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Publisher's note:

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1 1950 THE FIRST GREAT ROAD RACE

Establishing La Carrera Panamericana

In 1945 the Mexican leg of the Pan-American Highway that would stretch from Alaska to Argentina was almost complete, and by 1947 there was paved highway from Texas to Oaxaca, over 300 miles south of Mexico City. This was a magnificent feat of engineering in southern Mexico's mountainous terrain. In celebration, an executive working in the Ministry of Communications, Guillermo Ostos, floated the idea of an international border-to-border road race, and his proposal caught the imagination of President Miguel Alemán Valdés. The project was driven by one Antonio Cornejo, an energetic Pontiac dealer in Mexico City, who was appointed General Manager of a four-man committee which liaised with police, army and officials. His garage in central Mexico City even housed some of the cars overnight when the entourage arrived in the capital.

The race was funded by the government, in partnership with the states through which the course ran, plus the road's contractors and elements of the Mexican automobile industry. One of its declared aims was to promote friendship and understanding between Mexico and the world at large, and the USA in particular. The event sparked interest in American racing circles, striking a chord with both Wilbur Shaw, director of post-World War II Indianapolis Speedway, and national hero Captain Eddie Rickenbacker, World War I fighter ace, race driver, ambassador and president of Eastern Airlines. Rickenbacker actively promoted La Carrera and personally donated an impressive trophy. Another trophy donated by Californian Governor Earl Warren bore the curious inscription 'One buy' or, in Spanish, 'Una compra.' It turned out he'd told the jeweller to inscribe 'Won by,' ('Ganada por'), but the verbal instruction had got lost in translation.

This was a prestigious national event, and the organizers' hospitality provided crews with the best in accommodation at the Rejis, Reforma or El Prado hotels in Mexico City. Banquets were scheduled every night (except at Oaxaca), with the Governor's palace topping the list in the capital.



The 1949 Lincoln of Abelardo Matamoros was typical of the American stock cars present in 1950, with a closed body, five seats and no modifications to the drivetrain.

(Courtesy Angélica Fuentes/Gustavo Serrano)

The route

The race route planned by the organizing committee literally followed the Panamerican highway from north to south, tracing a sinuous course through central Mexico, arrow-straight across desert and prairie in the north, rising to temperate mountainous Mexico City and remote tropical jungle in the south. The start was at Ciudad Juárez, just south of the Rio Grande and El Paso in Texas, and the finishing line at El Ocotil on the Mexican-Guatemalan border, a 2135 mile journey. In 1950, El Ocotil consisted of just four thatched houses, so the authorities constructed



'Almost all the American cars, including the Lincolns, had automatic gearboxes, which called for a special driving technique: before entering a corner the driver had to brake with his left foot while holding down the accelerator with his right, so the automatic transmission would down-shift. Then, at about a third of the way round the corner, the driver released the brake pedal, allowing the car to accelerate away.' – John Fitch



Even before the start there was tragedy. Two US fans were killed on the eve of the race when their Jaguar XK120 rolled en route to Tuxtla. (Courtesy Angélica Fuentes/Gustavo Serrano)

Alfa's adversaries were modest by comparison. There was a Borgward Isabella for veteran Adolf Brudes and seven Volkswagen Beetles with 1192cc engines, whose 31bhp and 68mph made them the slowest cars in the race. Four were entered by Prince Alfonso von Hohenlohe from his Mexican franchise, and he drove one with Count von Berkheim. A popular figure in Panamericana circles, von Hohenlohe was keen to publicise the VW's reliability and build quality. He bet that he could average higher velocities than the VW's publicised top speed and proved his point by skilful teamwork. The VW drivers drove in single file, like a train, on those long straights with just inches between them so that only the lead car cut through the air and the rest were slipstreaming. Therefore, they went faster and used less fuel. From time to time, the running order was changed, and the lead car went to the rear, passing air-cleaving duties to the second car up, as in team cycle races.

The story of the race

The race gets under way

The lead-up to the race was fraught for organizers and participants. Along the highway 3000 labourers worked day and night to prevent the race being called off as torrential rain had caused washouts in the desert and landslides in the mountains. Almost twice as many soldiers as the previous year were policing the route, and the National Railway agreed to stop its trains at crossings to prevent accidents.

The ship transporting some of the Ferrari personnel and cars, including Maglioli's, the official works Porsches, the two Austin Healeys and the three Borgwards, docked at Veracruz on November 16th, many days late. This hampered pre-race preparation and reconnaissance, and in fact Juhan, Herrmann and Segura drove their 550 Spyders from Veracruz to Tuxtla-Gutiérrez and only got to the start line the evening before the race.

Fatalities occurred even before the race began. A crew of Argentinean entrants was involved in a fatal accident driving to Tuxtla-Gutiérrez, and two US fans, who simply wanted to watch the start, overturned their Jaguar XK120 and were both killed. The Lincoln service van also flipped during the trip to Tuxtla-Gutiérrez, seriously injuring some mechanics. The press sneered at Tuxtla Hospital with its five beds and a primitive operating theatre lit by a 40-watt bulb, but it was already at full stretch.

At Tuxtla-Gutiérrez the organizers' efforts were undermined by the protests of celebrity entrant Porfiro Rubirosa, 'el don Juan atomico,' who arrived in his personal DC3 to find no room at the inn.

DAY 1, November 19th, 1954

Leg 1 Tuxtla-Gutiérrez to Oaxaca

At 6.00am Jack McAfee's 375 Plus was first off from Tuxtla-Gutiérrez on the 329 mile run. After the big sports cars it was the turn of Sport Menor, then Turismo Abierto followed by Turismo Especial and, lastly, Turismo Europeo. Eliminations on the first leg included a tense Bracco whose 4-cylinder Ferrari burst a water hose while he was crossing the Tehuantepec plain. He reached Oaxaca seven minutes over the allocated maximum time and was thus automatically disqualified. His pre-race hopes were dashed – in five races, he never once reached the finish. A piston fractured in the Oldsmobile engine of Duane Carter's Kurtis Kraft, which also arrived too late at Oaxaca, as did Lance Macklin who had electrical problems with his Healey. The Chevrolet Corvette's engine also packed up on this demanding stage. Alfonso de Portago and McAfee were in a dog-fight for the lead, side by side at 170mph on the Tehuantepec straight. De Portago spun as a piston seized after just 160kms and he was out, travelling the rest of the race by plane. So McAfee was leading the race when, 50 miles past Tehuantepec and just a mile from a service point, he lost control at 120mph on a right-hander. The big Ferrari broadsided across the road dived down a 30ft embankment and rolled over twice, ploughing trees and sagebrushes for two hundred yards. McAfee walked away but co-driver Ford 'El Toro' Robinson died instantly of a broken neck. McAfee immediately

Opposite: Giovanni Bracco arrives at the Oaxaca finish in his ailing Ferrari 750 Monza only to be disqualified for exceeding the allotted time. The sister car of Alfonso de Portago didn't even make it, the 4-cylinder engine seizing 103 miles from the start. (Courtesy Angélica Fuentes/Gustavo Serrano)



Sport Menor allows classic cars like the Alfa Romeo Giulietta and Giulietta to run the largest available version of the Milanese maker's twin-cam power units, so a car that might have started life as a 1300 can be fitted with a 2-litre unit. (Courtesy Rebecca Olausson)



In recent years there have been few takers for Sport Mayor, though the locally-built LT Chevrolet roadster of Jorge Arroyo and Juan Corcuera is a fine example. (Courtesy Rebecca Olausson)

Opposite: In 2007 the highest finishers in the Original Panam class were Carson Scheller and Shields Richardson in their 1954 Ford Mainline Tudor sedan.

the Turismo de Producción class encompasses cars that could have competed in the original Carrera from 1950 to 1954; in 2007 there were just half a dozen. In this class, you can only run up to 302cu in with four-speed transmission, and there's a maximum size for rims and brakes. In 2006 the Panam was won for the first time by a Turismo de Producción car – the '53 Ford Tudor sedan of Gabriel Pérez and Angélica Fuentes. Turismo Mayor was more popular in 2007 with 19 entries, and you can run 351cu in V8s and five-speed gearboxes, which is the province of the really quick cars questing for outright victory.

The Original Panam group is looser, chronologically, than Turismo de Producción, but tighter in terms of what goes mechanically, requiring the correct engine and running gear for the car at the time it was produced. For example, a Porsche 356 constructed for this category would need an original Porsche engine and not a Type 4 VW unit. This, therefore, is potentially the slowest class and there were 12 takers in 2007 – the highest Original Panam finisher was the Ford Tudor sedan of Carson Scheller and Shields Richardson in 31st place.



The Volvo PV544 of Joaquin Conde and Joaquin Conde Jnr is a prime candidate for Historica A.

LA CARRERA 2006 AND 2007

The Porsche 550 Spyder of Bill Hemmer and Adriana Robles, finished in the livery of Canada Shoes in celebration of Salvador Lopez-Chavez's 1950s predecessor.

a two; you need to keep on the pace. You must keep talking, talking, talking. You need to be aware, because we were going through a corner and I could see the car ahead and he couldn't! I was like, "Mind the car," and fortunately, I was on the ball. It's exciting, multi-tasking!

Like all the regulars, she's had some scares over the years: 'I was with Jorge Pedrero in the Studebaker Champion, like Pierre has, in 2003, when something in the suspension broke. We were going downhill to Tehuacán, and we lost brakes and we lost steering and we lost everything. He just turned around to me in the middle of the stage, we were going really fast, and he said, "Do I brake, do I turn? What should I do?" We were so lucky as the car just took the corner and stopped; on the other side it was a 150 metre drop so that was really scary.' And she has suffered from the loss of fellow Panam participants. In 1999 her good friend Alda Arnauda, another woman co-driver, was killed on Mil Cumbres, along with her driver Bernard Obregón, a Mexican circuit racing champion.

How did Angélica learn to navigate and hone her skills? 'Well, I've been doing it for 24 years and that's a lot of kilometres on the road. There is a lot of psychology in the relationship between driver and co-driver. You never, never blame the driver, and you never fight in the car. After you finish the stage you need to say, "I didn't like that." You need to talk to each other frankly to have a good result, so that's what I have learnt. I've rallied in Mexico a lot; I was the first woman to win a championship, I was the Mexican Rally Champion co-driver in 2002, and winning co-driver in 1998 with Carlos Izquierdo.'

Across the street I spot the silver Porsche 550 Spyder, icon of the original Carrera series, thanks to Hans Herrmann's third overall in '54. It's in immaculate period Canada Zapatos livery (the Mexican shoe brand) and when I see a toddler crawl, unchecked, up the car's front panel, suspicions of a fibreglass body are confirmed. There was a legitimate precedent for this medium, according to driver Bill Hemmer: in the

'There is a lot of psychology in the relationship between driver and co-driver. You never, never blame the driver, and you never fight in the car ... You need to talk to each other frankly to have a good result.'

