

A '39 Olds Adventure

On August 1st, 32 vehicles ranging from brand new to 59 years old assembled in Surrey B.C. to depart on the 1998 RCMP Wheels for Kids Rally. This made for fun event's purpose was primarily to raise funds for the Surrey Children's Hospital and attracted a wide variety of vehicles and crew.



I had the 59 year old car. It is an unrestored 1939 Oldsmobile coupe, complete with its original dirty green flathead 6 cylinder engine and radiator, 59 year old interior, 59 years accumulation of dents and grease, and a very weathered flat black paint job all combining to give the appearance of something just pulled from a barn. Used by the Brandon Manitoba's fire department through the 1940's, with a dozen subsequent owners, this car has seen plenty of use and shows it. With 1,500 challenging miles ahead of us, onlookers looked curiously at the Olds asking me questions like... what year is it?... does *this* run?... Are you taking *this* on the rally?

Well of course I was going on the rally and yes I had some idea what I was in for as I had rallied with the same organizer, Malcom Wilson, all the way to Fairbanks Alaska early in the winter of 1992. While it was true that that car was only 38 eight years old (1954 Dodge), it was the same rally format. You rely on instructions like, "turn right at 43.2km" and you make sure you arrive at your check points neither early nor late. Well yes, there is no needle on the speedometer of the '39 Olds and the fuel gauge always reads full no mater what, and no my odometer doesn't read in kilometers. In fact, it reads in miles and is about 20 percent low. However, in the glove box, connected to a 6 to 12 volt inverter, is a driving computer capable of reading speed and distance in miles or kilometers as well as time to arrival at current speed. Also, special rear axle gears allow a 20 percent higher road speed than the 1939 version, allowing 100 to 110 kilometer an hour cruising!

I had a bit of trouble finding a passenger for this trip as most of my family new they didn't want to spend a week in 100 plus degree temperatures, bouncing around the province in an old car, however, my mother and I share the same blood and she was all for it.

Our first leg took saw sweltering temperatures as we traveled up the Fraser Canyon to Lytton were we turned on to secondary highways, skirting Lilloet and heading towards our lunch stop at Hat Creek Ranch. Since this was an RCMP sponsored event, I was not surprised that a large portion of the participants were with the RCMP. What, I didn't know is what type of law enforcement would I be subjected to in their company. Would they order a safety check on my car? Would they issue speeding tickets to rally participants? If I get behind, should I speed to catch up so I could check in at my prescribed time? From Lilloet to Hat Creek, the road was isolated and had little traffic but I was being followed by the RCMP Camaro SS in full cruiser markings. I wanted to try and make some time but decided to hold back and show some appreciation for the speed limit. When we stopped for lunch, the constable driving the Camaro remarked that the '39 Olds really moved and that several times he had been able to "open the Camaro up a bit" to keep pace. He made no suggestion of excessive speed and I also noticed there was absolutely no speed measuring equipment in the Camaro, so I knew that this was one police car I didn't have to worry about!

By the time we were finished lunch, the temperature had climbed to somewhere around 110 degrees and it was time for the first big climb of the tour. Now, unlike the Vintage Car Club Tours which avoid long hills, this route seemed to have sought out as many challenging routes as possible. The first of which was just ahead, timed for the hottest part of the day, beginning in one of the hottest parts of the province. Ashcroft to Logan Lake. This long steep winding climb last for miles yet is full of curves, making it impossible to get up to any speed. We made it up okay at a fair clip, reaching the Logan Lake check point at our prescribed time.

Next morning we departed North from Kamloops, via the west side of the Thompson River traveling to the McLure Ferry. This quaint two car barge style cable ferry quietly and efficiently carries two cars across the river, using the river current to provide the required propulsion. We then traveled north towards Dawson Creek on the Yellowhead for a short while until we reached 20.2 km from the ferry where our route books instructed us to turn right and head east. Eventually the road turned south and sixty three bumpy, rough and dusty kilometers later we were turning on to Highway One near Adams Lake, heading east to Revelstoke!



At this point we were near the lead in rally point standings assisted considerably by the accuracy of the computer. It was interesting to note how the comments about the car had changed from wondering if it ran to, noting that it was still going. The jaunt from Salmon Arm to Revelstoke put us in temperatures that were still above 110 degrees as this type of heat was to last all week. In keeping with the rules of the competition, we had to watch we did not get ahead or behind of our allowed check point arrival times to avoid penalty. With good roads and traffic conditions it was sometimes easy for us to come in too early. Reading the computer, we could see we were near the Craigellachie check point, but several minutes too early so we had to look for a good spot to pull over. As we rounded the next bend to pull over we were surprised to find we had caught up to the Viper that was part of our group.



Day three saw us at Banff, day four, Nelson, day five, the Salmo-Creston Skyway and on to Castlegar, Trail and Rossland. Hot temperatures persisted as forest fires raged through the province, however conditions were very pleasant at Nelson. At Nelson we had several hours free time so I went exploring a maze of old wharves and boathouses on the lake. I chatted with an elderly man in a boathouse, working on a magnificent wooden boat as I poked along. As departure time arrived I headed back up the ramp to shore and found the gate was closed and locked! I was trapped on the wharf for who knows who long, yet my departure time was minutes away. I quickly went back to that boathouse and found the wooden boat owner still there and just ready to leave for lunch, so my dilemma was quickly resolved as he unlocked the gate so we could go to shore.

From Nelson to Castlegar, the distance is not great, but the change in temperature was! In a matter of minutes we went from the pleasant Nelson lakeside to temperatures well past 100 at Castlegar. As we pulled into the local Chevron station to receive yet another fund raising check, one of the much newer cars was overheating from the slow hot climb now behind us. Although the temperature gauge on our Olds had gone to new heights on this trip, there was no sign of steam or boiling. However inside the radiator cap opening there was quite an accumulation of greasy sludge that wasn't there before we left. Even though I had chemically flushed the cooling system, the continual high speed pace and high temperatures were more than this motor had seen for decades!

The next stop was the GM dealer in Trail. Although it was very hot and the route prescribed in our rally book was full of cryptic turns and signs, we made it to Trail on perfect rally time, but this was definitely one of the hottest destinations so far. The computer was recording close to 120 degrees inside the car, as quite a bit of the engine heat finds its way into the car in a '39 Olds.

We were now practically in top place as one of the leading sports cars with a GPS aided navigator got lost finding the Trail GM dealer and picked up several points against them for arriving late. My thoughts were now on the climb to Rossland that we faced next. After a break in Trail, it was time to travel the final leg for the day. Rossland is not many miles from Trail but it was now late in the hot afternoon and the long second gear climb would prove interesting. By now mom and I endured so many days of hot travel we were practically numb to it but I knew it didn't work that way for the car. I think the hot slow steep climb to Rossland was amongst the hottest of the entire rally. Just as we pulled into Rossland I was alarmed to see smoke or steam whispering from the glove box! It seemed to be coming from under the hood. When I opened the hood, I could see it seemed to be coming from the rear of the motor due to hot engine or transmission oil. Also at Rossland the heat was causing high pressures to build up in my gas tank for some reason which resulted in gas spraying out from a new small opening in the tank. This was relieved by regularly taking off the gas cap, resulting in an escape of pressure you would expect to get from a radiator cap.

The next morning was one of the coolest of the trip so far because the air was cloudy with forest fire smoke as we drove high in the mountains from Rossland towards Grand Forks. One of the features of this rally were the optional gravel routes. We had already traveled on a few by now like the one that started north of Kamloops and came out near Sorrento. They were optional in that we could buy an exemption from them for a very nominal fee with the money going towards the Children's Hospital. Not wanting to miss any scenery or adventure, we had decided not to bypass any of the gravel. Today there were two of these adventures ahead of us. The first was to take us from the Christian Valley Road junction to Beaverdell Road via the Ouellette Creek Forest Road, 18 kilometers through the mountains to the Rock Creek Kelowna highway. Unfortunately for our rally score we ran into a 45 minute roadwork delay early in the morning which we never fully made up because of all the backroads on the same day.

The Ouellette Creek Forest Road started out as an easy route that soon changed when we came to a long steep hill where the road comprised of large broken rocks. I had let the other 10 or so vehicles with us on this road go ahead but caught up to some of them at this hill because the other car, a 1973 Pontiac, that had not taken the gravel road exemption could not make the hill. It did not have the ground clearance and traction for the broken rocks on the hill. The four wheel drive vehicles had no problem but had made deep ruts, leaving a high centre of rocks. The 4x4's had gone ahead and it was now my turn since the other car was off the hill and going back for the paved route. The roughness of the rock combined with a risk of them cutting my 650-16 4-ply nylon tires meant going slow and easy, but the steep incline suggested a moderate amount of speed would be necessary to make the grade. I started out at about 10 miles an hour as a few loose rocks touched the bottom of the car. A minute or two later, we were close to the crest of the climb but the gas was to the floor and we were really lugging hard. That highway cruising axle ratio was now working against us. Moments later we were successfully at the top and were the only two wheel drive vehicle to do it. The rest of the Forest Road was less challenging but rough so I kept the speed down as I did not want to abuse the Olds by pounding it along a rough gravel road. When we finally reached pavement again, we were surprised to find a small welcoming party of the 4x4 group cheering our arrival. They had waited to ensure a search party wouldn't be required to retrieve us!

From here we headed up the highway towards Kelowna when we found the Pontiac stopped on the side of the road. They had traveled many more miles than us since turning back on the steep gravel on the Forest Road and were out of gas! They were quite relieved to find I had spare gas which I retrieved from the trunk of the '39 Olds and they were soon on there way.

At Kelowna we toured the Summerhill Winery before heading south to Penticton. Normally Kelowna to Penticton traffic uses the highway on the west side of Okanagan Lake but we will take the 33 kilometer Gillard Forest Access Road on the east side of the lake. This route started with several miles of steep twisty climbing on loose washboard gravel. It was so steep that our rear wheels were often loosing traction in the gravel and the temperature gauge needle was making one of its many treks to the top end of the scale. Soon things leveled out as we entered the abandoned right of way once used by the Kettle Valley Railway. We eventually drove past the Chute Lake fishing camp and after a steep winding decent met the paved road connecting Naramata to Penticton. We found it very hard to make any time on this stretch of paved road because it is one of the most winding roads in the province with continuous sharp curves. Our limited cornering ability combined with brakes designed for the 1930's made it hard to make up much of the time lost at the highway construction and on the gravel sections today but I wouldn't have missed the adventure and scenery of the day for anything.

Our final day began at Penticton where the Olds took the first quart of oil since we started, as well as a bit of water for the radiator. The last leg home, over the Hope - Princeton Highway and back to Surrey seemed like a breeze compared to some of the previous routes.

The rally wound up with a formal banquet where all the participants received completion medals and various other awards. We placed seventh overall in the rally and received a special commemorative plaque for "the oldest vehicle to complete the route". We also were the only two wheel vehicle to complete all the gravel routes. The week had been a real blast. We had a good time, made some new friends and raised over a thousand dollars for the Surrey Memorial Hospital thanks to our many sponsors. The car gave no trouble at all and a few weeks later was earning its keep as "Docs Car" in the CBC series, "Nothing Too Good For A Cowboy". This is one of many movies this car has been used in. It is popular with the film makers because of its style and authentic aged appearance. Nothing Too Good For A Cowboy is set in Vanderhoof B.C. during the 1940's where dusty old cars were common place and with a little help from rally, the '39 Olds was more than ready.

