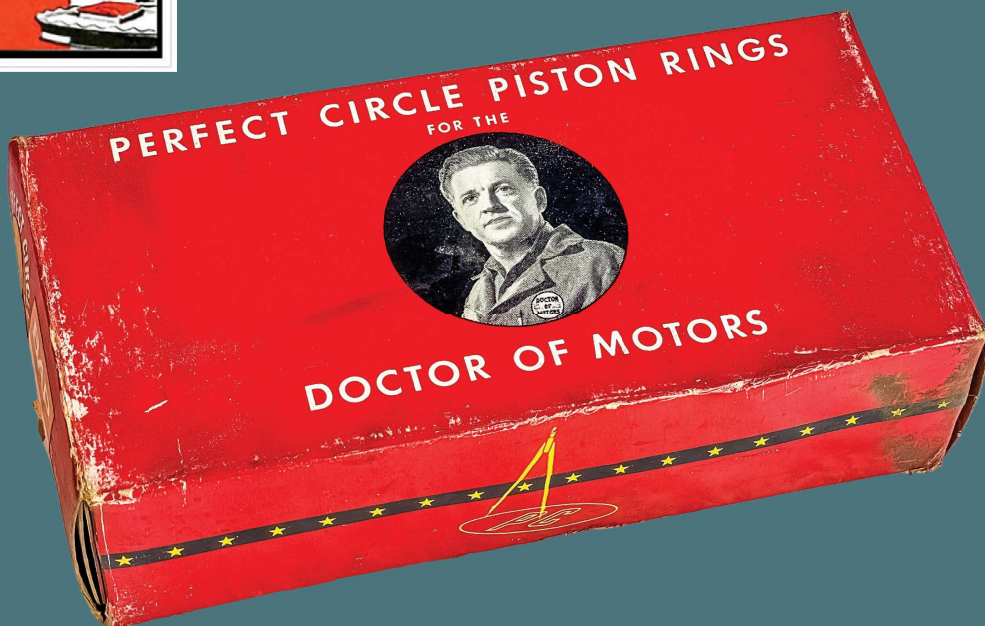
Peace of mind is yours... Even at today's higher speeds there's no danger of running out of oil unexpectedly. PERFECT CIRCLES save every drop that isn't actually required—yet insure thorough cylinder lubrication. Always enough oil—never too much!

Three-fourths of America's passenger car makers use PERFECT CIRCLE Oil-Regulating rings as standard equipment... for PERFECT CIRCLES are designed to keep pace with faster driving and higher speed motors.

Any garageman will respect your judgment when you ask for PERFECT CIRCLE Oil-Regulating rings. It will pay you in money and peace of mind to have them in your motor.

THE PERFECT CIRCLE COMPANY, Hagerstown, Indiana
Export Sales Department, 349 West Washington Street, Chicago, Illinois

PERFECT CIRCLE PISTON RINGS



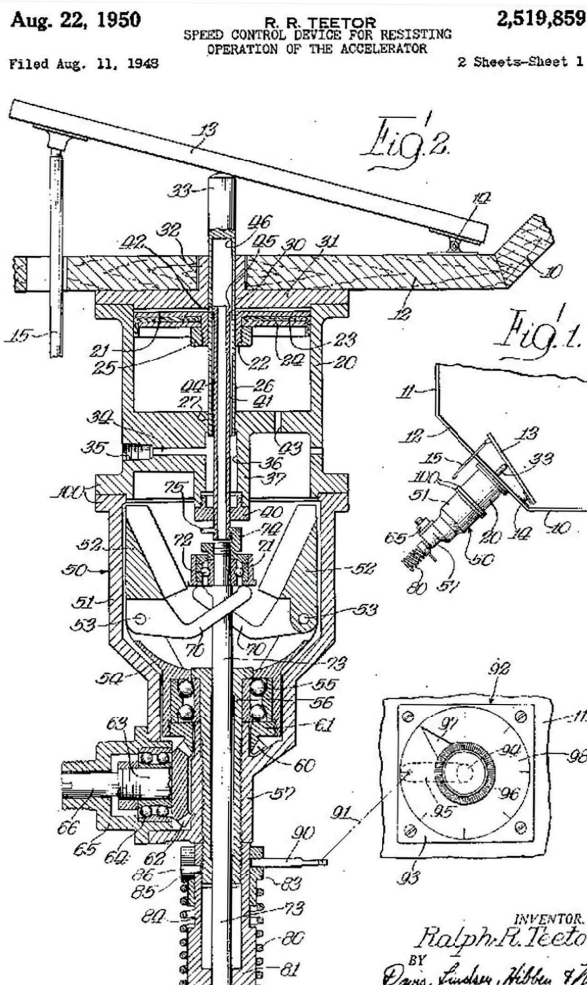
Teetor envisioned a speed mechanism controlled by the motorist. Upon reaching a driver selected speed, the motorist would feel some resistance from the accelerator pedal. Holding the pedal steady would enable the motorist to maintain a dialed-in speed, and pressing down would deliver acceleration.

The first prototype, called the "Speedostat," had a dashboard mounted speed selector connected to a mechanism running off the drive shaft. As speed approached the amount set by the driver, the governor-controlled mechanism activated a vacuum-driven piston that would push back against the gas pedal. Teetor's patent for his speed control device was granted in 1950.

In 1958, Chrysler was the first automobile manufacturer to offer the Speedostat, and even then, it was only a luxury model option. As its popularity increased, Chrysler began to offer Speedostats on all car models. General Motors' Cadillac Division followed and, renamed and marketed the device as "Cruise Control." Cruise Control became popular as a convenient, though non-essential, feature on many cars.

Right: Teetor's 1950 U.S. Patent for the Speedostat.

Below: Ralph Teetor, holding the Speedostat device he invented, shows the technology to Perfect Circle President William Prossner.





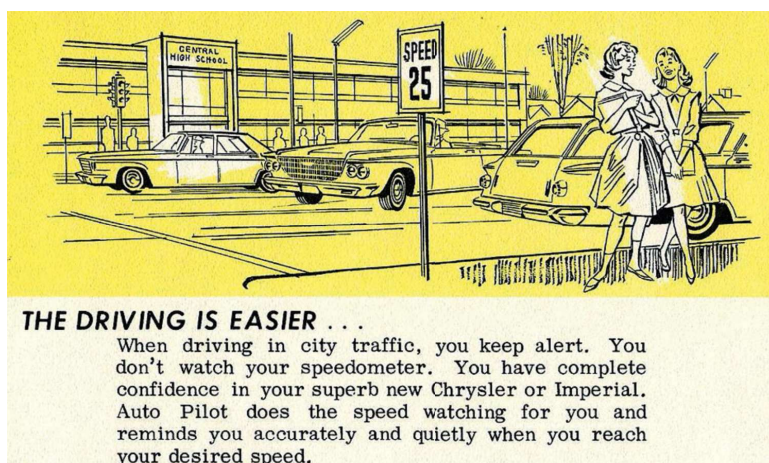
Through vibrations and sounds Ralph Teetor (right) used his keen sense of touch and hearing to detect the health of a race car's engine.

Then in 1973, when OPEC imposed an oil embargo against the United States, Teetor's invention became a widely accepted, gas-conserving driving tool. Some studies have estimated the national speed limit prompted by the oil embargo saved 167,000 barrels of oil a day, and Teetor's invention was a perfect way for motorists to maintain this speed limit.

Hollywood captured Ralph Teetor's incredible story on film. In 2025, Ralph's great-nephew Jack Teetor, wrote and produced the movie *Blind Logic: The Ralph R. Teetor Story*. Mike Rowe narrated the film. The movie can be streamed.

When Ralph passed away in 1982 at the age of 91, he had over 50 patents to his name.

So, the next time Johnny and Susie are complaining about how long this trip is taking, set the cruise control, turn up the radio, and relax a bit. Just don't relax so much that you run off the road. The navigation systems to keep you in your lane are here also, but that's another story.



A Chrysler "Auto Pilot" promo from 1963.

(Images courtesy of Tracy Leshner and Carl Worstell)

