

LE SAHARIEN

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ET SPORTIVE

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SOMMAIRE

SAHARA

- «Le Saharien» et vos cotisations, par A. NABAL 2
- Le renouveau de l'Islam, aperçu sur ses sources idéologiques et sur ses sujets de
discorde, par G. Jean-Louis SOULIE, Ambassadeur de France 4
- Liaison entre les Méharistes de la Mauritanie et ceux de la Saoura et du Touat,
par le Capitaine RESSOT (fin) 14
- Commémoration du Cinquantenaire de la Première Traversée du Sahara en auto-
mobile, par Louis GAY (fin) 22
- Le Pays des Affars et des Issas, par le Lieutenant-Colonel Roger MARIE (fin) 32
- Sables et vieilles pierres, par Aldo CEREGHETTI 42

VIE DE L'ASSOCIATION

- Assemblée Générale de la RAHLA du 13 juin 1978 48
- Distinctions - Liaisons - Carnet - Deuils 57
- Les Comités et la Bibliothèque de la RAHLA 64
- Nouveaux membres et changements d'adresse 68

LIVRES ET REVUES

- Le Guide du Raid Auto-Moto, par Daniel BERGER et Christian PORTAL. —
— Vers d'autres Tassilis, par Henri LOTHE. — Bibliographie éthno socio'logique de
la Tunisie, par André LOUIS. — Thèse sur la traduction automatique de la langue
arabe, par Pierre VERMEL. — Les contradictions sociales et leur expression symbo-
lique dans le Sétifois, par A. OUITIS. — Un village algérien, structures et évolution
récente, par C. LACOSTE-DUJARDIN 72

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

by Louis GAY (end)

While waiting for the signal to depart, near one of those piles of stones at the edge of the old track, with on the other side that almost illegible sign, where it is recommended that drivers get out "in first gear." Despite this wise advice, vehicle wrecks lie at the bottom of this rugged landscape, with the winding of the old track that clings to the whims of these escarpments, with hairpin bends, a 20% gradient drop, we find ourselves at the bottom of this chaos. After a good straight stretch, the track heads due south with a right-hand curve, and soon the construction site clinging to the cliffside disappears in the dust.

Here the almost straight track crosses a wadi bed marked by a few bushes, then we cross another construction site. Our tracked vehicles, spurred on by the bulldozers, their larger counterparts, hurtle along at 15 to 20 km/h through the dust that splashes like water; the landscape in this dust seems unreal, and our machines, like monsters, disappear and reappear. Once again, the brand-new track on which we were rolling despite the lack of tarmac.

Three hours after we are met. We have to reluctantly let the wheeled B2s go, so they can hurry along

at full speed, and change tracked vehicles, because In Salah is our next stop. Before reaching it, the track crosses a rugged landscape. There, we have to rescue our tanker truck, which, having left the track, is stuck in the sand. Hand shovels, planks and the help of our Mercedes 3-axle truck quickly got him out of this sticky situation.

It's almost dark when we cross the cliffs between which the track winds, and it's well into the night that we enter In Salah.

Here, there are no sidewalks, no asphalt, just red sand, red sand everywhere, against the dark red walls of the houses. Then, we stop in a small square, still covered in this reddish sand. From the square, a street lined with trees leads to the other cars; the hotel is surely nearby, but with the arrival of our crew, it's full. Jean-Yves and I have a room, given to us by the filmmakers, in a modest hotel.

In the morning, after breakfast, we do a little mechanical work on the B2s: a broken front spring, a few lost bolts, others loose, a few wheels to repair, and a tire to change. The filmmakers filmed the rehearsal, and now that everything is ready, we take the main street that leads towards the palm grove, passing under this monumental reddish-brown gate whose top is crowned with pointed crenellations, an avenue of tamarisk trees, then palm trees and, to the right, magnificent golden dunes topped with small palisades of palm leaves, their orientation designed to delay the menacing advance of the dunes towards old In Salah, some of whose walls have already crumbled under the pressure of the sand that will soon

be at the foot of the minaret.

Under the clear blue sky, these golden dunes, these palm trees with their green leaves, the all-red city of In Salah is very beautiful, and a few donkeys laden or ridden by their owners pass near our cars, which some kids watch, while Serge Marquand and his team work.

In the early afternoon, we were back on the road in the truck towards Arak, our next stop. The sun, at its zenith, made In Salah dance in the distance, soon disappearing, and a vast expanse of golden light surrounded us. The darker track, tinged with red and violet, seemed to climb, then to the left, hills appeared where mirages, lakes, or inlets, vanished as suddenly as they had appeared, stretches of stone and sand with a section where hardened salt left white traces, and more very low hills that shifted through all shades of blond, brown, and violet. Shortly before nightfall, we came within sight of Tadjemout; the hills to the left and the rounded mountain above the palm trees were an unreal, flamboyant red. We stop to refresh ourselves at this spring which disappears at the foot of the palm trees where a black and white kid, two or three days old, frolics and bleats.

We set off again almost immediately because night falls very quickly. The road winds its way between the hills, which take on a gray hue, and soon we need our headlights. We drive for a while and enter gorges that must be very beautiful to see by day; we cross the wadi bed and after driving for a while at the foot of the very high cliff... a light! It's Pierre who shows us the way down to cross the wadi. A thorn bush stands at the crossroads that leads to

the old fort, which can be glimpsed in the darkness, as can the well in the middle of the slightly sloping embankment, this well, whose shallow water is protected by a round masonry structure covered by a door. All around, the cliff towers above us. We are in Arak.

We settle into an old metal shack that is available to tourists and is guarded by an Algerian civilian. After the meal, it's bedtime for everyone, and sleep quickly falls. Silence reigns in this dormitory where the two women on our team, Michelle and Renée, are staying.

In the morning, what a sight! The sunrise in the gorges, with the fort, tiny vehicles between the cliffs, all crumbling at their base, which the sun colors red on the peaks and pink and mauve on the backlit parts, and, amidst this mineral landscape, in the bottom of the wadi, with tall grasses, a few palm trees and thorny bushes, among which, on the eastern side, there is a nomadic encampment with dark tents.

We set off again along this track where, suddenly, around a bend, the fort disappears. We climb only to descend immediately, only to climb again in a strange, tormented landscape, all violet and mauve for kilometers. From the top of a steep path, a few huts made of palm leaves appear. The landscape opens up, revealing higher mountains in the distance, and shrubs in the meandering wadi. This is Meniet.

After several hours of walking, a lunar landscape unfolds: rocks pierced with the shapes of creatures from the diluvial period, a curve in the track, a few thorny bushes, and at the far end of this plain, a completely white marabout (shrine) adorned with

small flags. After circling the road several times, we stop, and the drivers go to the marabout. We admire the site. To the southwest, a rounded, metallic gray mountain rises, its two enormous humps supported by unstable boulders. At the foot of the mountain stands a completely white house. The Algerian drivers leave the marabout. They beckon us to accompany them to a tall, veiled man wearing a dark brown burnous who serves us coffee in cups arranged on a tray. A child of about twelve helps him. He is bareheaded and wears a burnous. With their short sleeves, these burnouses make them look like penguins.

"Here," Brahim tells me, "we don't pay, because offering them money would be an offense. However, they accept coffee or sugar that drivers or visitors give them." We are in Tesnou, Zaouïa of Moulay El Hassan. We rejoin the track that winds in wide curves between the hills with their ever-changing hues. On these stretches between the hills, thorny bushes, clumps resembling esparto grass, give the impression of a cultivated field.

After a good stretch of track, there, on the mountain to the right, unusual for this place, are electricity poles with, in the distance, a water tower near a shack, a paved track, and also a few abandoned shacks protected by barbed wire. We stop to eat because it's past noon. We share our provisions with the drivers and the big fellow from Tesnou who came with us, because he's going to fetch water from the metal drums we put on the truck. Another person will bring them up to him in Tesnou, so he can offer passersby coffee or fix an empty radiator.

We drive a short distance and stop the truck near

the water tower. Here, water—scarce—flows into troughs where camels and goats drink.

It's warmer. The sky is a brilliant blue, and the track winds through a wonderful landscape. Around a bend, a few houses with flat roofs appear, nestled on land elevated above the rather rough track. A left turn and a few palm trees with greenery beneath them disappear at the next bend: we've just passed through Im Emguel.

Soon, to the left, fairly substantial mountain ranges appear in a haze that seems to dance in the heat. These are the foothills of the Hoggar Mountains, and here and there, patches of greenery. Walls surround some cultivated plots. To the right, a rather unusual structure: a row of pillars like a Greek ruin, palm trees, and a few tamarisk trees.

The bilingual "Tamanrasset" sign is there, along with the paved road, and soon the reddish-brown city



Blue Men. Tuareg passengers.

appears with, to the left, red and white metal pylons. On either side of the road, houses are being built with mud bricks made directly on the ground from which the reddish-brown clay was extracted. Tamarisk trees line the lane we are driving on. This is the center of Tamanrasset. We pass near a square dominated by a metal tower where flags are flying. The Bordj of Father de Foucauld is on the right, a massive reddish-brown structure with crenellations.

We cross the entire city to the Mouflon Hotel; not far away, there are some rocks where our truck stops. When the whole team arrives around evening, almost all of us settle into the municipal campsite in thatched huts, and a few others find rooms in town, because it's time for a big Tuareg festival in Tamanrasset. They come from the Hoggar Mountains, from all over the southern Sahara, from Mali, from Niger; which makes for a lot of people, along with tourists of all nationalities at the beginning of the year.

Our old cars also attract curious onlookers, especially tourists, because the locals possess this curiosity that allows them to remain impassive, sitting on their heels watching people and vehicles go by. There are, of course, those who know about mechanics ask the most questions, and if they are offered a ride, even those who were indifferent are ready to get on.

The day after our arrival, we set off early in the morning towards the northeast along a track where the corrugated metal is particularly beautiful, due to the rocks that line the track. After a few kilometers, to the left of the track, a peak, a sort of

fluted column on a base of scree from the summit of this peak, the result of erosion that has been eating away at it for millennia. It is Pic Laperrine, a reddish-brown against the almost white sand, under a very blue sky. A little further on, a mass of rocks glistening with a pinkish-gray; in the middle of this landscape, a few thorny bushes, and there, in this precarious shade, a group of Tuaregs awaits us. There are unveiled women and their children, whom they cradle while singing, as the Tuareg men dance with swords, bows, and spears. Upon our arrival, we exchange greetings while the cameramen film. We take the delighted Tuaregs for a few rides in the car. After filming, we descend back to Tamanrasset. The faster B2 trucks, with their wheeled vehicles, speed along the track and disappear in a cloud of dust. With the tracked vehicles, we can go wherever we please, and what a pleasure it is to frolic outside the terrain frequented by wheeled vehicles. Here we are again in the foothills of the Hoggar Mountains, near a guelta, whose water is contained in a basin formed by the rocks, in front of the circus-shaped wall where the water has left clear traces that reflect the blue of the sky. We descend into the wadi, but there, only the tracked vehicles can pass through this coarse sand, because in two wheel rotations the standard B2s are stuck in the sand up to the bridge. We pull the B2s out of the wadi and return to Tamanrasset.

The next day, we set off for the Hermitage of Father de Foucauld at Assekrem. On the way, we make a detour to see a magnificent guelta in the middle of this desolate landscape, to see this limpid water where the blue sky is reflected, with oleanders and

rushes, in a tiny valley lost in this immensity of brown rocks.

The track continues to climb, winding between the mauve, brown mountains where peaks emerge like a raised finger. The guide points out to us large blocks of rock where there are some rock engravings, evidence of the passage of humans.

Our snowcats find their bearings and slowly gain momentum on this track with its bluish-white outcrops and small, glistening pebbles, in a landscape of mauve and bluish-gray rocks. We continue to climb. Then, in a vast panorama, a thin, lighter-colored track appears on the mountainside, zigzagging up as if it were heading for the clouds. This is the track and its switchbacks towards the Assekrem refuge, with, high above, like a dark cube, the Hermitage of Father de Foucauld at 2,900 meters.

Cautiously, without pushing the engines, we climb in second gear, then very quickly we have to shift into first. To avoid straining the gearboxes, I ask Jean-Yves, who is following me with the second snowcat, Mr. Arnaud's, to use the relay and shift back into second gear. The engines are running almost at idle. I shift into third gear and we climb very well. The B2s with wheels that had been going up to this point are now overtaken their clutches, put to the test, are emitting the smell of rather battered linings. They'll have to use the Land Rover to get them to the top of the pass; we continue in second gear, which we keep until the refuge, in front of which we stop. It's not warm, so we leave the cars and on foot we take the path that climbs in switchbacks among large boulders, and suddenly, at the last bend, the Hermitage appears with its door 1 meter

from the ground, through which you have to stoop to enter. Inside, the dim light and the calm encourage contemplation. Among the weather instruments are religious objects and books in Arabic. Then we go back outside and there, in this marvelous light, we discover the full beauty of the site. At our feet, this magnificent valley where the track climbs between the blue-gray, mauve, pink mountains. In the distance, thanks to the orientation table in front of the Hermitage, it's possible to identify these peaks. It's with regret that we have to descend.

We have a quick meal at the refuge that Pierre and Renée have prepared. We thank the refuge wardens for their kindness in sheltering us while we eat, as it's still cold. It's past 2 p.m.

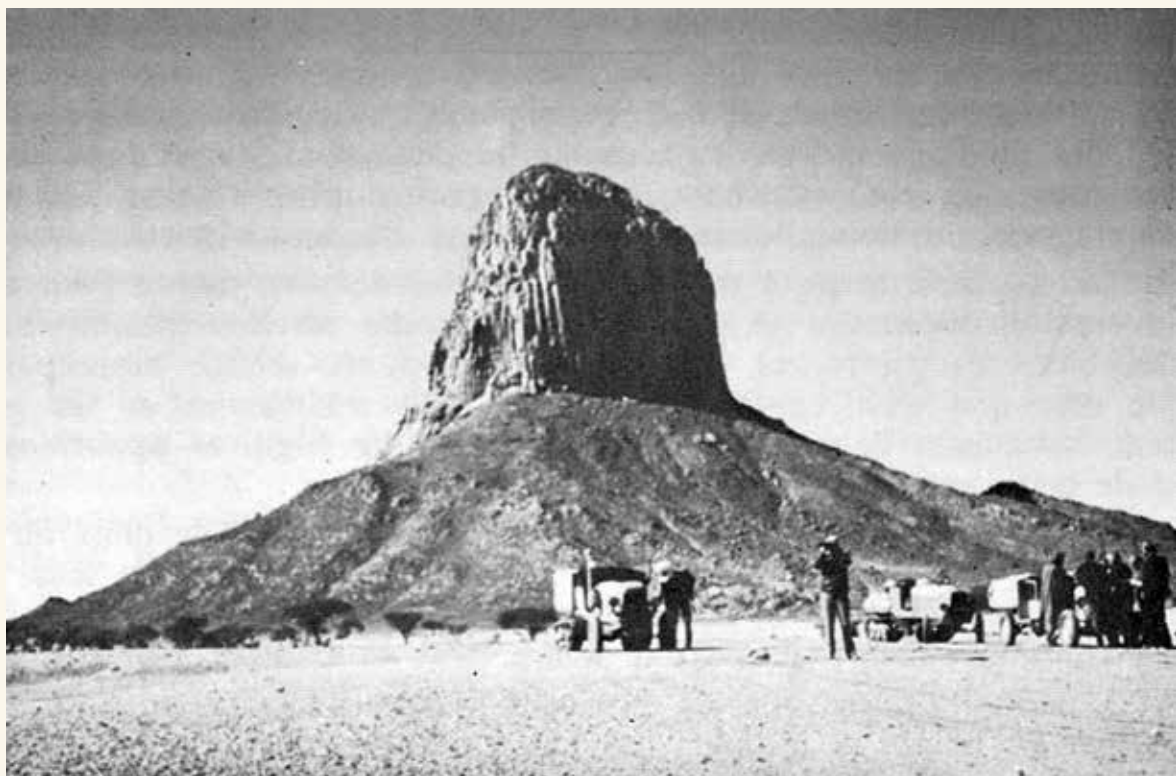
We take the track again towards Tamanrasset, the track that comes from the North. What a wonderful ride it is to travel in a snowcat, even if the track is quite bad, but after many kilometers, we have to load the snowcats so as not to return too late. We're back in the truck, the track crosses a chaotic landscape of wild beauty, what a shame that we couldn't have more time, because if the climb reveals wonders, the descent, especially towards evening, in a landscape where everything is different, offers sumptuous lighting.

Once again, the track clings to the mountainside where the vast curves of the terrain make it impossible, in the approaching twilight, to distinguish the track's route in the valley, so great is the distance. Hairpin bends force our truck to maneuver, the front wheels driving over the unstable stones of the track's retaining wall. At one bend, Habdallah guided the maneuver with more than five steps forward

and backward to get through.

Here, the backdrop is magnificent. To the north, mountains of bizarre rounded shape, which the setting sun tinges pink. Jean-Yves and I have run out of film to capture the colors of these mountains, which, towards the lower slopes, have patches of pale yellow against grays and mauves. Then it's a toboggan run where our truck hurtles. It's almost dark. The descent brought us to the foot of the mountains, whose peaks stood out against the sky, almost red on the west side, making the hues of the mountains that now loomed over us on all sides seem even more surreal.

Between the rocks, the very narrow track twisted and turned, climbing only to descend again abruptly, and sometimes the rear wheels skimmed over boulders, and thanks to the two rear axles, we could almost say it was comfortable. It was dark now, and the headlights illuminated the masses of rock, fleeting apparitions



The vehicles at Pic Laperrine (Hoggar).

in the midst this frozen landscape.

On a raised section of ground, the track passed by two or three small, deserted huts surrounded by low stone walls. This was the only sign of habitation we had seen in the more than four hours we had been driving; and it would continue for another hour or so.

Little by little, a few shrubs appear, then clumps of fairly tall grass, lit by the headlights, and still not a light in sight. The sky, now a deep blue where the stars shine, dominates the landscape, which seems to expand. Finally, headlights in the distance; it's a car coming towards us, then the filmmakers' Rover with Serge Marquand, who, not seeing us arrive, came to meet us. We're almost there, he tells us, since I've driven about an hour to get here. He turns and drives off again, and we plunge into the dust kicked up by the car. We're alone again. After several kilometers, a glimmer on the horizon. It's surely Tam, and then after a while, there are the lights—disappointment, they're the runway lights. Tam is still 10 km away—a crossroads, and there's the paved road—we've arrived.

I must pay tribute here to the skill of Brahim, the driver of the S.N.T.R. Mercedes truck, and his assistant Habdallah, for driving us along this track, as I was very afraid we wouldn't make it out.

It's past 8 p.m., we eat and go to bed in our hut. We fall asleep quickly, but during the night I have a few nightmares. I see our truck suspended above the void, wedged between the rocks. Finally, dawn breaks on the last day we will all spend together in Tam.

In the morning, we set off again for the Assekrem track, at the foot of Pic Laperrine where we had met the Tuareg. There, all the vehicles provided by the Algerians were waiting for us: the tanker truck, the Gazelle, the Land Rover, and the S.N.T.R. Mercedes. with all the drivers and mechanics in their work clothes, our four support vehicles, all the team members, the two B2 wheeled vehicles, and our two tracked vehicles.

Serge Marquand and his film crew positioned the camera very high up in the scree opposite Pic Laperrine, which will serve as the backdrop for a shot that will likely be the final cut of the film.

All the vehicles are arranged in the shape of a Southern Cross, the drivers and passengers at the most slender point of the cross, while four vehicles circle around to form the central circle.

We return to Tarn around noon, then it's time for preparations for the B2 and the support vehicles for the departure the next day, as the separation will take place here; the tracked vehicles returning to Algiers by truck.

In the afternoon, we travel to a small Tuareg village northeast of Tarn, using the two tracked vehicles and the Gazelle truck with the filmmakers.

In this village, artisans craft arrows, spears, knives, daggers, bronze hammers for breaking sugar, and leather goods, while unveiled women, basking in the sun, prepare couscous, comb each other's hair, or simply sleep with young children in their arms, while the older children play like children everywhere.

Back to Tam. In the evening, we all gather at a res-

taurant to treat the Algerian delegates, drivers, and mechanics who have been with us since Algiers to a méchoui (whole roasted lamb). Wine was bought, an extra, as it's expensive in Tam, and the evening ended, full and content, a night where the understanding had allowed for excellent coexistence during this trip.

The next morning, final preparations for those continuing. After customs at 9 a.m., it was departure for distant Niamey, 1,800 km away, where part of the mission was to catch a flight on January 22nd. Three of us would return directly to Algiers, transporting the tracked vehicles by truck.

We needed to give the truck some attention because it no longer had an alternator belt—there weren't any left in Tam—and the front left spring had a broken axle right in the bracket. The same axle had been replaced on another truck the day before. There weren't any left at the S.N.T.R. garage.

So, in agreement with the driver and the garage manager, we decided to swap the broken front axle with the rear axle of the same spring—the one in the chassis mount that supports the binoculars. We finished this operation around 9:00 a.m., and confidently, at 10:00 a.m., we set off north on the track; that evening, we spent the night in Arak.

Without wasting any time, the next day we passed through In Salah at noon, where we ate at a restaurant. That evening, we camped near Fort Miribel, where the paved road begins. It was very cold. The five of us ate the couscous that Habdallah had prepared in the tent. The truck was parked on a slope so we could leave without relying on the batteries,

which hadn't been recharged for several days.

In the morning, when we woke up, everything was covered in frost. It was cold. After breakfast, we set off again, and what a pleasure it was, after the dirt track, to hear the truck rumble along the paved road, without the clanging of the sides. At noon, we ate on the track next to the truck, still parked on a slope, and in the evening, at nightfall, we arrived in Ghardaïa.

We left Ghardaïa very early the next morning for Touggourt, where we arrived around 1 p.m. We booked a room at the Transat for the three days we would spend in Touggourt, to allow time for the truck to be serviced at the vast S.N.T.R. depot.

Here in Touggourt, our friends, Mr. Bakala, and Brahim, our driver, received us very warmly at their home, and it was a great pleasure for us to be in contact with friends whom we would regretfully have to leave in a few days.

While waiting for our departure, Mr. Bakala, in his car, showed us around the areas surrounding Touggourt, notably the track to Temacine that the tracked vehicles used fifty years ago. Everything is just as Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil wrote; The irrigation channels, the small marabouts, which we visited at the invitation of the Algerians who were praying there.

We strolled through the picturesque maze of covered streets in Touggourt, sometimes coming upon closed doors that made us turn back. We were received very kindly everywhere. Mr. Bakala, who is very well-known, introduced us to many people who showed us great interest, which clearly demonstrates that our commemorative walk has value for their country. It

was at the mosque that Mr. Bakala's popularity and erudition were revealed to us by the number of people who greeted him. We entered the mosque after him, removing our shoes like him to respect the holy place, a marvel of decoration.

Then we returned to Touggourt. Mr. Bakala, during the journey, tells us about Algeria, its past, its future, and the history of Touggourt; at his home, we admire his collections, and it is with regret that we take our leave. After the meal that Mr. Brahim, our driver, had offered us the previous evening at his home, we will take away from Touggourt the memory of true southern hospitality.

The wonderful setting of Touggourt will see us leave very early the next morning for the final leg of our journey, which will take us to Algiers, where we arrive late in the evening in torrential rain. We spend the night in a very modest hotel, and the next day, after unloading and driving our tracked vehicles to the Citroën garage in Hussein Dey, we settle in for a very short time near the Aletti, in a very nice hotel.

We visit friends while waiting for the ship "L'Avenir," which brought us to Algeria four weeks ago. In conclusion, our commemorative journey of the first automobile crossing of the Sahara, including the making of a film, was undertaken by SONATRACH, which led us to modify our initial project. Despite this modification, it was a great adventure full of wonderful discoveries and lessons learned. As for the old cars, the B2s with wheels demonstrated remarkable endurance, covering more than 5,000 km at 25 and 40 km/h between Algiers and Niamey. They weigh between 500 and 600 kg each. The tracked vehicles,

weighing between 1,300 and 1,400 kg each, with a maximum speed of 25 km/h, covered approximately 1,000 kilometers across the terrain between Touggourt and the Hoggar Mountains. The film was produced by Serge Marquand and his team. If the necessary time were allotted to the tracked vehicles, they would follow, off-road, the same route as that taken fifty years ago by the Citroën expedition. We note with admiration that the Touggourt-Timbuktu raid was completed in 1922 in nineteen days and pay tribute to our predecessors.

Louis Gay,
member of the "Transatlantic" expedition of Dr. Ivars, 1972-1973.

Editor's Note - As a note to Mr. Louis Gay's account published in our journal, No. 66, we are publishing below a letter from our friend J.R. Berge who, at the time of the first trans-Saharan automobile journeys, was assigned to the Zinder District, then commanded the nomadic subdivision of Azaoua.

Louis Gay's account published in "Le Saharien," concerning the fiftieth anniversary of the first crossing of the Sahara by automobile, reminds me of the automobile. In 1923-1924, I was in Niger, assigned to the Zinder District, whose administrator, Mr. Fleury, with his long gray beard, died a few years later of filariasis.

Since I came from the Moroccan Spahis, he had tasked me with gathering five or six hundred horsemen and taking them to the Tessaoua trail, to welcome the Black Cruise, Haardt and Audouin-Dubreuil's Citroën

Mission, which was crossing Africa using tracked vehicles. I had no trouble finding these horsemen in Birni, Zengou, and the immediate vicinity of Zinder, as the locals enjoyed such events.

Some horsemen had even fitted their horses with padding, which was meant to protect them from arrows and gave them a completely unexpected medieval appearance.

We left Zinder at daybreak, hoping to find the vehicles on the road. Around noon, we arrived at the first encampment, at Tirmini, I believe, where I decided to stop because the sun was starting to get too hot. We waited until evening, in vain, and returned to Zinder somewhat disappointed and in a truly disorganized fashion.

The vehicles arrived in Zinder the next day and the day after, or a few days later. The tracked vehicles had suffered terribly from wear and tear in the dunes. Parties were organized afterward, and the riders and filmmakers were able to indulge themselves to their hearts' content.

Later, the six-wheeled Renaults arrived in Zinder in better condition. Equipped with large tires, they were truly vehicles of the countryside—of that countryside that Commander Rottier crisscrossed in every direction on his little indestructible Ford. And when the tires were worn out, they were stuffed with tall grass...

A few years later, Mr. de Loppinot, who commanded the Tahoua District, entrusted me with the first nomadic subdivision, that of Azaoua, replacing Captain Charbonnier, who was able to dedicate himself to the camel corps platoon.

Unfortunately, my health did not allow me to stay there long. I did not have the stamina of Commander

Févès, whom I saw again in Timbuktu, nor of Father Yagouba, who, after thirty years in the southern Sahara, had managed to maintain his fresh Burgundian complexion.

Le Floch, from the Civil Service, replaced me at the nomadic subdivision. Having returned to Algeria, I learned around 1939-1940 that Captain Charbonnier had been tasked by the Governor General with distributing fabric to the needy in the Southern Territories.

I had the pleasure of receiving Mr. de Loppinot and his son during one of his brief stays in the South of France. A man of wide open spaces, he could not adapt to our cramped life and returned to Goundam. According to "Le Saharien," his grandson is following in his footsteps.

Administrator Loubet de Margaria recently died in Axles-Thermes. We were talking about the past, what had become of my friend Paul Nouvel de la Flèche, from the office of Governor General Jore, and Mr. Calteau de Tessaoua, whose faithful servant Madjouba used to stuff me with Savoy cake (we said from Tessaoua) and floating islands until my liver burst. What had become of my old friends, from when I was young, and when Africa had a different face? J.R. BERGE,

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09270 Mazères.

