

# The 1965 Canadian Winter Rally

— story by Terry Lynn Benson

In the Fall of 1965 Chevrolet introduced the totally new 1965 Corvair, which addressed all of the deficiencies Ralph Nader detailed in his book, *Unsafe at Any Speed*. I rushed down to my local Chevrolet Dealer with my list of options for a two-door Corvair Corsa coupe: 180 hp turbo-charged engine, rally suspension, wood steering wheel, simulated wire wheel covers, dark blue with black interior. There was a four to six week waiting period: that seemed like forever.

I told my close friend, Bruce Gezon, of the purchase. He informed me that my car would be perfect for us to enter into the Canadian Winter Rally, which was leaving from Toronto on the 12th of February. The rally would cover about 1,300 miles of twisty, snow-covered dirt roads requiring expert driving skill, as well as navigating exactness. Average speeds would range between 25-45 mph and temperatures predicted to be between highs of 45° and expected lows of -30° — and being 25 years old, single, a sport car enthusiast, and winner of several local sports car events in my MG-TD II and Corvairs, I was all enthused and ready for the challenge.

We contacted The British Empire Motor Club in Toronto requesting information and their application form. The package arrived a couple of weeks later with the requirements from both The British Empire Motor Club and the Federation Internationale De L'Automobile. It was December and time was getting short. Once we received Canadian approval and our F.I.A. licenses it was less than a month before the rally. We removed the back seat and packed and repacked the car. Bruce and I made practice runs to ensure that our driving and navigation skills were at their peak. Then on a Thursday morning, February 11th, 1965, we left Morgantown, W.V., driving our loaded Corvair the three hundred-plus miles to the far Eastern outskirts of Toronto.

What have we gotten ourselves into?

Once we found the starting location and turned into the entrance, the doors rolled up exposing a well-lit cavernous building that was crowded with all types of cars prepared for the rally. There were one hundred and forty cars entered and we could see VWs, Saabs, Morgans, Volvos, Porsches. Luigi Chinetta Jr.



Terry Benson Collection

**Bruce Gezon and Terry Lynn Benson, ready to leave Morgantown, W.V. for Toronto.**

had a 330 GT Ferrari. Ford Motor Company had a three car team of Cortinas. Simca Division of Chrysler also had three Simca 1000s, and there were eighteen Chevrolet Corvairs scattered throughout the huge garage area. Each car was decked out with an array of driving lights. Some had racing stripes, others had sponsor information, while others looked like they had driven family cars straight from work. We looked at each other and asked ourselves are we ready to compete against



these professionals and their teams of support personnel?

We were directed to an empty space and then to the registration desk. We presented our driver licenses, F.I.A. licenses, and our car insurance certificate and received our packet containing our placard with #36, and were given our starting time of 19:36 p.m. After unloading our car to get the studded tires, mounting them on the car, then repacking the car with the road tires and our spare parts, tools, fire extinguisher and many other items we thought we might need, we went looking for a local gas station to top off our fuel.

As we were waiting in line, 10 minutes prior to our start, we were given our "ROUTE BOOK" and a road map. Up the ramp onto the starting stage we drove as soon as the #35 car was flagged off. The official counted us down fifteen seconds, ten seconds, five, four, three, two, one. GO! "From the start turn right onto Eglinton Avenue and proceed east. You are to arrive at mileage 18.89 in exactly thirty minutes. There will be no checkpoints within the first fifteen miles." Bruce calculated we were to average 38 mph on this leg. At 18.89 miles commence average speed of 40.1 mph.

The first check point was at mile marker 33.58 at 21.04 hours. We zeroed the check! There was significant snow on the side of the road, but the road itself was good. We were feeling confident. Then at about the forty-mile marker we turned onto a back road near Mospot, Home of the Canadian Grand Prix. There had been heavy accumulation of snow just days prior to the event followed by a thaw just before the start, flooding a big part of the course. This was followed by freezing temperatures down to below zero. The road looked like glare ice. But no, there were potholes of ice and water that were as much as one to two feet deep and extending for several hundred feet. Water would cover the car. The Corvair's heating system came off the engine, the defroster sprayed a coating of steam and water across the windshield blinding our view of the road. Bruce and I grabbed the first things available, wiping the window. We turned off the defroster fan and by plugging the ports were able to continue, only wiping when we hit a large puddle that drowned the whole car in icy water.

By the time we reached the second checkpoint ice had been building up on the surface of the car, in the suspension, and on the cables going from the accelerator to the





**A Porsche 356C ready to leave the starting ramp**

engine compartment. The steering, lock-to-lock, was getting smaller and smaller. The engine normally idled at 700-800 rpm and was now idling at over 2,000 rpm. While Bruce went to get our book stamped, I went back to the engine compartment and adjusted the throttle linkage to where it would barely idle. We had zeroed the second checkpoint at mile 78.80 and 22:10 hours.

The roads seemed to get worse as we continued on. We were on time when two other rally cars started blowing their horns and flashing their lights to get past. After a mile or two there was a wide place in the road and I motioned them around. My mistake! As they passed, throwing up waves of water, they completely blinded our view of the road. Not wanting to collide with them, I tried to keep as far to the right as I could. All at once the car came to an abrupt stop. We found ourselves off the road stuck on top of the snow.

We jumped out; the wind was blowing and the temperature was near zero. We attempted to shovel, but the car was grounded like a beached whale. Back inside, we attempted to find the come-along, which was buried below half of our supplies in the back seat. Once it was found, we attached it to the front of the car and ran the other end across the road to a tree. Slowly but surely this was working, then we heard a car approaching and had to drop the line so as not to cause an accident. Fortunately, there were only two cars that passed while we were getting the car back on the road.

We lost a good 15-20 minutes, but off we went to try and make up for the lost time and stay on course. We arrived at the next checkpoint, mile 112.48 at 23:09 hours, only eleven minutes late. Bruce had our book stamped and I again went into the engine compartment to loosen the throttle cable, as we were again idling at over 2000 rpms and running out of threads on the linkage.

It was getting colder, and the road conditions were worsening, but we were on time when we saw the lone red 330 Ferrari stuck on a mound of snow. Once we determined that they were ok, we continued on. Then, at the 135.3-mile point, we were allowed a two minute and fifty-three second break at a BP gas station. When attempting to open the doors they wouldn't budge. Rolling down the windows only

exposed a one-inch sheet of ice. We each broke out the ice and crawled through our respective window. While Bruce used a hatchet to chip the ice from the gas cap cover and began to fill the car with gas, I once again went to loosen the throttle linkage.

Behind time again! More snow, ice, and water filled potholes with some going on for one hundred feet or more. The ice under the fenders on the steering arms and suspension was making it near impossible to steer the car around sharp corners. The engine now idling near 3000 rpm's as we came into another checkpoint. Bruce went to get the book stamped and I made the last adjustment to the throttle. Unthreaded until there was no more threads left to adjust, the engine now idled at 1500 rpm.

The next surprise came when we saw the 1965 Corvair Monza of C. W. Stockey and J. Bird. It had skidded off the road with the left side off the ground and it was being precariously supported by the branches of a large tree. We asked if they were all right and they responded as if they were very comfortable with where they were and wished us good luck. Bruce and I were feeling really good at that point, because we made it further than Stockey.

Red sky in the morning, sailor's warning. It was now about four o'clock in the morning and the sky ahead of us had a very red glow. It was too early for sunrise, but as we got closer the redder the sky became. Intuitively as I approached the crest of a large hill, I slowed down to a crawl. Two men with lit flares were using the spiked ends to help then up the ice covered road attempting to place the flares at the top. They both said: "Don't go down! There are 15-20 cars off the road and the road is blocked." We pulled to the side to wait for a while before attempting to continue. We could hear the cars at the bottom of the hill working themselves free and back onto the road one at a time. After about thirty minutes we saw bright lights and high revving engines coming toward us at a fast clip; they had to be going at least 50 mph or more. It was two of the Simca 1000s that passed us like they were on rails. We remembered then that they had heavily spiked tires on their cars at the Roots Motors garage.

We figured if they were able to get through so could we. Our lights only showed the two sets of tracks left by the Simcas; it was like they were the only car ever to be on the road. We eased our way down the hill and proceeded with the rally. Then I lost it and the car came to rest against a bank and at the bottom of a shallow hill.

Using the clutch, shifting between first or second and reverse, we worked our way up the hill. The clutch was burning and the side of the car was grinding against the bank. I knew the right side of my new car was totally gone. With the smell and the smoke coming from the clutch, I knew we would be lucky to make it to the top, but we did. We were aware that we had major car problems and later, when the clutch was pulled, there was only a silver dollar size of clutch

material on each side. We also found the side of the car had been protected with a thick coating of ice and there wasn't a single scratch.



**A 1964 Ford Anglia Super nearly goes airborne during the 1965 rally. Road conditions along the route were problematic.**

When our route came to the intersection with Highway 62, knowing the condition of the car, we had a decision to make. Turn right and continue on a 300-mile leg that would take us round about to Bancroft, or turn left and drive 20 miles to Bancroft where we could find a service station willing to help get us road worthy again.

As we turned left toward Bancroft. We said, "Just wait until next year."

Of the 140 cars starting, 95 were out by the end of the first night. Only 23 completed the entire rally. For each minute early two penalty points were issued and one for each minute late arriving at each of the 47 check points. Two of the Ford Factory Team Cortinas came in first and second with a total of four and nine penalty points. None of the 20 teams of three cars finished the rally intact.