The Great White Cruise Or:

How Charles Bedaux Tried to Conquer the Canadian Rockies With a Citroën Half-Track and Almost Invented Off-Road Racing

All he needed was a little luck.

BY BRUCE MC CALL AND ROBERT L. REID

• One thing that can be said for the Rocky Mountains is that they're there. Noticing the same thing about Everest in 1924, the Englishman Leigh-Mallory determined to climb it. The French-born naturalized American multi-millionaire Charles Bedaux, grasping the immutable fact of the Rockies' existence a decade later in 1934, resolved not simply to climb them but to traverse their rugged northern British Columbia mid-section with a caravan of Citroën half-tracks.

Today it might be termed an ego trip by a wealthy sportsman to whom the limits of a polo field felt too confining. At the time, it was officially sanctioned as the Bedaux Sub-Arctic Citroën Expedition and less officially the White Cruise, as earlier Citroën half-track ventures in Africa and Asia were dubbed the Black and Yellow Cruises. Citroën's heavy investment in caterpillar-tracked *autochenilles* had been partially amortized by well-publicized slogs through the Sahara and Gobi Deserts and across the Himalayas, and now it was the Western Hemisphere's turn. Any vulgar implication of publicity stunt was dispelled by the trek's soberly stated purpose of testing the feasibility of mechanized polar exploration, *autochenille* style. That a middle-aged tycoon with no known scientific or technical background was heading it up could be easily explained with impeccable French logic: Bedaux was footing the bill.

But by any name and however tenuous its objectives, the Bedaux Expedition rates

at least a footnote in that great big funny book in which quixotic automotive exploits are recorded. Ego trip or not, Bedaux in one grand conceit had anticipated the essential elements of the Baja 1000, the Cannonball Baker Sea-to-Shining-Sea Memorial Trophy Dash and the Press-On-Regardless Rally, all long before their time. Dwarfing the lot in scope and sheer chutzpah, the Bedaux Expedition was the North American prototype of these and events like them that proliferated in the postwar leisure boom as outlets for high motoring spirits and a certain daffy brand of pluck: It was grueling, performed more or less in private and had a slim if not zero hope of any payoff. And like them, it pitted man and his trusty machine against an obstacle that normal folk gave no thought whatever to pitting themselves against—in this case, the entire Rocky Mountains. Bedaux may not have thought too rationally, but he sure thought big. That's the way with your typical American pioneers.

That was certainly the way with Mr. Charles Bedaux, who through energy, nerve and a certain kind of vision had risen from dishwashing to become internationally rich and famous—and scorned—as the father of "one of the most completely exhausting, inhuman 'efficiency' systems ever invented," in the words of a contemporary critic. Bedaux fit the ruthless-tycoon image even in stature, standing a Napoleonic five-foot-six, and any guilt he might have felt about his ill-gotten gains was well-concealed within the trappings of a baronial mode of living almost comic in its pomp. Bedaux headquarters in New York was an office suite high up in the Chrysler Building, modeled after a medieval monastery, and the Bedaux entourage moved with the seasons from a game preserve down south to a grouse moor in Scotland to Chateau de Candé, a rebuilt Renaissance castle at Touraine in the countryside of France where in 1937 the Duke of Windsor, formerly King Edward VIII of England, would take Wallis Simpson in marriage.

For Bedaux, the British Columbia jaunt was a mere temporary distraction, a gaudy lark undertaken by a restless, self-styled man of action. Just as four years earlier he had crisscrossed North Africa by motor vehicle and three years later would roam around Tibet.

The challenge Charles Bedaux set for himself in July of 1934 was to make it over more than 600 miles of British Columbia

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Citroëns had conquered the wastes of Africa and Asia, but the Rockies were to stop them dead.

By mid-August, Bedaux was mired at the Peace River—and two half-tracks had already been lost.

backwoods and mountain passes, beginning north of Dawson Creek at the Hudson's Bay Company post of Fort St. John on the Peace River and weaving a trail northwest, following the Halfway and Muskwa Rivers en route to Sifton Pass before heading down to Telegraph Creek near Skagway in the Alaskan Panhandle. There was no Alaska Highway at the time and no road where Bedaux and his Citroëns planned to go. Two months prior to the expedition start, an eight-man gang had been sent to hack a crude trail through the muskeg and forest as a path for the half-tracks to follow.

Bedaux had assembled a literal "party" for the expedition. Besides the dozen cowboys, the geographer, mechanic and guide enlisted as necessary baggage, the roster included cinematographer Floyd D. Crosby, Bedaux's personal valet, and three females: Mme. Bedaux, as sleek of carriage as a Borzoi even out here in the backwaters of British Columbia; her Parisienne chum Bilonha Chiesa; and of course, her indispensable maid. And it was going to be a successful party in more ways than one. Bedaux and his court would be cushioned against the rigors of roughing it by a rich layer of creature comfort. Besides the usual tents and stoves and drums of gasoline, the inventory of the Sub-Arctic Citroën Expedition counted endless crates of cutlery, crystal stemware, French china, silk pajamas, rugs, beds, baths, toilets and a larder short on pemmican but long on caviar, truffles and Devonshire cream.

All but obscured in this surfeit of portable *joie de vivre* were the five vehicles on which success would ultimately depend. They were four- and six-cylinder versions of the C-type Citroën half-tracks that had recently conquered the Beirut-to-Peking route on the so-called Yellow Cruise, themselves descended from production Citroën passenger cars of the day. Capable of lumbering along at a top speed of no more than twelve miles per hour, they were fitted with six-speed gearboxes and able to clamber up 40-degree slopes on their rubber treads.

The half-track idea was to spread weight evenly over a large area—a track—rather than concentrate it over four wheels and had been around since 1908 when the Frenchman Gaston Liégard converted a Peugeot touring car into a *chenille* (or caterpillar) with two eighteen-inch strips of coconut matting. But it had been perfected by the former technical director of garages to Czar Nicholas of Russia, Adolphe Kégresse, who then sold the rights to Andre Citroën in 1921. In full Sub-Arctic Expedition trim, the AC6G and AC4G Citroën half-tracks looked like canvas-topped demi-roadsters, festooned with lights and sporting supplementary forward rollers as extra protection against the rocks and stubborn underbrush that lay ahead.

On July 22, 1934 the Bedaux Expedition, attended by a phalanx of packhorses, straggled northwest out of Fort St. John, still burping from the Board of Trade banquet thrown in their honor the night before. The send-off speeches, wishing Godspeed to the stalwarts in their Citroëns, were no doubt sincere.

But good wishes were not quite enough—a thought Charles Bedaux may well have pondered 24 hours later while sitting stuck in the muddy bottom of a four-foot-deep creek aboard the lead *autochenille*. A floating bridge ferried the other four tractors across while Bedaux's stranded vehicle was winched back to dry land. An undignified beginning and a bad omen, soon to be proven all too true. By next morning, in fact, the caravan was balked again, this time by a quarter-mile

His Citroëns beaten by Murphy's Law, Bedaux converted his cowboys into stars of the show.

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stretch of muskeg swamp that by rights should have been gravy for the world-beating Citroëns but instead took four hours of slow churning to navigate.

Things weren't moving the way Charles Bedaux had foreseen. Things were in fact barely moving at all. There was no inexorable push through the yielding wilderness as nature fell back from the onslaught of M. Kégresse's relentless rubber treads. When the tractors weren't floundering around in the mire, laid up for repairs or simply stopped dead by the mud that clogged their tracks and transmissions and brake drums, they were being winched up hillsides or floated across rivers. Sifton Pass lay 300 miles distant but it might just as well have been 3000. As July merged into August in the sweltering gumbo of summer in the Rockies, progress averaged a hard-won three miles a day. The ladies sulked in their tents while the cowboys were ordered to act out little dime-novel dramas for director Bedaux and cameraman Crosby, augmenting the unphotogenic drama of a slow crawl through the bogs with staged heroics worthy of a Cecil B. De Mille. And faced with a paucity of thrilling news to relay to the outside world, the flamboyant Bedaux began fabricating breathless bulletins to newspapers in Paris and New York. A cowboy left the expedition for a visit to a nearby settlement: "Cowhand Missing!" A horse drowned: "Man Lost In Raging Rapids!"

Two of the Citroëns had been ditched within the first three weeks. Now, in mid-August, Bedaux saw the handwriting in the mud. The Sub-Arctic Citroën Expedition was doomed. At the current rate of progress, the party would be overtaken by winter long before it had even reached Sifton Pass. The order was given to abandon the remaining *autochenilles* and proceed the rest of the way on horseback. Perhaps a Bedaux Sub-Arctic Horseback Expedition could be salvaged from the fiasco.

But the Citroëns, Bedaux suddenly decided, could not simply be abandoned—not dramatic enough. Two of the remaining three were rolled to the brink of a 120-foot cliff and then toppled over, fodder for Floyd Crosby's lens. The last half-track was placed on a raft and sent careening down the Halfway River. Bedaux meant to blow up the cliffside with dynamite as the raft hurtled past, but like so many other things on this ill-starred adventure, the dynamite fizzled. The raft and the Citroën swirled blithely on down the Halfway.

Extra horses purchased along the route replaced the half-tracks as beasts of burden and personal transport. Advancement, if

Bedaux (center) hams it up for the camera.

slow, was at least steady. But the first snowflakes now began fluttering down. The temperature fell below freezing. The country grew wilder as the party moved within sight of Great Snow Mountain's 9500-foot peak. Sipping pink champagne from crystal goblets in the middle of nowhere had begun to strike the ladies as something less than jolly fun. They were sore, they were bored and they wanted to go home.

By September 27 the Expedition found itself at Sifton Pass, 200 miles short of the original goal. It was 200 miles too far for Bedaux and company. Defeat was accepted. The caravan turned and headed south for the Finlay River and a ferry ride back to Fort St. John.

But Charles Bedaux's flair for the dramatic was still not exhausted. On the way to the Finlay, cowboys were filmed crawling on their bellies in mock desperation, feigning starvation. There were shots of dead and dying horses—for whom the desperation was anything but mock. Hoof rot had broken out, and 50 of the original 130 animals on the expedition never made it to the Finlay River rendezvous.

The last British Columbia was to see of Charles Bedaux and his ladies was a few days later on the railway platform at the town of Pouce Coupé, waving goodbye.

Poetic purity would have the abandoned Citroëns left to rot in the wilderness where they fell, but instead, an enterprising citizen of Fort St. John went scavenging and found four of the original five. One he used into the Fifties. With parts from the three others, he cobbled up a fourth that was eventually donated to a museum in distant Saskatoon.

The postscript on Charles Bedaux is longer and more lurid. "He was one of those strange manic types," observed a recent chronicler, "who appears from time to time on the financial or industrial scene, makes a large fortune and a brilliant reputation very quickly, and ends, as often as not, in trouble." Trouble is hardly the word. Ten years later Bedaux died by his own hand in a Miami jail cell, shortly after being indicted by the Department of Justice for treason. He had been found in North Africa in 1943, engaged in a scheme to lay a pipeline intended to bring peanut oil to the Nazis. Among his documents was an identity card from Vichy, France describing this American as "attached to the German military high command."

A hell of a legacy for the Baja, the Cannonball and the Press-On-Regardless to have to conjure with—their spiritual progenitor, a card-carrying Nazi collaborator. Perhaps someday someone will decide to complete the challenge Charles Bedaux so badly bungled back in 1934 and redeem the tainted honor of this premiere American automotive quest. Someday, perhaps, but there is absolutely no rush. The Rocky Mountains will still be there. •

In a final, doomed attempt to create drama, Bedaux tried to blow up this cliff over the raft.