

1978 Ready Plan Rally History

By Ian Richards

The history of this unique event goes back at least to the 1975/76 George Derrick Memorial Trials, or in concept, back to the BP Rallies, the last of which was run in 1973. With the demise of the BP there was an absence of any long distance events that explored new and often remote regions of Victoria and adjoining states. This was also against a background of the evolution of rallying away from any kind of horrendously tricky navigation towards straightforward map reading and a high proportion of fully route charted events. The Derricks and subsequent Riverland and Ready Plan Rallies sought to fill the gap, providing competitors with longer more adventurous experiences in new terrain but with straightforward navigation.

Organising any rally can be a huge task, a two or three day event even more so, but add in completely new previously uncharted territory and the effort required was enormous necessitating a significant team of people. CCRMIT, under the directorships of Noel Richards and myself, developed this team concept with the 1975 and 76 Derricks run out of Hamilton over two nights, both of which were heats of the Victorian Rally Championship and the 1976 event also a heat of the SA Rally Championship. For both events we assembled a team including Garry Spence, his wife Carol doing the secretarial work, Noel Kelly and Rex Leitch as well as locals (to the south-west) Max Nathan and Perry Kilsby. Tom Cox was always Course Checker, as he was of the subsequent Riverland and Ready Plan events. The 1974 event required a lengthy period surveying the new unused territory between Hamilton and the SA border which was achieved by us all taking the 1974 Christmas holidays in the camping ground at Port Fairy from where we ventured out every couple of days to explore and map. The 1976 event used much of the same terrain but Noel and I also explored and used territory in SA around Mount Gambier, Penola and Millicent. Both events ran successfully and were well received by fairly full VRC (and in 1976 SARC) fields of competitors.

After the 1976 Derrick the team decided that we would pursue a non-championship BP style event and we would look at using largely unused territory (except in a few previous BPs) in Victoria's Mallee as well as south-west NSW and the Murray River forests. Fairly soon that event was designed with five divisions going overnight from Echuca to Swan Hill for a rest break, then daylight to Mildura and night back to Swan Hill for another rest break, an easy afternoon division down to Bendigo and a final loop through the St Arnaud and Dunolly goldfields to finish. The team concept was employed more fully with individual division directors, Mike Baxter for the first, Garry Spence the second, Rex Leitch the third, Ross Turner the fourth and Noel Kelly the fifth. Noel and I were co-directors with responsibility for overall planning and to ensure adherence to the overall concept. Christmas 1976 saw the Richards, Spence and Leitch contingents camped at Wood Wood north of Swan Hill from where we ventured out on daily sojourns into the various areas to the west and north. Meanwhile Mike Baxter explored the Murray River forests of Bama, Moira, Millewa and Perricoota-Koondrook while Noel Kelly developed a challenging final division through the

much more familiar goldfields country. It was fun exploring the Mallee terrain north west from Swan Hill and over many days we had effectively mapped the almost grid like road system, identifying which roads were good gravel, usable sand, too sandy or simply non-existent. Another day we ventured in two cars across the Sunset Country from south to north, which in the middle of summer was a somewhat daunting prospect. Another day we ventured into NSW and found some fabulous scrub country and fast flowing station tracks to the north east of Mildura. The nearby Nyah Forest became well known to us as we visited frequently for picnics and swimming in the Murray River. The myriad of approvals involved us learning about the NSW Western Lands Division and the contacts for the owners of the various pastoral leases, as well as the usual shire and forestry authorities. Frank Kilfoyle had been helpful in this regard providing us with access to some of the old BP files. We had also introduced some new concepts, namely the touring stage where it was understood that you were not to drive flat out and the times were set accordingly, as well as the coffee break, a concept which we borrowed from Tasmanian rallies.

The 1977 Riverland Rally was eventually sponsored by Datsun, and ran successfully in good weather conditions over a long weekend, presumably Anzac Day, in April. It attracted a reasonable field and was well received for the sense of adventure, the straightforward navigation and the entertaining roads. But it had taken its toll on many of the organising team and most wanted to have a rest or pursue other interests. I still had the desire to run a similar event in 1978 that would go deeper into NSW as well as SA so began to assemble a new team of helpers, the first of which was Steve Hollowood, who was effectively the co-director. Also joining the team were Dick Gill, Doug Hall and Rick and Kate Thorpe, with Kate taking over the secretarial role from Carol Spence. Tom Cox was again Course Checker.

Steve and I did the majority of the new surveying out of Mildura during the summer of 1977/78 with two three day camping sojourns, one to the north west and one to the north-east. The country was fabulous although we did find a lot of tracks that were too sandy to be used. A separate survey trip explored deeper into the Sunset Country while weekend trips from Melbourne explored more of the Murray River forests, including Gunbower, and the Terrick Terrick Forest west of Echuca. By early in 1978 we had the majority of the route in place, with an afternoon Echuca start, a short twilight division through Terrick Terrick and Gunbower to Kerang, a long run through the Mallee to Renmark for breakfast and a daylight division half way to Broken Hill and back to Mildura for a true overnight rest break. Another daylight division went north east from Mildura and back through Balranald to Swan Hill, then a night division through Koondrook-Perricoota forests, across to Mathoura and an interesting loop to the east through the Millewa Forest before breakfast and a run around the autocross track at the Deniliquin Car Club. A final Sunday morning daylight run would use familiar stages in the Moira and Bama forest to a lunch time finish back in Echuca.

Well it didn't quite work out that way. I don't recall exactly when the event was originally calendared, perhaps April or May, but certainly by then 1978 was developing as a pretty wet year and various authorities were withdrawing approvals for many of the roads, primarily in the southern parts of the event. As I recall, we postponed the event for a few months in the vain hope of drier weather but in fact it got wetter with Echuca experiencing its wettest July

since 1960. The Murray River forests were starting to flood, as they do every few years when Australia is not in the grip of an el Niño pattern. It was clear that we were going to lose the first and last divisions and much of the run from Swan Hill to Deniliquin. In the lead up to the event we hastily added new sections to make up the distance that was expected. Dick Gill was instrumental in putting together the touring sections from Kerang to Ultimo that allowed us to make up for the loss of the first division while it was fairly easy to add the loop west from Swan Hill that replaced the loss of Perricoota and Millewa. The remaining divisions around Renmark and Mildura were largely intact save for a few bog holes that had to be avoided. And that's pretty much how the event ran, with the final decisions about some of the Murray River forest sections being left until the last moment. In the end I surveyed the Koondrook Forest section on the night ahead of the field and found rising flood waters over the southern part of the section requiring the deletion of a couple of vias.

In parallel with all of this planning was the need to find a sponsor. David Cartan, an associate at the Light Car Club with whom I was working on promotion for the Alpine Rally later in the year, suggested that we approach Ready Plan Insurance. They had sponsored the Phillip Island 500 the previous year and as a new company specialising in easy to buy car insurance, he thought they would be happy to buy some cheap exposure. Interestingly, Ready Plan was an offshoot of CE Heath Insurance, which later became HIH, which even later took over the FIA group and subsequently collapsed in perhaps Australia's largest corporate scandal! Anyway, Cartan reckoned we needed a hook for the sponsor and through some friends in road safety research he came up with the idea of wiring up a driver to see how his performance degraded with fatigue. Subsequent phone calls lead to Brock being enlisted as the target driver and Ready Plan took the bait. We needed a navigator for Brock and although my brother Noel had absolutely no involvement in the organising of the 1978 event, he knew much of the country quite well and was an obvious choice. His name was put forward and he subsequently received a phone call from George Shephard. Everyone knew that a Round Australia Rally was planned for 1979 and it is fair to say that his role as Brock's minder on the Ready Plan Rally lead to him continuing with Brock in winning the 1979 Repco.

While the stories of the competitors are told elsewhere, the organisers had their own dramas during the event. While zeroing the 100 mile section through the Sunset Country, Steve Hollowood, navigated by Mike Osborne, broke a diff in his 180B. This not only left the remainder of that division without a zero car, but required Ian Wallace to go in and tow him out about 24 hours later. It also required others, mostly me, to cover Steve's activities on the daylight division from Renmark to Mildura. I had my own problem while zeroing much of the division from Mildura back to Swan Hill losing third gear in my long suffering Datsun 1600. The disappointment of the event was the relatively small field, perhaps caused by it being re-scheduled and sitting as a non-championship event in a very busy calendar. Nonetheless, most competitors appeared to thoroughly enjoy the event, particularly the daylight sections north of Mildura where the scenery, as well as the roads, were fabulous and the sense of remoteness and adventure was compelling.