

## La Carrera Panamericana 2004 - The Great Mexican Road Race

by Gentry Zentmeyer

### CHALLENGE MET!

The cow that almost killed us looked like an ordinary brown cow. It stood awkwardly on the mountain bank beside the curve in the road. As we rounded the curve at speed, it LEAPT into the middle of the road, directly in our path. Smoke poured off the tires as we flat-spotted all four and aimed at the edge of the road, only blue sky to be seen over the cliff. Only a miracle kept us from hitting the cow or going over the edge. Strangely, the cow didn't seem nearly as panicked as we did. Who knew cows could jump?

This is how we were welcomed to the 2004 edition of "La Carrera Panamericana," or what's more commonly known as the "Great Mexican Road Race." The race runs almost 2,000 miles from the jungle at sea level near Guatemala, through the mountains up to 9,000 feet elevation through Oaxaca and Mexico City, and ending back near sea level at Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, near the Texas border-town of Laredo.

A brutal week-long race that was initiated to celebrate the completion of Mexico's Panamerican Highway, the race was run between 1950 and 1954 before shutting down because of the number of lives the race claimed. The race reopened in 1988 with several new rules to make it less deadly. The race attracts



drivers from around the world, especially Europe, in what are mostly modified cars built between 1940 and 1954. A new "Historic" class brings the final year up to 1965 and adds more fun and variety.

Before I tell you about this crazy race, I want to mention that we decided to build a Studebaker because of its light weight and aerodynamic advantage. What I didn't know was how hard we'd have to drive it and how punishing it would be to the drivetrain. I really can't believe we didn't blow it up! We practically ran the engine wide open and at around 5,000 rpm for a week! What type of engine will take such a beating? Dave Thibeault built our racing engine and he obviously did a tremendous job. The car had gobs of power and we were clocked in one of the speed stages at 128 mph. Jeez, that is flying! Raymond Loewy never thought this car would go this fast or he'd have realized the windshield wiper arms lift off the windshield and float 6" from the glass at this speed! Not good in the rain.

Each competitor receives a route book showing every turn in the race stages and also the severity of the turn. You might see an arrow pointing to the left with a "1" beside it. This means "1 to the left, followed, say, by a 3 to the right. There also may be the word "RAVINE"

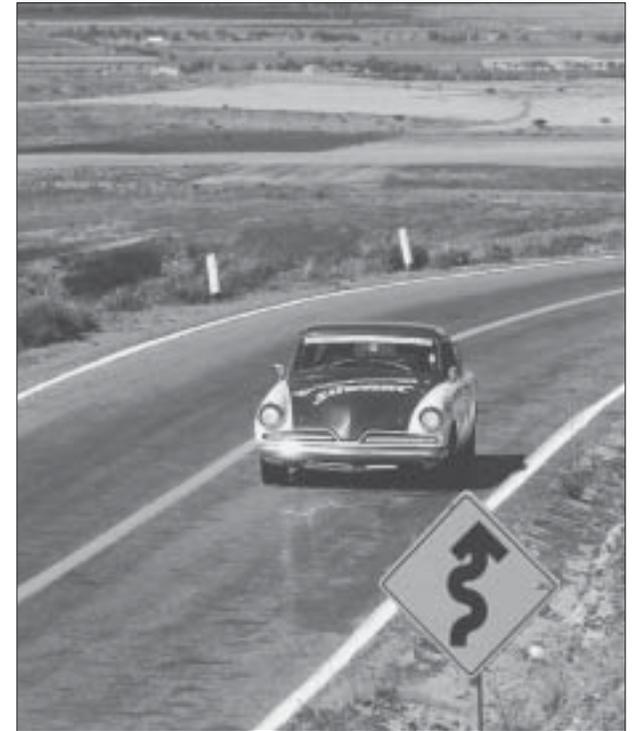


Photo by Jim Muise (texasdrivermagazine.com)

listed beside one of these curves. Somehow I think something was lost in the translation from Spanish to English because these aren't ravines, they're CLIFFS! There are practically no guardrails on any corners in Mexico. If you notice a corner with a guardrail, WATCH OUT! It is one bad corner.

We eventually settled into a pattern of being in the cockpit from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. as we averaged about 300 miles per day, completing daily stages where drivers attended nightly race meetings before working on their cars and resting up for the next day.

There were several terrible accidents but no one was killed this year. The worst accident happened to some new friends in an old BMW when they went over a cliff. They were saved when they hit a tree head-on at about 60 mph. It pushed the engine into the passenger compartment and crumpled the roll cage like a pretzel. They



were in a Mexican hospital for three days, one with memory loss and both with concussion. We met up with them later, both had neck braces and both eyes swollen shut. Not good.

One time we came around a corner in a race stage and found another '53 Studebaker smack dab in the middle of the road after it hit the mountain and rolled four times. Absolutely torn all to pieces. Glass blown out all over the road. I don't know how we missed him. Steel Tech Solutions provided one of the largest disc brake kits I've ever seen and it kept us from hitting cows, rocks, and Studebakers in the road! The car stopped so fast we once lost our chewing gum!

We often rounded corners and found four skid marks going off the cliff. We didn't stop. We had been told not

to. I hope they were okay. Other surprises included mountain slides covering half the road, rocks the size of cereal bowls all over the road, streams crossing the road, cows in the road. These were all in race stages where we were running wide open. You're really on your own in Mexico.

The race is divided into two separate units: transit stages and race stages. You have to travel some distance (transit) to get to the race stages, often racing five or six times a day. Our biggest surprise was finding out that we had to run the transit stages practically wide open. We'd find we needed to be, say, 200 kilometers away (about 120 miles) in 90 minutes. We'd run the heck out of the car at 110-115 mph over public two-lane roads and get to the stage with four minutes to spare.

On two lane roads in Mexico, they have an extra two feet of pavement off the side of the road. When you come up behind a truck, he'll just move over to the right to make room for you. If a truck is also coming at you, he'll move over to his right too. You pass in the middle. The middle of the road! Lay on the horn and pass. After a couple days you get used to this and start passing everyone over blind hills, around curves. Doesn't matter. This is how we passed everyone for two weeks. Running as fast as we could, passing in the 'middle' lane. . . I don't know how we didn't kill the car.

We also found we had diplomatic immunity, or at least if felt that way. Red light? Lay on the horn, drive through it and wave at the cops. They waved back. We passed cars on the left, on the shoulder, in oncoming





lanes. Lay on the horn and wave. Everyone waves back. Imagine how you'd drive if you were being pursued by the police. This is what we did. This is what we had to do to keep up – the cars in the faster classes ran much faster than us; that is just part of the race. The Mexicans are very proud of their race and apparently let the racers do what they want or need to do. Absolutely no rules. Only in Mexico could this happen.

We once came up on a Federale (Mexican Highway Patrol) while we were running about a hundred. He sped up to 110 and turned on his lights and sirens. I guess he felt we needed an escort.

On a long transit stage we had a big Lincoln overtake us at about 110. We sped up and followed him. He obviously decided we'd followed him long enough so he opened it wide open and ran up to 125 mph. We stayed right on his tail. We only had two or three miles per hour left in the car and Chip, who was driving, wanted to pass him. "No," I said, "Don't show him what we've got! Let him think about it!" I bet we ran this speed for thirty miles. Incredible! Later that evening we found the big Lincoln on his trailer chained down. Scratch one Lincoln. He was finished.

I could go on and on, but the one thing I'll never forget is trying to drive home from the airport in Raleigh. How in the world can all these people drive so slow? So we passed them in the middle lane. Their reaction was somewhat unexpected. Some habits are hard to change!!

We have a new-found appreciation for Studebakers – what kind of car, even a new car, could do what we did and survive? The Studebaker aftermarket parts industry was just fantastic too. Everyone was willing to help and very gracious with information and products to help us build our "Carrera Killer." Our sponsors helped us build a tremendous car, a car that handles and stops exceptionally well and also had more power than most people will ever need.

Speaking of the car. Did I mention that we finished second in our class and twenty-second overall out of about eighty cars? This is unheard of, especially for first-timers. Our car would easily run and handle as well as most of the other cars and was extremely reliable. This was the main reason we did so well. Although we overheated the car once, on the last day, we made and finished every race stage. We also won a trophy, usually a second place trophy every night for being one of the top three "fastest time of the day" cars in our class.

We had a tremendous time in a wonderful country with some of the nicest people we've ever met. It was a life-changing event and something we'd wanted to do since we were young. We will never forget it!

Viva la Mexico!

Viva la Carrera Panamericana!

Oh, next? We're thinking of repowering the car, maybe installing a turbocharger on a 259 and taking it to the Bonneville Salt Flats this August. We've found an

obscure record that we think we can. . . here we go again! Anybody want to go? Hey, at least there aren't any cows in the road!

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