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AutoWeek takes you inside every week



ALCAN 5000, the sequel

This year all Satch rolled was the cooler

By Satch Carlson

OK, let's get something straight: Of course John Buffum won. He had the best equipment. That is, he had Tom Grimshaw, who for all his flaws (I think Grimshaw collects flaws, the way some people collect art; these people are practicing up to become patrons, while Grimshaw is practicing up to become a curmudgeon) is nevertheless still the second-best navigator in the Go Long, Go Fast rally business.

But this year's running of the AlCan 5000 Rally also put J.B. up in the pantheon of Real American Good-Guy Heroes, more about which later, so I didn't mind not winning, even though of course I was supposed to. Next year for sure. After I get my navigator back. And maybe shoot

Grimshaw in the foot.

Where to begin this tale of splendid excess, this story of le voyage formidable, as our French-Canadian amigos and ami goettes might put it? The entrants? No: We'll get to them in horrifying detail a bit further on. The cars? Well, there's not much you can say about the cars, ex-.. unless you talk about Buffum's Audi 5000 Quattro ... or the IPD motor home, for God's sake ... or the four-wheel-drive Rolls-Royce..

So maybe we start with the rallymaster, Jerry Hines, since by now he'll have gotten off most of the feathers and some of the tar, and the event itself. And maybe Brock Yates, who just may be responsible for the entire decline of western

civilization.

It was Yates, after all, who discovered that if you came up with large-scale insanity, true world-class lunacy, you would have an entire field of enthusiastic bozos all eager to (A) drive across the country at high speed, or (B) take a stultifying 8,000 mile tour around it. (Come to think of it, maybe this insanity really got started back in the days of the old trans-Canadian Shell 4000 Rallies. Or, for that matter, the Monte Carlo. In any event, the Whacko Factor certainly breeds true. And it's contagious.)

Since Jerry Hines, who lives in Seattle, had long been pondering the effects of microwave and gamma radiation on the brain cells of the average car freak-i.e. would long-range symptoms really include a tendency toward driving the Alaska Highway up and back in a week, and, if so, how could it be done-and since he obviously had too much time on his hands last year, he set up and executed the first running of the AlCan 5000 (which came very close to setting up and executing Yr Hmbl & Obdnt Crspndnt). Which was wonderful adventure. Yes, so much that Hines set about preparing to run it again in the next even year (odd years were out because there's already too much that is odd about this whole affair).

But he was persuaded-some say threatened—into staging it again this fall.

Which is why I bought a new car. Nobody's leaving ME out of World Class

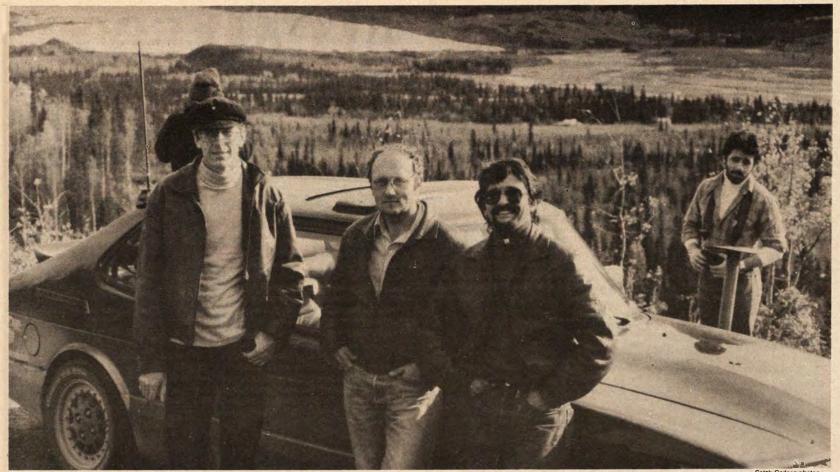
Nor was I alone; somebody shook the filbert trees, I guess, because there are all sorts of nuts running around with visions of long-distance rallying bouncing around in their cavernous heads. The Canadian AMC Jeep people, for example, have in mind a coast-to-coast run next summer in conjunction with Expo 86. The rumored/revamped/rumored again/revamped Amerathon is semi-scheduled for next fall. And there are mysterious rumors of a revival of the old Shell 4000, as well as certain plans afoot to run a sort of coast-to-coast performance rally, one with high-speed

Could this be the coming thing? Well, over two dozen AlCan crews evidently think so. There were the diehards from last year, of course, but we had also been joined by such luminaries as Competition Limited's Gene Henderson, who was rallying Conestoga wagons when Tom Grimshaw was in diapers-and Grimshaw's six days older'n baseball. There were the Tiggers, as they came to be called, Paul Mlinar and Ron Weir, who were flying across the wilderness on behalf of Flying Tigers in a Dodge Shelby Turbo

Old hands turned up in new rides: Derek Steele and Blake McGuffie, the two Canadians who were in first place last year when their venerable Datsun 510 was delayed by construction, turned up in a Skoda, of all things. Suzy Fouse rode last year in another Canadian Datsun, but this year she and husband John were anchoring the Alaska Rally Team in a brand-new VW GTI, the Spirit of the Vietnam Veteran. (Fouse, himself a veteran of two tours on the other side spends a lot of time trying to shake a fair deal for Vietnam vets.) We also had newcomers Jerry Heckel and Tom Olson in a glorious red Porsche 944, and of course I was riding with my semi-ex-brother-in-law, Craig Chanslor, aka Von Boot, and Oregon newspaperman Jerry Boone in the Spirit of Erik Carlsson, CB handle Blackbird, my new Saab SPG.

We had originally planned on capturing all honors for Excessive Opulence: The SPG is lined with tan Scottish leather. after all. Had I not picked it up in Yurrup? Had I not driven it straight away to Safety Devices, Ltd., in Newmarket for fitment of a roll cage? Had they not sent their minions down to London for an entire hide of Connolly leather with which to wrap the cage so it would match the interior? Indeed. And the Gucci roll cage might have won us the plush award, had it not been for the entries of Charlie Martin/Doug Kopp and the assembled multitudes from IPD in Portland.

Martin and Kopp showed up in a Cadillac-powered Rolls-Royce—on a Chevy Suburban chassis (license plate 4BY4RR). About halfway through the event, Martin was heard telling a gullible CBC newsman that they had built the car on special assignment from the Queen, which one-upped the Gucci roll cage for



The Spirit of Erik Carlsson and its crew of Satch Carlson, Craig Chanslor, Jerry Boone were sure they'd win Excessive Opulence honors but they couldn't top the competition.

Richard Gordon and Rob Rissberger came from Portland in the Ultimate Cruising Vessel: A 29-foot Rockwood motorhome, complete with closed-circuit television (for backing up), a microwave oven (to prepare their catered meals), and enough luxury options to make you consider selling your house and moving in—if you could get enough money for the house. At every rest break in the rally, the IPD crew would have open house (WIPE YOUR FEET BEFORE YOU COME IN HERE!), and their only moment of panic came when it looked like the microwave oven was about to go Tango Uniform, forcing them to eat their catered meals cold.

Thus we set out on the second running of what must be the most beautiful rally-cum-tour-cum-adventure you could imagine; up through the river valleys of western Canada, the trees glowing gold in the crisp fall air. Off we set with odometers dialed in, hopes high. Had we not learned from last year? Were we not intent on keeping it on its wheels and navigating to a gnat's eyebrow?

It wasn't until the first turn in the first timed section that we ran into trouble.

Hines had wisely outlawed rally computers this year, having grown weary of the whines of people who insist that they couldn't have been half-a-hundredth-ofa-minute off at the last checkpoint. But anybody with a hundredths-reading clock and an accurate odometer can factor it into a one-leg computer, staying right on the mark until hitting a speed change.
That wasn't our problem: We simply forgot to make the first left turn.

Well, it wasn't my fault. We were all so intent on matching the numbers that we forgot the first rule of rallying, which is stay on course! It does you no good whatsoever to keep perfect time in the wrong direction, and, before we had recovered, we had already amassed 14 penalty points.

They would not be the last.

As if to reassure me that this would not be our year, the Rally Gods, on a twisty uphill section of timed road, opened the hatchback of the Saab and dumped out the ice chest. A brand-new ice chest!

Twenty bucks at Jafco! MY 20 bucks! Along with a few other items, like Jerry Boone's portable computer, which I backed over in my haste to return for the

We never did find the lid.

This was still the first day, of course, barely 200 miles into the 5000; there was no way we were going to win this thing, even with Hines' new kindness, a plan whereby we would throw out our worst scores in various sections of the event. So we settled down to minimize our losses, practice for next year, and enjoy the



friendships were being rekindled and the battle lines had been drawn among the serious competitors. Buffum (who had brought his son, Paul Choiniere, along as the third driver) was ahead, but not by enough to matter at that point, with Henderson and Mike Van Loo in a new Subaru up there as well, and Rod and Lee Sorenson hovering in a new Mazda. And then there were the Tire Wars: Uniroyal had posted contingency awards and provided tires to anybody who wanted them, Buffum (and the Alaska Rally Team) were on B.F. Goodrich, and the Rockwood

By the first night's stop in Quesnel, old



Cadillac-powered Rolls-Royce of Charlie Martin and Doug Kopp and ipd's 29-foot motorhome stand head and shoulders above the Saab when it comes to cruising in luxury.



Is a navigator really necessary when there are so many signs to tell you where you are?

(aka Rocky II, since IPD had already put together a LONGER motorhome with the same fat sway bars and Bilstein shocks and fuel injection and hot water and a big refrigerator and THERE OUGHT TO BE RULES AGAINST THIS SORT OF BE-AVIOR) was on brand-new Goodyears that were to prove delightful on the gravel sections, as well as handling snow and asphalt with aplomb.

And then there was Al Schmidt. Al Schmidt and Bill Todd had driven out

from the east coast in Schmidt's venerable (another word is archaic) VW Bug. You may remember AI; he was the one who remained cheerful and unruffled last year as he went through nine tires. (Rally stories being what they are, some people maintain it was 17 tires. Trust me: It was only nine.) This year he was not having any tire trouble at all. Nor was he scoring many penalty points. It looked like it could be his year at last.

Of course, the charm of the longdistance rally is that anything can happen in the course of a week or two: Strange roads, mistakes, fatigue (mechanical and human), despair. The Rally Gods are

patient-and capricious.

The second night—we always measure these things by the evenings, since that's when the parties are—sees us once again at the Fort Nelson motor lodge, the oddest oasis in the Yukon, what with its inside swimming pool and stuffed elephant. By that time (A) everybody has had a chance to be photographed in Dawson Creek at the beginning of the Alaska Highway, (B) several of us have learned the fiendish rallymasterosity involved in keeping us to a 50-mile-an-hour average up a hill shaped like an arthritic corkscrew, and (C) Ed Botwick has decided he knows more about time than the guys in Greenwich. He starts a timed section exactly an hour early and then tries to convince the world there really WAS a time change in there somewhere. Since Botwick is obviously addled, having survived two One Lap of Americas (One Lapse Of America?), the semi-aborted Amerathon, and the first AlCan 5000 in his Audi 4000 Quattro, he

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ALCAN 5000

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is given the benefit of the doubt; he is humored as one might humor the lastborn child, the one spawned after the genetic pool has dried up like an African swamp.

The next morning starts the Long Push. That is to say, here is where the tour, the navigation, and the Vitamin C all melt together: A 24-hour push from Fort Nelson up north through Whitehorse, up past Lake La Barge (three choruses of the cremation of Sam McGee), up along the Yukon River to Dawson. Gold country. The birthplace of legends. Here is where most of the crews, doubtless addled from lack of sleep, elected to turn right for a 250-mile jaunt even farther north, an optional excursion up to the Arctic Circle itself

It was during this stretch that John Fouse got lost.

You'd think it would be hard to get lost in the north, wouldn't you? I mean, there's only one road to speak of. But the side trip to the Arctic Circle required drivers to turn right off what we laughingly call the main road, and Fouse missed the turn! Which meant that he pressed on about fifty miles or so on into Dawson, still thinking he was headed for a tiny Eskimo village. It wasn't until he saw the sign



Venerable Veedub of Al Schmidt Bill Todd gave John Buffum a chance to be a hero.

that read DAWSON FIRE DEPARTMENT that he realized his mistake; then, madder'n a Russian jumpmaster over Washington with a planeload of quitters, he turned around and hammered it back down the road to the intersection, turned left at the junction, and joined the other Why?-Because-it's-THERE! retardos at the Big Dotted Line in the Wilderness.

Me, I've BEEN to the Arctic Circle. We went to Dawson to rest up for the push to Anchorage instead.

Anchorage was MAHVELOUS, dollinks, what with good champagne on sale, hot showers, and two days to recuperate from the Halfway Party before heading up to the shadow of McKinley on the way back down the road. Here was the greatest challenge: While we had hit some snow on the Top Of The World Highway out of Dawson, now we were making the crossing through the foothills of the Alaska Range, scootering out from under the leading edge of a major storm. This was the road to Paxon, a twisty lane-and-a-half caribou track that would have been rutted dirt if it hadn't been layered in drifting snow.

Here's where Buffum played the hero. What happened was that Al Schmidt, who was now in contention for the overall lead (second at the halfway point, and Buffum had lost some time waiting for a school bus; they run in packs in Alaska), found himself in the middle of the Alaska wilderness with a big No Can Do on the oil pressure gauge, so he parked the Veedub by the side of the road for a look-see. Buffum & Co. stopped to see if they could help out, and by the time we arrived (you have to plan these things carefully so you can offer to help without any real chance of getting dirty), there was Buffum under the hood, reassembling the fitting on a braided steel oil line.

You ever work with that stuff? Pokes holes in your fingers. Slides up under the nails. Yet here was J.B. helping out the crew that had the best chance to beat him.

The rest of us took up an oil collection. flagging down the other rally cars until we had so much oil that Al could start being picky about brands. Up comes the Rolls-Royce. "We don't need any more chirps Suzy Fouse. "You got any **GREY POUPON?!**

And sure enough, down rolls the smoky window, and out comes Charlie Martin's blazer-clad arm, clutching a jar of the infamous mustard.

Unlike the '84 event, this one took us down the Cassiar Highway through the British Columbian outback in the daylight-and what a spectacular road it is! Mile after mile of the sort of road that people used to drive on the Alaska Highway: Narrow bridges! Ruts! Dust! Gravel! And the worst fate of all: Following an RCMP Travelall for 150 miles at 80kph.

That run took us into Prince Rupert. where we spent a rainy, boring day waiting for the ferry to Vancouver Island. By now we had figured out why we kept picking up points: I had forgotten the second rule of rallying, which is use Sanforized tires. See, unless you use steel-belted radials, the tires have a tendency to grow and shrink at various speeds over various road surfaces, giving you very strange mileage readings. What was even worse than my selection of the Euro Radial T/As, however-great tires, but no steel belts—was the fact that Hines had laid out the course on similar gumballs, so our error factors compounded each other.



John, Suzy Fouse anchored Alaska Rally Team in a brand-new Volkswagen GTI.

On the ferry-where Buffum turned 40, by the way (you might want to avoid such ferries)-Jerry Boone figured out that we still had a statistical chance to win the event. "The way I figure it," he said, "we can still pull it off—if, when they're unloading this barge, they dump the first eleven cars into the bay.

The British Columbia Ferry System refused to cooperate.

So there we were, cruising home in 12th place. Schmidt's orange plaguemobile finally threw a fan pulley, giving him his second straight Rotten Luck award; the only serious threat to Buffum came from the Sorensons. They actually scored fewer penalty points, but the toss-your-worst-scores provision had them throwing out piddly little two- and three-point scores while the rest of us were discarding disasters. When the smoke had cleared, then, Buffum had a final score of only 43 points—to the Sorensons' 50.

In third place with just 56 points were Gene Henderson and Mike Van Loo (which rounded out the Tire Wars nicely: Buffum was on BFGs, the Sorensons were on Uniroyals, and Henderson chose Bridgestones). Back another half a minute were Canadians Derek Steele and Blake McGuffie in the Skoda, causing many rude comments about tortoises and hares, and the wonderful Rolls-Royce rounded out the top five with 111 points.

We, of course, consoled ourselves with having stayed upright and pointed mostly in the right direction and running the whole thing on the original four tires. Next year for sure.