

insisted Mrs. F.



The start of one of the thousands of rallies staged annually in the U.S.

PARLOR GAME ON WHEELS

Share the hilarious fun of two bewildered entrants in a 150-mile road rally

By DEVON FRANCIS

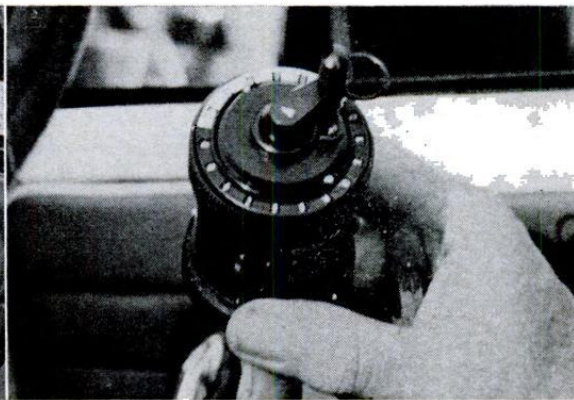
Here is this character in this sports car, see, and he is saying to me, "What I will do is, I will enter your name in the rally next week," and the next thing I know, there I am in my four-speed Corvair sitting in a parking lot with my wife and dog, and it is drizzling and miserable, and there is a *number* on my car. It is 8:30 a.m. on a Sunday, and I should be in the sack, and what am I doing here?

I have been parted from five bucks to be an entry in an event staged by some sports-car club. You know what a rally is? A rally is a parlor game on wheels. You compete, like a game of bridge, or chess, or dollar-a-hole golf. No, it's more like poker dice. Except you

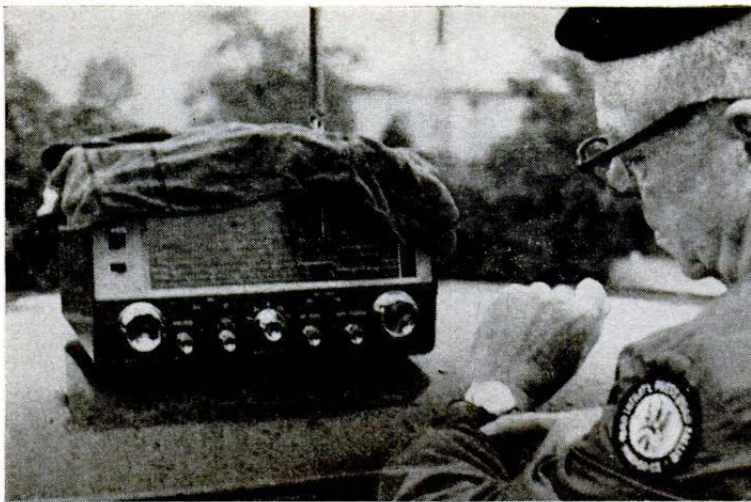
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Another computer—this one pretty sophisticated, too. Still another car had the left front wheel operating a special odometer by means of a microswitch.



Most-rudimentary computer was a "coffee grinder," like a desk calculator. The rally was staged by the Triumph Sports Car Club of New Jersey.



Rallyist Francis gets a time check by National Bureau of Standards radio station near Washington, D.C. (And little good it does him!)



Car 54 ("Where are you?") reports in at one checkpoint on the route. By day's

"The Equipped entries are loaded down with enough gear to go

need a car if you want to get in this game.

You have a navigator who computes for you, and you are forever trying to figure out your time-speed-distance, and you are forever looking for things like "*Horseshoe Over White Garage Door*" (a clue to the Rally Route as described in the Sheets of Instructions), and not finding it, and your wife—who in this case is your navigator—is forever wailing, "Now we're lost, *now* we are *really* lost; we'll never finish!" And that's rallying.

A man comes by our car. He is a rallyist and he is grinning.

"Car 54, Where Are You?" he chuckles.

I get out of my car to confirm it. Yup, that's our number, 54. Or maybe you don't watch the TV reruns.

Let me explain about the rally. There are all these cars, see—88 of them. Although only half of them are sports cars, the event is sanctioned by The Sports Car Club of America, and it is very official. There are four main classes: Equipped, Unequipped, Novice, and SOP. The Equipped entries are loaded down with enough gear to go into orbit, and so are the Unequipped, and the only difference between the Equipped and the Unequipped—and honestly, now, I'm not kidding—is that the Unequipped don't carry a computer.

The Novice class consists of people who have never won anything. My wife and I are SOPs, which means Seat of Pants, which means not only that we have never won anything, but that we haven't the vaguest idea of what we're doing. Our entire instrumen-

tation consists of a speedometer and a wrist-watch. Even our odometer is taped over.

The idea of the game. The rally has three phases with different rules, all based on time-speed-distance, and the idea is to cover an extremely complicated course over hill and dale—for 150 miles—in a given amount of time by following signs, like a name on a mail box. No allowance is made for traffic. That's your lookout.

The Club supplies you with 4½ single-spaced pages of rules and almost seven double-spaced pages of route instructions. The rules are knotty enough to require the services of an attorney, and the elapsed time is figured right down to one-hundredth of a minute!

In the parking lot, everybody seems happy and, above all, friendly. This, we are soon to find, is a bitter deception.

At 10 a.m., the cars start leaving at exactly one-minute intervals. At exactly 10:53 plus 10 seconds, we roll up to the starting line.

"You SOP?" asks the Rally Master, poking his head in the car to see the taped-over odometer. At 10:54 he says, "Go."

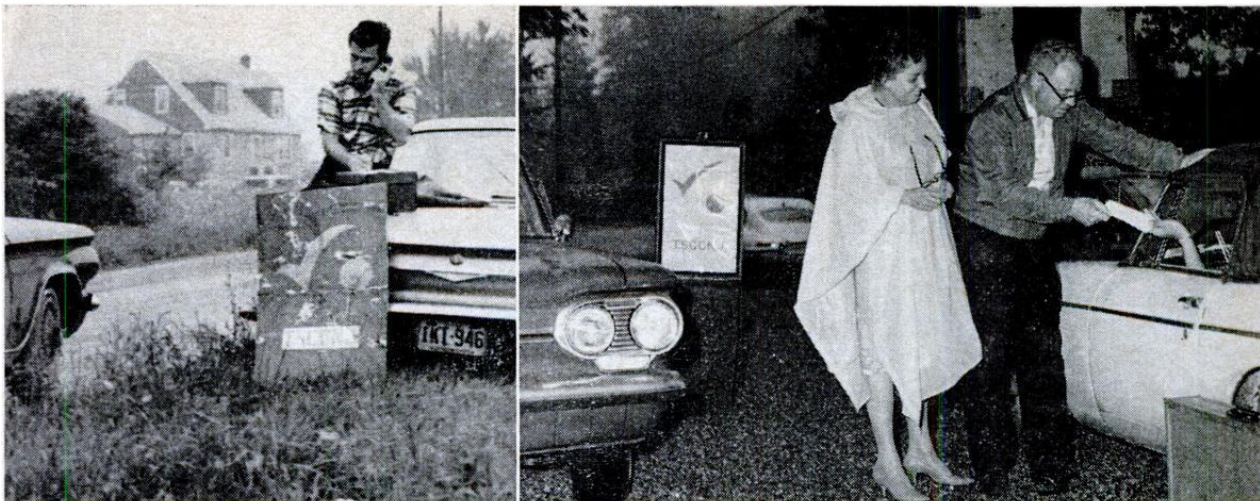
We go. The instructions read:

"1. R [right] out of Bowlero parking lot onto Rt. 3. Mileage begins at **KEEP RIGHT** on left. Begin tire warmup. You have 50 minutes to Odometer Check, Inst. [Instruction] No. 14.

"2. BR [bear right] toward Paterson.

"3. R at STOP.

"4. Follow signs for U-turn. Mileage at first sign."



end, the next-to-last checkpoint considered Car 54 lost beyond recall.

But—will miracles never cease?—Car 54 finished, in 80th place. (It may have been only because eight other cars dropped out.)

into orbit . . . My wife and I are SOPs—seat-of-pants drivers”

We didn't follow Inst. 4 and have to pull into a gas station. We have now covered exactly 3/10ths of a mile and already we are off course.

“Can't you read what it says?” I ask my navigator tartly. She glares at her papers.

A trick? At Inst. 8 (“L at second traffic light”), we debate. This may be a trick. There are two traffic lights beside each other in the intersection. I decide to turn. That's a mistake. It costs us five minutes to find this out and retrace our route.

“Couldn't you see that second light a couple of blocks away?” demands my wife. She adds contritely, “At this rate, we won't be speaking to each other at the finish.”

By the time we have gone 10 miles—we are guessing, without an odometer—we are taking the wake of another rally car. It's number 63, and it had left the parking lot nine minutes behind us. We are 14 minutes late at Odometer Check, Inst. 14, a mere distance of 20.01 miles from the start, though we had been given 50 minutes to make it.

We droop. “You want to go on?” I ask. My navigator nods, but it takes her a long minute to do it.

Most of this driving is on back roads, and now we hit dirt that the drizzle has diluted to mud. It's milk-chocolatey and shiny and slippery. We slither around. I wrestle the wheel.

Car 74 whizzes by. “Hey!” I yell, intending to ask about that last instruction. The guy in the right seat gives me the fish eye. Disillusionment now tinctures our suspicion,

and we are steadily losing ground. Car 74 had left 20 minutes after us.

At Inst. 43 the mileage listed is 34, and we have been on our way for an hour and 25 minutes. We feel awfully alone. The dog requires a tree. We are tensed up, watching for clues. I keep trying to drive the average speeds designated by checking my watch against the speedometer, then adding some to make up for lost time. I'm not that good. I flunked simple algebra in high school.

At Inst. 48 we debate, and among three possibilities we take a right-hand road. A half-mile down, two girls in a Triumph, backtracking, sing out, “Off course!” This is the first and last time that we get any help. So *we* backtrack. The middle road obviously is a private road, so we take the left. And bam! Here's a checkpoint car, and we get handed a note:

“You have entered an off-course control. The straight-ahead rule should have been utilized . . . where you turned left. [Then the middle road had *not* been a private road.] Please follow these instructions to get back on course . . .”

“Car 54, Where Are You?” says Rosemary.

Time out for lunch. We had had breakfast at 6:45. It's now after two p.m. We are still speaking to each other, my wife and I, but only just. Then, at the bottom of Page 3, comes the lunch break.

We pull into a restaurant. We are due out one minute later—by the schedule—but we have had it. We eat well. We squander 40

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Parlor Game on Wheels

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minutes. We feel better. Things look different. The countryside is radiant, even in the rain. The crests of the hills are wearing gossamer rosettes of mist.

We resume. We get lost again, badly, and go maybe seven or eight miles off course, but now it doesn't matter so much. We are learning. We discover that sometimes we have to drive miles between clues. Then there is something else—we come across other rally cars going every which way. They must be lost, too. We've got company!

We stumble badly at Inst. 66: "L at 'Rascal.'" There's a Rascal Something, which we take and have to backtrack, then a Rascal Ranch, finally a Rascal Rd., which is it. So what? We grin at each other.

As we go through Insts. 103 and 104 my wife says, "That's another sneaky one. We are supposed to 'change to average speed' of 100.67 miles an hour—and they gave us 50 feet to do it and slow down to 30."

End of the trail. We've got it made, almost. But it's getting late. Insts. 128 and 129 are deliberately reversed in sequence, and we are too tired to notice, but somehow we come out all right. Then comes Inst. 132, and just up the road is the last checkpoint, and we are at it, and I am yelling at my wife, "We finished, we finished!" and she is slapping me on the leg, and the dog is barking, and anyone would think we had just come into a million clams.

I yell at the guy in the checkpoint car, "We're car 54, and we know where we are!"

It is 6:20. It has taken us not five hours but seven hours and 26 minutes, and we have driven not 150 miles but 186, and who cares?

We go in for a cup of coffee, and all these people are milling around and whooping it up and laughing, and there is this character who conned me into it, and I pound him on the back and yell, "We finished, we finished!" Pretty soon we go back to the car, and there is an announcement under the windshield wiper of a rally next week. I am still pretty excited.

"It's 200 miles, this rally," I say.

"Never mind," says my wife.

"It says, 'In the lovely Pocantico Hills.'"

"Never mind."

"There's a dinner afterward, only \$4.75 per person."

"You're hooked," says my wife.

I'm afraid she's right.

