

## **A history of motorsport in Qld Part 2**

By Malcolm Spiden

On Christmas day and Boxing Day 1916, the first Australian Speed records attempts were held on the beach sands at Southport. The start was from the Burleigh Heads end heading north towards Meyers Ferry (the Southport Surf Life Saving Club). A vehicular ferry traversed the Nerang River from the mainland (Meyers Ferry Road where the Gold Coast Arts Centre now stands) south of Goat Island, (now Chevron Island) to Myers Ferry Road on the beach side (now Cavill Avenue). Top speed for the ½ mile course on the sand was 84.5 mph (completed in 21.4 seconds) set by Alex Jewell in his 6 cylinder Studebaker.<sup>15</sup> Two further events were held at Southport on 2-3-4 June 1928 from north of the regular bathing beach to Salamande Point and 24-25 December 1928. Motor cycle clubs also used both the hill climb venues as well as the Southport beach track for their competitions.

During this early period record attempts between Capital cities as well as major centers were held. Walter Trevethan travelled from Brisbane to Toowoomba in 3 hours 7 minutes on 1 October 1912; the Brisbane to Sydney mark was lowered to 32¼ hrs in January 1917 by Alex Jewell and Jack Walsh (Studebaker) then to 26 hrs 3 mins on 21-22 December 1917 by Boyd Edkins (Vauxhall). Other record holders for the Brisbane to Sydney distance in 1918 were Fred Z. Eager and Wallace G. Webb (Overland – “Whitey” – 19 hrs 38½ mins), Norman “Wizard” Smith (Essex), and Lee Murray in 18 hrs 33 mins.

For those who are aware of automobiles of the 1910's, cars used by regular competitors include Buick, Cadillac, Calcott, Chandler, Chevrolet, Fiat, Ford, Hispano-Suiza, Hudson, Hupmobile, Maxwell, Metz, Minerva, Moline Knight, Napier, Overland, Phoenix, Studebaker, Swift, Talbot, Vauxhall, Vulcan, Waverley, and Willys Knight.

Of the early competitive motorists in this decade names reoccurring included L.T.S. Morris, A.H. Sager, Boyd Edkins, G.W. Whatmore, Walter M. Trevethan, A.B. Overell, Fred Eager, Dr A.R. Menzies, Alick V. Dodwell, Wally Webb, Victor William Croston (Richard Croston's grandfather), George Ferrie, Jack Walsh, Walter and Wyndham Pike. (Reports up to 1940's usually referred to competitors with just an initial and Surname rather than their Christian and Surname.)

Reports of major races, Grand Prix, rallies and hill climbs from both America and Europe were published in local newspapers and the few motoring journals. These must have attracted the attention and dreams of any sporting enthusiast; however Australia, like Britain, prohibited motor car races on public roads. In the 1920 decade without any suitable venues, activities would be confined to social runs, petrol consumption contests, the occasional hill climb event then reliability contests and acceleration tests. Buchanan points out that in the 1920's a house may cost between 450 to 850 pounds, a car 200 to 400 pounds whilst a motor cycle about 60 pounds. (16). This cost factor would see the more rapid expansion and popularity of motor cycle activities compared to that of motor car as activities as events involving cars may have been confined only to those well off.

Motor cycle popularity grew through detailed reports of speedway events in the local newspapers, the ease of finding venues as well as the relative low cost of a machine compared with that of a car. Many a local showground or horseracing track could be used, thus events at Maleny, Innisfail, or Gordonvale were conducted. Larger centres such as Townsville, Cairns, Bundaberg held events whilst Toowoomba and Ipswich each had the luxury of 3 venues. Toowoomba had Clifford Park, Werrington Park and the Showgrounds, while at Ipswich venues of Bundamba Racecourse, the Showgrounds and East Ipswich Hockey field are listed. In Brisbane, the Deagon Racecourse (1 mile grass track) commenced motor cycle races on 11 March 1922, Exhibition Speedway (1/4 mile) on 26 October 1926, Coorparoo Racecourse on 28 May 1927 for the Winter season (1/2 mile grass track and now site of the Coorparoo Secondary College) and Davies Park (1/4 mile) operated from 6 August 1927 until the South Brisbane District Cricket Club lobbied the City Council in 1933 to have this activity “removed from Davies Park” (17).

There were a few motor car races programmed at some speedway venues. The Townsville Motor Cycle Club ran a five cycle with a one car race programme (the first motor car race event in North Queensland) on 27 December 1925 at Ross River Plains. The last event on the programme, a handicap race over 5 laps of the 1.2 mile course, attracted 5 participants with Don McInnes in his Special Six Studebaker off a 8 seconds handicap being the victor. (18). However a match race at the Davies Park event on 6 August 1927 between Henry Horstmann (Seneschal) and Arthur Jenson (Austin 7) was reported as a ‘dull and tame affair’. (19). Probably compared to the rough and tumble of bike races they were, so until both special and sufficient numbers of speedway dirt racers were developed or purpose built circuits to enable car to display their full entertainment potential were built, this perception would remain.

From 1920 to 1928 interstate and intrastate Reliability Contests became annual events. Some over a 1 day period such as Brisbane to Nambour, others over a 4 to 6 day period as Brisbane to Sydney, Brisbane to Katoomba, Brisbane to Rockhampton and return, or Brisbane to Grafton and return. The first multi-day between Sydney and Brisbane (18 October 1920 to 21 October 1920) was conducted jointly by the ACQ and Automobile Club of Australia (which would become the NRMA). Many of these events would normally have sub-events as part of the contest. The 1925 Five day Reliability Touring Contest (Brisbane to Bundaberg and return) gave the 26 entrants 5 sub events which included a hill climb from the foot of the Toll Bar Range to Toowoomba, a flying ½ mile special test on the main road about half a mile outside Dalby, a petrol consumption test from Gayndah to Bundaberg, an acceleration test on the road between Esk and Ipswich, and a reliability test which covered the total run distance. Given sub-events were conducted on quiet sections of public roads outside townships, it can be deduced the local authorities had full knowledge and had given permission for these activities.

An annual Hill climb event continued at Mt Coot-Tha until 20 October 1923 where the quickest of the 24 entries was the Essex driven by R P Randall with a 1 min 51 sec time. For the hill climb at Mt Coot Tha on 21 October 1922, electronic timing was used. Competing cars would be given a 10-yard run up to break a cotton thread strung across

the start line that would activate the timing gear and a similar arrangement at the finish line. (20).

As concerns grew over the deterioration of the dirt surface at One Tree Hill, the Mt Gravatt road to the summit was then used with the first event on 25 October 1924. It would operate until 18 May 1935. Although this venue was a greater distance from town, crowds of 2000 spectators were reported. Classes in the first event were Novice, Restricted and Unrestricted (Speed). Of the 33 entrants, the fastest time on the first event was set by P.V. Jones in his Napier with a 78.8 seconds run, with the timing via the field telephone system. Electronic timing was used for the 24 October 1925 event where, of the 18 entrants, E B (Gus) Gustavson in his Overland sports (named 'The Red Devil') set the record at 57.7 secs, some 19 seconds quicker than the existing record and described in the newspaper as 'sensational times'

With the City Council improving the road surface, three further events at One Tree Hill on 5 November 1927, 31 March 1928 and the last on 18 May 1929 were held. A spectator crowd of between 3000 to 4000 watched Gus Gustavson set fastest time of 1 min 35.5 in his Red Devil Overland Sports whilst 3<sup>rd</sup> in the restricted class (running in the heavier touring format) J W Whatmore had entered a Morris-Oxford MG Special (1802cc engine) to record a 1 min 50.9 sec run. (21). At the following event in 1928 Henry Horstmann (Grand Prix Bugatti) broke the outright record by 6.5 seconds with a 1 min 29 run. (22).

However not all were happy with this venue. An article in the Sunday Truth newspaper criticised the venue under the headline 'Risking Their Necks For Fame' urging the RACQ to 'cut out the hill from their list'. The author describes the track as narrow (15 to 20 foot wide), with a slope that innumerable cars can ascend in top gear so not really a challenge. The safety aspect seemed of concern with a 'wall of rock on one side and a precipice the other, guarded only by a wooden fence which a man could almost push down with 2 hands'. Also of concern to the author were the numerous sharp bends and 'two down grades where terrific speeds can be attained'. The article urges the venue 'not be used again by the RACQ or that the City Council should refuse to let the event be run there'. (23).

Events then returned to Mt Gravatt; however, the Sunday Truth did not care for this venue either as they declared that City Council had decided no more competitive runs would be held. This, the reporter said, was due to the condition of the road to the summit as it is 'too bad, the climb too severe, and when the top is reached there is nothing to do, and precious little to see'. The reporter also described the site as 'a dud' given the energy by 'the sportsmen to spend money and labour in reconditioning the surface in preparation for events'. (24).

15 The Steering Wheel, Vol 3 No 3, January 1917, p21.

16 Buchanan, Robyn, 'Ipswich in the 20th Century', Ipswich City Council, Ipswich, 2004, p124.

17 The Brisbane Courier, 21 October 1933, p11.

- 18 Townsville Evening Star, 30 December 1926, p4.
- 19 Truth Sunday, 7 August 1927, p6.
- 20 The Brisbane Courier, 26 October 1925, p16.
- 21 The Queensland Motorist, Vol 2 No 8, November 1927, p27.
- 22 The Brisbane Courier, 2 April 1928, p8.
- 23 Truth Sunday, 8 April 1928, p9.
- 24 Truth Sunday, 15 December 1929, p11.