

Caballa

The Iron Horse rides again.

By Ray Brock

PHOTOS BY ERIC RICKMAN, BRUCE GLASCOCK AND THE AUTHOR

Back in 1950, the original Carrera Panamericana was staged by the government of Mexico to publicize completion of their portion of the Pan American Highway, from their northern border across from El Paso, Texas, to the southern border at Guatemala. The pavement ran from Juarez to the sleepy town of Tuxtla Gutierrez, in the southernmost state of Chiapas, about 50 miles short of the border. From there, on to the border, the road was gravel. Following completion of the race, competitors made their way back to Tuxtla for hotels and auto repair facilities to prepare for the return trip.



Herschel McGriff won that first year in a 1950 Oldsmobile and post-race publicity of the event excited the imagination of drivers and racing teams throughout the world. The following year, the race course was reversed, with the starting line at Tuxtla and the

finish line at the airport just south of Juarez, so larger crowds could be accommodated and publicity better distributed worldwide.

Italians Piero Taruffi and Alberto Ascari finished one-two with Ferraris in 1951, with an assortment of American stock cars close behind. The world was now aware of the "Mexican Road Race" and factory racing teams throughout the world made plans for the 1952 event.

A Whittier, Calif., hot rodder, Ak Miller, got the bug to race



and, with the help of his local Oldsmobile dealer, entered a 1952 Olds in the 1908-mile race. Ak and his co-pilot, Doug Harrison, learned the hard way that a completely stock sedan was not suited to the rigors of an international road race, especially when ricocheting off curbs, dirt banks and potholes. The Miller-Harrison Olds retired at about the halfway point, in Leon, with a burned-out transmission tailshaft bearing.

Despite the disappointment of not finishing, the team decided they would compete again the following year but this time in a car of their own design, a genuine hot rod. At that point in early 1953, I entered the picture, covering the construction of El Caballo de Hierro (the Iron Horse) in my new job as assistant technical editor of *Hot Rod Magazine*. It wasn't long before I was pressed into service to help and became an official team member.

When this creation—comprised of a '27 T-body, modified '50 Ford frame and front suspension, cross-leaf rear axle, souped-up '50 Olds engine, '37 Cadillac transmission and '35 Nash overdrive—reached the Tuxtla Gutierrez starting line in 1953, the Mexican press promptly dubbed Iron Horse "Ensalada" (the

Salad), because of the wide variety of components that had been tossed together to build the car. The Mexicans loved the car because it was the way they would have built a race car—a little of this and some of that!

We had two service cars in '53, a Cadillac-powered '50 Ford with Dwight Phillips and Hal Powell, and me in Ak's '50 Olds

The '91 crew of Caballo de Hierro includes veterans Ray Brock (left), Ak Miller (right) and newcomer and car owner Bruce Glascock.



SON OF El Caballo

The reincarnation of a legend.

By Ron Ceridono

A number of famous cars have been rebuilt, or recreated, over the years. It's a process that Bruce Glascock knows all about, he being the man who tirelessly tracked down Spence Murray's long lost *Rod and Custom Magazine* Dream Truck, finally bought it, and then painstakingly restored it.

After that long, drawn-out process, Bruce sold the truck but evidently for him restoring famous cars is like eating peanuts, because once he started, he couldn't stop. Since his last project was a custom, Bruce decided the next undertaking would be the revival of a famous hot rod. He concluded there could be no better example of the genre than Ak Miller's El Caballo.

Originally built in 1953 to compete in the Carrera Panamericana road race in Mexico, El Caballo was hot rod through and through. The construction of the car was documented in *Hot Rod Magazine* by Ray Brock and upon completion, El Caballo's performance set the sporty car world on its ear. This American backyard creation, piloted by a couple of SoCal hot rodders, finished the race two years in a row on the heels of Europe's finest thoroughbreds. Bruce felt that a hot rod with such a dis-

Vehicle: 1927 Ford Roadster
Owner: Bruce Glascock,
San Francisco, Calif.



sedan loaded with spare parts, oil, etc. On the trip from Whittier to the starting line, El Caballo was driven rather than trailered, so we could determine if there were "weak links" in the parts mixture. We found and fixed a wide variety of problems on the way down, but learned we had a major problem that couldn't be rectified prior to the start of the race; the '50 Ford

ring and pinion could not take the horsepower and speed created by the big Olds and 30 percent overdrive. After a few hundred miles of high-speed driving, the gears became razor-sharp and a loud howl announced impending failure. Solution: One of the support vehicles would drive ahead to the next day's finish line, locate a new ring and pinion set, and stand by to

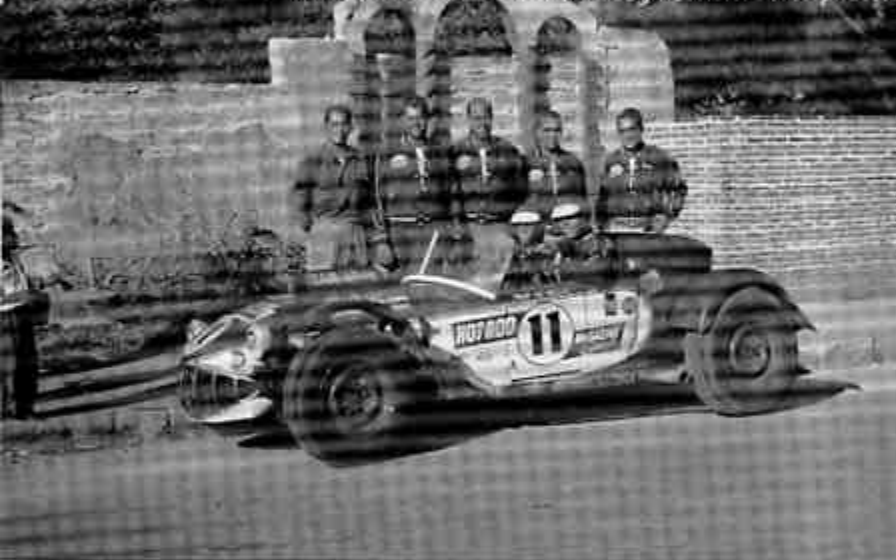
install the gears after El Caballo crossed the finish line each day. Ak reduced speed to lessen the strain, and the hot rod entry managed an eighth-place finish in the large sports car category five days after leaving Tuxtla Gutierrez.

For 1954, we knew the car's weak points, so a stronger '53 Lincoln rear axle and '53 Lincoln 11-inch brakes with wider linings were installed. A few other minor changes were made and a bright *Hot Rod Magazine*-sponsored paint job covered the car. We felt we were ready to race the big boys. El Caballo made the trip to Tuxtla without a hitch, so we adjusted the valves, changed oil and drove to the starting line.

At Juarez five days later, Ak and Doug finished fifth in the large sports car category, trailing four Ferraris. One morning when the race was leaving Mexico City, the major local newspaper had a head-on photo of Iron Horse occupying the entire front page. They loved Ensalada!

Plans for a sixth Mexican Road Race in 1955 were cancelled during that summer, but only after

Original crew consisted of (left to right) R.E. "Pete" Petersen, Clem Tebow, Ray Brock, Pete Coltrin, and Racer Brown. Pilots as well as Doug Harrison as Co-pilot.



tinguished history just had to be brought back to life.

Unfortunately, the search for Ak's car was a short one. It didn't take long to discover that El Caballo had been parted out in 1955 and nothing of the original roadster remained. Bruce, who was not easily discouraged, figured that El Caballo had been built once, and it could be built again.

A phone call to Ak was all it took to involve him in the project, and a little research produced everything ever written in *Hot Rod Magazine* about the car. With 40-year-old magazine articles, and the car's originator supplying a myriad of obscure details, Bruce set about recreating El Caballo. He gathered up a pile of early parts and pieces identical to those used to build the original car, and then enlisted Vern Tardell, a very capable Santa Rosa, Calif., hot rodder to help assemble it all.

Vern modified a '49 Ford chassis just as had been done umpteen years ago, then installed the running gear, and mounted the '27 T-body. Bruce hammered out the nose (made from two '39 Dodge rear fenders, just like the original), built the Kurtis-inspired grille insert, then finished the bodywork and applied a duplicate of the 1953 paint scheme.

Opposite, above: Between the '46 Ford taillights is the original Carrera Panamericana license plate worn by El Caballo. Ak donated the one-of-a-kind item because he felt the car had the heart and soul of the original and deserved to wear it. Rear end is a '53 Lincoln hung on a Ford transverse spring.

Opposite: Larry Spangler bored the 371-cid Olds Rocket motor .030 in. oversize, then fitted the '58 block with an Isky cam of Ak's specifications. Other than that, internally the engine is basically stock. Weiland manifold now mounts a pair of Ford 2-barrels that replaced the troublesome Strombergs.

Once the car was completed, it was turned over to Ak, who made the car race-ready by tweaking El Caballo as only its original creator could.

Despite some problems during its initial outing, El Caballo needed only a few minor changes to get the performance to match the potential. A pair of Ford Motorcraft 2-barrels replaced the four leaky Strombergs, and a stock ignition system was substituted for the fried electronic components. Those changes made, El Caballo was ready to go. And does it go. Not a display piece requiring periodic dusting, El Caballo goes out in the real world and raises dust and gets dirty, just as it did in 1953.

As well as competing in the modern-day running of the Carrera Panamericana, Bruce has run the car at the nostalgia drags, and competed in the Silver State Classic, an annual road race held in Nevada. Considering the less than high-tech components and its 40-year-old design, El Caballo's performance is spectacular. Bruce and El Caballo averaged 120 mph for more than 100 miles in the Silver State, and finished second in class. In the same event, El Caballo was clocked at over 150 mph in the straights and Bruce says it's capable of going faster. Not bad for a hot rod built in 1953. Not bad for one built in 1993.

Bruce started out to build a copy of El Caballo, but has accomplished more than just building a done. The car you see here is more than just a re-creation, it's a reincarnation. This car has all the attributes of the original—the look, the sound, but most importantly, the soul of the original. It has successfully picked up where the tire tracks of its predecessor left off.

Long live El Caballo!

Ak and the team had started a new car, featuring a Kurtis torsion bar chassis and an envelope aluminum body, which would give aerodynamics to match Ferrari. Brakes, rear axle, wheels, seats and a wide assortment of other pieces were cannibalized from El Caballo. Before long, the old hot rod was a shell of its former self, and Ak sold the remains to someone whose present whereabouts are unknown.

Enter a new era: Mexico's Tourist Bureau revived the Mexican Road Race theme by announcing La Carrera Panamericana 1988, a rally event. It followed the original route but with Transit, Limited and Speed sections instead of all-out racing of the early '50s where thousands of Federal troops closed the highway to all local traffic each day during racing hours.

This rally theme requires moderate speeds on Transit sections with penalty points for being too early or more than 15 minutes late for the time allowed. Limited sections require more aggressive driving, even though local traffic is also using the road. Hidden checkpoints along Limited sections penalize cars traveling too fast or too slow along the route or arriving at the checkpoint late.

Speed sections are just as the name implies ... all-out for 5 to 50 kilometers. Local traffic is stopped and the fastest car in each category establishes a benchmark against which other competitors are graded and penalty points given.

Coincidental to this race revival four years ago, a San Leandro, Calif., hot rodder, Bruce Glascock, had started construction of a replica of the famous hot rod entry in the 1953-54 races. Bruce had originally called Ak to see if he could buy El Caballo de Hierro. Ak didn't know where the remains rested, so Bruce asked Ak if he would mind if he recreated the car. Ak said, "Go ahead!" Bruce dug out everything that had been written about the car, plus made countless phone calls to Ak over the next three years asking questions about components.

By mid-summer 1991, Bruce said he thought he could have El Caballo done in time for the race in late October. Vern Tardell, a Santa Rosa hot rodder, was conducting major assembly of the salad parts with Bruce driving up after his job in downtown San Francisco each day.

Bruce asked Ak and me to go with him on the trip to Mexico and share the driving chores (Doug Harrison no longer drives and is retired in Leon, Mexico). We agreed! On Saturday, October 5, Bruce drove the replica up to Ak's shop in Pico Rivera with anti-freeze spewing from the radiator overflow. The car looked exactly like the original and was beautifully painted *Hot Rod Magazine* Special colors with original sponsors' names in place.

Vern had followed along with a trailer, just in case, and admitted that he hadn't had time to properly finish the car and that there were "a few things that should be checked out." We had already guessed that the radiator was inadequate, and over the next 10 days, Ak, his assistant Bradley Glaser and I found out what Vern meant about running short of time. We hurriedly revised chassis settings, added safety items, fitted Goodyear Gatorback 60-series tires and installed a larger-capacity radiator with an electric fan.

On Tuesday, October 15, we loaded the "fresh salad" on a transporter to Laredo, Texas, where it was to be driven across the border and then loaded aboard a Mexican car transport for the trip to Tuxtla Gutierrez. There, Bruce, Ak and I would



greet the car on October 23, two days before the start of the race.

We arrived on schedule in Tuxtla Gutierrez to learn that the cars had trouble getting through customs at Nuevo Laredo and the transport truck was running late. And, "By the way," an official said, "your car had a little engine fire crossing the border so is not in running condition." What?

It seems the day was quite warm at the border, traffic was heavy and the driver didn't know how to turn on the cooling fan. Result: The engine got very hot, causing the No. 4 Stromberg carburetor float to stick open. The overflow of gasoline covered the rear half of the engine and caused a substantial fire. When the transporter arrived in Tuxtla late the afternoon before race day, the three of us were there to meet it with great concern about what could be done.

We hired a taxi, tied El Caballo to the end of a rope and made for a local garage where we hoped to solve the problems. The electronic ignition wiring was badly burned, but we managed to splice new wires, then replace spark plug wiring. After a few hours, we got the car running and took off for our hotel near the starting line to get cleaned up, eat and sleep.

Traffic was jammed as all the locals were also heading that way to see the race cars. We had the electric fan on and had almost made the hotel when orange flames started coming through the porous firewall. Another engine fire! Ak and I jumped out, yanked off the hood and smothered the fire. Now we had to start all over again. Inspection of the antique No. 4 Stromberg disclosed that it had played lead in the Anvil Chorus sometime past as the cover was well-dented from frequent poundings to release a hung-up float. Primary ignition wiring was once again burned up, but the new plug wires were okay. Ak decided to eliminate the troublesome No. 4 carburetor, so a plate was made to fit atop the throttle body with the float bowl and cover discarded. We figured that the Weiland manifold design with an open plenum under the remaining carburetors would feed adequate fuel.

At 7 o'clock the next morning, Ak and I were in El Caballo awaiting our starting call. Bruce had arranged a ride in Charlie Rau's Corvette chase truck, which would follow after all cars had departed. Bruce also had our luggage.

Since our last trip to Mexico in 1954, their highway depart-

