

NORTH TO ALASKA



"Just boogie on up the Interstate 5 Highway 500 miles to the regularity" . . . this was my first instruction on the Alcan 5000 Rally. To someone reared on Scallion Cup and Queens Winter type 100 miles navigation rallies, it was something of a cultural shock — but this was rallying North American-style.

The Alcan 5000 clerk of the course, or rallymaster as he is called in the State, Jerry Hines, explains all in his foreword to the rally regulations. "The Alcan 5000 Rally was first presented in 1984 as a new event based on an old concept, that of the early days of endurance rallies such as the Monte Carlo, Tulip or Circuit of Ireland, before their emphasis shifted to closed stages and high speed. The rally is intended for the experienced driver, from whatever background, and will provide again a true test of reliability, consistency, crews, equipment and endurance."

Jerry didn't say in his foreword that he had left a lot of time for partying as well but it definitely sounded interesting.

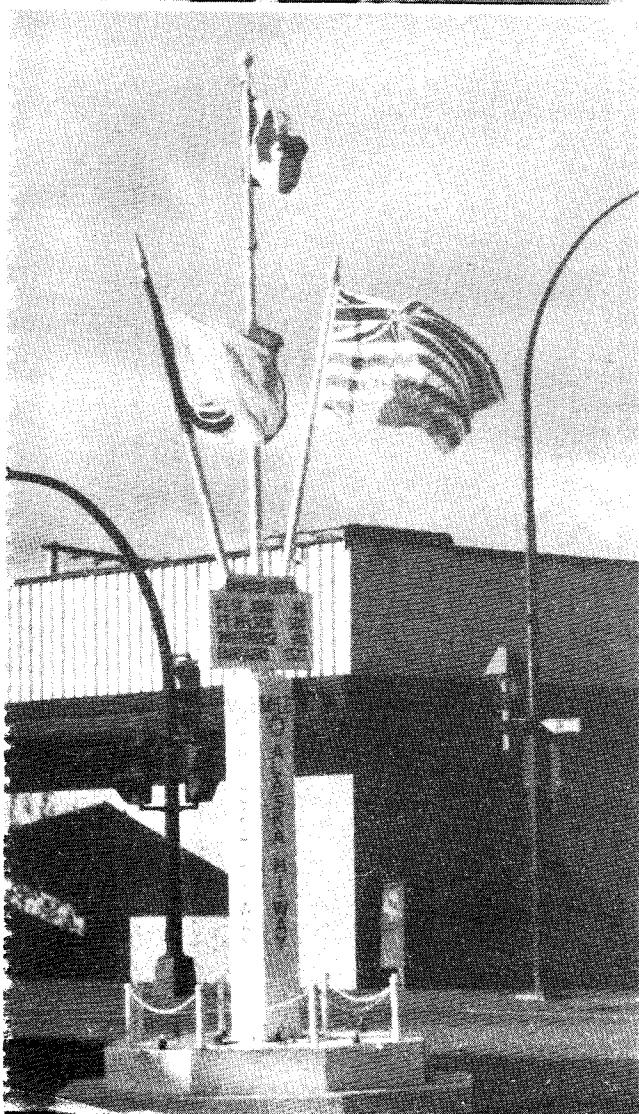
Watching the latest James Bond movie 10 miles up over the Atlantic it was time to reflect on just what a small world it is. It had been five years before that I met Jerry Hines, and that was on the Galloway Hills Rally in Scotland. There were vague memories of having a "wee dram" together — but really it was going to be a hard job to recognise "the man" at Seattle airport.

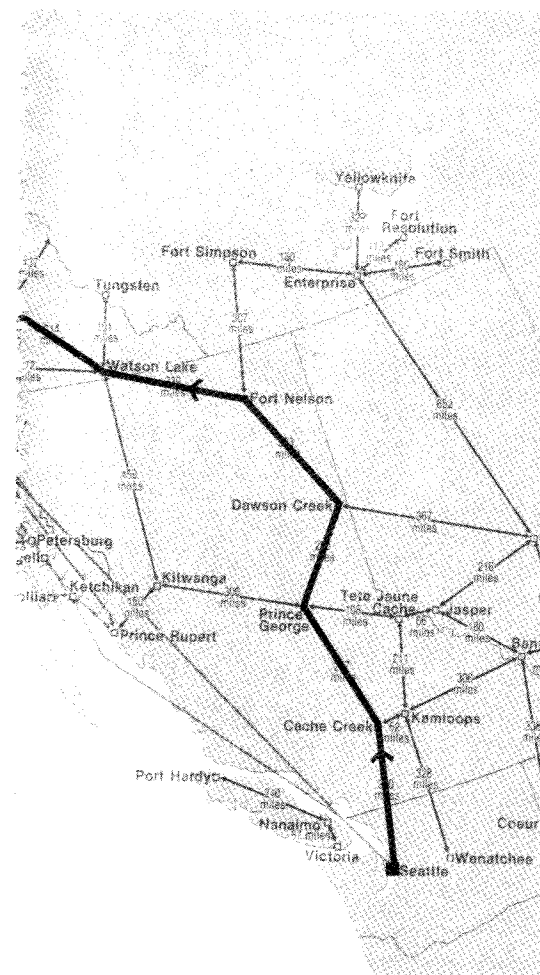
Still it was a pleasant way to spend a Monday morning as the Jumbo's Aer Lingus stewardess brought another gin and tonic — for a Punt, a Pound or a Dollar, it didn't seem to matter. It was duty free and a lot cheaper than where I was going although I didn't realise that at the time or maybe a camel impersonation and some storing up inside would have been attempted.

It had been a letter out of the blue that invited Liz and myself to the Alcan — we hadn't spoken to or seen Jerry since that Castledouglas weekend, so it really was a surprise. A fantastic surprise, as neither of us had been to the States, so it was going to be a great big adventure, with a capital "A".

BRIAN PATTERSON and his wife LIZ, the Rally Bulletin people, accepted an invitation to the United States and found themselves re-tracing the steps of the YUKON gold rush prospectors. Brian tells how and why...

Above: Yet another time zone change — Yukon into Alaska on "Top of the World Highway". Brian and Liz stop for a breather.
Left: Just 9 days to go — Mile "0" on the Alaskan Highway.





Some of Jerry's other observations made fascinating listening to someone from Glengormley . . . "the Top of the World Highway has no snow reported at the moment, but if it does get blocked it will only mean a re-route of about 400 miles" . . . and "we don't want to upset the natives, the average speeds are set at 55 to 60 m.p.h., including quick stops for gas".

And a warning . . . "we'll be boogeying along right there with you and if you keep passing us day after day, and throwing stones up at our windshields, you're going to hear about it. You may not have a room that night." (Jerry held all the hotel bookings).

He went on to explain about the State Troopers being out with the radar. "Cos no-one else goes up there after September." We'd be hitting Alaska on October 1st!

It started to sink in just what we were getting into when shown over the Dodge Wagon we were to use, complete with comprehensive spares, petrol cans, survival blankets, chunky Uniroyal tyres and snow chains tucked away somewhere.

To comments like "No piddling little 85 tickets boys, they must be at least into three figures" from Saatch Carlson, an Alaskan journalist all the way down from Anchorage, we prepared for the off.

Saatch, incidentally, was driving a Saab 9000 Turbo for which he had flown to London and bought, even having the roll cage fitted in Safety Devices and trimmed in the same gold leather as the seats.

As we moved up to the starting area, there to meet us were the press with a capital P . . . KIRO TV, KING, KLSY, local radio and "Print Journalism". The Alcan 5000 had really hit the headlines.

All it needed was someone with a chequered flag to shout through a megaphone "Gentlemen start your engines" . . . it had that sort of pioneering spirit about it.

So the great adventure got under way. In my case just about. I was handed the keys of the Colt and told to follow "Wayne".

Wayne was in "the black Dodge Challenger, the one with all the antennae sticking out of it — he talks to the world from in there". I didn't know what a Dodge Challenger looked like but I saw the aerals.

It was just as well, because I didn't know whether I was turning left or right, I hadn't driven the car before, I had never driven in America and there were 468 miles to go before supper at Williams Lake, and the start of the second regularity where

we found out later we were doing a control.

All in all an interesting few minutes ensued while I sorted out the driving bit, but once on the Interstate Highway it all began to settle down. At least I did better than Stephen Emerson, 20 miles out from Seattle he was nearly arrested by a State Trooper for "tailgating and exceeding the speed limit". A 96 dollar fine! Apparently tailgating is sticking too close to the car in front's back bumper.

Soon it was off the Interstate and on north and east towards Sumas, the road goes through lots of little settlements, many with Dutch Barns showing where the original settlers came from. On through the Canadian Customs, heading ever northwards, following the "Alpines" (what we call tulips) in the road book. Gradually the countryside became more rugged, with beautiful rolling hills covered in yellow-leaved ash, birch and poplar trees. Quite unlike anything we'd ever seen before.

Now there were fewer and fewer junctions or turns in the road book, up to 150 miles without a single symbol, just the occasional landmark like "Hells Gate Tunnel" and "150 Mile Hotel" as reassurance.

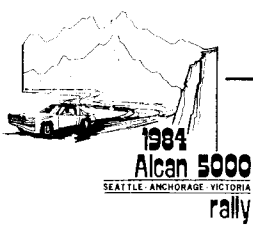
The Colt sucked the unleaded petrol through at quite a rate, so there were stops for juice every couple of hundred miles, but apart from that it was press on all the way, no time for cups of tea on this rally. Average speeds were always just about the 60 mark, with one ear cocked for the "escort" — the radar — detection machine screwed above the sun visor and which everyone who does a big mileage in the States seems to have in their cars as an early warning system.

At last it was Williams Lake by about eight o'clock that evening and time for supper. Apparently it was also time for the next regularity — whatever that was. It was time for a look at the regulations!

Under "definition of sections", it was apparent that what we had just come up was a "Transit" which was the same as a "Monte Carlo" only with time to stop for petrol and something to eat. The regularity, or TSD (Time Speed Distance) required competitors to maintain a pre-set average speed over distances of 10 to 30 miles approximately, and there would be secret checks timed to the second with the drivers penalised for every second early or late. Which is very much the same as navigation rallying is going back to in Northern Ireland.

Anyway after something to eat — I was starting to realise these guys ate such huge meals because they didn't stop too often — it was on up the road, onto dirt forestry tracks and left at a lay-by to wait for the first set of headlights. We didn't know where we were except that it was





pitch black in the middle of a forest, and what seemed to be exceptionally funny stories about bears in the bar the previous night, suddenly didn't seem so funny any more. It was a long way from the bright lights of Seattle.

Twenty six cars duly passed, at varying shades of accuracy, with a couple of them just about spot on, particularly current American rally champion John Buffum's Audi, Lee Sorenson from Sacramento in his Mazda RX7 and New York's Al Schmidt in his V.W. Beetle. At least that was by our unofficial reckoning.

By the time we had driven the last 70 miles to Quesnel in British Columbia we were past caring, totally bushed, as was just about everyone else judging by the way they disappeared into bed.

As all the controls that really mattered were secret, Terry and Colleen who were looking after the results on the rally, had to wait until each of the control cars appeared with their respective time sheets before they could "mark the scores". It was to be the next night before we found out what was happening on the rally — a mere 1160 miles from the Bellevue — Seattle start.

Sounds a bit odd by Irish standards of computerised results and bulletins every couple of hours detailing just what is going on during an event, but this was a different type of rally, and the system was quite satisfactory for the Alcan 5000.

Also a bit different from most of our Irish rallies was the number of marshals employed on the Alcan. Whereas the Circuit of Ireland for example claims that it takes 1500 marshals and officials to run the 1500 mile Easter classic, for the Alcan it takes six cars for all of the 5000 mile route. Those six were the Rallymaster Jerry, ourselves in the Colt, Wayne in the antennae, Gerald Hawley in a four-wheel-drive Chevrolet which the Rainier Club had bought to do sweeper and road opener in the event of heavy snow, Terry and Colleen in their Saab and last but not least a lovely man called Milton Moorhead and his son David in their little Mitsubishi. Milton was responsible for the roadbook, or "route book", and one of his personal touches was a piece of Scottish poet Robert Service's work before each daily leg of the rally. Service worked in the Dawson City post office during the gold rush just before the turn of the century.

The piece for the start of day two read:

This is the law of the Yukon and ever she makes it plain;
"Send me not your foolish and feeble; send me your strong and sane.
Strong for the mad rage of battle;
for I harry them sore;

Send me men girt for the combat,
men who are grit to the core;
Swift as the panther in triumph, fierce
as the bear in defeat.
Sired of a bulldog parent, steeled in
the furnace heat.
Send me the best of your bosom,
them will I call my sons;
Them will I gild with my treasure,
them will I glut with meat."

An appropriate piece for the territory we were heading into where it must have been survival for only the fittest years ago.

The idea of only six control cars for the whole rally worked and it fitted in with Jerry's ideas of keeping the whole rally compact and tight, with every one knowing everybody else and becoming very much a team.

The team was boosted by the Porsche Club of North America for a section near Anchorage, but mostly it was just the six cars, leapfrogging the competitors now and again to do a section at the start and end of a day's run.



"Rallymaster" Gerry Hines receiving moral support from Liz and girl friend Margaret.

There were no unnecessary frills or controls either. For example there was no start control at any of the legs — the competitors knew what time the regularity sections started and they just boogeyed on up the road when it suited them and, just as long as they arrived on time without breaking the speed limits, that was O.K..

Day two then took us from Quesnel in British Columbia 620 miles to Fort Nelson on the Alaska Highway. Just a couple of miles out from Quesnel was the first regularity of the day, using dirt and gravel roads through a magnificent forest, an autumn frost in the air.

The regularity was eventually cancelled because of a road book error, but it did give us the opportunity to talk to a couple of guys driving huge caterpillars. They told us of working away day after day just grading and regrading the gravel roads to keep them open, of 10 and 20 foot snowfalls in winter and soaring temperatures in summer. They were nice blokes, but hard men indeed, and fascinated by the rally, which was something completely new to them.

That first section of the day also gave us the chance to trail the 30 foot Rockwood motor home along the gravel roads and see how it handled. Which was exactly what it did do — handled. At speeds up to 70 m.p.h. those guys threw the "Rocky 2" as it was christened round the gravel bends and over the bumps as well as our estate car, which was semi-rally prepared.

The guy in charge of the motor home project was Richard Gordon from Portland in Oregon. Richard runs his own business specialising in high performance parts for Volvo and Saab cars. His business has mail order customers all over the world as well as the States and he also did a lot of saloon racing himself.

A couple of years ago he bought a Rockwood motor home for himself, and thought "just how awful it was to drive". So he started to beef it up a bit, then thought that other people might like to enjoy driving their motor home as well. So, in conjunction with Chevrolet, upon whose chassis the motor home was based, Rockwood themselves, Goodwood tyres and a few other companies, a second machine — hence the name "Rocky 2" — was developed and the Alcan 5000 rally was being used both as a test exercise and to demonstrate that the whole thing worked. It certainly seemed to — complete with cordon-bleu cooking!

As ever on the Alcan any stop to admire the scenery or for the eggs over easy with the hash brown, meant falling behind schedule and many hours of non-stop driving to catch up. What an enormous pleasure it was, just boogeying along hour after hour, the occasional comments coming over two-way radio, about the scenery, the schedule or where to stop for petrol.

Already we were into sparsely populated countryside, with petrol stations few and far between. Ahead and around us stretched various bits of the Rocky Mountains, the horizon a kaleidoscope of snowy, fantastic forests rolling past and the road constantly passing over a variety of bridges spanning wild rock-strewn rivers.

The road surfaces were good again and settlements with romantic-sounding names like Fort McLeod and MacKenzie came and went as we ploughed ever



onwards, our immediate aim Dawson Creek and the start of the Alaska Highway.

The history of the Highway, Alcan for Alaska-Canada as it was originally known, is interesting. During the second World War the Japanese invaded North East Alaska, and the U.S. Government had no way to move troops or reinforcements up there. So 10,000 U.S. Army engineers and 6,000 civilians built the 26 foot wide road 1700 miles from Dawson Creek up to Fairbanks in under eight and a half months. That also involved 200 bridges and 6,000 culverts over streams and rivers.

On through the Rockies, the last couple of hundred miles on the Alaska Highway, the surface varying from good to terrible, dark slippery mud indistinguishable from the ditches in the darkness.

The Fort Nelson Hotel in the town of the same name was a welcome sight indeed. Again, despite being on milepost 300 of the Highway, and not exactly at the centre of civilisation the hotel was great, with a great wooden banqueting hall, complete with swimming pool and huge stuffed elephant heads! The hospitality wasn't bad either, but that's an altogether different story.

We were able to find out that American rally champ John Buffum was leading in his Audi. Tying for second was Gene Henderson, a former American champion and retired Detroit police sergeant in his Subaru XT and Al Schmit, a New York Pan-Am employee who had elected to take his wife Fernie's V.W. Beetle on the Alcan instead of his Porsche.

In 4th place were Lee and Rod Sorenson from Sacramento in a Mazda RX7.

In 5th was Belfast ex-patriot, Derek Steele, in a Skoda. Derek, whose father Sydney is still actively involved with the Knock Motor Cycle and Car Club, had settled in Nanaimo, British Columbia, and ran his own small garage, or auto shop. In 6th was last year's winner of the Alcan, Tim Patterson, but he was to have problems with his Mazda RX7 gearchange, and that was to drop him right down the order.

The rally received quite a bit of press coverage in the Fort Nelson area, and there were quite a few people out and about to see the cars. Buffum's Audi and Henderson's Subaru, for example, were brand new models, that some of the dealers hadn't even seen.

After the hospitality and late night revelry in Fort Nelson it was rather a bleary-eyed and slightly late start the next morning.

Ahead, on this leg lay 1000 miles, up to Whitehorse for a late dinner, and then off the Alaska Highway and on to the Klondike Highway, driving through the night skirting Lake Laberge and the Pelly Mountains, over dirt roads and with warnings of snow forecast, to arrive into Dawson City for breakfast on the Saturday morning.

Sounds fun? Oh yes, and there was an occasional loop up to the Arctic Circle. That day's poetry in the route book read

There are strange things done in the
midnight sun
By the men who toil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret
tales
That would make your blood run cold
The Northern Lights have seen queer
sights,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge of Lake
Laberge
I cremated Sam McGee.

Before we got as far as Lake Laberge there was a regularity, a mere couple of hundred miles up the road, starting at the



It gets cold!

site of one of the many hot springs. Just up the road was a wooden-hutted petrol station, which the owner claimed housed the only library on the entire Alaska Highway — and that consisted of every centrefold of every Playboy ever printed!

Oh, and there was an Irish shop and cafe there as well, with leprechauns made in Hong Kong for sale!

On the way up, still travelling through the Rocky Mountains, the views had again been breathtaking, with places like MacDonald Creek, a tremendous river valley, and the brightest of bluey green Muncho Lake, the colours coming from copper oxide leaking into the 700 foot deep waters. The roads in this area were great, good surfaces, no traffic, winding and swooping round and over hills, passes and valleys. The weather was again kind, clear blue skies and lots of sunshine.

Just under 600 miles from Fort Nelson, the last couple of hundred in darkness, it was Whitehorse and supper. Then on again, stopping for a regularity just outside the town on the Yukon Highway. It was here that the crew from Wisconsin in the V.W. GTI blew their chances. They missed the turn off for the Yukon altogether, so hard were they concentrating on keeping their average speed steady.

The driver of the Golf, Brian Davitt, restored Jaguars for a living back in Wisconsin and took his maximum points for the section philosophically. "I was just concentrating so hard I didn't see the arrow. I guess I'm just dumb."

It is interesting to note how the drivers were able to pass the secret controls, after 10, 20 or 30 miles at a steady 54 m.p.h. or whatever, absolutely spot on. The co-drivers worked out beforehand how many seconds it should take to cover every single 10th of a mile to be covered on that regularity at that given speed. The co-driver then simply watched the tripmaster and as each interval of one 10th passed, he was able to tell his driver if he was fast or slow, and by how many seconds. The driver was then able to speed up or slow down accordingly.

Maybe sounds boring to someone accustomed to our special stage rallying, but after a while it became quite fascinating. It certainly was a demanding and exacting business, and on some of the frozen or muddy sections, the set averages were not that easy to attain. One of the most fascinating sights of the entire rally was when the Northern Lights started to play on the horizon a couple of hours after midnight. To see that, in that forever Arctic clear night sky, would almost have made you believe in Star Wars!

However on the Alcan 5000 there was never time to sit around, it was 500 miles to breakfast, 500 miles of mostly mud and gravel.

Not so long ago the only way most people had of getting from Whitehorse to Dawson City was to walk. People still do. It takes three weeks. We were frightened of even getting a puncture. It was cold, dark and lonely. A real wilderness, with one stretch of about 170 miles there wasn't a light, there wasn't a single on-coming car, just the occasional reflection of a light beam from one of the rally cars.

There were reports the next morning of some drivers seeing bears, Buffum hit a coyote, one driver nearly hit a moose, which apparently is like hitting a brick wall.

At long last we came to Dawson City, and entering the gold rush town was like entering a time warp. Old fashioned wooden facades, mud streets, plank sidewalks. Our temporary home was to be

the Eldorado Hotel, gold dust accepted in the bar, 20 dollars for a steak with all the trimming, a bedroom fit for a king. It had a devastatingly primitive exterior, but the height of luxury inside.

Now there are just under 900 people living in Dawson City. In the height of the gold rush just before the turn of the century tens of thousands of people flocked there, many ruined or destroyed by ill health in the primitive and tough conditions. Now the Canadian Government is preserving the gold rush atmosphere, and the couple of hotels keep their old style exterior.

There are still prospectors in Dawson — but now they pan the river beds with Caterpillars. Still, the few we saw having breakfast in the Eldorado were real tough characters.

In the Eldorado we wanted to photocopy a bulletin, the girl behind the desk directing us down the back of the hotel, to "Alex's office." It turned out that this guy, Alex Seely, lived in the hotel, sort of en suite with his office, his washing machine and kitchen sink all jammed together. Pride of place went to his gold scales. He was the buyer of all the real gold in the Yukon area around Dawson City. He mostly sold it to Johnson Matthey, the bullion company.

When Alex talked about gold, it was with a gleam in his eye. A huge barrel chested man, sitting in his vest and pants, with a cigar gripped between his teeth, he chatted for a long time about his favourite subject. In the course of that chat he reached into his desk and produced what looked like a jam jar, rolling the contents, at least half a dozen raw nuggets, out for us to examine.

Minimum value of each of them was 10,000 dollars, he explained, caressing one of them.

Gold was his passion, his life. Handling the glowing lump, it was easy to see why thousands of people did, and still do, risk their lives for the stuff. It's not even the monetary value. It's hard to explain, it was almost like a drug. We bought a nugget, just a teeny teeny one, as a memento.

Last word on gold must go to Alex. His watch strap was made from raw gold nuggets. It must have been worth a fortune but every seven or eight years, with the gold being so soft, it just wore away. He must have had the most expensive left hand shirt cuffs in the world. Maybe that was why he wasn't wearing a shirt that evening!

Back to the rally ... by now Gene Henderson had moved into a tie position with Buffum, Al Schmit in the Beetle was third, Gene Henderson was 4th. There was a new name onto the leaderboard in 5th place, in the shape of Howard Miller and his wife Xlee.



"Just a dotted line on the map".



Rally winner John Buffum --- looking for the dotted line.

Mr. Rolls and Mr. Royce must have turned in their graves — but the Chevy based Roller caught the imagination.





Howard was in the wholesale stationery business in Ohio, and drove one of my favourite cars in the rally, a metallic dark red Ford Thunderbird. Unfortunately the husband and wife team blew their chances on the next day's regularity. Xlee got her pluses and minuses mixed up, urging Howard ever quicker, so that he passed our control a couple of minutes early, and at about 100 m.p.h. instead of 54, which was quite enough on the frozen roads.

Another new name was up to 6th, Ken Maytag in his Chevrolet Suburban — a four-wheel-drive sort of American version of the Range Rover. Ken who worked in the family cheese making plant in Carpinteria in California had been having all sorts of brake problems before Dawson, and just couldn't sort it out himself. By the way, service vehicles or organised service weren't allowed on the rally, apart from at the half way halt in Anchorage.

So Ken was sort of stuck, and couldn't find a garage in Dawson to help but remembering something his mother told him, if you are in a jam, contact your local Episcopalian minister. He did just that and to cut a long story short, a mechanic working for the Royal Canadian Mounted Police was contacted — the Mounties just happen also to drive Chevrolet Suburbans in that area — and hey presto, Ken's problems were solved.

Hanging onto 7th was Derek Steele in the Skoda as we headed on the ferry the next morning over the Yukon river and onto the Top of the World Highway, en route for Anchorage, and civilisation. Many of the drivers had opted for a loop up to the Arctic Circle the previous day, that was after the 1100 mile run to Dawson, another 500 or so. That trip had been all mud and snow roads, so by now the cars were getting tired and dirty.

So it was a relief to be heading for garages and refuelling sessions. A relief also that the ferry was still running, and the Top of the World Highway open. Within two weeks of our trip the river would be iced over, the Highway closed for the winter.

It hardly seemed possible, but scenery was even more breathtaking as we moseyed on, through the Canadian border again, on through Tok, across the Alaska Highway again, the 500 miles to Anchorage, by now seeming like a mere stone's throw after what had gone before.

We knew that we would be leaving the rally in Anchorage, and were bemoaning the fact that we hadn't seen a moose anywhere along the route. Just as we started on the "Divided Highway" into Alaska's capital city we spotted what

looked like a road accident up ahead, with cars slithering to a halt on both carriageways. But it wasn't an accident, it was a mummy moose with its two offspring wandering along the edge of the forest. We could go home happy — we had seen a real live wild moose.

They call Anchorage the air cross-roads of the world. The city has five airports. On just one of them on the way in, there were aircraft parked side by side, wall to wall, almost as far as the eye can see. We stayed on the 11th floor of the Sheraton Hotel, and seemingly just below our window was another airport for private planes. It was like the taxi rank outside Euston Station — planes taking off every single minute, to buzz away all over Alaska, many of them fitted with floats for people commuting to work from their own lakes.

The rally had by now covered over 2600 miles, John Buffum's leading penalty by now a mere twenty seven seconds, with Al Schmit just two in arrears. The Porsche Club in Anchorage laid on a big reception that night, and between there and the night club across the road from the Sheraton, called "the Original Alaska Bush Company", many were the stories told and retold of the happening in the wilderness.

There were so many interesting characters in the rally that there's not the

space to mention here — like the "Flying Tigers" crew from California in their Dodge Shelby Turbo — the co-driver one of the original World War Two Flying Tigers, and then an airman of fortune all over the world. Or Vietnam veteran John Fouse and his wife Susan in their Golf GTI — John, incidentally, having been awarded two Silver Stars and three Bronze on his two tours of Vietnam.

No, the characters and the stories would take for ever.

Our own driver Stephen Emerson, nicknamed D.F.I. (dumb 'something' Irishman) by his American co-driver Terry Beadle, was back in 14th place, and destined to finish 15th, hampered by the lack of a tripmaster. Buffum eventually won when the rally finished in British Columbia after a couple more thousand miles and a 19 hour trip down the Inside Passage by ferry.

But for us the Alcan 5000 was over, and it was to be almost two days by plane before arriving home for the Uniroyal Cork '20'.

It would be easy to say from the sublime to the ridiculous, but it wasn't like that. Just two different rallies, but hopefully the dates won't clash next year — it would be nice to see Expo '86! — and more moose...and bear and...and...and...

ROAD BOOK PAGE

1985 ALCAN 5000

DAY 3 PAGE - 20

TIME/SPEED	MILEAGE	ALPINE	INSTRUCTION or REFERENCE
	1364.22	Ref.	"815"
	1369.73	Ref.	"825"
	1372.43	Ref.	Bridge End Section.

15:20:27			Begin Transit

	1372.43	Ref.	Bridge
	1401.11	Ref.	"FIRESIDE"
	1452.88	Ref.	"SHELL" (Iron Creek Lodge)
	1462.20	Ref.	Bridge
	1475.29	Ref.	"LOWER POST"
	1482.13	Ref.	"WELCOME TO YUKON"
	1489.47	Ref.	"STANDARD" (at Watson Lake)
	1570.50	Ref.	"THE MESSAGE POST" (Gas and food to go. 25% exchange on U.S. funds and an extra 10% off for cash when buying fuel).
	1683.51		towards Whitehorse