

Mexican Road Race

“Carrea Panamerica” means “Mexican Road Race” in Spanish. I don’t know who dreamt this deal up, but if it had a main sponsor, it should have been the morticians of Mexico. Marshall Teague wanted to run a Hornet in the ’52 race. Hudson says, “Yeah, we like that...here’s ’bout 5,000 dollars...go tear ’em up!” We got three Hornets: a race car, a tow car, and another Hornet to pull a two wheel supply trailer. In the race it’s Marshall and co-driver Les Snow. Les is a driver, and a pretty good one, from some rough suburb of Chicago...a nice guy. Also a damn good mechanic in general, though not an engine ace. One guy on the crew was from Marshall’s gas station, Harry Van Driel. Harry was a damn good general mechanic and is still around. If I missed someone, I apologize.

We got ’bout 50 bucks a week and expenses. Some motor companies spent a fortune to try and win. Lincoln-Mercury were big spenders, with maybe the greatest mechanic that ever lived, Clay Smith as their

main man. Watching Clay’s behavior, and absorbing his preparation...it was a treat to watch one of our peers show you how it should be done: so perfectly and with seemingly effortless execution. Clay Smith was a genius. Probably the greatest so-called “racing mechanic” in the world at the time. But none of his ability impressed me as much as his helping his competitors with advice, and sometimes materials and tools. I’d watch him at 1:00 am, knowing he was as tired as I was, in the garage where we were preparing the cars for tomorrow’s run. He would go help a competitor fix his carburetor so it wouldn’t flood. True, the Lincoln budget was light years ahead of us, but he still had time for anyone who asked him for help. He did this in boats, Indy cars, midgets and stock cars. He even ground his own cam shafts. I think his 1st year to Indy, his car sat on the pole with a rookie driver, Walt Faulkner. In three point hydro in both classes...(racing boats) we run Ford 60s and Ford 85s...this was in the

early 50s...I worked my ass off to beat him. Next week he'd come back and beat us again. The sad thing really is, to this day, racing has never come close to recognizing his contribution to helping build the foundation U.S. auto racing sits on. You know what really makes Clay Smith story so sad? He was killed at a way early age by his own race car. A sprinter that lost control coming off turn 2, and got in the pits and "nailed" him. The driver was one of Clay's best buddies.

Back to the race. There are a thousand stories 'bout the Mexican Road Race. Hell, in 1950 Bill France, Sr. and Curtis Turner co-drove an "upside-down bathtub" (Nash) in the race. Well, we drive down through Matamoros (Brownsville, Texas). We have been told all kinds of horror stories 'bout the bad roads soon as you enter Mexico...(cept the Pan American' hi-way to El Paso). I'm driving one Hornet, towing the race car. We cross over into Mexico and hell, it's a good paved three lanes...for three miles.

Turn a corner...Bam!... running 60 and the asphalt stops no, one lane dirt... wrong road? turn around? down a little hill... hard turn... pow!! Wheeeeeee!!...river...no bridge... whoooooe... goddam near drove 'er in a small river. The river's got a flat deck barge, but river is way up from too much rain, (yet when we crossed the Rio Grande in Brownsville, it was damn near bone dry)... river's too wild... can't cross. Turns out five bucks gets river crossable (barely). Really, that was a very

hazardous crossing. We could have lost everything we had. A single cable keeps barge from getting out of hand and you pull yourself across with rope-hand-power. Well we manage the skinny, rough roads until we find the Pan American hi-way to Mexico City. (From there to Mexico City, roads good...very good) Mexico City...everything's same as today I think, 'cept then it was 90 percent smaller. Traffic rules are Russian roulette, kinda "don't let the other guy see your eyeballs." It's actually a game of "chicken." There were no traffic lights there. A very loud horn was best driving aid.

In Mexico City we work on car at the Hudson dealership. We can't speak Spanish, but the dealer's got a 15 or 16 year old son. A real nice guy and helper. He's going with us as our interpreter. (Good idea as it turned out.) Gotta have a place to stay for five days. Taxi driver says "Go to Angel's, best place in town" Angel's is a big house, 15 bucks a day for room and three meals...free booze part of rent...free hookers and dirty movies all day and night...all for 15 bucks a day. Yes, it was all good... for a dose of the crabs...quite an interesting place.

The owner took a liking to our driver. I observed her giving oral sex to him with a condom on. That puzzled and amused me. Actually... Les Snow, the co-driver, brought it to my attention... it was as interesting, I think, as the discovery I had made a few minutes earlier. After Les guided me to the room where our landlady was attempting to



Effective Mexican Army crowd control.

relax the driver, I then showed him my startling discovery. Remember I said “whiskey no charge?” Well if a tenant had sex with a waitress or bartender, an old lady would come in room after, and

wash your sex parts with whiskey. Makes sense right? Well, on the second day I notice a door and I wonder “where does that go?” So I open door and am startled to see an old lady pouring whiskey out

of wash basins into a funnel stuck into a whiskey bottle. I realize "Hey! That's what we were drinking"... (No wonder it had an unusual flavor) We soon solved that problem. We were able to buy a quart of good whiskey for 'bout three bucks.

I will always have a fond spot in my heart for Angel's place. Those young ladies actually taught me some things that the Californian's hadn't got to yet...(the deal with the beads in particular). Although that deal actually had a few draw backs – I got no rest at all. I told you about acquiring a group of annoying passengers in an area you see baseball players scratch all the time. Every time I see it on TV, I smile and say "wonder if they been to Angel's?" Piggins had made arrangements for us to stay in a private home in Mexico City, so when Les and I turned in our expenses (5 days, \$75 as medical expenses for the "Inca flu"). Piggins disallowed the expenses. I guess he was pissed we didn't invite him over there.

I'm really grateful to Marshall for including me in the race. It was an experience. When Marshall first invited me, I understood I was gonna be a co-driver. Now co-drivers never drove. They just sat in right side of front seat and hollered..."Watch it!"..."Slow down!"..."Turn right you dumb shit or you'll never make it!"..."Whoo-ee!"..."Oh-shit!"...or when you passed someone in your class, give 'em the finger. But when the time came, Les got the co-driver job. The race was run on a new paved road (two lane) that run from El Paso in the

United States to Tuxtla, at southern end of Mexico at beginning of Central America. One-half mile south of town, road went to jungle... not even dirt road. The Pan American hi-way race was 1,934 miles long in 1952 we ran it in five days: 1st leg: Tuxtla to Oaxaca; 2nd leg: Oaxaca to Puebla; 3rd leg: Puebla to Mexico City; 4th leg: Mexico City to Leon, 5th leg: Leon to Durango; 6th leg: Durango to Porral; 7th leg: Porral to Chihuahua; 8th leg: Chihuahua to Juarez. The race was a mountain road race, on a typical mountain...sharp turns... always either gaining or losing altitude...with no goddam guard rails and plenty of 5,000 foot straight down drops in case you slid off. Damn rite, somebody got wiped out 'bout every day... and sometimes spectators...actually, 26 people (mostly spectators) died in five years.

I left out something regarding Mexican culture and law. Radios and guns...it was not legal to have a radio capable of any distance to speak of...so getting car in country with radio was a son-of-a-bitch...and if that radio was gone when you tried to leave country...that was hell. So guess what would get stolen quicker than a cat could lick it's ass? Right...the radio. I took radio out, and antenna off, and hid them in with spare parts. Guns? gave 'em away in Brownsville coming in when I heard how that worked. More about guns later.

Now the little town where race started, is at the southern very end of Mexico. This is mountain... dry, poor, old-old town, but they had a Ford deal-

ership there that was one half block square (inside). This dealership had a huge parts department. Very few cars, new or used...but at least one of every kind of tool to work on Fords, Lincolns and Mercurys made in the world, and take my word for it, them cats knew how to use 'em. They had some uncanny metal, or body men...threw away damn near nothing...straightened everything...like big Cadillac bumperette...How? Split 'em in four pieces... straightened each piece, then welded back together. They had a chrome plating facility that amazed me. The Mexican state troopers all run Mercurys. A wild bunch...you haven't lived until you get on latin country roads, including cities. No traffic lights, big-assed loud horns, and the code of the hills is "big is better"...so 100,000 pound tractor and trailer double, owned the road. (Yes, they had them...pulled by French tractors where 15 year old kids rode on both front fenders and hand oiled the valve gear... huge engines, diesel, 'bout 1,000 cubic inches.) For some reason these Latino truckers ride in the middle of a two lane hi-crown road and drive like a "bat out of hell." I swear, when they wind down out of the mountains and hit a town, they add 30 miles per hour and blow the horn like a freight train going through Fayetteville. Most Latinos can't drive worth a shit, but some of them cats with a little experience and good equipment, can race any son-of-a-bitch in the world.

Back to the Carrera Panamerica. OK... Here's

how it works. Race starts around 6:00 or 7:00 am in morning (first daylight)...cars are flagged off a couple minutes apart... 'bout 10 classes, so "hot dogs" go first. Idea is to keep "hot dogs" from wading through "slow stuff." This is a real road course – no fences or guard rails either. The way they kept people and animals back, or kept regular cars off the road was to station soldiers within sight distance of each other on alternating sides of the road. (By the way, they drive on same side of the road we do.) It's a simple deal...in the race hours the road's closed. If an animal or human attempts to cross during the forbidden hours, the soldier shoots your ass "to kill." The race I was in, a young man right on outskirts of Tuxtla, crossed the road...soldier shot and killed him. A friend of mine, (well actually a friend of any racer), Don O'Reilly, had a magazine called "Speed Age" and witnessed this deal. He like to went "ape-shit" over it. I seen him a few months ago at his house, and we talked about the killing.

OK...pit crew: at the end of every "leg" you got lots of things to fix. (Reference: sliding off the road, tires, broken engine) so the pit crew gets cars ready to race, then you drive your ass off all night to get to next check-point, cause if you don't make it by "road closing," it's over for that team. Well, "we" (the Hudson team) are the Mexican Hudson dealer's son, Marshall's mechanic/employee, hi-buck 10-dollar-a-day-man Harry Van Driel and myself. The back of car is full of parts and tools,

and we are pulling a two wheel trailer loaded with tires, parts and fuel. We had to carry everything we needed. At that time in Mexico, a gas station was a collection of 50 gallon drums along the road at a house. You stop...toot your horn and maybe. We all ride in front seat...either Harry or I drive. Let's call the son, ('bout 15) José OK? (I forgot his real name, sorry.). José is our interpreter, and a damn good one. Can speak English super...we have to really haul ass to get to next race checkpoint. First night, just 'bout midnight on Isthmus of Tojuanapac Road on the only straight level ground in whole race, ('bout sea level), all of a sudden... road block (with driftwood)! I'm asleep...car is lurching...tires screeching...horn blowing...guns going off. Harry, the dumb shit has decided to run through the road block, running 'bout 90, with the trailer flying all over hell behind. As I look in rear view mirror, I see what looks like career-ending flying experiment of a Mexican highway bandito. The trailer catches him, and he gets a trampoline type launch from the swinging trailer. I think "Harry can file at least one notch on side of the steering wheel"...(but probably two)...or we can paint something on side of car (kinda' like fighter planes did in war for a shot down enemy) ...well nothing broke.

Next night Harry's driving again, I'm opposite side...José in middle. Hear brakes, then downshift and wide-ass open engine. José's hollerin' "Stop!!!"...I look up... horses lined up across road,

and up each bank...'bout 20 of 'em...all got rifles, and they are coming down. Twenty rifles are aimed at the windshield. I reach over, turn key off. Harry gets 'er whoa'ed 'bout five feet from the end of twenty rifle gun barrels. The boss-man is 'bout five foot four tall by five foot four around; got glasses and a mustache; got a "general" kinda hat with a strap to hold it on when his horse is going real fast. I can't understand him, but he is pissed! And Jose is talking his little diplomatic ass off to keep Harry from being turned into a very dead gringo son-of-a-bitch. (You know Harry, I doubt you have any idea how close you came to having a rock sitting in a cemetery, where the last thing on it said "1952.") Well 'bout nine-ten bucks was cost of "permission" to continue on our mission to next check-point at Oaxaca... You'd think by now I'd get thinking and put Harry's ass in the trailer and drive myself. Nope, I need some rest...ain't no way in hell it's gonna happen again rite?...so I doze off. Now we're in bad very-very twisty mountains, 'bout 4:00 am, Getting close to check point – one to one and a half hours out. Car's slowing... I hear José raising hell with Harry. I wake up...we are damn near stopped, going up real steep hill. I see 'bout 20 Mexicans...rocks across the road. One cat had a pistol...'bout 10 with machetes. Whoa Nellie! I wind window down...I'm opposite Harry, Jose in middle. Mr. Bandito is shit-faced drunk... Got a pistol with 'bout an 18 inch barrel, and he sticks it in my right ear. Harry don't see the pistol, and as

men move around in front of car, and José tries to negotiate a peaceful arrangement which will let us continue to Oaxaca without any leaks in our blood carrying equipment, (engine's still running). I hear Harry say "I'm gonna floor it and take off – road is clear now." I say, "Harry, before you do, check over here and see what's sticking in my right ear and note the drunken and unhappy attitude of the cat that's holding it." Well 'bout two quarts of wine (a departure present from the ladies at Angel's), about three or four bucks and one five gallon can of gas cured that deal. We get to Oaxaca an hour before road closure, so I decide to notify authorities about our terrible experiences. (Get the cops in the deal.) José says, "I don't think so"...I say, "Bullshit," so we go. It ain't far. Still dark as hell. As I walk into station I damn near have a heart attack. There sits Mr. Five Foot Four's twin brother (the horse bandit)...even the same clothes – boots and hat. I know it's impossible for it to be the same man...no vehicle passed us all night. Or was it the same man?...maybe there's another road? Anyway, José explains whole terrible deal. Mr. Mexican general rolls to the side, lets out a big fart, and eats José's ass out, and tells us "get our ass over to check-point garage and keep our damn mouths shut, or our ass is in jail." "OK, OK"...I've heard 'bout Mexican jails, and we ain't hurt. "Come to think about it, maybe it never happened...maybe I dreamt it' we got our stuff out to do our work, but still got to wait four or five

hours. An American tourist...(big trout fisherman...fly rod champion of the world I think) is a Hudson Hornet lover, matter of fact, has a year old Hornet right outside. He can't go till race cars come and go (remember the system..."road closed to public and animals for a time?") He tells me about Mexican's trying to hold him up. He was fishing some place to our west, and came onto the Pan American highway 'bout 20 miles before "Mr. Long barrel pistol." They set up a road block with small rocks. He got scared and pulled a "Harry Van Driel, and run the road block. I said "Did they shoot at you?...Did it hurt your car?" "Hell no!...I'm a good driver!...I then notice a dark puddle under the engine, and a wet looking place at rear of the car, so I get a light and get close... You guessed it: oil and gas leaking. Turned out "Mr. Good Hudson driver" had 'bout no oil in oil pan (a rock from road block caused oil pan to flunk the "hit a rock with the oil pan at 60 miles per hour test") and "Mr. Very Lucky Champion Fly Fisherman Hudson-loving Good Driver-lucky Son-of-a-bitch, only had 22, yup...22 bullet holes in back of his "lucky black Hornet." Well "Lucky" decided he wanted to talk to the American ambassador to Mexico...said he knew him (maybe he gave him a free fish) about this outrage. So I directed him to the military headquarters and "General Fat-ass." I don't know what happened, but we left 'bout four hours later, and the "lucky black trout fishin' Hornet" with 22 bullet holes in it was still

sittin' there, and the puddle of oil under engine was 'bout two foot in diameter. If your still living "Mr. Champion Fisherman," I'd appreciate a note from you telling me how that deal ended. From there on, I never got to meet any more Mexican bandits, but I kinda' have a little idea how those people felt when they were on the stage coaches and they were attacked and robbed. I guess it's tougher the way we had it, cause only José knew what the bad guy was saying. (You know, Harry might have been a stage coach driver in a previous life.)

Another thing I haven't mentioned was the goofy spectators. Wherever anybody run off the road and got killed last year, that's where there would be 4,000 people – rite up to the edge of the road, and as a rule on the outside of turns. Then in Mexico City, you're coming in straight...running over a hundred...you've been off the road three or four times front and back. (What's the tires look like?). There's damn near a million people lined up for four or five miles with their toes on edge of asphalt, and your going by 'em at over 100, rubbing your left and right door handles against their tits. What if a tire lets go? Those in back shoved those in front, and they couldn't back up. No, it never happened...maybe courtesy of the Inca gods...but in general, few races in the world extracted an unacceptable high cost in lives, sheet time, and inconvenience to the citizens as the Mexican road race. The same thing, reference

crowds, happened coming into Juarez at end of the race.

Clay Smith and his Lincolns, and Bill Stroppe and his Mercurys dominated those races. Marshall and Les did pretty good. I think they ran from fifth, and I believe ended up seventh in stock car class and thirteenth overall. The whole deal took 'bout 22 hours racing time. Hershel McGriff, from Portland Oregon, won the first race which changed his life forever. I remember the car. An Olds 88, with a clever sign on it from Portland, Oregon "For You in Portland, a Rose Grows"... Who in the hell ever heard of a sponsor who sold roses in early '50s? Hershel I guess is still going... He turned out to be very good, and last I heard was 'bout 70, and still winning.

The Mexican Road Race was a wild chapter in American racing's early experiments while trying to find it's way, or to find a place where those who loved to go fast went to hear those loud, tortured engines. The hope was to establish a least an annual event that could fund the competitors sufficiently so that they could do it one more time next year. There are attempts to re-establish parts of that exciting time...but men, you missed the boat. It has come, and it has gone...like the Pony Express.

Mercedes won the race with a gull-wing coupe, with, I believe, a German driver (in 1952). John Fitch, a yankee American driver, was at his prime, and really doing the best job...but poor John got

screwed by the Germans. They wanted a German driver to win, and as I remember, they had four or five cars in the race. At race end, Fitch gets disqualified cause he can't curse in German, and Karl Kling, a German race hero got the marbles. The Mexican Road Race ran many classes...from the fastest sports cars in the world to stock car to little shit-box sports cars with 'bout 100 horsepower at 8,000 rpm. So this race was between Mercedes and Ferrari. I guess the four things I remember most were: Number One – Angel's guest accommodations. Number Two – watching and working with Clay Smith. In my book Clay, you're "#1" by a ton. Number Three – The pit action of Ferrari and Mercedes...particularly the Germans: they performed as an army exhibition marching team, like robots with human minds. Watching John Fitch die a million deaths trying to get his car repaired (he developed brake trouble) But the real act was Ferrari.

No Keystone Cop movie can ever match the act those 20 "dago" mechanics, drivers and staff, put on at every pit stop. They were poorly equipped in all ways but bodies. At mid-point of a day's running, you have to fuel – change tires – and as a rule, change drivers...(Only the hottest sports cars had professional sports car drivers). Remember all these had co-drivers...(Some dumb shit who strapped his ass down in right hand seat, or left hand, as case might be) to yell at driver his observations, opinions, advice and/or criticism.

Driving a race car is, as a rule, fun. But be a passenger in a fast car with a great driver, or even worse, with some terrible driver with tons of money and the balls of an elephant...and do this five to 10 hours a day for four or five days. As far as I'm concerned, is like sitting in an electric chair for that amount of time waiting on them to fix a problem in the system so they can fry your ass. Well the drivers jump out, after sliding a quarter of a mile, and ending up running over their pit set-up. Why?...he is headed for the shit house...remember he's on 'bout on his fifth day of Mexican food. During a Carrera Panamerica stop, besides changing tires, (and fueling in case of sports cars), you had to for sure replace brake pads, and fix or "band-aid" whatever else is "not doing it." The Ferrari tire changers best act was to drop car without the wheel on yet...or put front tire on rear, or vise-versa. The fuelers, (with cans), dumping gas all over everybody and everything...and sometimes catch car on fire on re-start. The "soakers" getting smacked by the "soak-ee's" and the "soak-ee" attempting to dump gas on "soaker" to get even. But by far the best act was the water boys. They used garden water cans, (like your grandmother used to water her garden...with built in funnel...held 'bout a gallon and a half). The Ferraris run hot...so as tires, fuel and brake pad were being done, two to four guys open hood and start dumping water on radiator and into radiator. In the process, the brake pad, and/or tire guy, gets

an unexpected bath, which pisses him off...so he jumps up, grabs the bucket and dumps it on radiator man, or the contest is even, and two guys are in a "bucket pulling contest," during which, driver accidentally gets a bucket of water down his helmet and back. Now mix in 'bout five officials, who don't know what the hell they're doing either, and Ferrari staff and race brass get into it...so now you got a mixture of Italian-Spanish, and maybe some English, French and German...cursing and lots of pushing and pulling...rule books, pit boards, and "motherfucker" in three to four languages. In addition to this, is a hoard of aficionados: ex-racers, wannabe racers, rich fans, about ten "Miss Italy's," and the news media (no TV yet). Every once in awhile throw in a Mexican policeman and farmer... (Wantin' to get paid, or "put your ass in jail" for a cow, donkey, pet or chickens you ran over last year.) And in Pueblo, a teen-age young lady with 'bout a three month old baby. Seems like a driver last year left some of his seeds with the little lady, and she wanted to talk to that driver about marriage, and a home in Italy...and it seemed like her father and brother had a different plan. They wanted to kill the son of a bitch. (This was in Ferrari pit.) Since big sports cars started first, and run fastest, we got to watch the deal from best seats before our cars came in. Number Four – the Mexican hi-way banditos, and their version on how to run a toll-road without any investment in

it. Maybe Number Five could have been the "Inca trot," caused by not being cursed by it in Mexico City at Angel's, and my assumption "I can drink the water and eat the vegetables...it don't bother me." I left a trail from Tuxtla to El Paso, and back into Florida...but it helped in later life, during the early sixties in my adventures in the jungle oil fields and gold mines in the Ecuadorian Oriente, I did not challenge the local medical wisdom of how to avoid the "toilet paper boogie."

Racing needed this five days of stupidity to guide us...but we didn't know it was a mistake until we did it...though it sure was a shame so many died. Actually, considering the scope of the race, the management did a hell of a job when you think of all the details of such an event. For those who would re-create this race today...some advice: just assemble all drivers in an auditorium and play Russian roulette instead. This spares the people who live on the race's proposed route the loss of several days of their lives, and the almost sure loss of several lives. Racing has "been there and done that." I learned one sentence "besame culo" in Spanish...(means "kiss my ass) and two Spanish words: "Adios" and "gracias."

"Adios" Carrera Panamerica... and "gracias."

