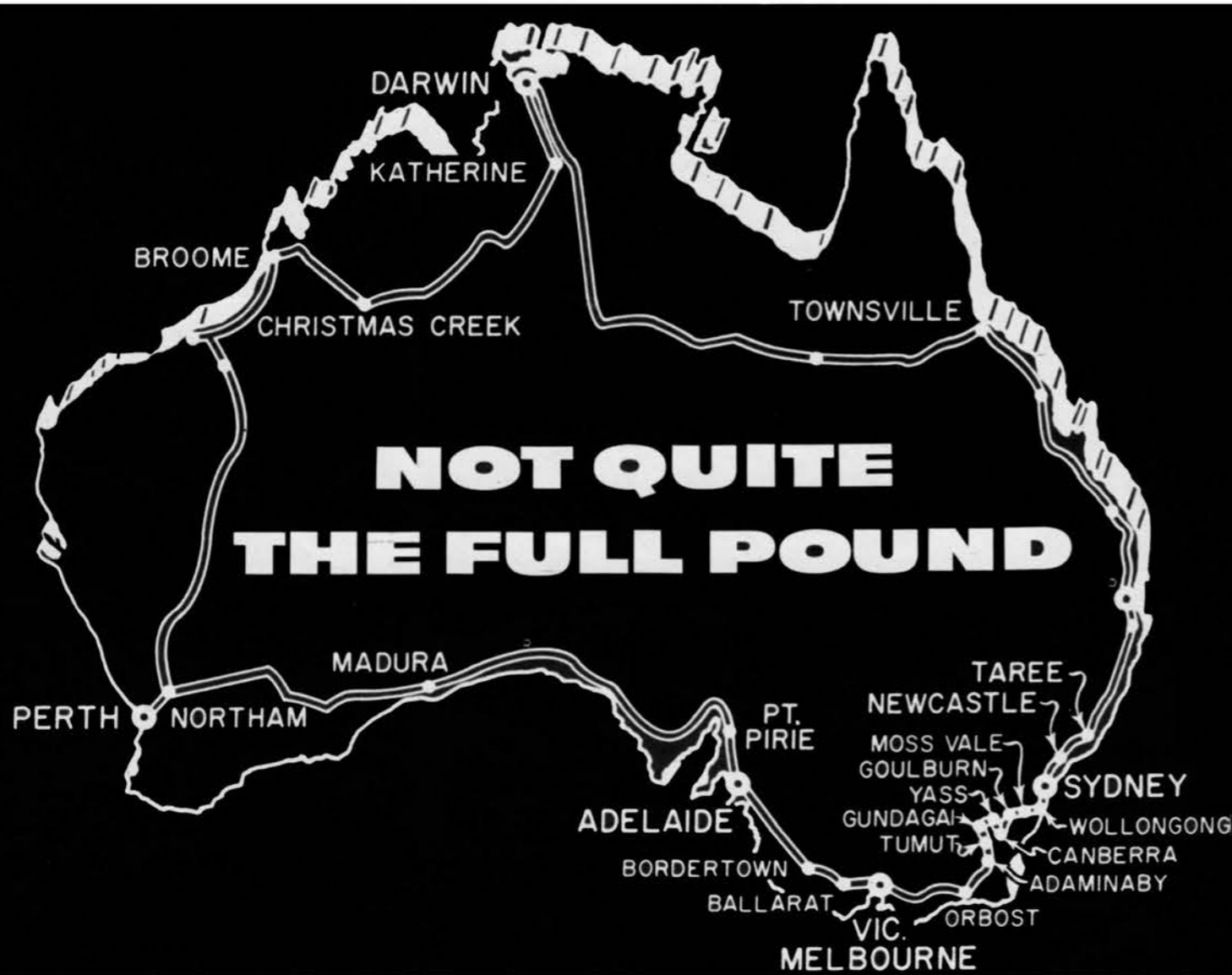


Australia's Redex trial was the World's longest, maddest, hairiest automobile event and the drivers . . . well, as their countrymen say, they're . . .



By **WILLIAM L. WORDEN**

AT MACKAY, a small port well up on the tropical Queensland Coast in Australia, wind clawed from the South, firing spray like bullets over the town's wharves and yanking at boat lines inside the breakwater. But the taxi ignored this, as well as other traffic, small boys and a happy collection of dogs, as it bounced over rough streets and out onto the breakwater, slowing only when it was necessary to turn around at a commercial dock where a dozen longshoremen barely moved.

"Have to be careful here," said the driver. "Them wharfies don't like something you do, they all quit work—and then there's all bloody hell to pay for the bloke who caused it."

He braked again, at a finger pier where foodstuffs were

being handed aboard a small cruise ship. "Looks like the start of a regular southerly buster," the driver said. "Guess I'm glad I ain't going with you. But you might as well sit in here until they're ready. No use in getting all spray before you have to." He flicked off the meter at five shillings sixpence, disdaining to charge for waiting time. The five-year-old taxi, showing signs of its service, sighed a little; and as the wind continued to blow, the body creaked now and then.

Without real interest, we talked in snatches about the weather, the low islands and the Great Barrier Reef offshore, the sweetlips and red reef trout to be caught, the already (at 9 a.m.) baking town on the shore. Presently, I noticed that the speedometer was curiously placed on the

left hand dashboard of the right-hand-drive Ford taxi, which also carried a special clock and compass. The driver's interest quickened only when I asked about the instruments. "For the navigator," he said. "Helps him in the Redex Trial. We put in an extra petrol tank, too." He gestured toward the floor of the tonneau, where a capped pipe was so placed that an extra fuel tank could be carried inside, its contents drained into the regular tank as needed. I had not noticed, because in this country, no sensible single patron ever rides in the back seat of a taxi. Do it, and the driver may decide you're class-conscious—and let you out where he pleases, not necessarily where you want to go.

"It works, right enough," said the driver. "We came in thirtieth last year. Dinkum little car." It was the first time I had heard an Australian actually use that adjective nationally credited to them.

Presently, the cruise ship was ready for passengers. In a burst of hands-across-the-sea fellowship, the driver even carried a bag down the pier for me, then looked out again at the end of the breakwater, where an approaching fish boat careened as it negotiated the narrow entrance to quiet water. "This wind'll be a buster, mate, for sure," said the taxi-driver. "I wouldn't go with you for the world."

Just as the ship got underway (for what turned out to be a reasonably quiet week's cruise) I looked back toward the town. The taxi already was underway, doing a good sixty before it reached the shore end of the breakwater. Practicing, I should think, for the race to come.

But I more or less forgot about the Redex Trial until, in South Australia, approximately a thousand miles from Mackay, there was a question about how to get out to the northwest of Adelaide another eight hundred miles. "Personally," said the newspaperman advising me, "I wouldn't take my own car much past Port Augusta. Rough beyond that; and by the time you get to Ceduna, it's gibber desert." He paused, thoughtfully. "Not that some don't do it," he said. "For two years now, those Redex people have come roaring through. Don't know that I'd be

guided by that, though. Those chaps—well, they're not quite the full pound."

A day later, the little Auster plane we had chartered in preference to driving was three or four hundred feet above the edge of the Nullarbor Plain, where a railroad track stretches three hundred miles without a foot of deviation. Down below in the early morning were dingoes, running madly from the plane's sharp shadow; now and then a few wild camels or brombies, also running. Otherwise, the plain was limitless, flat and empty—only the millions and millions and millions of little round stones, the gibbers which have driven wanderers mad just from stumbling over them, covering the baking desert. Briefly, there was some sort of a road beneath us; but it was marked only by the wheel tracks, in and out, around and over the gibbers. Here and there, along the miles of railroad track, there was the ghost of some hamlet, the roofs burned off the houses, the adobe walls crumbling. These were places where, sometime, there had been a little water, but not for long.

I could not deny that it would be possible to take an automobile over that terrain. In the dry season, too many do take autos through. Possible, but absolutely nothing more.

I did not think about the Redex again until some weeks later and approximately fifteen hundred miles north. Down from Darwin on the Arafura Sea, we had followed a metalled road through the heart of the Northern Territory (it was built with American help during World War II) to the hamlet of Katherine where, if possible, there were more flies in daylight and more mosquitos at night than we had seen before. Three or four weeks after the end of the rainy season, Katherine was baking, with a quarter-inch of dust on houses, windows and on the tables beyond the bar of the town's only pub. When beer was served, flies came just to sit on the rims of the sweating glasses and cool off.

"Not bad here this time of year," said a lean cattle-station man at the next table. "Later, it gets a little warm."

(Continued on page 56)



Packed to the limit with gear, these Redex trialsters prepare to meet hazards of tortuous back roads of Australia. Extra lights helped them through fog and dust. Tire strapped to front was precaution against getting bashed by leaping kangaroos.



Navigator J. Harris sits in back of Redex car cramped with built-in table, extra speedo, clock, oil can, machette, digging-out tools etc. Most cars were rigged Okie style for journey.

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Hustling Hermit

(Continued from page 55)

pounds. As however her new owner's ambitions centered mainly on straight-line running on smooth sand, in other words the Land Speed Record, this questionable strength-power ratio was not of much importance. As it developed, the car duly pulled off the L.S.R. the very first time Tommy appeared with it in public, clocking 169.23 over the flying kilometer at Pendine in the summer of 1926. This burst jacked the record up by 17 miles per hour, the biggest hiding it had taken in the whole of its 28 years' history. The next day, after expurgating a misfire, Thomas improved his speed to 171.09 mph.

Early the following year, Campbell visited Pendine with his Napier-Campbell and went one better again, 174.88 mph. That was the figure Tommy was out to beat when the broken driving chain knocked his brains out.

Shortly after *Babs's* Pendine triumph in 1926, Thomas returned to Brooklands and filed entries for three races in the first meet that came up, nominating John Cobb to drive *Babs* twice and himself once. Although Cobb was already an experienced hand with big man-hater cars, a comparison between his performance and Tommy's on the same machine and under identical conditions puts Thomas's skill and fearlessness into true perspective. The hermit's best flying start lap was nearly ten miles per hour faster than John's. Here again, the fact that Thomas knew every nut and splitpin on the car, and exactly understood its capabilities and limitations, no doubt accounted for some part of the difference. Cobb, of course, had about as much knowledge of automobiles as Little Red Ridinghood.

Born and raised in the unpronounceable Welsh village of Bwlch-y-ciban, of which his father was vicar, Parry Thomas had a pious upbringing. Although in his adult life he certainly never wore his religious convictions, whatever they may have been, on the sleeve of his Fair Isle jersey, he had an integrity and underlying kindness that won him everybody's respect and admiration. Behind his taciturn and even morose manner there was a vein of humor and boyishness that is a treasured memory of the few who could claim his friendship. Veteran race mechanics around the Byfleet district still vie in reminiscence of the greatest European trackman who ever lived, including a prideful greybeard whose favorite souvenir is a pair of flannel pants that had the seat ripped out by Bess and Togo in the winter of '24. "Paid me double their value," he recalls, "and then, dammit, what does he do but add in an extra quid to buy a Christmas spree for my kids." That would be just like John Godfrey Parry Thomas.

Dennis May.

Redex Trial

(Continued from page 23)

Asked what he was doing in Katherine in mid-week, he shrugged "A bit sticky," he said. "I should be out at the station for muster, but the strip's too soft. Aircraft can't land for another three or four days."

I said, "But isn't there a road out to the west from here? The map shows a track out via Wooleroo and Victoria Station, then on west."

"Mate," he said, "I think you've missed the small print, down at the bottom of that map: see., it says, 'most roads and tracks impassable . . . November until March.' This year, a bit later." Like the newspaperman in Adelaide, he took time to be thoughtful. "Not that it's any boulevard any time," he said. "Might ride out and have a look."

We did. A little rented Vauxhall had done well, down from Darwin, but it bucked and complained as soon as we headed off the highway. Before we were out of sight of the paving, red dust was rising around the wheels and filtering under the doors. "Bull dust," said the station man. "You get used to it." On the flat plain, white ant towers stood like gravestones in a limitless cemetery—some a foot high, some ten feet high. A few coolibar trees fought for life, but the thin and twisted ghost gums with white trunks appeared already to have given up. After a quarter-mile, low gear was necessary. The Vaux yawed like a tug in a rip tide as we dodged boulders and scraped bindle-eye bush, then jounced down a small incline. Another hundred yards, and nobody needed to tell the driver to stop. Ahead was a depress flat, perhaps half a mile wide. Water from the late rains ran down ruts in the track as rivulets, then disappeared, as moving streams, and became part of the enormous mud pie ahead. A heaved rock landing where the road should be made a soft sucking sound, nothing more.

I said, "I don't think we'd better try it. Maybe, with a four-wheel drive . . ."

"Cobber," said the station man, "you couldn't get through there in a bloody tank. And in the dry, it's almost as bad. Hard clay underneath but two feet of loose sand and dust on top. Last year—he paused and grinned—"there were about twenty of those Redex cars, stuck in here at the same time. I heard somebody with some horses made a stinking packet—"

I lighted up a NavyChoice, just as if it tasted like a cigarette. I said, "Well, but they're not quite the full pound, those Redex chaps, are they, now?"

"The bottom," said the cattleman. "In sense, the absolute bottom."

Down here where kangaroos are a traffic hazard and wild donkeys bray at night, you learn the language fast. I knew exactly what he meant, I also knew what he meant when he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth,

slowly and thoughtfully. In the pub at Katherine, the flies were waiting for us. When the beer was poured, the flies came over and sat on the glasses. Where they landed, there was a small sizzling sound, a little column of steam.

Presently, I acquired the official rules and regulations for the Redex Trial. These revealed that the affair actually was not a race. Officially, it was "The Redex Around-Australia Reliability Trial," sponsored by an oil-additive company (Redex is the product) and conducted by the Australian Sporting Car Club, Ltd. "The trial," said the brochure, "shall be conducted on roads used by the public and shall be a test of vehicle reliability, driving skill and map reading." Prizes were topped by the \$4,500 offered the over-all winner, with a variety of smaller awards and trophies for classes with 1100, 1500, 2500 cc and unlimited engine capacities; state winners ("most successful Tasmanian entrant," etc.) and supplementary divisions.

Each car was required to carry a crew of at least two; and each passenger, for obvious reasons, signed away his rights to sue anybody for what happened to him.

Rules were simple. Armed with route instructions and route cards (but no maps except those they brought themselves), crews were "to proceed from the start to the finish through controls, check points and other controls . . . in their proper order of designation" and at specified times. Thus, a car traveling from Sydney, New South Wales, north to Southport (a typical situation) might be required to cover the distance at an average speed of 45 miles per hour. If the contestant arrived on the dot of the specified time at Southport, or no more than ten minutes ahead of it, his route card would be validated without comment by officials. Earlier—or even a minute late—he would be assessed a certain number of penalty points. Thus, a perfect score would be a completely validated route card with no points—but penalties could be incurred not only for late or early arrivals, but also for failure to find check points, for working on a vehicle at other than specified times, for replacement of any of the specified parts (practically, anything on the car except tires), for breach of traffic regulations (which were *not* relaxed by state or municipal police) or for damage to the autos.

When 176 autos lined up in Sydney's Parramatta Park August 21, 1955, approximately 100,000 people were in and around the place to watch the start. Entries were headed by 41 Holdens (the sort of half-sized Chevrolet built by General Motors of Australia with a one-piece arrangement of body and frame); 29 Vanguards (English); 17 each of Ford V-8s, Peugeots (French) and Volkswagens. Zephyrs, Chevrolets, Plymouths, Renaults, Humbers, Morrisies, Dodges, Austins, Hillmans, Hudsons, Skodas, Wolseleys, Consuls and Citroens were represented with two or more entries; and single hopefuls showed up driving Hansas, Fiat Topolinos, Singers, Mer-

(Continued on page 58)

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Redex Trial*(Continued from page 56)*

cedes-Benz, Vauxhalls (I was glad to see that, having developed some fondness for the breed) and a Spacemaster Diesel.

Drivers were as various as the cars. Three women journalists represented a Sydney magazine; several lean-looking drivers had been on reducing diets; a couple of foggy types had managed to get themselves hypnotized in the hope that the beating wouldn't hurt so much that way; and Jack Murray, 1954 winner, appeared in proper gear, including high boots for working in mud or dust.

The boys and girls popped up to Brisbane, moved inland around the river mouths, roared through Maryborough and ended at Rockhampton: 164 still present out of the 176 starters. Wharfies, naturally, quit work to watch them come in. But drivers weren't all exactly happy, in spite of their first views of rich cane fields, fat stock ready for the slaughter houses and other evidences of the neotropics. At Southport, some had found water in their petrol tanks (Sabotage!). One team had discovered its tank leaking after it had reached a control point and temporary stop; and two others, the angriest, were routed from their rest periods by faked telephone calls that their tanks were leaking and that they had left their lights burning.

The trial was still successful, however, for 104 cars, none of which yet had any penalty points against it.

But things were getting a little tougher. From Rockhampton to tropical Cairns, northeasterly city of importance in Australia, the drivers not only had palm-lined roads, but variety; blinding sun for a while, then fog, then more sun. Frank Kleinig, of Sydney, had special problems. The throttle cable on his Volkswagen broke at a country village. No garage, no parts—but there was a mother carrying a small baby in the crowd which gathered. A safety pin from a diaper enabled Kleinig to get to Cairns; but nobody thought to ask how the baby got home.

At Cairns, the wharfies quit work to watch the cars come in. So did most of the rest of the 25,000 inhabitants. The showground looked a bit like a wrecking yard, displaying four cars which had been overturned, others with missing windscreens (those Queensland roads are not the state government's pride), headlights broken, noses pushed in and mudguards and bumper bars hanging by steel threads.

From Cairns to Hughendon, in the Cairns ranges, the trial had been nicely planned: mountain sections with 700-foot drops beside the winding, narrow road were run in darkness. Six cars ran off the road (not dropping 700 feet, however) when they hit boulders at creek crossings. Then things really got tough. Melbourne journalist-driver Laurie Whitehead described the section from Duchess to Mount Isa (the uranium-mining town) in the only way possible.

It was, he said, "bloody impossible." On a mountainous road including the crossing of 51 unbridged watercourses, nine cattle guards (they're rough) and 32 creeks mostly bridged with one-way causeways, covered by water, indicated speed was 41½ miles per hour. Attempting to maintain it, seventy cars were wrecked or for other reasons abandoned. The dust-caked crews hitch-hiked into town (when they could get any other competitors to risk loss of points by stopping for them) or just walked. Eric Nelson, still among the leaders with only five penalty points against him, left the trial. He had to, after his diesel hit a kangaroo seven and half feet high, pushing the car's radiator back against the engine block.

Now they were in the dry heart of the country. The trial cars went up the metalled road through the Northern Territory (Tennant Creek, Katherine and Darwin) but did not quite equal the speed record set a couple of years ago by a Jaguar, which averaged close to ninety miles an hour for the thousand miles between Alice Springs and Darwin. (At the end of that drive, the Jaguar driver was arrested: for speeding.) Some crews quit at Isa, calling the trial a suicide race; but the 100 crews still racing reached Darwin and took time out to go crocodile-hunting, water-skiing and swimming (the blue-bottles weren't bad, that day.) Others, as in many towns, took over local garages to work on their vehicles. Garage owners stood watching, charged for use of their tools.

The trial came back to Katherine. In the sand pits west of town, there was sand. So many cars bogged down that nobody kept track of the number. Kangaroos and frilled lizards, with an occasional goanna (also a big lizard) and stately brogga birds five feet high crossed the track or wandered among the ant towers.

In some of the continent's worst (and most empty) country, the trial route led a thousand miles from Darwin to Fitzroy Crossing. This is the area where stockmen used to force cattle mobs more than a hundred miles between water holes, not daring to stop for fear of losing both the cattle and the drovers. This is an area where the only inhabitants for hundreds of square miles may be Myalls, aborigines still living apart from the whites, and in their loose tribal organizations.

This run was tough on everybody. Three of the crews whose cars had broken down decided that they'd had enough, chose to take a short-cut across the interior to Alice Springs, near the geographical center, thence home. Despite police advice against it, they thought the short-cut track couldn't be much worse than the route they'd just traversed from Katherine.

But it was. All three cars bogged down in loose sand, miles from the nearest cattle station or drilled well. William Cousins, 39, of Sydney, said, "We had to do something or perish. So we all prayed. Then we decided that the best thing we could do was to lift the cars bodily." In eighteen hours, six men lifted three autos a full mile across the sand to a solid footing.

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By this time, the trial was away out west, where there's nothing much but pearling ports, petroleum exploration (maybe, some petroleum) and wind. Twenty more cars stranded in soft sand, foot-deep dust and dry creek beds between Halls Creek and Fitzroy. Near Broom, an added interest arrived: a truck carrying ten tons of dynamite was traveling the same route as the racers, and not in the least interested in staying out of their way.

Nearing Carnarvon, on the Indian Ocean at the westernmost bulge of the continent, drivers screamed over desert tracks—and screeched to a stop at a sign painted on a bed-sheet: "Secret check point. Phone Carnarvon 5."

The recent bride whose telephone number it was didn't think the joke was funny. Neither did drivers who lost minutes trying to get the number from isolated country telephones.

To make up some of the time, the 71 cars now remaining hit 95 miles an hour on the 1,100-mile dash from Carnarvon to Perth, on the continent's southwest tip. "Kangaroos," said a driver, "were as thick as pedestrians in Sydney's Pitt Street. The only thing to do was to outrun them."

At Sydney, the trial ended—for the remaining 69 cars—on September 10. Whitehead and his co-driver, Robert Foreman, had lost only 27 points driving, but scrutineers found a hole in the floor of their Volkswagen and assessed 250 points for that, 250 more for a half-inch crack in a rear mudguard arch. Perkins ended with only 66 points but also lost 500 for superficial damage. Brooks, with 219 points, and no damage, appeared to be the winner until an appeal to the Royal Automobile Club of England (I don't know exactly how they got into the act) overruled judges and gave the \$4,500 prize to Whitehead.

Of the starters, 13 Holdens finished, 14 Vanguards, seven Ford V-8s, six Peugeots, five Volkswagens, four Zephyrs, two Chevrolets, two Plymouths, two Humbers and one each of the Dodges, Morris Oxfords, Austin A-50s, Austin A70s and Skodas. "Somewhere along the 10,500-mile trail," said a Sydney newspaper, "lie or struggle their way homeward the other 107 battered things that were motor cars."

Subsequently, a Sydney journalist estimated the costs: approximately \$16,500 to the sponsoring company; somewhere between \$170,000 and \$240,000 to the competitors in ruined cars, entry fees, time lost and garage bills. But this discouraged the enthusiasts very little. When the sponsoring company withdrew for 1956, two other oil companies promptly announced competing reliability tests for that year with bigger prizes and, they hope, more entries.

I don't know whether the Mackay taxi-driver won anything with his dinkum little car. Nor will I ever understand why a man who enjoys the Redex should be cautious of wharries or afraid of a little southerly buster wind. Pleasant chap, but not quite the full pound.

William L. Worden

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