DAREDEVIL GOOD LUCK WITH A PRAYER

BY DON THORNTON, CORRESPONDENT



Bert Ward Beam didn't fool around when he wrote his newspaper advertisements for his daredevil auto stunt shows.

The ads shouted: "**DEATH RIDES AGAIN ... STAY AWAY ... DEATH STALKS THE TRACK AGAIN"** (Image, left). There also was this warning: "If You Have a Weak Heart or High Blood Pressure, Doctors Everywhere Advise Against (seeing) It!" (Image, right)

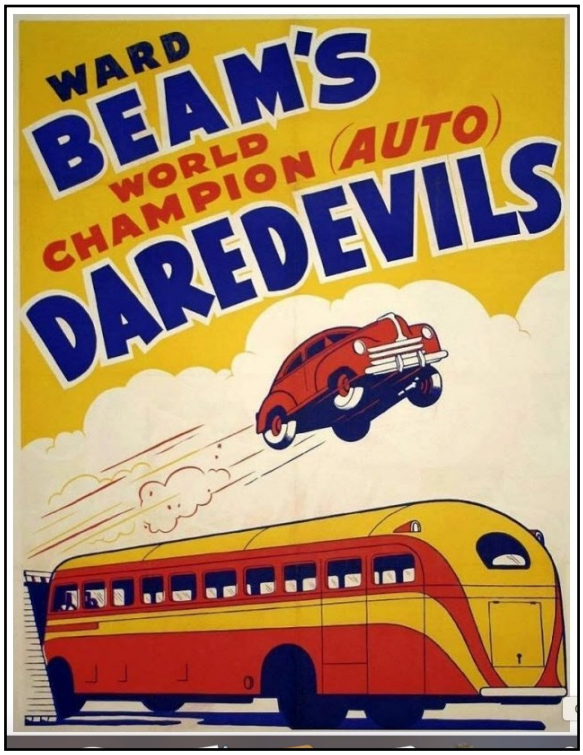


Ward was a small time promoter based in Celina, Ohio who began has ascent to the big time with an evolving show of a group of daredevils driving their cars like, well, daredevils. And he used his daredevils to launch a "good luck" advertising piece that survives today decades later.

"After convening the first crew in early 1923, *Ward Beam's International Congress of Daredevils* performed its inaugural show in August of that year at a local Toledo fair, giving birth to a new genre in America's mass amusement culture – the auto thrill show," according to Boston University sociology professor Itai Vardi.

Vardi's 2011 scholarly article "Auto Thrill Shows and Destruction Derbies, 1922-1965: Establishing the Cultural Logic of the Deliberate Car Crash in America," explored the ubiquitous cultural practice of crashing cars for entertainment, focusing in part on Beam's daredevils.

"Beam's men initially devised a set routine of car tricks, consisting mainly of precision driving and automotive endurance demonstrations," Vardi wrote, but over the years, they "turned largely into spectacles of high risk and destruction."



According to the article, Beam discovered the greatest attractions were "the wrecks and smashes: autos colliding in head-on crashes, slamming into brick and flaming walls, leaping from ramps straight into other crashes (known as the 'T-bone Crash')...". Beam's real-life, deliberate car crashes "became a burgeoning avenue for public amusement, gaining rapid popularity nationwide."

The popularity of Beam's "international champion daredevils," later named "world champion daredevils," over the years, soared with sell-out shows throughout the Midwest and East Coast in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. The Daredevils put on 140 shows at fairs and carnivals in 1954 alone.

At the shows, Beam's daredevil crew handed out metal good luck coins advertising his death defying contests. At the time a free advertising token was a popular promotion -- innovative in that it was not thrown away but rather carried by the consumer. The daredevils' wrecked cars are long gone, but Beam's "good luck" coins live on today.







The metal 1 ¼-inch coins were first marked on the front **WARD BEAM'S INTERNATIONAL AUTO DAREDEVIL CONTEST** with a car sailing high in the air off a ramp (image above, left). A second version was marked **B. WARD BEAM'S WORLD'S CHAMPION DAREDEVILS** with a car flying over a transcontinental bus (image above, middle). The back of the coins were marked **FOR GOOD LUCK CARRY THIS** and the added incentive of **THE LORD'S PRAYER** in full in tiny type ending with **AMEN** (image above, right).

The daredevil coins still turn up today with at least a dozen different offerings daily on eBay -- which due to the time span translates into thousands and thousands given away at shows.

In an article looking back at the Daredevils and competing "Hell Drivers," *Sports Illustrated* paid tribute to Beam in its May 17, 1971 edition: "The thrill show does not change much, not even from generation to generation. Most of the standard stunts were devised before World War II by a wily, vigorous old promoter named B. Ward Beam, the man who conceived the thrill show and promoted the first one at the Lucas County Fairgrounds ... in August 1923. "

Beam continued to operate at state and county fairs into the late 1950s, finally selling out to a competitor. He died in 1979 at the age of 87.