



Drivers and crew show smiles of success in St. Louis after run: Thurman Kite, Roy Cullum, Lyndon Graham, Mike Cullum, Roy Splawn and Burt Presson.

New Orleans - St. Louis Record Run

DRIVER'S OWN STORY OF 31-HOUR MISSISSIPPI GRIND

By Roy Cullum

IT WAS JUST breaking day of Friday, July 12th at 4:30 a.m. Lynn Graham and myself, sitting in our boat, *Rambler II*, were impatiently waiting for the official starter, who was already late. We had intended to start at 4:30 a.m. Finally, after a 43½-minute delay, we were officially started at 5:13½ a.m. At the signal, I threw both throttles of our Mercury motors wide open and we were on our way.

Lynn and I were confident without being cocky about this trip. We knew it was a long way to St. Louis when we pulled away from the foot of Esplanade Street in New Orleans. We knew also it would take luck, skill, determination and, above all, the team work of all six of us, to beat a tough Mississippi River and set a new record. I was right; it was long and it was rough and I would hate to have to make that trip very often.

I was at the wheel as we left the rough, turbulent water of the harbor and felt a keen sense of satisfaction because I knew we had the best equipment that money could buy. We were driving a sleek white fiberglass Crosby 16-foot boat with no special reinforcement. Although this boat is recommended for 60 horsepower, it carried twice this power and showed no damage whatever. Our boat was powered with two powerful 60 horsepower Mercurys that made up the sweetest outfit I ever set in. Couldn't help thinking of the contrast between our fine outfit and the ungainly *Robert E. Lee* that outran the *Natchez* and set a

record of 90 hours and 30 minutes 'way back in 1870. That record stood until 1929. Since then, more than 1000 hopefuls have tried. Only about 17 have completed the trip and only about 10 have bettered the *Lee's* time.

After leaving New Orleans, everything went beautifully, outside of having to pass several tugs. We pulled into Baton Rouge at 8:37, running the first lap in 3 hours 23½ minutes. Refueled in 3 minutes, thanks to the best ground crew that a man ever had—Thurman Kite, Mike Cullum, Roy Splawn and Burt Presson.

After taking on gas and ice water we again headed north. *Rambler II* was running nicely and rocking along at 45 to 47 miles per hour. The river was very high but surprisingly clean; what debris there was, was in the strong current in the middle of the river, and we were running the sides to take short cuts and miss the trash and strong currents.

At Natchez our ground crew had discovered that the strong current would make refueling very hard and had found a cove out of the current. We headed that way. After a fast refuel and more water and milk, we were again on our way. It was only 73 miles to Vicksburg and tough refueling, so we decided to by-pass Vicksburg.

Even in serious times, funny things happen. It happened at Vicksburg: as we were approaching Vicks, we looked up and, bearing down on us, was a boat. At about 200 yards, the driver stopped and began waving a white

flag. We didn't know who he was, but guessed him to be an official, as he had binoculars around his neck and looked the part. Lynn said, "What shall I do?"

I knew it would take valuable minutes to stop and see what he wanted; I was afraid we had broken some rule or regulation. "Don't stop unless he starts shooting!" I said and, as we passed, his mouth dropped open about six inches. I knew he couldn't catch us once we were past. Later on we worried about it, not knowing what it could be. We could think of all kinds of things. I was afraid the ground crew had run into trouble and had sent him out to tell us. We worried about it until we got to Greenville and Roy Splawn told us he had given the boat driver some money to buy us sun lotion to keep us from blistering. Some relief!

We had set our schedule to be at Greenville by 5:15 and we pulled in at 4:25, 50 minutes ahead of schedule. This was one time we almost beat out our ground crew. They had just arrived and were pouring the gas up in the containers, but in 10 minutes we were refueled and pulling out into the river. We were heading for Helena, 130 miles away, hoping to get there before dark.

At Helena our ground crew was waiting for us. We pulled in at 7:45, just at dark. At this point we were 12 hours ahead of the record that Dick Arant and I set last year. It took ten minutes to refuel and again we touched the starters on those mile-eating Mer-



Lyndon Graham, left, and Roy Cullum, author of this article, shared the driving on the 1053-mile dash. Boat is twin Mercury Mark 75-powered Crosby.

curys. Up to this point (which was just over halfway), we had not hit anything as big as a matchstick or touched a sandbar; it seemed almost too good to be true. Then we had our first trouble; both our spotlights burned out. We slowed down to about 20 miles per hour, running in absolute darkness.

We ran at this speed until the moon came up. As soon as the moon rose, so did our courage. As our eyes became accustomed to the darkness we began to drive faster and, as the moon got brighter, so did our hopes. We again started to get some speed and were able to drive 30 and 35 before the night had gotten too far along. A little scary, yes—but it was necessary if we wanted to hold a good average. We averaged 25 miles per hour during the eight hours of darkness, covering 200 miles.

We changed drivers every hour so that we could remain alert to the constant danger of logs and bars. We were lucky to hit only two large logs. We also ran upon two bars with only about two feet of water covering them. We got out of the boat and shoved it off with little trouble or loss of time.

We arrived at Cruthersville at 2:10 a.m., Saturday, July 13th. From there we went on toward Cairo, always fighting the wakes and rough water thrown up from the tugs and barges. Those hard-working tugs tear up the water for five or six miles when you are coming up behind them.

We ran from Cruthersville to Cairo,

133 miles, in 3 hours 20 minutes. Our ground crew was waiting and, after a quick refueling job with 86 gallons of gas (over 500 pounds), we set our *Rambler II* toward St. Louis, with the intention of by-passing Chester. I think this was our one and only mistake in the whole trip; our gas load was so heavy it made the boat tail heavy and, as a result, it porpoised very badly coming up behind the tugs. In smooth water it was ok. There were so many tugs that we were compelled to change our tilt angle to the first notch. That made the boat ride fine, but we lost

speed. We ran this way until we had used about half the gas and then we put it in the second notch again and regained our speed. I think we would have done much better to have refueled at Chester; we would have saved time by doing so.

Even right on up into the harbor of St. Louis, we fought the tugs. We arrived at St. Louis at 12:23½, with a record run of 31 hours 11 minutes. We both felt like we wouldn't want to ride in a boat for a month, yet, the very next morning, we were out taking the ground crew for rides.

Ground Crew Notes

Two ground crews serviced *Rambler II* on her record-breaking run. Crew number one consisted of Thurman Kite and Roy Cullum's son, Mike. Crew number two included Burt Presson and Roy Splawn.

- Checked props at Cruthersville. One found bent, probably due to striking log. Decided not to change prop and ran it right through to St. Louis.

- Logs and sandbars were struck with such force that the fronts of the engine cowls were crushed against the boat when the lower units kicked up. Yet the lower units, driveshaft housing and clamp brackets remained unharmed.

- Running up on a sandbar in the darkness, both men had to get out of the boat to shove it off. A little later,

they narrowly missed running into a three-foot-high sandbar by cutting sharply to the left at the last moment.

- At Cairo, there was no suitable place for refueling, so the boat had to be run up the Ohio River about two miles, where it was refueled at the Cairo boat club facilities. On top of that, one of the ground crew cars ran out of gas before getting to Cairo. By coaxing the last drops from empty fuel drums into a quart milk container, they got the car to travel four miles to a filling station and just made it in time to meet *Rambler II*.

- Commodore Edwin C. Koenig checked the drivers in at St. Louis. Official arrival time at the Midwest Yacht Club was 12:23½ p.m.