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Commemoration of The Fiftieth Anniversary of The First Automobile Crossing of The Sahara

by Louis GAY (Part One)

How I commemorated, with Dr. Ivars, the fiftieth anniversary of the first automobile crossing of the Sahara by the Haardt and Audoin Dubreuil mission - in 1922-1923.

In May 1972, during a meeting with friends, I learned that some intrepid individuals were planning to travel to the Sahara towards the end of the year, using cars from the 1922-1925 era, to pay homage to the pioneers of the Citroën expedition which, having departed from Touggourt on December 17, 1922, arrived in Timbuktu on January 7, 1923.

I was already familiar with the various expeditions that Citroën had successfully completed across the African continent and in Asia through their chief mechanic, Maurice Penaud, whom I have had the great honor of knowing as a friend for almost twenty years. Accompanying the drivers of the test vehicles around Mont Ventoux, Maurice Penaud was the undisputed leader, despite his height of 1.60 meters; and a great storyteller.

In the evenings, after work, over drinks, or around the campfire, Maurice Penaud would relive for us the

wonderful moments of the "cruises": the first crossing of the Sahara—the second: the crossing from Africa to Madagascar in 1925—and the third: the Yellow Cruise in Asia in 1931.

With his stories and his Parisian accent, Maurice Penaud was embraced, a fact he remembered, and when he retired, he came to settle here in the South of France, 6 km from my home, even closer to Mont Ventoux, since he lives in Bédoin.

It was there that I told him about my plan to set off for the Sahara in a 1922-1925 car. He said to me: "Well, well!" At your place in Mormoiron, there was at the time we were there, a van that was originally a tracked vehicle. What became of it?" I surprised him by announcing that I had bought it. It was July 1972, and a few days later I bought the farm tractor on which the original radiator of this tracked vehicle had been mounted.

In the meantime, I had contacted Dr. Ivars from Bagnols-sur-Cèze, the organizer of this commemorative trip. At that time, the plan was to leave with wheeled vehicles of the B2 type. I overhauled the engine, its large-capacity radiator, and the front axle of this old tracked vehicle, but I was missing the tracks and the special rear axle that made up the "Kegresse and Hinstin flexible tracked propulsion system," the original axle having been scrapped about twenty years ago. I embarked on a veritable hunt to find another Kegresse rear axle.

Meanwhile, Dr. Ivars, who was looking for B2 parts, learned that not far from his home, in Tresques (Gard) to be precise, a winegrower, Mr. Arnaud, owned a B2-type tracked vehicle which he had used, some years more transporting water to treat his

vines. Mr. Arnaud agreed to lend his tracked vehicle to Dr. Ivars. Time passed, and thanks to information from Mr. Michel, an antique dealer in Avignon, I found a wreck with tracks and a Kegresse 2nd type rear axle.

A technical detail: Citroën Kegresse tracked vehicles are classified into 2 types of tracks: a) The rubber track strips are driven by pinching, between the drive pulleys, the inner guide lugs of these 15 cm wide strips, b) The track strip is an endless belt, made of rubberized canvas, 21 cm wide, on which metal pads with rubber road blocks are fixed on the outside and inside of the strip at the center of the guide lugs, on the edges of the drive blocks. This assembly on either side of the track is secured by 3 bolts per track pad, with 50 tracks per track; this second system was fitted to the B2 and the C4 and C6 models, which remained in service. This is the case for the B2 that Mr. Arnaud lent us. At the beginning of October 1972, I had all the parts, but my profession as a winegrower forced me to bring in my harvest and postpone the assembly of the track system until mid-November.

One problem remained: the track bands were rotten. I contacted the "Kleber" dealer, the Bordet Company in Avignon, which produced endless tracks from industrial conveyor belts, which I then fitted. It was at the beginning of December 1972.

On December 17, 1972, "Les Amis de Sénanque" (The Friends of Sénanque) hosted us in Gordes (Vaucluse) at the Abbey that houses the Sahara Museum, built by Berliet; I still had the old tracked vehicles that day, and the departure was imminent. I spent the

Christmas holidays preparing, and by December 26, everything was ready. I went to Bédouin so that Maurice Penaud could christen my tracked vehicle "Lune d'Argent" (Silver Moon), which he drove briefly for reporters and newspapers. Mr. Arbillaud, the local councilor and mayor of Bédouin, expressed his best wishes for the success of the expedition in a few words. These few words from a car enthusiast were most welcome.

On December 27th, we left for Marseille. A friend, Max Calamel, transported my tracked vehicle to join everyone else. We had arranged to meet at the Marseille municipal vehicle garage on the Route de Lyon, from where we departed in convoy, preceded by two motorcyclists from the gendarmerie who escorted us through Marseille to the RMC (Rencontres Métropole de Marseille) where a reception was planned. Our stop on the Canebière caused a traffic jam as on-lookers slowed down in their cars.

Then, we set off for the docks, always preceded by our two friendly motorcyclists, through the Old Port and along Rue de la République. As we passed, after noon, there were many people quite surprised by our cars from another era; finally, the docks and the C.G.T.M. ship, "L'Avenir," at its berth, with which we would leave Marseille that same evening at 6:00 PM for our journey to Algeria, a country I don't know. We stopped in this immense maze of port warehouses, and our motorcyclists left us.

While waiting for customs formalities, we ate near the cars, then it was time to board with our vehicles. There were many tourist cars; the hold of "L'Avenir" was full, and we made our way to our cabins. For departure, Captain Weber invited us onto

the gangway to watch the maneuver; There was also Mr. Leparoux, the CGTM delegate in Algeria, who was returning to his post. He helped us as much as he could during the landing in Algeria, and it was a pleasure to see him again upon our return on January 22nd, to pick up "L'Avenir" for Marseille. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him here for his help with the formalities and paperwork.

It was from the gangway that we saw Marseille illuminated all around the harbor, then, having passed the Château d'If, we picked up speed and headed out to sea.

Back in the lounge while waiting for dinner, something unthinkable happened: in the lounge bar, the regional TV station was broadcasting all the reports they had come to film here, as well as the morning's report from Marseille, where Jean Claude Juan had interviewed us. None of the crew noticed, so absorbed were we in this end of the day, which marked the beginning of our adventure.

Then came dinner. Almost the entire crew was at the table, and despite a very calm sea, a few stomachs allergic to the sea forced us to make prudent retreats to our cabins. After dinner and a leisurely stroll in the bar while watching the evening's film, we returned to our cabins. I shared one with Jean-Yves, ten years younger than me, an excellent and wonderful friend. The next day, our journey continued on a beautiful day, with a very calm sea. Around 10 a.m., a visit to the engine room for a few mechanics enthusiasts, in the overheated and deafening atmosphere of the powerful engines.

After lunch, a nap for some, card games for others, long but pleasant moments spent on deck enjoying the

sea air while waiting to arrive within sight of Algiers, which we finally glimpsed all white in its harbor just before nightfall. We docked, the modern vehicles were unloaded by the Algerian customs officers, who exceptionally allowed us to unload the older cars ourselves.

Customs formalities were rather lengthy, despite the good offices of the SONATRACH representative, Mr. Girbhi (Citroën Algeria), the delegate from the Algerian News Office, and finally, we left the port. Our yellow convoy, the modern cars and the wheeled B2s, in the joy of driving through Algiers, outpaced the two tracked B2s on this road south to Hussein-Dey and the Citroën garage, which welcomed us admirably. Both at this stop and upon the return of the two tracked vehicles four weeks later, I thank Mr. Musard and Mr. Girbhi, the managers, for their personal assistance. It was in the heart of Algiers that we met on December 28th, at the headquarters of Algerian News, where we were to be hosted for the night. But before going to bed, prominent Algerians treated us to an excellent meal with carefully selected wines at a private club. A very pleasant atmosphere ensured the reception lasted very late into the night. The next day, final preparations were made for our journey south, following agreements with the Algerian authorities, who asked us to modify our planned itinerary for filming that Serge Marquand was to undertake.

The following route was chosen: Touggourt, Hassi-Messaoud, Ouargla, Ghardaïa, El-Goléa, In Salah, Tamanrasset, Niamey in Niger via Agadez. For the films directed by Marquand, SONATRACH provided us

with vehicles free of charge, namely: a tanker truck with 5,000 liters of gasoline, a Gazelle truck, a Land Rover for the filmmakers: Marquand, Tassot Papadaquis, Ane Andrieux, and the Algerian representatives, and a 16-ton truck from SNTR to quickly move the two tracked vehicles, which only travel at 20-25 km/h, on routes where there was no filming. As we will see later, these trips often took place early in the morning or late at night, and the drivers, mechanics, and grease gunners of these vehicles have my esteem and my deepest sympathy.

THE JOURNEY FROM ALGIERS.

The convoy of support vehicles and the B2 trucks departed around noon on the 29th for Bou-Saâda, the first stop, where the trucks, which had left Algiers that evening, arrived late at night in a downpour. This leg of the journey was very difficult for the B2



Between Touggourt and El-Oued: the four B2 vehicles.

drivers, who had no windshields.

After a few hours of rest at the hotel, we set off early again for Touggourt, still in the rain. The landscape is constantly changing: sand at the start of the journey from Bou-Saâda, then hills with esparto grass, then small villages nestled among the palm groves that the road crosses, and little by little, the landscape opens up, becoming almost flat. The railway line runs alongside the road, and the rain continues to fall. Soon, to the south, the sky is almost blue.

We arrive in Touggourt. It is past noon. We check into the Transat Hotel. Opposite the hotel entrance, a square with palm trees, eucalyptus trees, oleanders, and, in the middle, a monument marking the departure point 50 years earlier of the half-track expedition that would make the first crossing of the Sahara along barely marked tracks, traversing the infamous Tanezrouf to reach Timbuktu.

Finally, the departure. You should see our old cars around the monument erected by Citroën, surrounded by a very interested crowd, tourists surprised by these special vehicles, many of whom are unaware of their glory days. Despite the rain, all the cameras are working feverishly, to the great delight of the inhabitants of Touggourt, including venerable old men, whose childhood memories of 1922 are evident in the explanations they give to the young people. We head south along the road that passes near the old citadel.

After that, we spent the whole day in the dunes near El-Oued, where we filmed, in every sense of the word, since the camera was there. In these dunes, the tracked vehicles got their revenge on the wheeled

cars, because the wonderful undulations of the blond sand were a game for their rubber tracks. This sand is very unstable under the wheels, especially when they are driven; because in two or three turns, the vehicle is stuck. One of the first solutions is "pushing" because "elbow grease" is very effective in the Sahara, or else "towing" by one of the tracked vehicles. On this first day, Serge Marquand was worried sick; the four B2 vehicles, due to their different cruising speeds, were not often grouped together. The tracked vehicles, despite their slowness, overtook the wheeled cars when it came to climbing the dunes, leaving behind two parallel tracks, without a scratch, despite their weight of 1,300 to 1,400 kg compared to the 500 to 600 kg of their wheeled counterparts.



Dr. Ivars on his B2, somewhere in the sand.

We returned to Touggourt, then it was on to Hassi-Messaoud where we arrived as night fell. What a sight! There, resting on the sand, dancing flames, dark red, emerge from this desolate land, and to the left, a patch of green awaits us: Maison Verte, a haven of calm with flowers and air-conditioned accommodations, the ultra-chic bar and its restaurant where we are welcomed for dinner, and later, in this night, where the glow of the torches is reflected in the black of the sky, we replace a "flector" on one of the tracked vehicles before heading towards the torches, these gigantic blowtorches whose roar and dancing heat are impressive. It is 3:30 in the morning when we return to our air-conditioned rooms; after a refreshing shower, we fall asleep with these Dantean visions captured by the camera, without the aid of projectors.

At dawn, the sun is low on the sands; Back to the flares and oil complex, with the camera still on, its eye watching us all the way to Tamanrasset, the final destination of the tracked vehicles' journey south. Here we are again, on the road; some on their own, others by truck. Ouargla only sees us passing by. Beyond lies a desolate, rugged plateau, and, rising from the depths of these valleys, all white and pale, very soft ochre, minarets tower over each village, which together form Ghardaïa, with its palm grove of an almost blackish green. A few turns, a descent, and civilization reclaims us. After the parade through the streets of Ghardaïa's old town, the colorful market, a visit to one of the satellite villages with its melodious name, a walk along wonderful, dust-covered paths where even the donkeys are startled. A few vines in the gardens still

have their leaves in this early January; we arrive in the palm grove with our old cars. For the other crew members, the visit will be like tourists. In the evening, we return to the Hotel Transat with its lovely inner courtyard and garden.

With regret, we leave, but at the end of this new leg of our journey, we discover El-Golea from atop a sandy cliff at a bend in the road. The town is scattered amidst a grove of palm trees. To the east, the ruins of old citadels, perched on two rocky outcrops, seem to stand guard: vestiges of the Rezzous era.

A few downhill turns through a gorge, a curve, and there we are on avenues lined with sidewalks, palm trees everywhere behind mud-brick walls, with many canals where clear water flows. What a contrast with the landscape we have just crossed!

It is noon. We are all gathered together. We eat the meal that Renée, Pierre, and Michèle have prepared in an abandoned palm grove by the roadside, where a fast-flowing stream adds a touch of coolness. Soon, a group of curious children kept us company, as the two cheerful ones, Bernard and Marc, had joined us the day before.

As we prepared to leave, we took stock of our plans: tonight we would camp at the beginning of the Tadémaït plateau at Fort Miribel, as the paved road currently ends there. So, off we went to Fort Miribel.

It was here that we split up due to a lack of clarity regarding the route of the new trans-Saharan highway; in fact, it no longer passes through Fort Miribel, and those who had gone before us hadn't left any directions at the junction, so we headed to Fort Miribel since that was our meeting point. After

30 km of rough track, we reached the fort. It was almost dark, but no one was there.

We prepare to camp since it's just us and the truck loaded with the two tracked vehicles, the driver Brahim, the oiler Habdallah, Jean-Yves, and myself. To say we were upset by this incident goes without saying, but what wonderful peace and quiet in the depths of this wadi near the well with its few palm trees. If our horizon is limited to the north by the silhouette of the abandoned fort, whose rather useless watchtower still stands, to the south the track disappears between clumps of broom, and to the east and west is the wadi. Soon night softens everything with a crystal-clear sky where the stars shine. We prepare a fire with pieces of broom and a few scraps of palm leaves. A bright flame soon rises.

What wonderful companions Brahim and Habdallah are to us, who immediately prepare the couscous they offer us, which we eat with pleasure. In turn, we offer them cheese and fruit jellies from the stash I had in my tracked vehicle. Then everyone gets ready for the night. Jean-Yves and I set up a shelter with a tarp over the truck next to a tracked vehicle. Brahim settles into the cab, and Habdallah unfolds his cot and puts it under the truck. After a while, just as sleep begins to overtake us, the sound of an engine makes us prick up our ears. We stick our heads out from under the tarp. It's definitely from the north that they're coming. The fort begins to stand out against the night, lit from behind by car headlights. A car appears next to the fort, goes down the track, and stops next to the truck. It's the Méhari with two of the young members of the team looking for us. They arrived after waiting at the

end of the paved road where everyone else had gone without going through Fort Miribel as planned. After reassuring them, we decided to stay and join the new track tomorrow, at the beginning of the Tadémaït plateau, continuing along the old track.

They left, leaving us blankets and sleeping bags, taking the track south to reach the campsite. After an hour and a half, when we were sound asleep, a car woke us up. It was them again. They had come back because, unable to find the campsite, they preferred to return to the track they had come on. They filled up their tanks and disappeared behind Fort Miribel. After a very cold night, ice cubes hang from the radiators of the B2s, and everything is white with frost that the sun melts in moments.

Habdallah relights the fire, we have breakfast near this comforting fire, then we set off along the track southwards, which climbs slightly to get out of the wadi. After a short while, what a magnificent view of the fort to the north, now illuminated by the rapidly rising sun, then the track, veering westwards, passes near a small lake, quite unexpected, in the middle of this vast expanse of arid rocks, with a few tufts of grass and shrubs scattered around the water where the blue of the sky is reflected. We pass not far from a nomadic encampment; a few camels watch us go by from afar, the others, closer to the track, move away with a light step like a race seen in slow motion, and soon we find the main track and, there too, the other vehicles of the team.

It is now the Tadémaït plateau in all its splendor, a dark gray, almost metallic hue, streaked by a multitude of vehicle tracks on either side of what will be the future trans-Saharan highway, which opens a

wound of a yellowish-brown red. The tracks of the vehicles are the same color, sometimes veering off for nearly a kilometer to search for virgin territory among the glistening pebbles, without losing sight of the white metal markers of the old track. On the Tadémaït, everyone chooses their own route, and the passage remains marked by a double track on the stony ground; As for the plume of dust that follows each vehicle like its shadow, it is dispersed by the light wind that blows almost constantly over the Tadémaït.

After a few hours of walking, we reach the construction site of the future trans-Saharan highway, amidst a large cloud of golden dust from which emerge enormous trucks and earthmoving equipment. In the morning, we stop; the tracked vehicles are unloaded and join the wheeled B2s that have just experienced their first real off-road adventure.

The camera focuses on our team of old cars, and there, among the construction equipment on this boundless plateau, we drive, preceded or followed by the filmmakers' Land Rover. It is past noon when we meet up with our colleagues in the dusty support vehicles. We eat quickly, as everyone is hungry; Then it's off again towards the south, towards the descent of the Tadémaït, the bane of Saharan truckers, which will soon be nothing but a memory, because in an incredible carousel, increasingly large vehicles bite into this rock, where the great, light-colored furrows of the future trans-Saharan road appear, visible from the edge of this magnificent citadel, sculpted by erosion that left pyramids to the left and, to the right, escarpments with deep traces of gullying.

Before this prestigious scenery, in shades of gray, pink, yellow, and mauve, the heart swells at the sight of this destruction wrought by man, in the name of progress. Our film crew will capture what remains of this site as our vehicles from another era pass by.

(to be continued)

Louis GAY.

