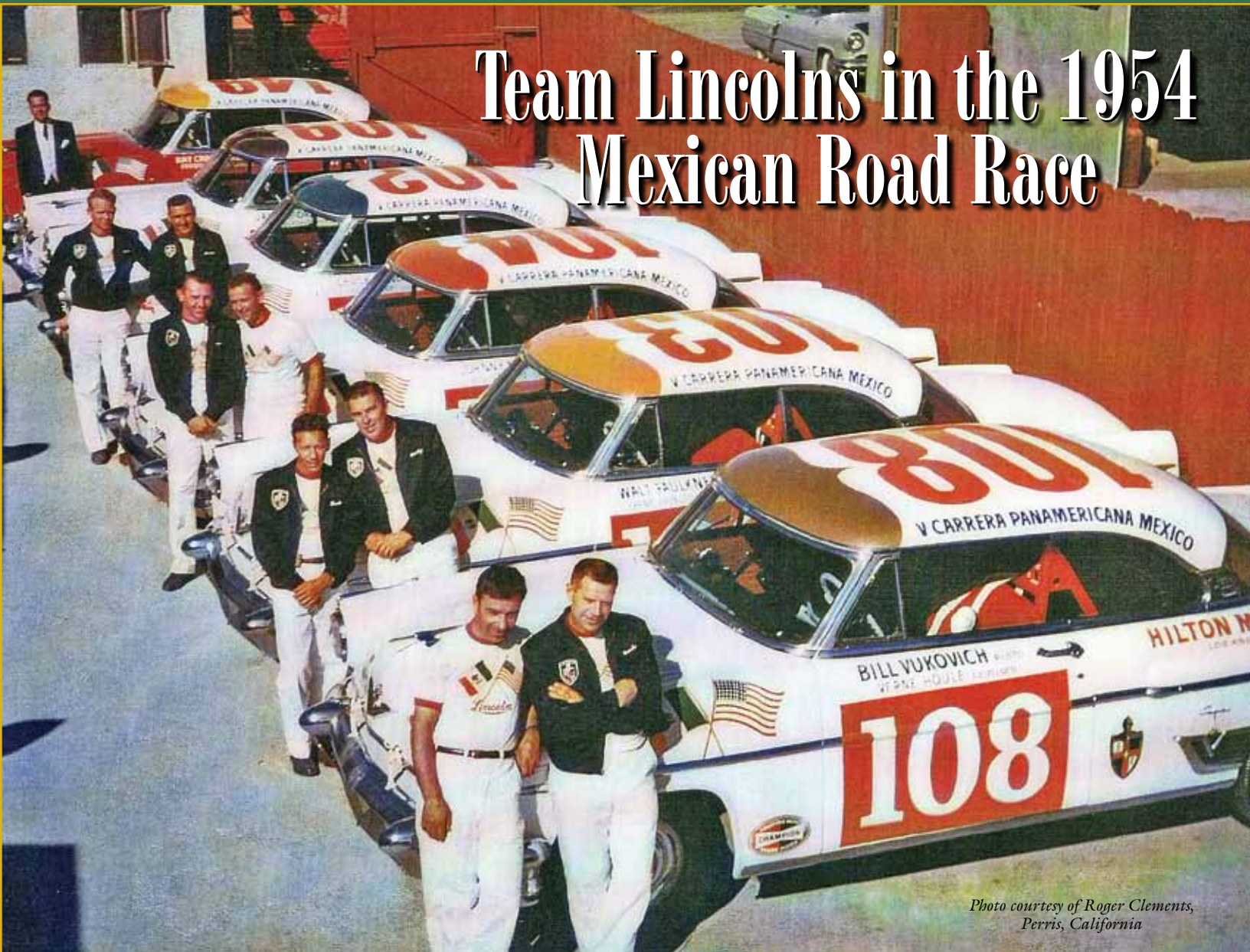


The LINCOLN LINK

LINKING TOGETHER ALL ELEMENTS OF THE LINCOLN MOTOR CAR HERITAGE

Team Lincolns in the 1954 Mexican Road Race



*Photo courtesy of Roger Clements,
Perris, California*



LINCOLN

MOTOR CAR FOUNDATION

PUBLISHED SEMI-YEARLY

VOLUME VI, NUMBER 2 • WINTER, 2008

La Carrera Panamericana

LINCOLN TRIUMPHS IN THE “MEXICAN ROAD RACE”

by Bill Culver, *Guest Editor*

THE LEGEND IS BORN

THERE ARE A LOT of ways to say it. Some would call it destiny; some would say fate. Some would think it was the serendipitous convergence and alignment of the stars and planets. However you put it, the events which created the “Road Race Lincolns” were magically timed, considering that two totally different cultures independently created those events which meshed and resulted in Lincoln becoming a “legend in its own time”!

IN THE BEGINNING

In 1950, Mexico was a country known more for siestas

and fiestas than for industrial progress. In its effort to modernize, it had launched an ambitious program to complete a highway from Ciudad Juarez in the north (across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas) to El Ocotil in the south, a tiny village on the mountainous border of Guatemala, a distance originally estimated at 2,178 miles (in later years actually measured at 1,908 miles)! Dubbed the “Pan American Highway,” the artery was to be completed in 1950, and Mexico announced an inaugural and celebratory road race. But this was not just to be *any* race. It was to be a grueling contest stretching the entire distance of the highway!

Meanwhile, at the Ford Motor Company headquarters in Dearborn, the years leading up to 1950 were tumultuous. The relationship between Henry Ford and his gifted son, Edsel, has been documented many times by various authors; it was tragic at best. Edsel essentially introduced the concept of “design” to Ford Motor Company, and his taste in styling is forever memorialized by the original sensational Continentals, the first of which were sold to the public in 1940.

But Lincoln was quickly losing ground to Cadillac and the other luxury models in terms of design and mechanical advances. In 1948, Lincoln was still using its old flathead V-12 engine and the traditional “fat-fendered” design on its bodies.

During this period, Henry and Edsel were in conflict over advances in styling and mechanics that Edsel wanted to bring to the company’s products, advances that were adamantly opposed by Henry. Edsel died in 1943 from cancer resulting from stomach ulcers. Henry Ford II was discharged from the military and made a vice president. Henry reassumed the presidency, but finally stepped down in 1945 at the insistence of the Ford family. He died April 7, 1947, at the age of 83.

The new 1949 Lincolns, besides being more advanced in styling, incorporated new and innovative mechanical features,



The 1950 race route was shown in this map that appeared in *Road & Track* magazine.

including a large and powerful flathead (L-head) V-8 engine of 336.7 cubic inches producing 152 bhp. This engine had already been tested as a workhorse, having been featured in the larger Ford trucks beginning in 1948. The new cars also featured independent front suspension for the first time, and the General Motors Hydramatic was offered as an option in mid-year. The “baby” Lincoln had a wheelbase of 121 inches, while the Cosmopolitan was stretched over a wheelbase of 125 inches. Clearly, Lincoln had made a giant step into the future!

It should be noted, however, that Cadillac had thrown down the gauntlet, and Lincoln immediately faced the challenge of Cadillac’s new overhead-valve, high-compression V-8 engine in 1949.

In 1950, the second year of the body style, the Lincoln was basically unchanged, as wheelbase and power remained the same. The Cosmopolitan fastback sedan and the “baby” Lincoln convertible were dropped from the lineup.

1950: THE FIRST RACE

The first race was scheduled for May 5–10, 1950. This race, the *Carrera Panamericana Mexico*, or “Mexican Road Race,” would extend for six consecutive days, requiring entrants to endure hours of high-speed driving over mountains, through canyons, jungles and deserts, and directly through old colonial towns and modern industrial centers. “Through” them meant careening through the towns on narrow streets winding tortuously around houses and buildings, with only piled hay bales as protection for entrants, spectators and loose



Johnny Mantz and Bill Stroppe blast out of the impound area at Tuxtla for the last leg of the 1950 race.

animals! Between the cities of Toluca and Puebla, the entrants would cross two great mountain ranges reaching altitudes of 10,000 feet and more! The route was paved all the way, save for the last 107 miles in the State of Chiapas, where the road was described as “a good gravel surface.” The race was to begin on May 5, 1950.

To entice entrants, Mexico offered elegant trophies and cash purses. The 1950 race attracted 132 entries, 59 of which were from the U.S. The remainder came from Colombia, Venezuela, Guatemala, Italy, Peru, France, The Republic of China, and El Salvador. Only six cars were non-U.S. makes: two Alfas, a Delahaye, a Jaguar,

a Talbot Lago, and a Hotchkiss. The American cars consisted of twenty-two Cadillacs, seventeen Buicks, thirteen Oldsmobiles, four Chevrolets, sixteen Lincolns, eleven Mercurys, eight Fords, three Chryslers, two DeSotos, nine Hudsons, eight Nashes, seven Packards, four Studebakers and a Cord. Of the 132 entrants, only 55 crossed the finish line, 20 of which were Americans. Of the Lincolns entered, eleven were 1949’s, three were 1950’s, and one was a 1947.

In the 1950 race, foreign and American cars raced directly against each other; there were no classes established. Entries were required to be stock, but cylinders could be rebored on 1949 and 1950 models to

thirty thousandths, while earlier models could be rebored to sixty thousandths. The rear seat could be removed to carry an extra gas tank or spare parts or tools; an open exhaust was forbidden. Hubcaps and fender skirts could also be removed.

LINCOLNS ENTER THE RACE

As fate would have it, Bob Estes Ford of Inglewood, California, entered a '49 Lincoln with Johnny Mantz as driver and Bill Stroppe as assistant driver (Entry No. 38). A total of fifteen Lincolns were entered in the first road race, all private entries.

On the first leg of the 1950 race, which ended in Chihuahua, Mantz recorded a time over 233 miles of 2:21:13 and an average speed of 98.991 miles per hour! A 1950 Cadillac with its newer design engine was first on that leg, with an average speed of 100.425 miles per hour and an elapsed time of 2:19:12, only two minutes faster than the Lincoln. Mantz remained in the money on each leg until the seventh. On that day, his brakes failed and he had to cross the last mountain range using only engine compression for braking. He was put to bed that night and copilot Stroppe worked on the car until the early morning hours.

Contestants learned early in the first leg of that first race that the stakes would be high, and that any mistake of judgment on the part of a driver could be fatal. On the first day, of the race, car number 112 wiped out at 105 miles per hour, only 19 miles from the starting line, rolling over six times and fatally injuring driver Enrique Hachmeister. He was driving a 1949 Lincoln Cosmopolitan,



During the 1951 race, Walt Faulkner (far left) awaits the completion of an oil change so he can get back on the road.

the only Guatemalan entry, and apparently took his eyes off the road for a moment as he arrived at a grade crossing.

Herschel McGriff won the race in a 1950 Oldsmobile 88 coupe, with an average speed of 78.421 mph. He collected a purse of over \$17,000.00.

Despite the brake problems, the 1949 Lincoln entered by Mantz and Stroppe placed 9th overall, 52 minutes from first place. Six of the other fifteen Lincolns entered also placed, in 13th, 19th, 20th, 25th, 34th and 49th places. Mantz, who was already known as the 1949 Pacific Coast AAA big car racing champion, and Stroppe, who had already won the 1950 Mobilgas Economy Run, would become racing legends as the 1950's progressed. Lincoln's investment in the mechanical improvements for the 1949 Lincoln had paid off, and Ford was hard at work on the major changes to be wrought for the 1952 series.

1951: THE SECOND YEAR

The pressure for mechanical advancement increased in 1951 with the introduction of Chrysler's "hemi" engine. Stuck in the third year of the body style cycle, Lincoln incorporated a few minor styling changes for 1951, and although it reportedly increased the brake horsepower to 154, Lincoln won the Mobilgas Economy Run that year, with an average of 25.448 miles per gallon.

In the meantime, the Mexican government had changed the race somewhat for 1951. The direction was reversed, from south to north. This time the race would begin later in the year, on November 20, 1951. Mechanical rules had changed to specify only that a four-passenger closed vehicle had to be powered by its original engine type with a stock camshaft. Many entries, therefore, resorted to multiple carburetors and high-compression cylinder heads.



Participants were required to wear protective helmets for the first time. There were only 105 entries.

A total of three Lincolns were entered, all 1951 models. The two American Lincolns were piloted by Ray Crawford and Walt Faulkner. The third was a Mexican entry. Crawford finished 8th. That race was won by a 1951 Ferrari driven by Piero Taruffi of Italy, with an average speed of only 87.6 miles per hour.

1952: THE THIRD RACE

Back in Dearborn, Ford proudly unveiled the totally new Lincolns. An engineering team headed by the fabulous Earle MacPherson designed the superior suspension system that would open the door to Lincoln becoming a racing legend. Gone was the old “king-pin” front suspension, and in its place was the first ball-joint suspension system on an American car. Gone was the flathead engine, replaced by the first Ford overhead-valve V-8 engine, although unfortunately equipped with a two-barrel carburetor. At 317 cubic inches,

Road & Track magazine road-tested a stock 1953 Lincoln, seen here (left) drag-racing Ray Crawford’s entry from the 1952 Carrera Panamericana. Crawford’s car was slower on initial acceleration but faster at the top end of the speed range, probably because of its truck cam and solid lifters.



Crawford’s Lincoln cuts back in after passing another car, showing very little body roll for its speed. Crossed flags of Mexico and the U.S.A. were used as a logo for the race. Note the strap at the right of the hood, a precaution required by the race committee.

the new engine put out 160 horsepower, approximately six more horsepower than its predecessor.

As Lincoln progressed, so did the race. For the 1952 race, two classes were created, one for sports cars and grand touring



Right: A readily detachable temporary muffler was installed on Crawford’s Lincoln to quiet the straight pipe for city driving. Out on the road, the muffler was removed.



Taking an overnight break from the 1952 race, the three team Lincolns recuperate in the service area of the garage at Chihuahua before the final day of racing to the Texas border at Juarez. From left to right are the cars of Walt Faulkner, Chuck Stevenson, and Johnny Mantz. Sponsors were Tupman, Ruppert, and Bob Estes dealerships.



The speedometer in Ray Crawford's Lincoln, entered in the 1952 race, here registers a tad over 120 m.p.h., yet thanks to the export springs and shocks, the big car rides as steady as a rock. Pictures from Hop Up magazine, March 1953.



The race committee required an extra fuel tank. In Crawford's Lincoln, the 50-gallon tank was securely mounted to the floor.

cars, and one for stock cars. Modifications to the cars in this race had to be listed in the sales catalogs as options. The dates

were November 19–23, 1952.

Bill Stroppe and Clay Smith approached Ford with the idea of mounting a factory team to win the race. Ford agreed, and officially returned to racing for the first time since 1935. Arrangements were made for Ford to provide a 1952 Lincoln with the 1953 mechanical modifications. Stroppe and Smith took that car to the Bonneville Salt Flats, where it ran 118 miles per hour! Ford then provided seven cars for the race, allowing Stroppe and Smith to take early 1953 Lincolns from the assembly line. Ford also updated the catalogs to include the modifications as available options. The cars were reworked

to include heavy-duty shocks, scoops to direct air to the brakes, Ford truck cams with solid lifters, and matched manifolds and ports. As modified, the cars put out close to 300 horsepower.

A total of eight Lincolns were entered in 1952, four 1952's and four 1953's. The Ford team ran four of the Lincolns. A total of 64 entries signed up for the stock car class, and 29 finished. After the first six sports cars crossed the finish line, the next four cars were Lincolns, running in the stock class! First place in stock was car #129, the 1953 driven by Chuck Stevenson. Second place went to car #122, a 1953 driven by Johnny Mantz; third place went to car #130, the 1953 Lincoln driven by Walt Faulkner, and fourth place went to car #130, a 1953 Lincoln driven by Bob Korf, which was a private entry. Stevenson had driven an average 90.78 mph over a total of 21:15:38 hours! It was truly *"The Dawn of a Dynasty!"* (Daryl E. Murphy, *Carrera Panamericana, History of the Mexican Road Race 1950-1954*, Motorbooks International, 1993).

1953: THE FOURTH RACE

The 1953 Lincoln V-8 boasted a new four-barrel carburetor, upping the horsepower to 205. Other changes included larger intake manifold runners, larger intake valve diameters, higher intake valve lift, higher compression ratio (8.0 to 1), and increased engine vacuum. Power steering and power brakes were new options. The famous “Uncle” Tom McCahill, the first writer to popularize automobile testing, fell in love with the 1953 Lincoln, and even bought one for himself. He reported clocking the car at 117 mph on one occasion. Seven years later,

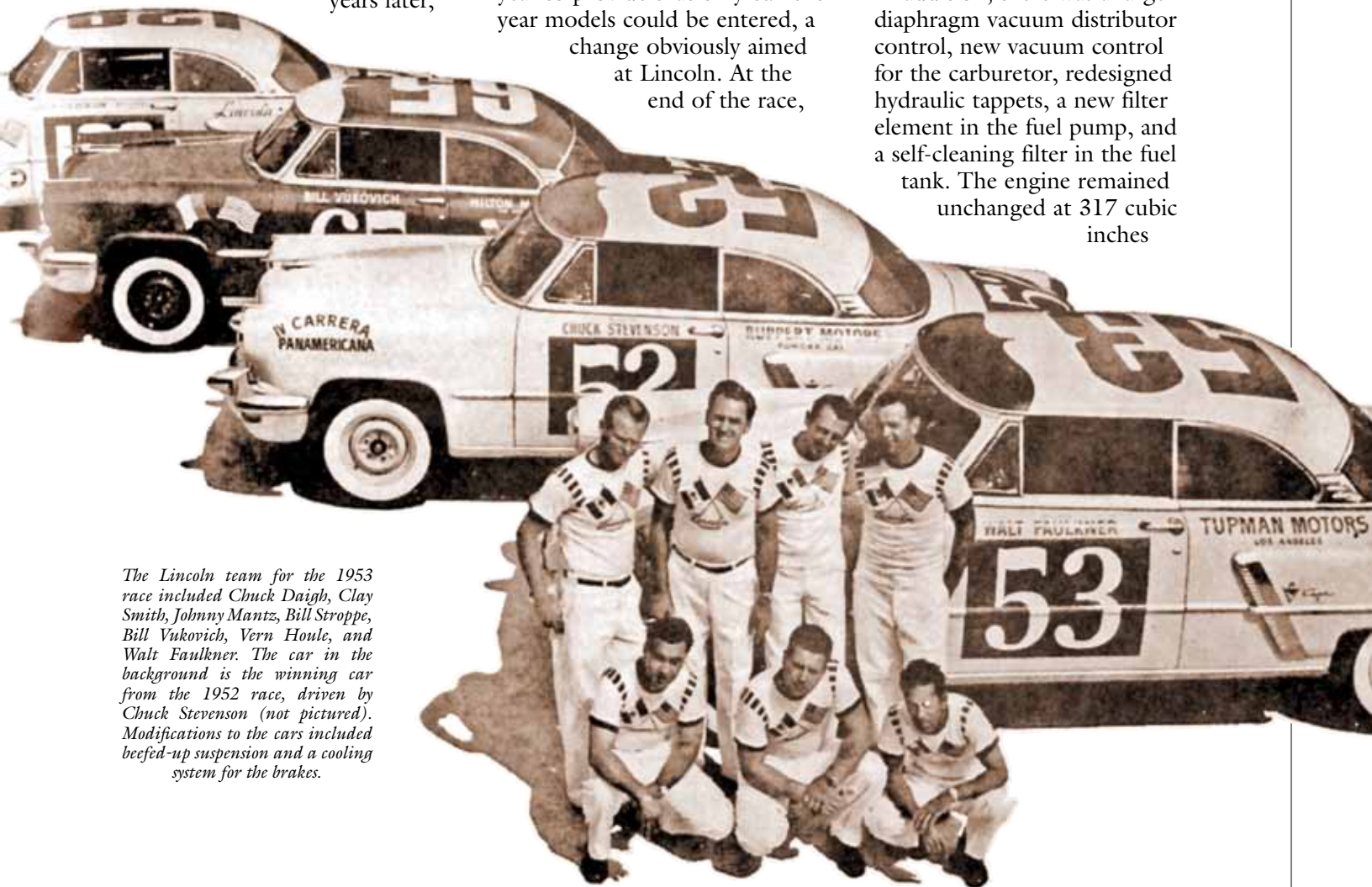
although he had sold the car in 1955, he was able to again drive it and reported topping 110 mph. The 0-60 time was still ten seconds flat.

The 1953 race saw two classes of stock cars: large and small cars. The race was run from south to north again, and there were 49 entries in the large stock car class; 23 finished. Ford again sponsored a factory team of four Lincolns. An additional entry, owned by Ray Crawford, had been prepared by Bill Stroppe, and was serviced by the Ford team. A total of 23 Lincolns were entered, all 1953’s. The rules had been changed for this year to provide that only current-year models could be entered, a change obviously aimed at Lincoln. At the end of the race,

Lincoln *again* took the first four places in class! Car #52, driven by Chuck Stevenson, was first, followed by car #53 driven by Walt Faulkner, car #95, driven by Jack McGrath, and finally, car #51, driven by Johnny Mantz. Stevenson averaged 93.2 mph, for an elapsed time of 20:31:32. In addition, other Lincolns placed 7th, 8th, 9th, 15th and 22nd, so seven Lincolns finished in the top 9 places!

1954: THE FIFTH AND FINAL RACE

In 1954, Lincoln improved its braking system, increasing the diameter to 12 inches. In addition, there was a larger diaphragm vacuum distributor control, new vacuum control for the carburetor, redesigned hydraulic tappets, a new filter element in the fuel pump, and a self-cleaning filter in the fuel tank. The engine remained unchanged at 317 cubic inches



The Lincoln team for the 1953 race included Chuck Daigh, Clay Smith, Johnny Mantz, Bill Stroppe, Bill Vukovich, Vern Houle, and Walt Faulkner. The car in the background is the winning car from the 1952 race, driven by Chuck Stevenson (not pictured). Modifications to the cars included beefed-up suspension and a cooling system for the brakes.



Chuck Stevenson and Clay Smith take the checkered flag in the 1953 race, performing an almost impossible feat by winning one of the world's toughest races for the second year in a row. As in the previous year, Lincoln took the first four places in the big stock class.

with a compression ratio of 8:1. Torque was now 305 foot-pounds at 2300 rpm. Horsepower remained at 205 at 4200 rpm. The Capri Coupe weighed in at 4,250 pounds and sold for \$3,869 new. These were the cars that would forever cast the shadow by which automobiles were to be measured.

The fifth and final race saw a new class added, designed to accommodate smaller European sedans. New rules eliminated the beefing up of running gear and modifications to brakes. A total of 13 Lincolns were entered, all 1954's.

Drivers this year were Bill Vukovich, who had just won

the Indianapolis 500 for the second consecutive year, Chuck Stevenson, Walt Faulkner, Jack McGrath (who came in 3rd in the 1954 Indianapolis race), Manuel Ayulo, and Johnny Mantz. In addition, Stroppe-prepared Lincolns were raced by Mexican Fernando Leeuw Murphy and Californian Ray Crawford, a supermarket owner from California, who had run private entry Lincolns in all previous races.

The first leg of the race was tough on the Lincolns. Due to the advanced timing on the engines, poor fuel resulted in burned pistons, eliminating the cars driven by Mantz, Murphy and Stevenson. Vukovich, on the

tail of Crawford's car, crested a hill at 100 mph, only to find a blind right-hand turn ahead. Although he braked hard, he skidded over a 150 foot embankment, somersaulted a few times, and ended up on the ground below. McGrath drove his car over a cliff and buried it in the jungle below.

Despite these losses, Lincoln was again the first car across the finish line in its class! In this case the winning car was #149, driven by Ray Crawford. Its average speed was 92 mph, with an elapsed time of 20:40:19. Second place was another Lincoln, car #103, driven by Walt Faulkner. In addition, Lincolns took 10th and 11th places! Lincoln and

Ferrari had dominated the race in their classes. Lincoln had three consecutive one-two finishes, two third places and two fourth places. Ferrari had two wins, two seconds and two thirds.

MEXICO THROWS IN THE TOWEL

But the adventure was over. A total of 26 lives had been lost in the five years of the race, most of them bystanders who had gleefully stood alongside the roadway and reached out to touch the cars as they hurtled by! The race

was being called the “Death Race” in the press. Speeds were up to 170 mph on the 20-foot-wide highway finished in 1950. Mexico threw in the towel. Only six months later, a Mercedes 300SLR tore into the crowd at LeMans and killed 80 spectators, and there were some other notorious crashes in various races that year.

YOU CAN'T KEEP A GOOD RACE DOWN

In 1988, some thirty-four years later, a group of Mexican and North American enthusiasts

revived the race in a more controlled format. It is now run much like a road rally. There are currently three unofficial levels of participation in the race. You can run it as a “tourist,” with an old car, adding some required safety features, and simply cruise the route. You may invest more in your car, and participate to run it hard. Finally, you can enter “full competition” where participants may spend large amounts of money on a thoroughly-prepared car in an attempt to finish first in class. There is an official website of the current race at www.

The 1954 race ended abruptly for Bill Vukovich—known as El Ruso Loco, or the Mad Russian—and his co-driver Vern Houle when their Lincoln somersaulted over a 150-foot cliff north of Oaxaca and alighted on a narrow rock ledge. Vukovich and Houle crawled away without injury.



lacarrerapanamericana.com.mx.

PUBLICATIONS

There are not a lot of publications dedicated entirely to the Mexican Road Race. Floyd Clymer appears to have published the earliest book, in 1950. There are apparently only a few others, and all of the books cited occasionally appear for sale on eBay:

- *Book of the Mexican Road Race*, Floyd Clymer Publications, 1950.
- *Carrera Panamericana*, Daryl E. Murphy, Motorbooks International, 1993.
- *The Carrera Panamericana "Mexico,"* compiled by R.M. Clarke, Brooklands.

Additionally, articles on the race appeared in many of the motoring publications of the era, including *Motor Trend Magazine*, *Motor Life Magazine*, *Hot Rod Magazine*, *Car Life Magazine* and *Speed Age Magazine*. Many of these also appear for sale on eBay on occasion. ■



The team fielded by Ford Motor Company in the 1952 race did not constitute Lincoln's only presence in the line-up. Native Mexican entries included (left) an early Lincoln-Zephyr body on a Ford chassis and (below) an elaborate monstrosity cobbled together out of Lincoln, Cadillac, Ford and aircraft parts.



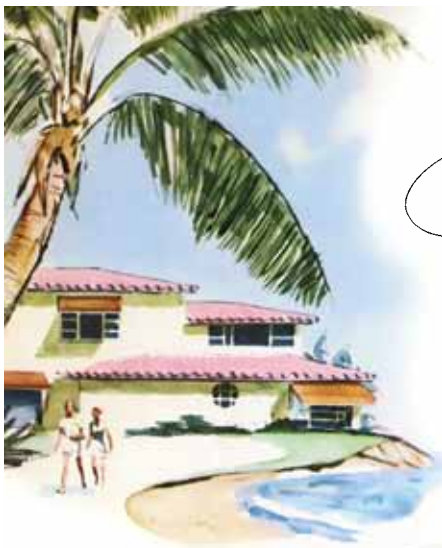
In the 1950 race, Harry Sents' '49 Lincoln inadvertently doubled as a demolition machine when it created an enlarged entry to this humble dwelling south of Durango.



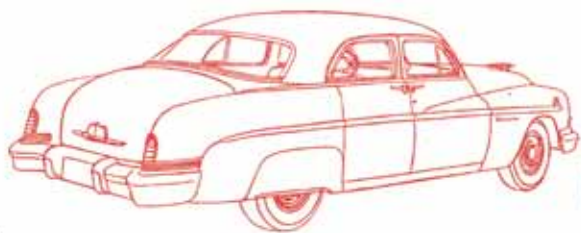
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Discover Lincoln for 1952—at your dealer's showroom. He wants you to try—the *one fine car deliberately designed for modern living.*
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You must feel the sureness with which Lincoln takes corners because of ball-joint front wheel suspension, found in no other fine car. You must touch toe to the accelerator to experience the *extra* automatic surge you get from Lincoln's new 4-barrel carburetor. And then you must try the safe, velvet-smooth stops with Lincoln's new giant-sized brakes.

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