

Viva La Carrera PanAmericana

By Dave Jenkins

In the early 1950s a wild road race was born. It was called the Mexican Road Race, or more properly, La Carrera Panamericana. It ran the length of Mexico, but should not be confused with the more recent Baja Run.

The first Pan American road race was run from Juarez (across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas) to the state capital of Chiapas, Tuxtla Gutierrez. 252 miles north of the Guatemala border.

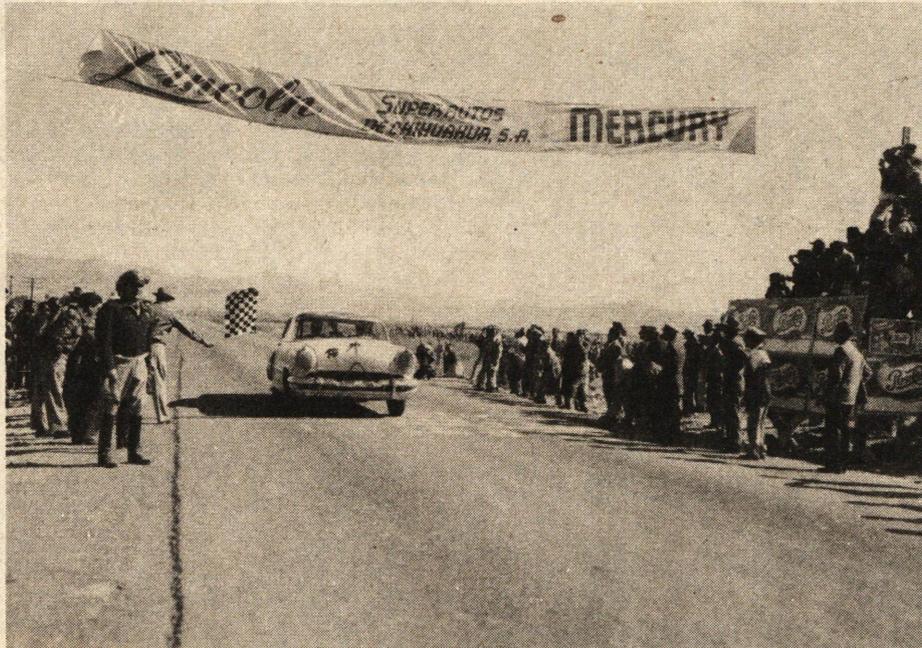
The Mexican section of the much heralded Pan American Highway had just been opened, and this was the route generally followed by the race.

The first event, run in November, 1950, started in the north and ended 2178 miles later in Tuxtla Gutierrez, with a number of overnight stopping points along the way. Herschel McGriff won in an Oldsmobile 88 with Tom Deal taking second place in a Cadillac. The race started with 132 cars; only 57 were running at the finish.

The following year the European factory teams were out for revenge. They aimed to show the world that American stockers were no match for Europe's finest sports cars. The course was shortened by 240 miles, and was reversed so that the finish line was just outside of Juarez at the northern terminus.

The Ferrari team came in first and second followed by a Chrysler, Mercury, Packard, Hudson, Cadillac and Lincoln, in that order.

The Lincoln that finished eighth in this second Pan American race was an entirely different car from its predecessors. It had an all new 317.5cid V8 (3.8" x 3.5") rated at 160hp at 3900rpm. Because it was an oversquare engine, piston speed was reduced 20% compared with the older



A Lincoln taking the checker is a rare sight these days, but in the early '50s it was common south of the border.

Lincoln flathead V8s. The '52 Lincoln could do an honest 100mph. Ball-joint front suspension was also new for '52, and proved to give the Lincolns very fine road holding for a car with a 123" wheelbase and an overall weight of 4630 pounds.

The 1952 race was changed again so the entries were split up into two different divisions—sports cars and standard touring cars. The only modifications allowed by the race committee were the use of heavy-duty equipment or "export kits" which had to be available to the general public from any local dealer in the United States. There were factory team entries as

well as cars entered by dealers and individuals.

The new '53 Lincolns, just introduced a few weeks before the 1952 race, were much stronger running cars than the '52 models. Four barrel carburetion, higher (8.0:1) compression ratio, larger valves and improved manifolding helped boost the horsepower from 160 to 205. This gave the '53 Lincolns the capability of 127mph, and on the straight stretches they could cruise well above 110mph for hours.

The 1952 race set a blistering pace for all serious contenders. The course ran from a point near sea level at Tehuantepec up through mountain passes south of Mexico City, over 10,000 feet elevation.

Two factory-entered Mercedes-Benz 300SL gull wing coupes won the sports car division with overall average speeds of just over 100mph. The Lincolns swept the stock car division with Chuck Stevenson first, Johnny Mantz second, Walt Faulkner third and Bob Korf in fourth position. Stevenson and Mantz crossed the finish line about a minute apart after nearly 2000 miles of racing! Possibly even more remarkable was that the Lincolns had averaged just about 10mph under the average for the winning Mercedes-Benz for the entire race.

The obvious strength of these Lincolns was their ability to maintain high average speeds on the tight curving mountain roads and then still hold together when they were pushed flat out over the straight, hot desert run up from Chihuahua to Juarez. These Lincolns had great staying power.

Unquestionably, this remarkable win in the 1952 Mexican Road Race did a lot to help bolster Lincoln's sales during the 1953 model year. The 1953 Lincoln was an outstanding car, and it had the racing record to back up its sales claims.

The fourth running of the Pan American Road Race in November, 1953, attracted more attention than ever. The course was again altered, cutting 40 miles off the total distance by bypassing a few towns. There now were four separate divisions: heavy sports cars, heavy stock cars, light

sports cars, and light stock cars. The Lincoln entries were of course in the second category.

The '54 Lincolns which were prepared and entered in the 1953 running were basically similar, at least in size and looks, to the Lincolns that competed in the 1951 and 1952 events. The two major differences were that the cars packed considerably more horsepower and were supported by really experienced pit crew teamwork at each of the overnight stops.

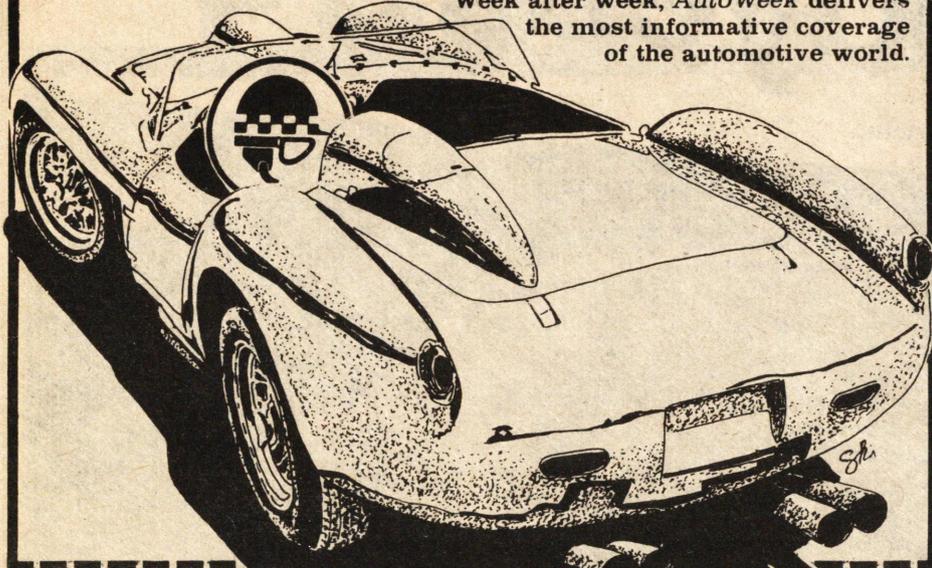
Lincoln was able to pull off another sweeping win the following year by almost exactly duplicating its performance in the '52 race. The cars crossed the Juarez finish line with Chuck Stevenson first, Walt Faulkner second, McGrath third, and Mantz fourth. Lincoln was the undisputed champion for yet another year.

The Pan American was run once again in 1954, and the new Lincolns were still able to hold their own against the best anyone else could field in their division. While not quite as spectacular a win as those in the two previous years, Ray Crawford crossed the finish line first with Walt Faulkner right on his rear bumper in another Lincoln. Third place went to Keith Andrews in a Cadillac who came in a little more than a minute behind Faulkner. Another Cadillac finished in fourth place. Out of seven Lincolns entered in this race, only the two winning cars completed the run.

Several drivers and co-drivers were killed in the '54 race as well as a half a dozen spectators along the way. Crowd control was fairly good, but with spectators spread out over the entire length of the course it was impossible to patrol the race the way it can be handled on a closed circuit. At about the same time, the tragic accident at Le Mans, where a Mercedes went through the fence and over a wall

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3rd straight victory! LINCOLN WINS AGAIN



in Mexican Pan-American Road Race
... stock car competition

A far cry from today: Lincoln featured its victories heavily in its advertising.

killing over a hundred onlookers, helped fan public outrage against road racing.

There was a lot of talk about a sixth Pan American Road Race to be scheduled for the fall of 1955, but as the date approached it became obvious that there wouldn't be a sixth Carrera Panamericana, and this exciting race became history.

From Lincoln's point of view, it was probably just as well. While the '56 Lincolns were handsome cars, they were too big and too softly sprung. It is doubtful that the Lincolns of the second half of the 1950's could have held the competitive edge enjoyed by the Lincolns of 1952 through 1955.

The Pan American road races were a harsh test of men and automobiles. The cars had to hold together for more than 1800 miles of punishing roads from sea level to mountain passes two miles high. The road passed through rain forests and long stretches of desert which can be a test for a car at simple touring speeds, let alone flat out driving—but these were the years of Lincoln's racing glory.

Congratulations and Thanks to Didir Pironi, Jean-Pierre Jausaud in their Renault for winning the 24 Hours of LeMans on



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