

The Great Northwest Adventure



BY BOB SEPE

It was cold and rainy, just like any other northwest December morning in Woodinville, Washington. I rolled the dormant 1986 Volvo 760 Turbo out of the barn, connected the battery, turned the key, and it sprang to life with a bit of misfire on number 4 cylinder, which was cured by cleaning the plug.

After warming it up, I tossed my foul weather gear into the trunk and directed the 760 out the farm gate to the highway and onward to the Edmonds-Kingston Ferry. Once on the Olympic Peninsula, I began the drive to the Pacific Coast. Living in North Carolina, I always desired to view incoming raging Pacific storms crash ashore and I knew this was my opportunity as stiff offshore winds were forecast for the next three days and the weather was to be sunny.

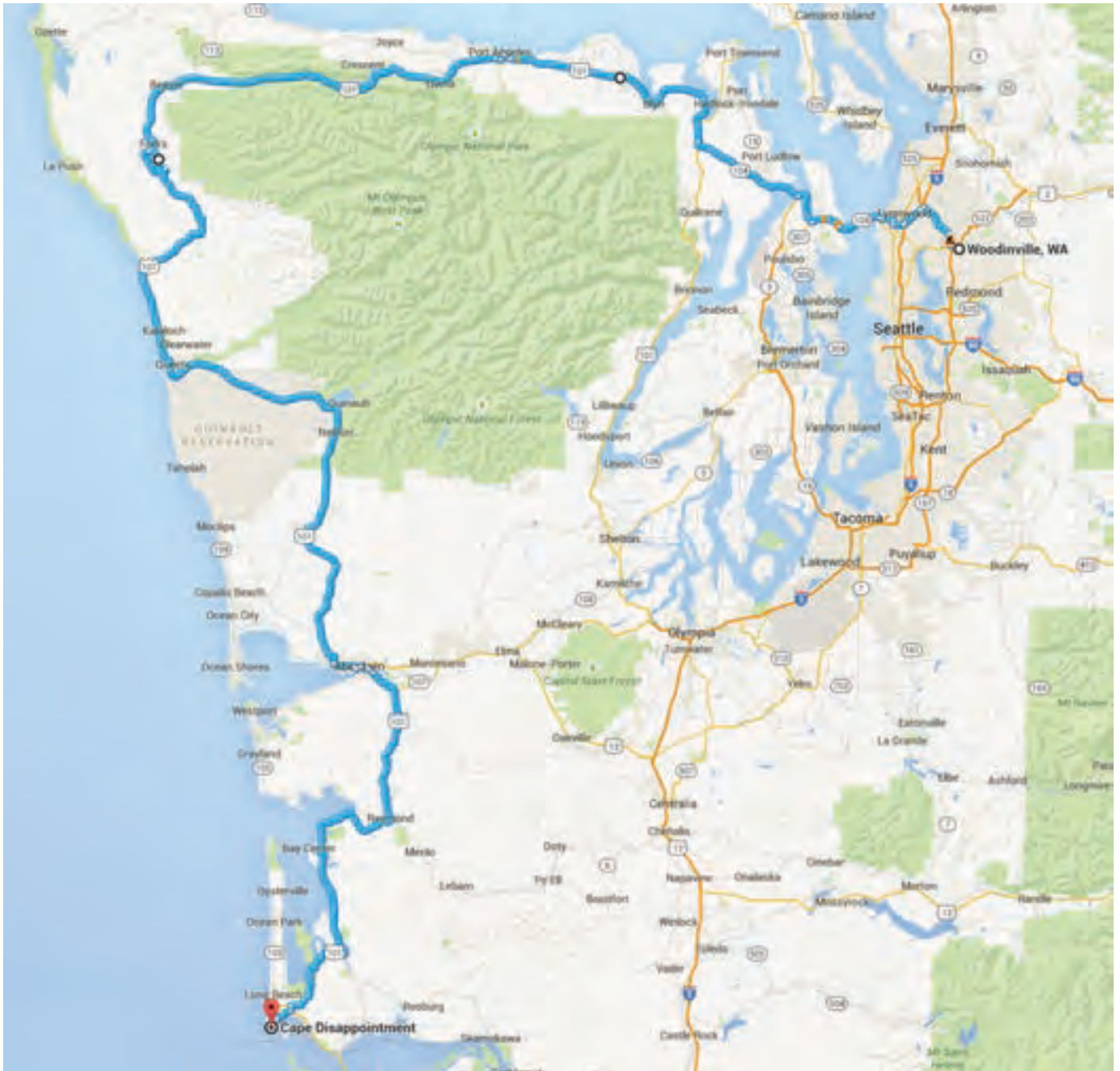
I fueled up in Port Angeles and drove south on US 101; the 760 just hummed along. After a stop in Forks for breakfast, the trip resumed. The car charged down the road through torrents of rain with wipers blazing. About 40 miles south of Forks, I noticed the odometer read 260,009 miles. A few minutes

later, as if on cue, the engine sputtered, my gaze turned to the instrument panel to observe that the voltmeter had nosedived.

I'd had just passed a lone convenience store in Queets a few minutes earlier, so I spun around, drove back, and parked under

The Queets convenience store where I sought shelter under the canopy.





My route along the Olympic Peninsula coast from Woodinville, Wash. to Cape Disappointment at the mouth of the Columbia River.

the gas pump canopy where the motor died. Rain driven by brisk winds pelted the area, but the cover offered some protection as I raised the hood.

Perhaps the battery terminals were loose? A quick tug and twist of the wrench told me they were adequate. So it must be the alternator. As I removed the voltage regulator, I noticed the armature brush was worn to its limit. Hence, it no longer made contact with the armature and the alternator ceased producing current. This was a predicament, as I was stuck far from assistance and any auto part suppliers.

You have to understand that Queets is sandwiched between the Olympic National

Park and a Native American Indian Reservation. Auto parts stores are 100 miles north or south on 101. I called auto part stores north to Sequim and south to Aberdeen but no one had a Volvo alternator in stock. I could order one and it would be available for in-store pick-up in three to four days.

The only bright spot was Frankie at A-1 Auto in Sequim. He believed he could have an alternator in the store the following morning, which was a Saturday. He said he'd call me around 8:30 am if he could get one. I didn't know how to travel the 100 miles to Sequim and return to Queets, but at least I'd have a replacement alternator waiting.

Standing beside the car, with torrents of

water cascading off the gas pump canopy, I cleaned the voltage regulator brushes and wondered whether it was possible to adjust the worn brush assembly to compensate for the wear and restore it to temporary duty. I reasoned that if I attached the voltage regulator to the alternator with a single fastener, I could cock it downward to allow the worn brush to contact the armature. I installed the regulator, pushed the free side downward and secured a jump start from a reluctant Samaritan. The 760 fired up and the voltmeter registered 15 volts. It was working, but it only made contact as long as I placed downward pressure on the regulator. Now what, I asked myself.





Rattlesnake Bob at the TrueValue hardware store in Forks let me use the shop vise so that I could enlarge the fastener holes in the voltage regulator.

I recalled a TrueValue hardware store 45 miles to the north in Forks. It's a one of a kind place that carries everything from ammo to zinc anodes and its resident go-to guy is Rattlesnake Bob. Bob worked for the Forest Service until he saved a woman from certain death at the fangs of a villainous reptile.

I bet Bob would have something in that huge store which I could use to resolve my predicament. With a full battery charge, I dropped the 760 into gear and headed north while keeping a wary eye on the voltmeter. One hour and more rain later, I parked the 760 beneath the TrueValue store's canopy, popped the hood, pressed on the regulator and recharged the battery. Again, it was raining torrents.

On the drive, I thought about which modification of the voltage regulator would result in continual brush contact with the alternator armature. I reasoned that if the two fastener holes were elongated upward an eighth of an inch, the voltage regulator could be moved closer to the armature to make contact. I purchased a slim chain saw sharpening file, and using the shop vise, I steadied the regulator and carefully elongated each hole. Once satisfied, the modified regulator was reinstalled, the fasteners tightened, and the car started. Again, the 760 blossomed to life and the voltmeter registered 15 volts. I believed this modification would allow the car to be driven several more thousand miles, or until I could secure a replacement voltage regulator brush set.

It was almost closing time at the TrueValue store. I chatted with Rattlesnake Bob, thanking him for having the kind of inventory that allows people to execute out-of-the-box solutions to problems. I decided to

roll the dice, throw caution to the wind, and turn south once more. One hundred rainy miles later, the 760 rolled into Canon Beach, where the following morning, I began a leisurely drive northward along 101. While driving across the bridge near the mouth of the Columbia River, a rainbow appeared as the 760 passed beneath. Undoubtedly, this was a sign of good fortune to come.

I'd rescued this vehicle from the scrap yard in 1997, the year before my wife of 30 years passed. She enjoyed traveling in the Volvo and we took regular trips in it. In 2000, I completed the restoration and took a photo of the 760 parked in front of Biltmore Estate in Asheville, N.C. This picture appeared on the back cover of *Rolling*. My

Frankie at A-1 Auto in Sequim ordered a replacement alternator for me, which I ended up not needing. I sent him \$20 as a thank-you for his troubles.



daughter keeps the car in her barn and whenever I'm in Woodinville, I fire it up, and take a road trip.

Frankie tried to call around 12:30 pm on Saturday, but the cell phone service was virtually nonexistent. I was unable to reach Sequim before A-1 closed. After returning to Woodinville, however, I sent Frankie a letter and enclosed a \$20 bill to thank him for his assistance. He empathized with my situation and was willing to go the extra mile to assist.

I did see an ocean-going freighter battle ferocious currents and waves as it negotiated passage from the Pacific into the mouth of the Columbia River while standing on the bluff overlooking the river at Cape Disappointment. To add joy to the moment, the rain stopped and the sun shone while I watched the drama unfold below. Once the freighter safely entered the river, the rain returned, whereupon I resumed my trip homeward in the rain.

In retrospect, I believe I've cracked the northwest meteorological code: sunny means brief periods of sunshine followed by longer periods of intense rain, while dry means it's not raining but is cloudy and everything is darn wet. This is perfect weather for a 29-year old Volvo. In a few days, I'll roll the 760 into the barn where it'll sit dormant until the next adventure.

If you ever drive the 101 between Aberdeen and Port Angeles, take time to visit the TrueValue hardware store and make a point to chat with Rattlesnake Bob. You'll not be disappointed. If you need parts, call A-1 Auto and ask for Frankie. ■

Bob Sepe is president of the Blue Ridge Chapter in North Carolina, lives in Cary, N.C., and can be reached at rfsepe@gmail.com.