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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 amiguettes 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, exactly ... 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 Hmb! & 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 Loony Behavior.

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/re-vamped/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 stages.

Could this be the coming thing?

Well, over two dozen AlCan crews evidently think so. There were the die-hards 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 Yurup? 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 newsmen that they had built the car on special assignment from the Queen, which one-upped the Gucci roll cage for sure.



Satch Carlson photos

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-of-a-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 ice chest.

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 voyage.

By the first night's stop in Quesnel, old 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

(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 BEHAVIOR) 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 Al; 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 long-distance 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 AICan 5000 in his Audi 4000 Quattro, he



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?

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