

Great American Mountain Rally Revival



BY DAVID WELLS, MARK AXEN AND PETER MCGUIRE

PHOTOS TIM WINKER AND GREGORY DAVIS

The second edition of the Great American Mountain Rally Revival (GAMRR) is now in the history books and all agreed it was a great success. There was a full slate of entries and a great selection of interesting cars, including two Volvos: Mark and Amy Axen's 1972 142S *Elsa*, fresh back from the 2019 Great Race, and my and Peter McGuire's 1966 122S *Phoenix*, aka *The Mountain Goat*.

Steve McKelvie and Gary Hamilton revived the general direction and route of the original 1950s Great American Mountain Rally in 2018, successfully recreating the spirit of the old event, which ran over Thanksgiving from 1953 to 1957. This was the first European style car rally sanctioned in the U.S. and featured the successful North American rally debut of SAAB. In 2018, we all had a great three-day adventure in early October through the mountains and valleys of N.Y., Conn., Mass., Vt., and N.H.

Some background: Steve McKelvie was a serious rally guy and wizard navigator with vast experience in America and Europe, including the Targa Newfoundland, Monte Carlo, Northeast Rally Club events in N.Y.

Above—Mark and Amy Axen in their 1972 142S *Elsa* leaving Lake Placid on day 2.

and Pa., and the 2017 and 2018 Great Race, where he navigated for Harald von Langsdorff in a 1972 Mercedes 350SLC. Steve also planned and routed the 2018 Trans America Rally between Charleston and Seattle. All this while holding down his day-time job as an engineering consultant.

I had the opportunity to be a part of Harald's and Steve's service crew in the 2017 Great Race. Both were significant influences and mentors in stoking my interest to drive the 2018 Buffalo to Halifax Great Race with Peter in our own car—another story for another time.

A typical transit section road in Vermont between regularity legs.





Computer-aided devices or calculators are not permitted. This car was equipped with a Halda Speedpilot, developed in the 50s to help rallyists keep on time. A stopwatch and a sweep-second clock are also allowed.

Sadly, Steve died suddenly in January 2019 leaving a huge void in the rally community.

Gary Hamilton, as rally master, was then faced with the difficult task of planning the second edition of the GAMRR for late October. Without Steve's guidance this was indeed a daunting task. Planning and driving all the routes, writing the course instructions, and coordinating all the periph-

eral things like venues, hotels, meals, and advertising. Quite a challenge for someone who also has a fulltime job.

Hats off to Gary and his team!

The GAMRR is a time-speed-distance rally—not a high-speed event—held on public roads open to traffic, so all normal road rules apply. Participants are allowed a speedometer and an odometer. You can use those from your car, but much better accuracy is



David Wells, in the driver's seat, and Peter McGuire in their 1966 122S Phoenix, aka *The Mountain Goat*.





Greg and Lynn Davis 1952 Hudson Hornet leaving a lunch stop beside a small fish hatchery lake.

obtained by using special equipment.

We use an accurately calibrated Timewise speedometer and a Brantz odometer. You are also allowed a stopwatch, an accurate sweep-second time of day clock (set each day to Rally Time), a clipboard (for course instructions), pencils, and a writing pad. Some participants make acceleration/deceleration charts for their cars, others do not, and, in the spirit of 1957, no electronic computer-aided devices or calculators are allowed.

Each day the routine was as follows: (a) a calibration run over a measured distance to check that your odometer is in sync., (b) transit sections to and between Regularities (timed sections), (c) Regularities themselves (usually four or five per day).

Regularities are usually between five and 12 miles, some a bit longer. Each comprises directional instructions accompanied by variable average-speed instructions, measured distances, and speed changes. These stretches are scored to the second.

The rally organizers have calculated exactly how long it will take to go from point A to point B, while taking into account the instructions for set speeds, speed changes, and distances. The navigator's job is to read the route instructions, communicate these to the driver, and keep a check on overages and underages (i.e., being early or late at various waypoints along the route). The driver has to follow the navigator's instructions for turns, stops, speed accuracy, and speed changes, etc.

This year's event also had some interesting twists to make sure competitors are paying attention. For example, we had to find the beehive and find the number on the back of a sign at a lunch stop. It all adds to the fun.

The idea is to keep on course, stay on time, and complete the set course in the time closest to the rally perfect times. Scores are based on one penalty point for each second early or late, cumulative, and are locked in once you pass the control point at the end of

the Regularity. In other words, you cannot trade off early or late scores outside each Regularity.

Start was Friday morning from the Saratoga Springs Motor Museum. (Mark Axen, who lives fairly close, volunteers there from time to time to help with museum events and functions).

The 2019 rally was a full house event, limited to 30 cars. Peter and I arrived Thursday evening in our 1966 122S after an eight-hour drive from Ontario. One team with a

View from Mirror Lake Lodge at Lake Placid.



Triumph TR3 hailed from Kansas, another, a 1974 Blues Brothers tribute car, was from Florida. Others participants came from Ottawa, Ontario, N.Y., Ohio, Conn., Wis., and other states. Gary's advertising and communications were obviously effective.

Thursday evening, we all gathered at the Saratoga Springs Motor Museum for registration, a get-together, some nibbles, and an intro rally school, put on by Gary and his team.

The cars were divided into three classes:

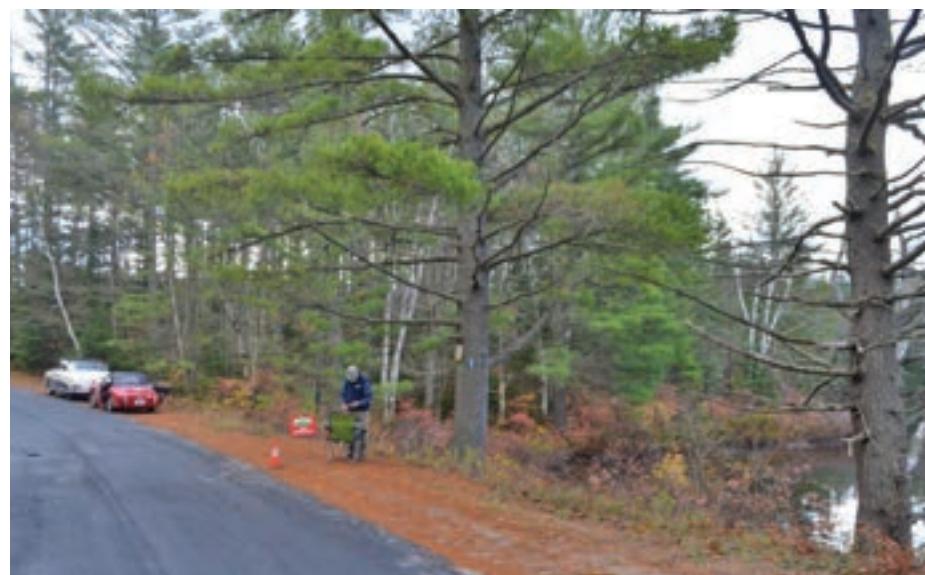
- Original cars—Up to 1957 (when the rally was last held in its original format)
- Classics—1958-1978
- Modern—1978 and newer

We all gathered at the museum the next morning for the official start at 0900. There was an amazing variety of cars. Everything from two beautiful 1928 Chrysler convertibles to early and late model Porsches, 1980s Mercedes SL/SLCs, a Triumph TR3, a Triumph TR6, a 1964 Mercury Comet rally-prepped car, a couple of 1950s Hudsons, and moderns, such as a Fiat 124 Spider and a Toyota Highlander.

Some of the participants were first-timers, a few others had extensive rally experience, and the rest had mixed backgrounds. Mark's and our team both had done several rallies, including the Great Race.

Hometown boy Mark Axen and his wife Amy were car #1 and first away at 0901, followed by the other competitors at one-minute intervals. We were car # 9, so were off at 0909. Thus, all the cars were on the road within 31 minutes of the official start time.

The route to our two-night central base near Lake Placid took us through some interesting open countryside, hills, valleys, and woods in the Adirondacks. We drove mostly on amazingly quiet roads, some of which seemed to have been recently paved just for us. The tertiary roads were either sand-



This is a typical endpoint of one of the closely timed regularity legs. The cars are timed through, then have to stop to collect their times from the control officer to make sure the times match.

or gravel-covered, but with good driving surfaces. The fall colors were still around at the lower elevations, wonderful to see if you had the time, but were mostly gone higher up in the hills.

Gary had chosen an amazing route for us, with about five Regularities each day. The first day terminated at the Mirror Lake Inn near Lake Placid. What a beautiful place—wonderful view of the lake in the evening light, great camaraderie, good accommodations, and good food. Everyone agreed that the day's rallying had been great fun on interesting and challenging roads.

Saturday morning, we headed out again at 0901 through the forests and backroads of upstate New York. We ate a very good packed lunch at a small clearing in the woods next to a beautiful lake by a fish hatchery. We continued to rally all afternoon,

ending up back at the Mirror Lake Inn for a pleasant evening and banquet with old and new friends.

Sunday was an early start at 0801, since we had a long way to drive and because the route had to be modified. Strong wind warnings were in effect for Lake Champlain, which would have made the planned ferry crossing at least tricky and most probably very time consuming. Thus, the coordination of the checkpoint crews would have been very difficult.

Gary and his team had to scramble to come up with another route around the lake that would include the planned Regularities in Vermont and still get us to Bennington, home of Hemmings Motor News and their motor museum, for a late lunch and award ceremony. Inevitably, due to the long run, the cars became quite scattered. Some arrived at Hemmings much later than originally planned, however, everyone agreed that all together it was a very enjoyable adventure.

Rallying is a really great way to enjoy your car, be it modern or classic. You get to meet and make friends with likeminded enthusiasts, engage in some friendly competition, and hone your navigation and driving skills. We encourage all Volvo enthusiasts and VCOA members to seriously consider making this type of rallying a part of your motoring hobby. You will not regret it! ■

Gary Hamilton of the Great American Mountain Rally Revival can be reached at gamrrally@gmail.com. Many more pictures can be found at www.shorturl.at/BU234.

David Wells lives in Lakefield, Ontario, Canada and can be reached at dhwells@nexicom.net.

The Mountain Goat getting a rest while we are eating lunch at Hemmings Motor News in Bennington, Vt. at the end of the rally before driving home.

