

**How a 1955 Chrysler C-300 made its intended debut at the revived La Carrera Panamericana 40 years past its prime.**

**By Jim Dietzler**  
 Photography provided by Ron Davis

**D**rop the name "La Carrera Panamericana" around car buffs and you'll most likely receive a blank stare—unless you're in the company of true road racing gearheads. Today, the race,

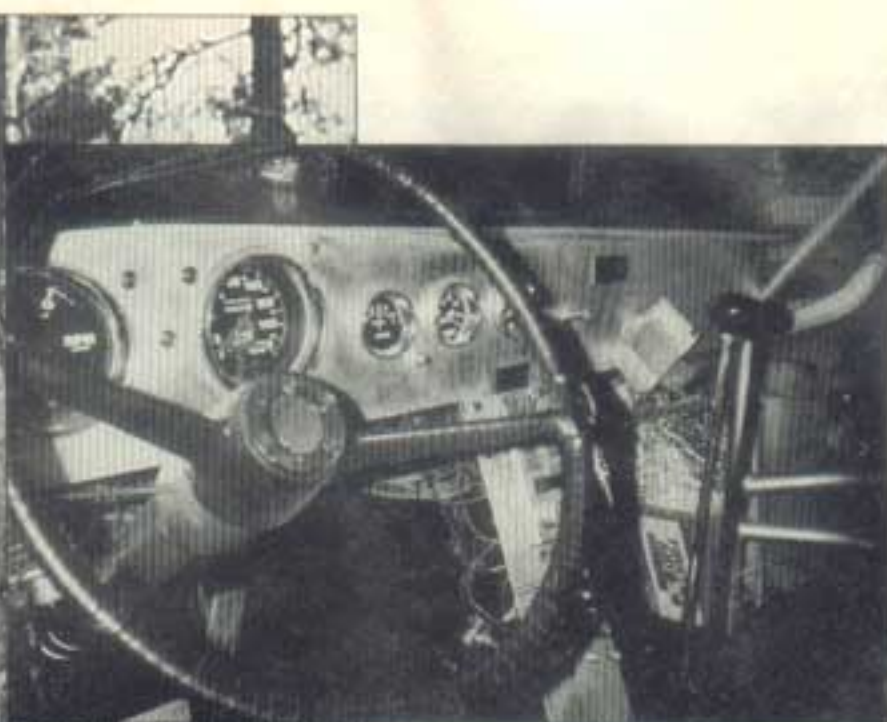
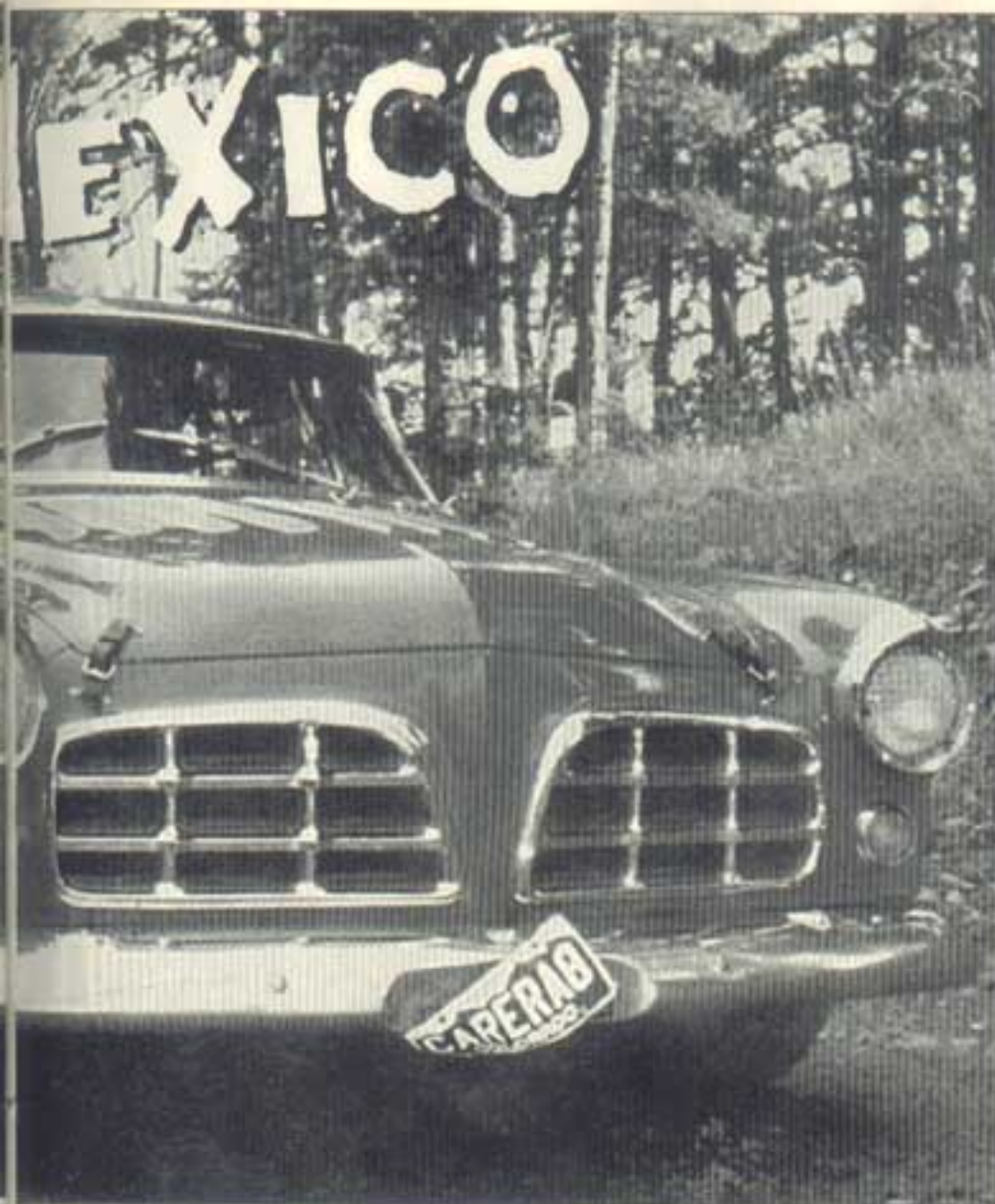
often referred to as the Mexican Road Race, is nearly 2,000 miles long and takes seven days to complete.

La Carrera Panamericana originated in 1950 when the Mexican government wanted to celebrate the opening of its newest highway, the Panamericana. In all, 126 American and European racers braved the 2,135 miles of the Panamerican highway. Even though Cadillacs dominated many stages of the race, it was Herschel McGriff driving an Oldsmobile who was the first winner. He rolled into El Ocotil after driving for 27 hours, 34 minutes and 55 seconds over four days at an average speed of 78.4 mph.

By its final year in 1954, the race had gained international fame and had been designated (in 1952) as a World Championship Course. The European factory works teams (Ferrari, Alfa Romeo, Mercedes and Lancia) had appeared in growing numbers over the years to compete in the sports car class. The American manufacturers weren't to be left behind and were also fielding race teams. Chrysler hadn't had much luck; the only win for the make came in 1951 when Bill Sterling pilot-



*There's nothing like 331 cubes of Chrysler Hemi firepower under the hood. Despite swallowing a piston, the Hemi powered the first C-300 to run in La Carrera Panamericana to the finish. Dual carbs weren't allowed in 1995.*



Owner Ron Davis refers to his Hemi-powered C-300 as a "huge, ponderous beast that just really gets it when it comes to being set up as a road racer."

All of the 300's luxury items were removed and replaced with a pair of racing buckets and a gauge-filled aluminum dash. Co-pilot Carl Schneider added the Pepto-Bismol.

ed a Saratoga to victory in the stock class.

At about the same time that the Panamericana came to a close, Chrysler was making a major impact in racing circles on American soil. At the hands of Tim Flock, a 1955 300-R owned by Mercury Motors president Carl Kiekhaefer broke the existing speed record on the

sands of Daytona. Flock won on the old beach course five times, and his 147.05 mph lap record still stands. He went on to win both the NASCAR and the AAA championships in 1955.

Chrysler had racing in mind when it created the 300, which also has the distinction of being the first true American

musclecar. One of the goals for the 300 was to conquer the Mexican Road Race, but that wasn't to happen.

La Carrera Panamericana had gained a fair amount of notoriety as one of the most dangerous racing events in the world. Between 1950-54, 12 pilots and co-pilots were killed. Crashes also claimed the lives of six spectators and one soldier on crowd-control duty.

After the 1954 race, in which five racers and three onlookers died, the Mexican government and the sanctioning body, the Asociacion Nacional Automovilistica, canceled the race indefinitely. Most accounts attribute that decision to the growing number of fatalities.

Enter Loyal Truesdale, a man who has his own opinion as to why the most grueling of all endurance races came to an end.

Loyal, a 55-year-old resident of Los Angeles, has been around racing for most of his life. For 10 years he was involved with the Skoal Bandit NASCAR team. He's raced motorcycles since 1960, and that interest is what led to his becoming actively involved in reviving La Carrera Panamericana.



Which way did he go? You'd better hope your co-pilot is pointing the same way you're turning. Co-pilot Carl Schneider (left) and pilot Ron Davis ham it up before the start of the '95 La Carrera Panamericana.



And whether or not it can be proven, his account as to the end of La Carrera Panamericana makes sense. "The real reason the original La Carrera came to an end was that the newly elected president of Mexico decided that the race had served its purpose. It was created to promote the opening of the highway. After four years, that goal had been accomplished. You have to remember that the race literally closed the highway for four days every year. It took 56,000 soldiers to do that. It was more of a fiscal decision than one based on the interest of the safety of racers and spectators," he explained.

In 1985, Loyal was organizing and participating in a road race series from Ensenada to San Felipe when he joined forces with a man named Eduardo Leon. Eduardo just happened to hold the rights to La Carrera Panamericana. The two men began to talk. When Loyal expressed his interest in reviving the original La

Carrera, he found that Eduardo felt the same.

It took three years for progress to be made. Said Loyal, "In June of 1988, we went to the Mexican Tourist Bureau and asked for a permit for an 'old car parade' from Tuxtla to the U.S." Simple as that, the Mexican Road Race was no longer a thing of the past. The bureau put only one mandate on the race: While the racers could do practically anything they wanted, they could not interrupt commerce, specifically the truck commerce that used the Panamericana.

"One of the original things we wanted was for an entrant to be able to buy a junker, drop in a similar motor, and build the car to at least 30 percent period matching." Loyal added that the race has evolved into "the ultimate privateer's race. You can get a buddy, a car and a roll cage and you're ready to go. If there are three similar cars we create a subclass. It's a legitimate deal;

nearly everybody can win."

In 1988, 56 racers took the challenge. However, for its second inaugural run there were some changes. No longer would the cars be allowed to burn up the entire race at full-tilt. Instead, the race is run as a time/speed/distance rally. That doesn't mean that it's been entirely watered-down, though. "It's broken down into about 80 percent limited speed and transit stages and 20 percent full-speed velocity stages," Loyal explained. "We give two good speed runs of about 10 miles each on a tight, twisty road every day. You've got to remember that in the first 300 miles in the mountains, there are over 3,000 turns to be made. Radial tires are God's gift to old cars!"

Even though the overall average speed works out to about 44 mph each day, according to Loyal, until one has run La Carrera for a couple of years, "your foot is in it all the time. You always have to hustle. If your co-pilot has to stop to use the bathroom, you'll drive on the sidewalks to make your starting time rather than have a time penalty assessed."

Every few years, Loyal takes a tour of the different areas that the highway traverses in each state of Mexico. Once he finds a section that meets his requirements for a velocity stage (long straights with tight turns interspersed throughout), the maps come out, mileage is calculated and a new route for the race is created. Loyal stated that this allows for all of the towns along the highway to participate and also brings the race into each of Mexico's many car club regions.

Over the last decade, the types of vehicles allowed to enter La Carrera Pan-



americana have been expanded. "When we heard that someone wanted to bring one of Bob Lutz's 300s down, we had to change the rules," said Loyal. There are now seven major classes that allow for cars from 1930-54 as well as later model years that did not undergo any significant design changes from 1954. The historic classes allow for cars from 1940-60.

While it may not cost too much to toss together a period-correct car for the event, the tab for the event isn't cheap. In 1996, \$3,600 got you in, but the expense is offset somewhat because it includes lodging and a lot of south-of-the-border-style fun.

## ENTERING A HEMI 300

It was in 1995 that the first Chrysler C-300 took the challenge that many say it was designed for.

When Ron Davis, a 53-year-old Elvis impersonator from Fort Collins, Colo., found his C-300 in 1990, he didn't even know La Carrera existed. Instead, he was looking for a used engine to put into his Dodge pickup. He found a '69 300 4-door sedan with the engine he wanted, and sitting behind that car was a 1955 Chrysler 2-door hardtop. "It had been years since I had seen one. It had been sitting in the same spot since 1972 and was mostly complete. It had good glass, and the chrome and stainless trim were in good condition. The owner suggested that I take both cars, so I did," Ron said.

The 300 sat for another two years at Ron's house. He hadn't formulated any plans for it until 1993, when a friend turned him on to Pink Floyd's music video, *La Carrera Panamericana*. The video features Floyd's music with footage from the 1991

Panamericana. It includes in-car shots from band member Nick Mason's Jaguar, racer interviews and footage from some of the early Panamericanas. (If you get the chance to watch it, it's worth the time.)

After one viewing, Ron said, "I was hooked!" He wanted to run in the race, but didn't know what to enter. After contacting Eduardo Leon, Ron says he was told to run the '55 with its original 331-cubic-inch Hemi instead of the 413-cubic-inch powerplant that he considered putting in the car.

Ron went to La Carrera in 1993 as a spectator and applied what he learned there to rebuilding the C-300 as a Panamericana racer. After viewing the problems others encountered firsthand, he soon learned how to go about the task properly. "Motor mounts broke on one competitor's car, on another the hood flew up and took out the windshield. What he saved in weight didn't amount to much, compared to driving the entire event with no windshield." Ron said. "The advice I got was, 'When you think you've built it strong enough, build it stronger!'"

Ron made sure he kept in mind just where and how the car would be running. He had B&W Race Chassis of Fort Collins cut off the front end of the frame and weld in a clipped '76 Pontiac Trans Am front suspension. The axles and brakes from the '55 went in the scrap heap and a set of axles and disc brakes from a '75 Oldsmobile took their place, while the stock Carrera gas shocks were retained to absorb any abuse the Mexican road race would dish out.

Ron took it upon himself to handle the task of preparing the Hemi for its life as a racer. Grant piston rings were slipped onto the stock pistons, FM 20 bearings were used for the main and rod bearings, and a

forged crankshaft and a Nielsen camshaft with a .260 grind were installed. The rules for the 1995 race required the standard twin 4-barrel carburetors to be replaced with a single Carter AFB.

In order to create a more reliable ignition system, Ron went to a GM HEI distributor and ACCEL wires. Handling the exhaust duties is an unmuffled Sander-son Backhugger 3-inch header system that exits through two holes cut in the body in front of the rear wheels. That little bit of work is one of Ron's favorite features on the car. "When you hear that 331 Hemi at 5000 rpm through 3-inch open exhaust tubes, I think you might like that most about the car, too."

The original Powerflite transmission was dropped in favor of a '76 GM 3-speed automatic. The Turbo Hydromatic 400 has a B&M torque converter, shift kit and large-capacity oil pan as well as a 27-inch Genie shifter. At the rear, stock 1955 Carrera shocks were kept, but the differential was replaced with a 1969 Dana 44 with 3.08 gears and rear axles from an '80 Trans Am. Ron chose BFGoodrich 235/60/15 tires on 15-inch Bart rims front and rear to keep the 300 planted on the pavement.

If it were stripped of its race decals, the Chrysler would look pretty much stock from the exterior. There are a few clues that tell the viewer something other than Sunday driving is going on with this particular 300. The hood has been louvered to facilitate airflow. For ground clearance, the exhaust exits through the 3-inch ports in the quarter panels. Period-correct leather-buckle hood and trunk fasteners are visible, and the Tango Red enamel paint can't be missed.

*continued on page 93*



# Mexico

continued from page 75

If the exterior provides only a few hints to this car's true nature, the interior flat-out screams "race car." The luxurious leather seating and other appointments that Chrysler so generously provided the 300 with in 1955 are long gone. Ron removed everything. In place of the back seat are two spare tires strapped down tight. A roll cage is required equipment for La Carrera. There are no door panels, and the leather front seats and stock dashboard are also missing in action.

Instead, you'll find an aluminum dash with Auto Meter tachometer, speedometer, and voltage, oil and water temperature gauges along with other necessary switches and relays. A set of Cobra racing buckets and 5-point harnesses provide security for both pilot and co-pilot, and for refreshment, a cooler is wedged in the middle. (Apparently, that's a high-priority item.) Ron credits a lot of the work on the one-off items to buddy Ed Wendel.

For the first-ever run of a C-300 in La Carrera, Ron teamed with Carl Schneider, a car dealer from Eureka, Calif., as his co-pilot.

However, Ron's first foray into the most famous of all endurance races wasn't without problems. On the first day, the pair managed to run out of gas. "I plan on replacing the 22-gallon fuel tank with a 32-gallon one to avoid that little problem in the future," he noted.

Much of the original design of the 300 helped in the race. "The roads in Mexico are brutal. At the entrance to each town are speed bumps called *topes* in Spanish. If you were to hit one of these at, say, 40 mph, anything hanging down is likely to be damaged or torn off," Ron said. "The framersails on the 300 act like big skis when we hit them. Everything is tucked above the frame."

For more than two days, the big 300 managed to survive the rigors of the Mexican roads. Squealing tires around hair-raising corners tend to become a little commonplace after awhile, but Ron jokingly pointed out that "Carl had that Pepto-Bismol taped to the dash for a reason, and he did need it."

Trouble hit on day three. "It sprouted one [threw a rod] after a few revs in the 7500-rpm range," Ron said. He admitted that he has only himself to blame for the dropped piston. "When I was rebuilding

the motor, I used the original connecting rod bolts."

As the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention, and when you want to finish a 2,000-mile road race, necessity leads to creative thinking. "The rod was peened over through the oil pan and didn't thrash around much. We pulled the piston and rod and put a piece of a pop can around the crank. We held that in place with hose clamps and used silicone sealer to hold the lifters off of the cam. We ran her on seven cylinders and, needless to say, it was a little rough running. It easily made 60 mph. I suspect it's what would have been done in the '50s, given the circumstances." Ron quipped that it was "under a cloud of smoke and a hearty hi-ho that we took off again."

Even though most of the festivities had concluded by the time the 300 limped through the finish under the arch at Chapultepec Park in Mexico City, Ron noted that running La Carrera was well worth the time and trouble. "La Carrera is the only place a wannabe, an amateur or a hobbyist is going to get a taste of full-on road racing. The problem then becomes, one run of La Carrera Panamericana is not enough."

In 1996, La Carrera had to do without the presence of the 300. Ron spent most of the year conducting research in hope of fielding a second '55 C-300 in the race. He also restored a Packard for the Packard Museum. His second 300 will sport a 2-speed transmission mated to a Dana rear with 4.56 gearing and improved rear suspension. That package is to be interchangeable with a GM Turbo Hydromatic 700 R4 transmission for La Carrera, but work on the car is behind schedule.

Ron's a little hesitant to put up the cash to run La Carrera until he's sure he has a serious car to run. However, he noted that his first 300, currently in storage, is a fun car to drive even if it isn't the most competitive one that he has. Believe it or not, Ron's also building a third '55 300 to FIA specifications.

Even if he doesn't make the '97 Panamericana, there's no doubt he'll be back in the future. As Ron put it, "Once you've gone down and spent time with the most famous names in racing as an equal, there's nothing like it. Especially after you finish and your name is listed with the likes of former F1 driver Clay Regazzoni and USAC Open Wheel Champion Chuck Gurney." That's enough of an incentive for me. Mexico, anyone? **H**

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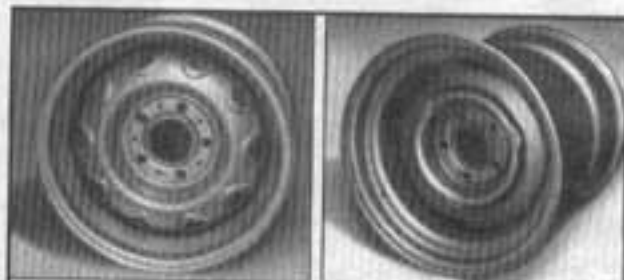
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