

Our Post-War Motoring Scene

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*

MOTORING IN THE 1950S

THE TRANS-AFRICA RALLIES

The first of the competitions that became known as the Trans-Africa Rallies was promoted as the longest and most ambitious production car event ever staged. The initial event, labelled the Mediterranean-Cape Motor Rally, was to have been held in 1939 by an association known as Les Amis du Sahara, which nine years before had organized a successful competition across the Sahara from the Mediterranean to Nigeria. Unfortunately World War II had intervened but, with the return to peacetime conditions, plans were revived in collaboration with the Automobile Club du Katanga and the RAC of South Africa. As the Commissioner-General of the rally, Colonel A. Nabal, aimed to focus world attention on Africa as a tourist destination, photographers were to accompany the cars in heavy-duty trucks.

On 28 December 1950 a simultaneous start was made by 42 cars from Tunis, Oran, Algiers and Casablanca, all aiming for Cape Town. Although most of the competitors were French, the rally had become a major international event, attracting competitors from nine other nations, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Spain, Hungary, USA, Egypt and South Africa. All of them crossed the Sahara and the northern provinces of Nigeria, traversed French Equatorial Africa (Central African Republic) into the Belgian Congo (DRC) where they split up, some taking the route through Kenya and Tanganyika (Tanzania) into Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and others continuing down through the Congo. Finally, all the cars reassembled at Victoria Falls before journeying south to the Cape via the Kruger Park, Pretoria and Port Elizabeth. The total distance travelled varied according to the route taken, but the minimum was



The 1951 elimination tests at the Muizenberg pavilion. The vehicles in the foreground include a Willys Jeep, a Landrover, a Lancia and a Ford V8.

9000 miles (14400 km), all of which had to be covered at a minimum average speed of 35 k/h. Competitors had to run to strict schedules and marks were gained or lost on overall running times between various set stages. The final stage measured performance between Victoria Falls to the finishing line on the Grand Parade in Cape Town; elimination tests were to be held to resolve placings between compet-

itors with equal numbers of points.

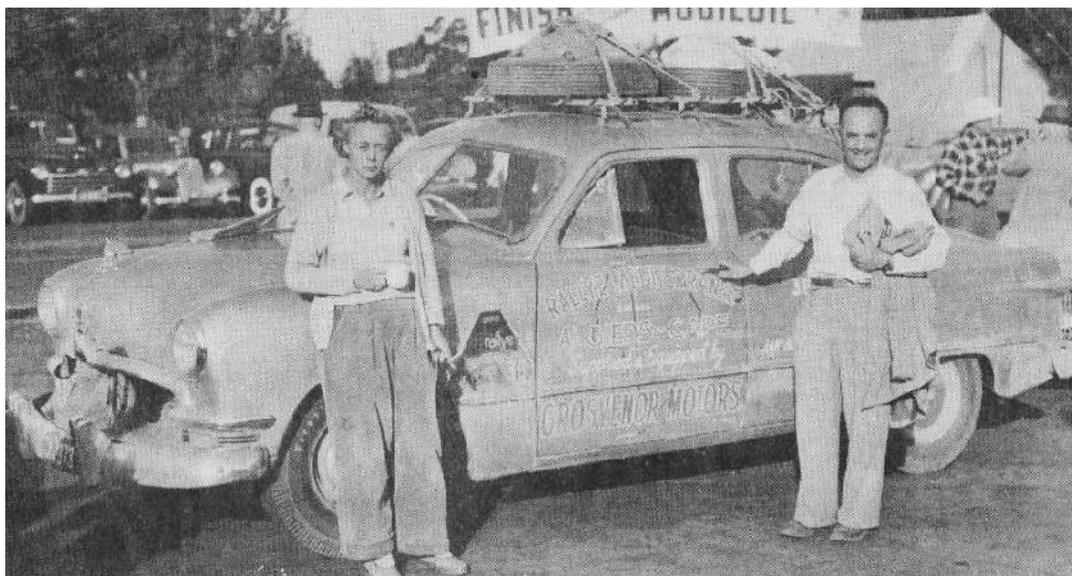
All participating cars were standard production models representing one of three categories; from 500 to 1 100 cc, 1 100 to 2 000 cc, and over 2 000 cc. The strong French contingent included small cars like the Dyna Panhard and the 750 cc Renault, ranging through the medium-sized Peugeot to large saloons like the prestigious Delahaye, Delage and Hotchkiss.

Both Renault and Delahaye were represented by French military teams. The Americans included Ford, Chevrolet, Nash, Willys Jeep, Dodge, Buick and Lincoln, with the balance made up by three Italian Lancias, two German Volkswagens and a British Land Rover. All would have to contend with extreme conditions which ranged from the snowstorms and icy cold of the Atlas Mountains, through the blinding clouds of dust and heat of the Sahara to the torrents of rain and humidity of the jungles of Central Africa.

The first competitor crossed the line on the Grand Parade at 5.30 pm on 23 February 1951, the last arrived at 9.45 pm. 35 of the vehicles had made it, a Hotchkiss had been in the lead but had caught fire just 15 miles from the city, and one of the Willys, after breaking down at Riversdale, had been towed in. The driver of the smallest car, the Dyna Panhard, expressed the view that he would rather have travelled four times across the Sahara than once through the Belgian Congo, where the roads



The 1951 arrival in Cape Town. The lineup includes a Hotchkiss, a Buick and a Dodge truck.



The South African team, Miss R. M. Lloyd Davies, Jan Gleisner and their Ford

were a sea of mud and the potholes as deep as his wheel-hubs. One American team had broken down in Chad and had spent a most uncomfortable night surrounded by a pride of lions. Another American had covered the whole route sitting in a deck chair on the back of a Dodge truck, sporting a fez after his hat had blown away in the Sahara.

The elimination tests were held the next day on Beach Road at Muizenberg and a convoy of cars and trucks drove to the pavilion on the False Bay coastline. Many well-known local names were involved in the final trials; the Starter was Henry 'Fireworks' Pheiffer, the RAC Steward was Colonel Jack Rose, the Clerk of the Course was Neville Minchin and the Scrutineers were Challenor Barson, Stanley Reed and Dawie le Roux. Times were taken for the contestants to advance and reverse between sets of lines laid out on the road around the oval garden in front of the pavilion, and finish with all four wheels at rest between lines back at the starting point.

The winners of the under 1 100 cc group were a Belgian grandmother and her daughter driving one of the Volkswagens, two French brothers from Tunis won the prize for the next category in the Land Rover, a vehicle that at that stage had seldom been seen out of England, and the third group was won by a Willys Jeep. Considering the overwhelming number of French vehicles on the rally, these results must have caused some consternation.

The South African entry, a Ford V8 assembled in Port Elizabeth and



The Lancia buses being rescued from the sea at Milnerton.

sponsored by Grosvenor Motors, had been driven by Jan Gleisner and Miss R.M. Lloyd Davies. Jan must have been inspired by his namesake Jack Gleisner who, in 1936, had smashed the Johannesburg to London record in a Plymouth. The Ford had experienced cooling problems in the Sahara and one of its springs had broken, but it had been driven through on a single set of South African-made tyres.

The rally had included an interesting character, Henri de Langlade, a nephew of the famous archaeologist the Abbe Breuil, who had left Algiers three days after the other participants on his BMW motorcycle, the first to cross the Sahara with a sidecar. He had arrived in the Cape at the same time as the others, carrying in his saddlebags two bottles of Sauterne wine in wooden boxes to present to the Prime Minister D.F. Malan.

On the day after the elimination trials the Lancia team had its worst experience of the rally. Determined to have an action shot of their two backup trucks on Milnerton beach

with Table Mountain in the background, they drove too close to the breakers. An enormous wave drowned the engines of both vehicles and a tractor had to be summoned hastily to pull the trucks out of the sea.

The publicity generated in

France by the lead-up to the Mediterranean-Cape Rally inspired attempts at the Cape-Paris record, which at the time stood at 24 days 16 hours. On 26 December 1950 Andre Mercier and Charles de Cortanze left Cape Town in their Peugeot 203 station-wagon, they shattered the record, reducing it to 17 days 9 hours, and within a year a Ford V8 convertible driven by Henri Berney and Henri Loos had reduced the Cape-Algiers record to a mere 13 days.

However success in the Trans-African Rallies continued to elude the French. They were again out of luck during the next competition, held in 1953 and promoted as the Rallye Alger-le Cap, when a Fiat 1 900 saloon from Italy, modified by the factory and 'elaborated' by Carrozzeria Ghia, swept to victory. France had to share the 1956 event when the prizes went to a Fiat 1 100, a Ford and a Peugeot 203. The fourth rally, held in 1959, went to Germany when it was won by the well-known racing driver Karl Kling in his Mercedes Benz 190 Diesel, and he was again amongst the winners in the fifth and last rally held in 1961, this time in a Mercedes 220SE. So it must have been a consolation when news came through late in 1958 that the Cape-Algiers record had been reduced by more than two days by Colonel Henri Debrus and two army colleagues in a Renault Frégate; unfortunately, while attempting to push on to establish a record to the Arctic North Cape they crashed the car. ■■■➔



Henri de Langlade with the boxes of wine for Prime Minister D. F. Malan.



The winner in 1953, a Fiat 1900 saloon.

A Moretti 750 at the finish in 1953 after an encounter with a buck.

The political unrest in the Belgian Congo, which in 1960 was renamed Republic of Congo-Leopoldville after achieving independence, brought an end to the popular Trans-Africa Rallies. After that the East African Safari, which had first been held in 1953 as the Coronation Safari, took over its role as Africa's premier long-distance motor rally. It proved to be a worthy successor; the East

African Safaris were held annually for the next fifty years, and motor manufacturers keen to prove the durability of their products were soon contesting eagerly for line honours.

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