

MOTOR WORLD

Witzenburg at the

Rally cars: A great way to

Gary Witzenburg, a Detroit-area automotive writer who does road tests twice a month for The Detroit News Motor World Section, today contributes a story of his experience as a participant in the Northern Lights Pro Rally May 1 and 2 near Houghton Lake.

By Gary Witzenburg
News Special Writer

We were careening through the forest in the middle of the night, as fast as we could go, on the nastiest, narrowest, roughest road I've ever seen. In fact, it was not a road at all but a snowmobile trail never intended for four-wheeled travel even at reasonable speeds.

Our powerful driving lights lit the way through gaps in the trees not much wider than the car. Our Peugeot's suspension pounded a continuous drum-beat rhythm over bumps, rocks and broken tree limbs.

Slide right, then left, up to 70 or 80 mph on a short straight, sail over a rise, plunge into a wallow, brake and downshift and slalom left/right again, ever mindful that a slight mistake could send us caroming off the trail, into the woods and probably out of the race.

"ARE YOU sure this is the right road?" I asked co-driver Clark Bond.

"Absolutely," he replied calmly, continuing somehow to monitor his navigational computer and jot notes on the rally instructions clipped to the pad in his lap. Bond, a Bay City resident, has been navigating performance rallies for 11 years and finished fourth in the country in championship points last year. He's one of the best — cool, unflappable and deadly accurate.

"One mile, left," were the next words he said. A few seconds later: "One-half mile, left." Then: "Three-tenths, left . . . Two-tenths, left . . . One-tenth, left."

I started to slow, downshifted . . . and there it was, another trail crossing at a right angle. I side-slid the car through the corner as

quickly and smoothly as I could, trying to stay in the deep furrows plowed by the dozens of cars ahead of us, pointed its nose up the new trail and floored it again.

A couple of miles later, a flare in the road — trouble! A second flare reflected off the side of a white Porsche stuck sideways in the dirt ahead. From behind the car, its driver and co-driver motioned us by on the left, between its expensive nose and a medium-sized tree. We squeezed through at a crawl with an inch or two to spare and were quickly back up to speed.

SOON CLARK was counting down to the finish, where a volunteer worker waited with a stopwatch to record our time. A few yards further down the road we stopped at a check point, collected our score on a little sticker, then proceeded at a leisurely pace to the next intersection. There he re-calibrated his instruments, checked the route instructions and told me which way to go and at what speed to reach the next check point exactly on time.

We had just finished one of 16 "special stages" that made up some 40 percent of the 260-mile Northern Lights Pro Rally run out of Houghton Lake May 1-2. Blocked off for safety, manned by course and control workers and occasionally lined by hardy spectators, these are the flat-out sections of a performance rally.

These are connected by "transit zones" on public roads that are run at legal speeds — and usually well-patrolled by the local cops. Along these transit zones are periodic scheduled stops for gas, service if needed, sometimes a welcome rest and a meal.

Sanctioned by the Sports Car



Gary Witzenburg at the Northern

Club of America (SCCA), there are 14 Pro rallies in America this year, of which the Northern Lights was the fifth. Two other Michigan events are the Nov. 4-7 Press On Regardless (POR) out of Houghton, in the Upper Peninsula, and the Dec. 3-5 Sno-Drift at Grayling.

WHILE STILL in its infancy here, high-speed rallying is immensely popular in Europe and most everywhere else. Manufacturers use it to develop and promote their vehicles, and crowds turn out for a glimpse of their favorite cars and drivers speeding by.

In America the sport dates back 30 years to the original

e Northern Lights

o get the 'feel' of the road



Lights Rally near Houghton Lake.

Northern Michigan PORs, which were sort of fast "outlaw" rallies run on logging roads without official sanction. Only in the last decade or so has it blossomed into the well-organized SCCA Pro Rally series, which attracts entries from all over the U.S. and Canada as well as from other countries.

The traditional rally car is small but tough, usually imported, souped-up for speed and beefed-up for durability, though today's entry list includes everything from Corvettes and Mustangs to four-wheel-drive Jeeps and pickups, some of them very competitive. Recent addition of a "Production" class, for cars unmodified except for lights, roll

cage and other safety equipment, has increased manufacturer interest, swelled starting fields and brought the sport within reach of almost everyone with a driver's license.

OUR TRUSTY steed was a production-class 1981 Peugeot 505 sedan with a 2.0-liter 4-cylinder engine and a 5-speed transmission. It started life as a fairly large (by European standards) luxury 4-door and was rally-prepared and raced very competitively last season by Gary and Carolyn Eaton of Ann Arbor. Built in France and sold throughout the world, Peugeots are a bit on the heavy side and not known for blinding speed, but their anvil-tough durability makes

them ideal for Pro Rallying.

After getting airborne on a bump and landing heavily on its nose at last December's Reno Rally (while leading the Production class), it was temporarily retired while the Eatons switched to a 505 turbo-diesel car — for 1982. More-or-less unbent by late April, it was generously offered to us for the Northern Lights.

Like tennis players, rallyists are ranked in "seed" groups according to past performance. All novices (regardless of experience in other motorsports) are grouped in Seed Six. Within each seed, starting positions are determined by a draw. By the luck of this draw, we started first in Seed Six — 60th in a 71-car field.

When the dust (literally) had settled, we found ourselves 24th overall, 13th of 24 in the Production class and first in Seed Six. At least we had beaten the other rookies, though most of the credit goes to Bond's expert navigation, Eaton's bullet-proof Peugeot and the super service (what little was needed) provided by crewmen Jeff Kersey and Terry Richards.

MY JOB was to keep it out of the trees and puckerbrush, which I did with only three or four scares when turns had popped unexpectedly out of the dust that hung in the air and cut visibility to a few feet much of the way. Our only real problem had been one flat tire — which we discovered at a fuel stop and quickly changed without losing any time. Talk about beginner's luck!

Thirty-seven teams had not been so lucky — some crashed or stuck in the woods, many out with mechanical failures, a few due to navigational errors. Only four of us novices made it through, and we'll get to start in Seed Five next time as a result.

Continued on Page 2H

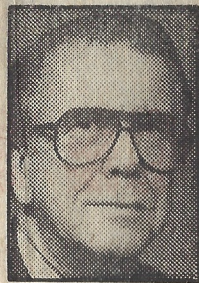
W.C. Vanderburg D. Lorek

Division. Vanderburg, who had been distribution and traffic manager in the division's general office, succeeds **George A. Koss**, now on special assignment pending appointment to a foreign-service post. Vanderburg joined Ford in 1947 as a design draftsman.

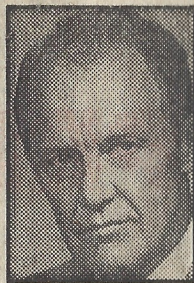
David Lorek is the new executive director, international source development, for **Motors Trading Corp.**, a subsidiary of General Motors Corp. Lorek had been director of energy resources and machine tools for GM's materials management staff. He now will have responsibility for developing new sources of raw materials and fabricated components for GM on a worldwide basis.

Chevrolet Motor Division of GM appointed **Otto K. LeBron Jr.** sales manager in charge of the eastern United States. LeBron had been on special assignment since January and prior to that was midwest regional

General Motors Corp. announced the retirement of **Robert F. Magill** as vice-president of the industry-government relations staff and **Frank J. Winchell** as vice-president in charge of GM's engineering staff. Magill, who joined GM in 1955 as assistant director of the tax section, organized the industry-government relations staff in 1971. Magill will continue as chairman



R.F. Magill



F.J. Winchell

of the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce. Winchell, who leaves GM after 42 years of service, started at the Allison Division in 1940, was transferred to the Cadillac tank plant at Cleveland, then to the Chevrolet Division. He became vice-president in charge of the engineering staff in 1971.

— *Norman Goode*

Two Salem College graduates, **Richard Kubis** and **Robert McElroy**, returned to their alma mater with what they insist is the world's only solar thermal automobile.

KUBIS, WHO did all the talking, explained the car's secret is a new method of capturing and storing solar energy at high temperatures for extended periods.

"The problem with solar energy is that, until now, nobody has found a way to store it," Kubis, a former high school teacher in his hometown of McKeesport, Pa., said.

Kubis said he and his partner have found a battery that can do just that.

Ingredients are petroleum waste products and a few other chemicals, but Kubis refused to be more specific to safeguard his trade secrets.

"It cannot blow up, won't radiate and it won't contaminate the environment," he said.

The battery is charged by hooking it to a parabolic solar collector that resembles a small satellite antenna, he said. The battery boils water in a

built the car after forming the **American Energy Corp.** of Arlington, Va. The vehicle has been the subject of articles in *Design News*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, the *Washington Post* and other publications, but Kubis says it's really only a gimmick.

HE SAID American Energy Corp. hopes to market the solar storage battery for use in home heating. The car was developed simply as a means of dramatizing the effectiveness of the system.

Asked if he and McElroy have considered marketing solar thermal cars, Kubis replied, "You're looking at the mid to late 1990s for something like that. This car alone took 6,000 hours just to demonstrate the principle."

After more demonstrations in West Virginia, Kubis and McElroy plan to head back to Arlington to prepare for the car's July 4 appearance in Washington D.C.

"We came to Salem to try to help out the college a little bit by putting on a little public relations show for them," Kubis said.

One way to get the 'feel' of the road

Continued from Page 1H

Oh yes, Vermonter **John Buffum**, America's best rallyist and many-time champion — who was first on the road (rally cars start one-at-a-time at one-minute intervals) and didn't have anyone else's dust to contend with — and Livonia's **Doug Shepherd** — won it handily in Buffum's awesome turbocharged Audi Quattro. Transplanted New Zealander (now Livonian) **John Woolf** drove brilliantly to bring his Peugeot

504 in second; Ohioans **Eric Jones** and **Roger Sieling** were third in a Datsun 510; Washington D.C.'s **John Woodner** and Detroit's **Ginny Reese** managed fourth in a Cosworth Ford-powered Datsun.

Pro Rallying may seem nutball on the surface, but it's tremendously challenging, exciting and — except when you're blinded by dust — fun. It's man and machine against the worst of roads and the elements — as well as car versus car, driver versus driver and co-driver versus co-driver.

Each is dependent on the other, yet each competes for points in a separate championship.

THE SPORT is also, surprisingly, very safe. Off-road excursions are fairly common, yet the cars' required safety equipment makes injuries rare.

Rally people are generally helpful, friendly and low-key. Except for a handful of paid pros (and a nicer bunch you won't find in any sport), they're basically hobbyists out to have fun with cars. As rac-

ing machinery goes, the basic rally car is cheap and simple to build, and the cost of competing is relatively low.

How does one get involved? Call the Detroit Region SCCA Hotline (591-9313) and tell them you're interested. Also, ask about the rally school put on by Gary and Carolyn Eaton in July. I took it last summer, and it's a great way to get your feet wet with a minimal investment.

But beware — it can be habit-forming.