

*Getting the story right. At the AHA 2019 Conference SAH Director Don Capps, in his presentation on the Birth of the Silver Arrows: A Consideration of Alternative Facts and Motor Sport History highlighted how erroneous details can live on as past publications get quoted in new publications. I believe that there is an important event in Australian automotive history that has become repeated as being at one date when it had to have been held a year later!*

### **Sydney's first gathering of motorists – when was it?**

Mention is made in quite a few newspapers, journal articles, and some motoring history books, about the first gathering of Sydney's motorists in having been in held November 1901.

The earliest such comments are the *Sunday Times* motor column in 1913 which reported:  
"The first motor gathering held in Sydney took place in November 1901, when Messrs. G. W. Innes (8 h.p. Winton), C. Highland (4 h.p. Cudell), H. Jones (5 h.p. Decauville), H. Vale (3 h.p. Benz), Bradwyn (4 h.p. Piper), and C. Thurla (4 h.p. de Dion) met at Lady Robinson's Beach, and as far as could be ascertained they were the owners of all the cars in Sydney at the time." [Growth of Motoring. *Sunday Times*. July 27, 1913, p. 17.]

Early motorist J. Spencer Nolan subsequently advised the paper that he was at that event also and a correction was given in the following week's issue adding his name. Then in 1921 Spencer Nolan told the *Evening News* that: "A run took place in November 1901 to Sandringham. There were there, according to an annual publication, Mr. H. Vale (of Auburn), Mr. Bob Gillett (Anthony Hordern and Sons), Mr. J. Spencer-Nolan (Oxford Street), Mr. C. Highland (Castlereagh Street). Mr. Jones (Asphalt Company), Mr. George P. Innes (Innes and Mills), Mr. Thurla (McMahon's Point), and Mr. Bradwyn. Each had a motor car and it was then believed that the cars which met at Sandringham were the only ones on Sydney.

Mr. Innes' car was an 8 h.p. Winton; Mr. Nolan's a 4 h.p. Cudell; Mr. Highland's, ditto; Mr Vale's a 3 h.p. Benz; Mr. Jones' a 6 h.p. Decauville; Mr. Thurla's a De Dion; and Mr. Bradwyn's a 4 h.p. Pieper." [First Run to Sandringham. *Evening News*. January 29, 1921, p. 2]

The following Monday the paper printed advice received from "a Sydney motorist" that Mr. C. Highland Senior's 1897 quadricycle was also at the gathering. [Sydney's First Motors. *Evening News* January 31, 1921, p. 4.]

Was the first gathering really in 1901? Despite extensive searches I can only find one early gathering of most of those named and their vehicles reported in the newspapers between 1901 and 1902, and that is for a run to Tom Ugly's Point and Sandringham on the 14<sup>th</sup> September 1902:

"On the 14th instant a number of motorists took part in a quiet run to Tom Ugly's Point. The following owners with friends or families made a start at 10.45 and proceeded to Sandringham, and thence to the point, where dinner had been arranged for, and to which ample justice was done. Mr. Jones and 1 passenger (Decauville car), Mr. Spencer Nolan 2 passengers (Cudell), Mr. Bradwyn 2 passengers (Pieper), Mr. Highland 2 passengers (Cudell), Mr. Innes 3 passengers (Winton), and Mr. C. Highland 1 passenger (quadricycle). Several other motorists had promised to take part, but owing probably to the threatening sky, did not put in an appearance. Needless to say, the small company enjoyed the outing, as the roads were good, the shower of rain on Saturday night having laid the dust, and made the air very refreshing. It is intended to try and get a much larger number of motor men together at some early date and visit more of our distant pleasure spots." [Cycling. *The Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, September 17, 1902, p. 759.]

So, was the earliest gathering of motorists in Sydney in 1901, as remembered by someone in 1913, and again by Spencer Nolan in 1921, or 1902 as reported in a 1902 newspaper? Considering that the papers in those early years were usually keen to report any of the activities of the earliest motorists had the run taken place in 1901 it is highly unlikely it would have been ignored by the Sydney papers.

My contention is that the first motorists gathering, often referred to as the run to Lady Robinson's Beach or the Sandringham Run, was actually in 1902, not 1901 as is often cited. I do remain open-minded on the matter though. As a professional researcher I don't feel I have quite enough documentation to prove for absolute certainty my case, but I do feel I have gathered enough data to throw into very significant doubt the 1901 date.

If someone can provide a verifiable and contemporary report of a gathering and run to Sandringham in 1901, or challenge the data that the arrival of three of the vehicles in all likelihood does not post-date November 1901, then I will willingly revise my argument. I do suggest though that at this time verifiable information outweighs recollections of the event.

#### What supports my assertion?

1. No newspaper reports of a gathering of Sydney's motorists in November 1901, or indeed any other time in 1901, have been discovered, but there is a contemporary press report for September 1902.
2. Coincidence or not? Spencer Nolan and the *Sunday Times* in 1913 and 1921 list essentially the same names and vehicles at the 1901 gathering as the 1902 *Sydney Mail* article.
3. Somewhat undermining the date nominated in the Spencer Nolan and *Sunday Times* items is the fact that some of the vehicles mentioned either were not in this country in November 1901, furthermore one of the drivers was, in all likelihood, overseas in November 1901.
4. All the vehicles and persons listed in the 1902 newspaper report were in Sydney in September 1902.

Table 1. The vehicles and owners/drivers

Vehicle	Owner and details	In November 1901?	In September 1902
8 h.p. Winton	G. P. Innes., as a motor trader that Innes had a Winton, in either 1901 or 1902, is not surprising.	<b>Possible</b> First Winton cars in Sydney in March 1901	<b>Credible</b>
4 h.p. Cudell	First mention of C. Highland with a conventional motor car is his importation of one from Germany, recorded in the shipping lists on 28 November 1901 <sup>i</sup> ( <i>The Cudell was a German-made car</i> )	<b>Questionable</b> Unless the car was unloaded and got going very quickly	<b>Credible</b> Highland was dealing in cars in 1902
5 h.p. Decauville	H A Jones sailed to England on 9 <sup>th</sup> March 1901 for a 6 months tour of the Continent, he returned on November 4 <sup>th</sup> 1901. Shipping lists for 23 <sup>rd</sup> December 1901 record his importation of a motor car from Britain.	<b>Unlikely</b> if car landed in December as the shipping lists indicate?	<b>Credible</b>
3 h.p. Benz	Vale and Gillett's Benz arrived mid-1900	<b>Possible</b>	Did not attend 1902 run
4 or 5 h.p. Pieper	J G E Bradwyn bought this car from G P Innes after he returned from the Boer War, it was the first motor car Innes imported, arriving in Sydney in July 1901. Bradwyn was with Kitchener's Horse in South Africa from 1900 to at least November 1901.	<b>Unlikely</b> Car was here, but the driver probably was not	<b>Credible</b>
4 h.p. De Dion	C. Thurla. As De Dion's were in Sydney in low two-digit numbers by November 1901, whoever Thurla was he could have been driving one in 1901.	<b>Possible</b>	Did not attend 1902 run
4 h.p. Cudell	J Spencer Nolan. The first reports of Spencer Nolan operating a motor car are July/August 1902 newspapers.	<b>Unlikely</b>	<b>Credible</b>

3 h.p. Highland Quad	Mr. O. Highland. Quadricycle possibly the one Highland Snr. built in 1897. <i>(It was reported to be still operation in Tenterfield 10 years later)</i>	<b>Possible</b>	<b>Credible</b>
----------------------------	---	-----------------	-----------------

So, we have a run that includes at 3 cars around which there is a question as to their even being on the roads in Sydney in November 1901, at least one driver who it seems did not commence driving till 1902, and another who was at the time involved in the Boer War.

Vale and Gillett are mentioned as 1901 participants. Vale's 3-1/4 h.p. Benz was imported in mid-1900 and they were extremely well-known motorists, so any list of the who's who of early Sydney motorists compiled from memory in the later years would include them out of respect and memories of their pioneering motoring. Curiously their motoring adventures, even small journeys, were often reported in the press in 1901, yet nothing about a drive to Sandringham in 1901. Their absence however from the authentic 1902 news item I cannot explain, I have checked both the general, social and business news for the period and cannot find a reason for their absence from the Sandringham run in 1902.

Some may ask why prominent early car owner Mark Foy was not listed among the motorists who gathered at Sandringham in either year. In September 1902 he was motoring in England in his Panhard, perhaps the same car that he had driven to Melbourne the previous year to see the running of the Melbourne Cup, so had the Sandringham run been in November 1901 he would have missed that too. As would Foy's motoring partner, W J C Elliott, who had again driven to Melbourne in October 1902, so was absent from Sydney in 1901 and 1902. Another leading motorist was Mr W. Gordon Dixon, the first to drive over the Blue Mountains, but a few days after the September 1902 run he was recorded as motoring through central west, so perhaps did not participate as he was preparing for that journey.

#### Unsolved

- Who was Mr Thurla mentioned in the 1913 and 1921 reports? Curiously no other mention is made of him in the Sydney or Melbourne papers between 1900 and 1920 in any capacity, motoring or otherwise. (I have tried variations of the spelling of Thurla)
- What was the "annual publication" to which Spencer Nolan refers to in the 1921 newspaper article? A search of those I can access which reported Sydney motoring matters 1901-1902 do not contain references to a 1901 motoring gathering event in Sydney.

#### Conclusion

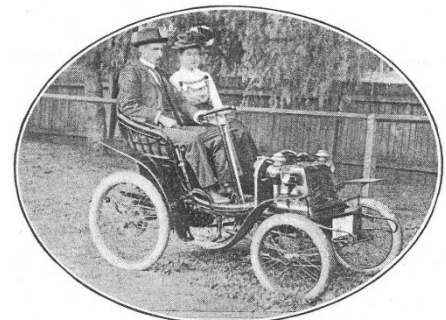
Those who refer to the first gathering of motorists and their cars in Sydney as being held in November 1901 are repeating unsubstantiated stories from 1913 and 1921, stories based on memories and not on any so far discoverable factual material. However, the news item of 1902 referring to a gathering held just a few days before its publication does seem more creditable as to the actual date when the first gathering was held, particularly when one investigates the vehicles and persons nominated.

So, Sydney's first gathering of motorists – was it 1901 or 1902? What do you think?

Jennifer Fawbert  
Automotive Historian

© 2020 Jennifer Fawbert. First published Veteran Car Club of NSW. (November 2017). *Spit and Polish*, pp.20-22. Revised August 2020.

The Pieper, Mr and Mrs G P Innes. *The Motor in Australia*, April 1, 1927. Image out of copyright



<sup>i</sup> Import Entries. (1901, November 28). *Daily Commercial News and Shipping List (Sydney)*, p. 2. Retrieved from <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article157843304>