

BIG HUEEVOS



BORDER TO BORDER

*Felice Bonetto and Bruno Bonini
near Tuxtla in their Alfa Romeo 6C 2500.
(Photo Jack Cansler ISC/NASCAR)*



PART ONE 1950

John M. Burns recounts La Carrera Panamericana—what may have been the most difficult, dangerous and grueling road race ever.

Last run over 40 years ago, La Carrera Panamericana Mexico, the Mexican Road Race, has become the stuff of legend, but like most legends its facts have become obscured over time. During its five year lifespan, it was the most difficult, most dangerous and most grueling race in the world, but that alone does not account for its legendary status. More than any other race, the Carrera was responsible for making the names Ferrari and Porsche known in the United States, the nation that would ultimately prove to be their largest market. Prior to that time, they were only laughably small car manufacturers, turning out a mere handful of cars, and known only to the select few who paid attention to their successes in European races like Le Mans and the Mille Miglia. Indeed, the Carrera's importance to Porsche is self-evident in that one need only walk around to the rear of any 911 built during the past 15 years. There on its tail, one will find the Spanish

word "Carrera" commemorating a Mexican race last run in 1954.

First run in 1950 as a one-time, government-sponsored event to celebrate the completion of the Mexican portion of the Pan American Highway, the initial Carrera Panamericana was a race filled with much pomp and little circumstance, which suffered from the problems that virtually all government-sponsored undertakings do.

First off, the race was scheduled for early May, to coincide with Cinco de Mayo, the grand Mexican holiday. However, this meant that the cream of American drivers would be at Indianapolis for testing and time trials and the majority of European teams would be busy preparing for the grand prix and sports car racing seasons ahead.

Plans for the race also seemed so grandiose and—Mexico's racing traditions, or its business traditions for that matter—so lacking that nobody believed the race could possibly go forward as planned. But

respected entrant and businessman Bob Estes traveled to Mexico in advance of the event to check out conditions as well as the intentions of the race organizers. With prize monies held in bank escrow, his reassurance to fellow racers and car owners guaranteed their participation.

Another potential trouble spot was the fact that the race was scheduled to be run from north to south, leaving the teams two thousand miles from home, in a small town in a tropical jungle on the Guatemalan border, at race's end. And finally, the event was plagued by rumors that the highway would not be finished, that the Mexican gasoline contestants were required to use was no good, and that the prize money would never be paid.

Despite the problems facing it and the pre-race rumor mill, the race went off as scheduled with 126 starters, among them only six European cars, contesting the 150,000 pesos (\$17,381) first prize. By race rule, the cars were required to be strictly

stock, only shock absorber and tire changes being permitted, and this had a disastrous effect on the combatants when engines blew on the long straight stretches of the northern sections and when brakes faded to nothing on the mountainous serpentine sections of the south. On the second day alone, 20 cars went out from crashes or mechanical failures. In the words of third-place finisher, Al Rogers, the race was a "car killer." And as the race progressed, other problems presented themselves.

The experience of Johnny Mantz is illustrative. He wrestled his Lincoln into the lead as the cars reached Mexico City at the end of day three. He held that lead on the morning leg to Puebla the follow-



ing day, but locking brakes on the afternoon leg to Oaxaca left him in tenth place. That night, while his team repaired the Lincoln's brakes and readied it for the day ahead, Mantz came down with an attack of dysentery. The next morning, still suffering from a high fever and the

after effects of his illness (or perhaps because of them!), he passed 30 other cars on the leg to Tuxtla Gutierrez, winning that leg and climbing back into fourth place overall, only to discover on the last leg to El Ocotal that at least one of the pre-race rumors was true. The final leg of the Highway from Tuxtla to El Ocotal was still largely unpaved and the gravel sections were composed of coarse volcanic rock that shredded tires. Far worse were the ruts and large rocks in this section, which tore at undercarriages and oil pans. In the end Mantz placed ninth, crossing the finish line with no front brakes, on three tires worn to the cord and a bare wheel.

Stock car driver, Herschel McGriff, won the race driving a 1950 Oldsmobile, finishing one minute and 16 seconds in front of Tom Deal's 1950 Cadillac. While McGriff had been able to avoid the tire problems that befell most of the field over the last leg, even his drive was not without incident. About a half mile from the finish, a huge rock disemboweled his Oldsmobile, leaving him to coast across the line leaking vast quantities of oil and gasoline.

In the end, only 57 out of the 126 starters finished the race. The highest placed European car was an Alfa Romeo driven by Felice Bonetto that finished fourth, 26 minutes behind McGriff. And while a Delahaye driven by three-time Monte Carlo Rally winner, Jean Trevoux, had finished sixth, and another Alfa driven by Piero Taruffi had finished eighth, the conventional wisdom was that the finishing order, with an Oldsmobile and

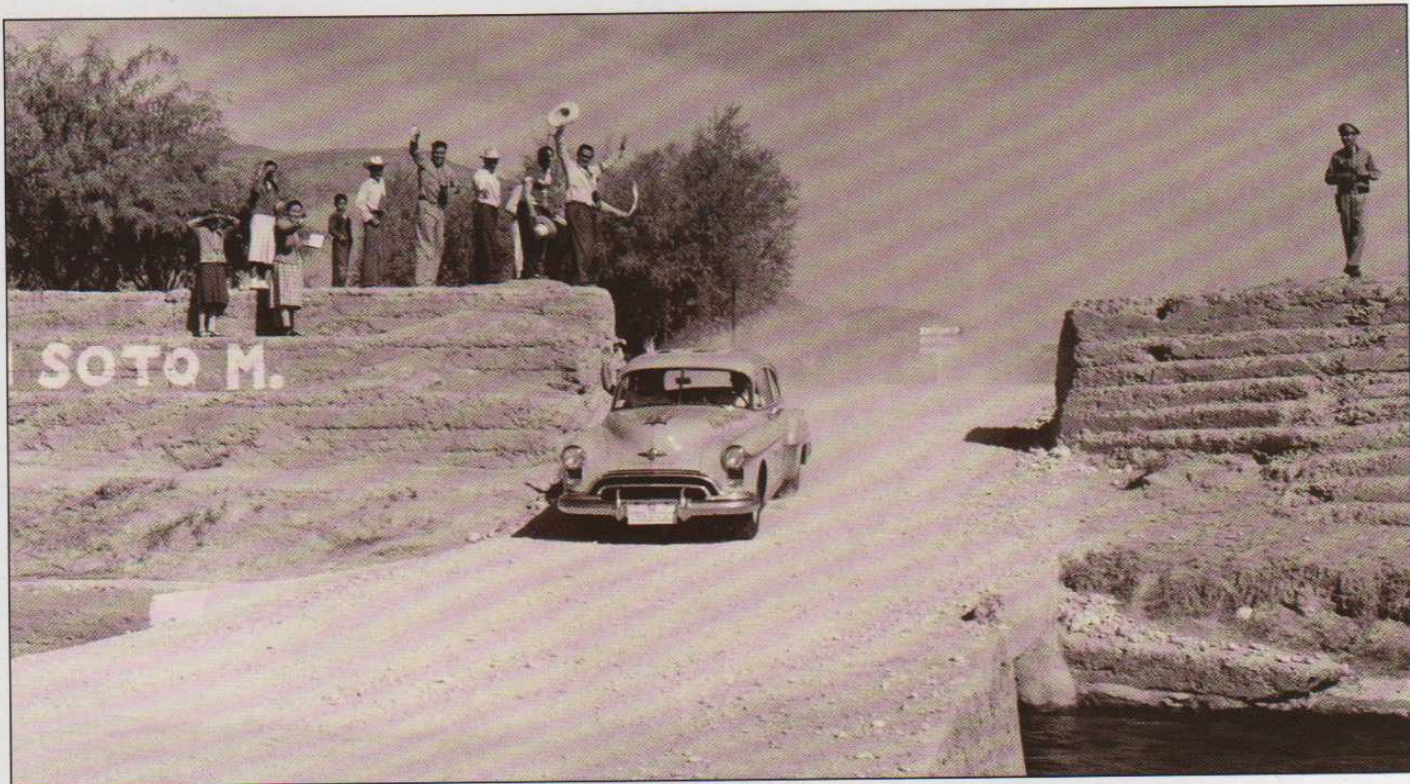


PHOTO JACK CANSLER/ISCNASCAR



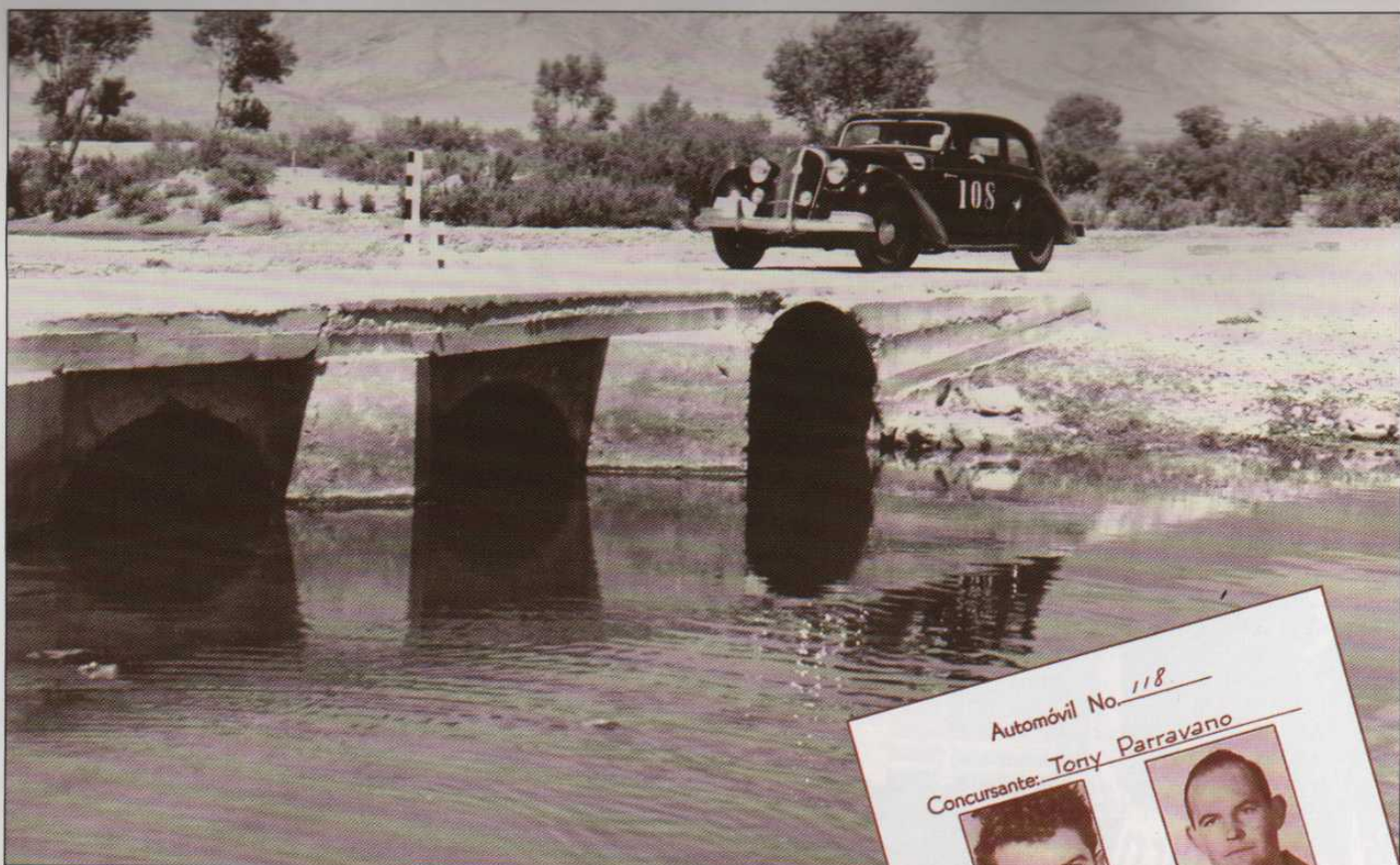
BRING ON THE PINATA

Above, left: All entrants were required to install official Carrera license plates. The color varied from year to year.

Left, middle: The 1950 race route took six days to complete.



Left: Race winner Hershel McGriff in his "City of Roses" Olds.

Top: Foster/Walker '47 Talbot Lago.
Right: Sterling/Arias '50 Cadillac.



Automóvil No. 118

Concursante: Tony Parravano

 Conductor <u>Jack Mc Afée</u> Nombre y apellidos	 acompañante <u>Ford Robinson</u> Nombre y apellidos
_____ Firma	_____ Firma

Marca del automóvil Cadillac

Motor No. 496185657

Placas No. 30A 3427

Expedidas por California

THE DUST AND THE GLORY

Top: A '38 Hotchkiss heads over one of the many bridge crossings. The race was open to any five-seat closed body passenger automobile.

Above: Every car carried a log book used for checking purposes throughout the event.

Left: Johnny Mantz' Lincoln screams past the crowd near El Ocotal.

Right: Tony Bettenhausen takes a break in Mexico City. His Chrysler was entered by Karl Keikhaefer.

two Cadillacs finishing first, second, and third, and American cars occupying seven of the first ten places, demonstrated the superiority of the heavy, big-engined American cars over their smaller, lighter European cousins. Certainly, as the racers reached the mountainous sections around Mexico City and to the south, the European cars had closed the gap, but the early lead built up by the leading American drivers on the long straight stretches of the north had simply proven too great to overcome. Clearly, American cars were fastest over American roads with their long straights and vast open spaces. European cars might be faster over a thousand miles of challenging roads in Italy, or on some country lanes in France, but they were no match for big American iron on real American highways, by God. As is so often the case with conventional wisdom, it would prove to be nonsense.

Was Success An Accident?

While in many ways the 1950 Carrera had been ripe for failure, a number of things conspired to make it a rousing success. First, and most important to the participants, the sizeable prize money was actually paid. Second, the crowds had been even beyond pre-race expectations, bringing in vital tourist dollars. Third, and possibly most important to its overall



survival, Life Magazine devoted three pages to coverage of the race. And while the photographs in Life were almost exclusively of crashes, including the race's only fatality, the magazine also trumpeted to the American public that, "American cars—originally rated below the flashy French and Italian autos—finished one, two, three." Thus the Carrera became a proving ground in the mind of the average American, a race that demonstrated beyond question the superiority of American cars and American know-how at a time when European cars were just beginning to infiltrate the American market.

Although La Carrera Panamericana had originally been organized as a one-time event, reaction to it was so positive that the *Asociacion Nacional Automovilistica* (ANA), the Mexican equivalent of the AAA, acting with the approval of the Mexican government,

decided to make it an annual affair. To remedy the problems faced in its initial running, the date of the race was moved from May to November, when racing seasons in the United States and Europe would be over; the troublesome, largely unpaved 170 mile leg between Tuxtla Gutierrez and El Ocotal was eliminated; and the race direction was reversed, now running from south to north with the finish virtually on the American border at Ciudad Juarez, just across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. By having the finish in Juarez, race officials also insured better press coverage. As now configured, the Carrera spanned 1933 miles and consisted of eight legs run over five days, with days two, three, and four featuring both morning and afternoon runs.

Unlike the year before, and in the hope that it would help to remedy the race's reputation as a car killer, substantial modification of the cars was permitted for Carrera II. Supercharging was forbidden, as was alteration of the camshaft, and the engine employed was required to be from the same manufacturer as the automobile itself, but otherwise virtually any modification was allowed. With such carte blanche, American racing teams rose to the occasion.

In the next issue, La Carrera continues with Part Two, the 1951-'52 events.—Ed. ●

PHOTO HECTOR GARCIA/COLLECTION OF DR. DAVID SCULLY

