

RUNNING ON EMPTY



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A roadside rescue begins a friendship

I have, I suppose, an unusual history of what we quaintly term *roll-over occurrences*, because a number of these have occurred when someone else was at the wheel—one, in fact, when I was asleep in the back seat on the Alaska Highway.

Which is how I came to make the acquaintance of Fred Ankeny.

It was 1984, if I recall correctly, that Jerry Hines first launched the Alaska 5000 Rally, an event that took several dozen adventurous loons from Seattle to Anchorage and back, about 2,500 miles each way. Details are hazy after three-and-a-half decades, but somehow I was able to borrow a 900 Turbo press car from Saab for this mad run, my first experience with the joys of multi-day marathon rallying.

Ankeny owned a tire dealership in Portland, Oregon, and somehow he and two of his BF Goodrich cohorts thought that it would be a great idea to run the Alcan 5000 in a BF Goodrich van—a Ford Econoline, I think. They mounted a fin on top of the van and named it Orca. I don't believe that any of us were all that serious about the rallying aspects of the adventure, but all of us were looking forward to good stories—like the guys who had grafted a Rolls-Royce body (two, actually, the front from one and the rear from another) onto a four-by-four Chevrolet truck chassis.

The first half of the event passed without incident, really. It was on the southward half that I crawled into the back seat, turning the wheel over to a young friend who fancied himself a rally driver, with my ex-brother-in-law in the navigator's seat. Somewhere near Watson Lake I awoke as the car lurched sideways in one direction, then swerved back. It was on the pendulum's third swing that I braced my back against the diagonal support for the roll-bar that Saab had thoughtfully installed—just in case—and jammed my feet against the other. The car left the road and rolled five or six times.

The driver had hip injuries serious enough for a helicopter evacuation, while the navigator had a few head lacerations that we treated with towels and duct tape. Eager volunteers splinted my ribs and fashioned a sling, and we stood around waiting for the RCMP to arrive and investigate the accident. "Or," said Ankeny, "you could just jump in the van and we'll hit the road."

That pretty much defined our friendship for the next thirty years: I'd get into some weird sort of predicament and Fred Ankeny would bail me out. Pretty soon I was storing a rally car at A-n-T Tire, as his shop was named (even though I argued in vain for proper apostrophes or an ampersand:

A 'n' T or A&T, which he said sounded too much like a telephone company.) Fred and his son Garth also ran a racing-tire service called Trackside, and I don't think there are many racers anywhere in the Pacific Northwest who aren't grateful for all the help they received during racing weekends.

Fred was simply the most generous friend of anyone who needed a hand, and I say that as one who has had many generous friends over the years. One winter I threw a rod in my old blaze-orange Saab 96 rally car about halfway down the Cassiar Highway. I called my oldest friend, Russ Huntoon, in Reno; he drove to Portland, borrowed Fred Ankeny's SUV and trailer, and drove for two days to come to my rescue.

That Saab 96, a factory-built rally car, was eventually stashed at A-n-T along with a growing fleet; I'm not sure how it happened, but eventually the place became Rally Central for me and a gaggle of other rally junkies. Fred started rebuilding Saab engines, since we had so many of them, and we collected several cars mostly for parts. Eventually I acquired the Bad Dog, an E30 325iX, and then the Red Rat, an iX four-door—but an ancient Saab Sonett V4 still did yeoman service for vintage winter events. Meanwhile, the old orange 96 sat in a corner, but one day Fred said to me, "I've been buffing that Plexiglas rear window with some aircraft polish, and I think it'll clean up just fine."

I stared at him in disbelief. "If you're so crazy about that car," I said, "I'll bring you the title."

It was really the least I could do. The thing is, Fred always waved away any attempt to pay him back for tire service, storage, or mechanical work. "Don't worry about it," was his mantra. (Garth, who eventually took over the tire shop, was the same way.) So I was happy to palm off the old Saab on somebody who would appreciate it, and we all sank a little deeper into rally madness. On one winter rally I navigated that old Saab for Fred, and I got us so lost that he had to back up through about three miles of foot-deep snow in order to get us back on the route. I proved even more inept when we took the car to Mexico for an anniversary run of one the early Baja rallies; that time I guided us into a sand wash, and it took us several hours to dig our way out of it.

Fred contracted some odd form of leukemia a couple of seasons back, but he made encouraging progress, and I was hopeful, although I doubted that he'd ever let me navigate for him again. But late last year he took a sudden downward turn, and a terrible year turned even worse.

I already miss Fred Ankeny. I never met anyone like him—and I never met anyone who *didn't* like him. I can't say that about many people.