



RACE CAR/LUXURY CAR

IT isn't reasonable to expect championship road-racing performance of a luxury automobile. The two concepts simply aren't compatible.

Or so it seems. Yet between 1952 and 1954, Lincoln racked up an incredible record in the bruising, bloody Carrera Panamericana — the legendary Mexican national road race.

The race, plans for which had taken form in 1949, was conceived by the Mexican government as a means of increasing tourism by celebrating the completion of its new highway, which extended border-to-border on the north-south axis, from the United States to Guatemala. The contest was to be conducted under the sanction and rules of the Federation Internationale de L'Automobile (FIA); and the course was to run from Ciudad Juarez, just across from El Paso, to El Ocotil, just north of the Guatemalan border. The total distance came to 2,135 very hard miles, ranging from sea level to elevations as high as 10,486 feet.

Appropriately, the starting gun for the first Carrera Panamericana was fired on a major Mexican holiday, Cinco de Mayo: May 5, 1950. Entrants were limited to five-passenger, closed automobiles — strictly stock, though factory options were permitted. Contestants ranged all the way from Cadillac and Packard to Nash and Studebaker to Alfa Romeo and Jaguar.

And yes, there were Lincolns as well,

by Arch Brown
photos by Roy Query

in that initial race. One of them, piloted by Enrique Hachmeister, accounted for the contest's first fatality, when it crashed just a few miles from the starting line, killing its driver instantly.

Lincoln had abandoned its silky-smooth but underpowered and trouble-prone V-12 following the 1948 model year. In its place, the completely redesigned 1949 Lincolns — introduced on April 22, 1948 — were powered by a 152-horsepower, 336.7-cubic-inch flathead V-8. In the face of the over-square, overhead-valve powerplants about to be introduced by Cadillac and Olds, the new Lincoln mill was essentially obsolete the day it first appeared, but it was nevertheless capable of giving a pretty good account of itself. Witness the fine showing made by midget car champion Johnny Mantz in the Mexican Road Race. Driving his own personal 1949 Lincoln, Mantz, together with co-pilot Bill Stroppe, ended up in ninth place with an average speed of 91 miles an hour. It was a highly creditable run, especially given the nature of the competition, and the Lincoln might have done even better had it not been beset, in the final leg of the race, by persistent tire troubles.



After the initial race in 1950, the course was reversed so that the cars ran from south to north, a change which provided much better press coverage (as well as superior hotel accommodations) at the finish line. At the same time the route was shortened to 1,933 miles, through the elimination of the original finish line town of El Ocotil. This time, the race would commence at Tuxtla Gutierrez and end at Ciudad Juarez.

The 1951 contest was a free-for-all, with all contestants competing head-to-head, regardless of class. Modifications to the engine and running gear were permitted that year, in a reversal of the original policy. There was another reversal for 1952, however, requiring all cars to meet factory specifications, and at the same time two classes — Sports Car and Standard Stock — were established.

Conspicuous by its absence, at first, was any participation by the Lincoln factory. But as the time approached for the 1952 race, Bill Stroppe, who together with his partner, Clay Smith, had signed on with the Ford Motor

Company to handle competition projects on the West Coast. They suggested to Benson Ford, head of Lincoln-Mercury, that the contest could become a publicity bonanza for Lincoln. Ford was reluctant at first, fearing the possibility of failure and the ridicule that it would bring to his cars, but Stroppe remained hopeful.

For the second time in less than four years (just three model years, actually), the Lincoln had been completely redesigned for 1952. Styling, developed by chief Lincoln stylist Bill Schmidt working under the general direction of corporate styling director George Walker, was crisp, clean and extremely attractive, representing a radical departure from the bulky designs of 1949-51. Equally new and different was the chassis. A more rigid frame, better brakes and larger shocks were featured.

Even more importantly, Earle S. MacPherson, Lincoln-Mercury's chief engineer, had developed a highly advanced ball joint front suspension, the first to be employed by an American automobile. Far simpler than the system it replaced, the new suspension

cut the number of lubrication fittings from 16 to four. Unsprung weight was reduced, and steering was lighter and more precise than before.

Best of all, there was a new, oversquare, 317.5-c.i.d. overhead-valve V-8, as modern as any engine then on the market.

But it wasn't the 1952 Lincoln that Bill Stroppe had in mind for that year's Carrera Panamericana. This time, the contest was scheduled for November, which meant that the 1953 models would be available. And thanks to redesigned heads, larger manifolds and valves, greater valve lift, four-barrel carburetion and a higher compression ratio, for 1953, the bhp of Lincoln's fine new engine had been raised — with no change in displacement — from 160 in its initial form to a rousing 205, marking the first time since the demise of the Duesenberg that an American automobile had offered more than 200 standard horsepower.

Finally, in the spring of 1952, Bill Stroppe received his long-awaited telephone call from Benson Ford, instructing him to put together a team for

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the Pan American. Ford told Stroppe that a prototype 1953 Lincoln was ready to go at the company's test facility at Colorado Springs. He asked that Bill, along with Clay Smith, pick up the car and drive it back to Stroppe's shop in Long Beach. The idea was that this extended run would enable the two men to make sure that the '53 Lincoln really was fast enough to compete successfully in the Carrera Panamericana. Benson Ford had to be absolutely certain of his car before giving the project the green light.

The prototype car had already undergone some brutal testing at Pike's Peak before Stroppe and Smith took it over, and Clay — a mechanic's mechanic if ever there was one — detected a noise he didn't like. Valves. So after the car arrived in Long Beach, the engine was torn down and the problem corrected. At that point, Smith and Stroppe turned around and headed back to the Bonneville Salt Flats. There, on the 10-mile oval, the Lincoln ran consistently at 118 mph. Plenty of speed for the Pan American.

Returning to Long Beach, Stroppe called Benson Ford to confirm the results of his test run. An agreement was struck whereby the company would field a team of Lincolns for the 1952 race. Three new cars were stripped to the bare chassis and every component was meticulously checked. The rules that year forbade any modifications from stock factory specifications, apart from safety measures, which included among other items two Houdaille shocks at each front wheel, and air-lifts at the rear along with oversized tubular shocks. The rear ends were raised about four inches, in the interest of better control. Tires were inflated with nitrogen, in order to maintain constant



Above: Plane-like hood ornament is a far cry from Lincoln's classic greyhound. **Below:** Lincoln "coat of arms" nestles in big chromed V on front of hood.



1954 Luxury Hardtops Compared

	Lincoln Capri	Buick Roadmaster	Cadillac 62	Chrysler New Yorker	Packard Pacific
Price (f.o.b. factory)	\$3,869	\$3,373	\$3,838	\$3,672	\$3,827
Weight	4,250 lb.	4,215 lb.	4,350 lb.	4,095 lb.	4,040 lb.
Wheelbase	123 inches	127 inches	129 inches	125.5 inches	122 inches
Overall length	214.75 inches	216.75 inches	216.4375 inches	215.5625 inches	215.5 inches
Engine	Ohv V-8	Ohv V-8	Ohv V-8	Ohv V-8	L-head str. 8
C.I.D.	317.5	321.7	331.1	331.1	358.8
Horsepower @ rpm	205/4,200	200/4,100	230/4,400	235/4,400	212/4,000
Torque @ rpm	305/2,650	309/2,400	330/2,700	330/2,600	330/2,200
Compression ratio	8.00:1	8.50:1	8.25:1	7.50:1	8.70:1
Braking area (sq. in.)	220.1	219.1	211.6	201.0	209.3
Transmission	HydraMatic	Dynaflow	HydraMatic	PowerFlite	Ultramatic
Axle ratio	3.31:1	3.40:1	3.36:1*	3.54:1	3.54:1
Horsepower per c.i.d.	.646	.622	.695	.710	.591
Weight (lb.) per horsepower	20.7	21.1	18.9	17.4	19.1
Weight per c.i.d.	13.4	13.1	13.1	12.4	11.3
Weight per sq. in. (brakes)	19.3	19.2	20.6	20.4	19.3
* Or 3.07					

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the Lincoln team that all-important competitive edge.

Not to forget the drivers. Stroppe and Smith, well known on the racing circuit, recruited the best in the business, selecting Walt Faulkner, Johnny Mantz and Chuck Stevenson to pilot the three factory-sponsored Lincolns.

As the 1952 race approached, Stroppe, with characteristic precision, had a sign painter prepare roll maps of the entire route, showing every detail of each town along the way and indicating the maximum speed at which each corner could be negotiated.

Tires were a potential problem, especially as the cars came through the mountains, for the roads were narrow and there were no turnouts where tire changes could be effected. In his excellent biography of Bill Stroppe, Tom Madigan describes what Bill did about it: "Late on the afternoon of practice...Stroppe discovered a small turnout where local buses could unload passengers. Half hidden by brush was a small soda-pop stand to serve the bus passengers. Knowing that all public traffic would be halted during the race, Stroppe rented the turnout for those days. He and his crew then embarked upon a masterpiece of one-upmanship. In the brush Stroppe hid six front tires, two for each team car. Then he carefully dug a huge hole and buried a cylinder of compressed air and hoses connected to a small platform. Next he hollowed out two ruts for the front tires. In the center of the two ditches he buried the platform. Two air wrenches were also hidden. When the Lincolns would roll into place, the driver and co-pilot would jump out, connect the air cylinder, and the platform would pop up under the front cross member and raise the car. Using the air-powered wrenches, the men could quickly mount two new tires in a matter of seconds. When quizzed later about his little innovation, Stroppe replied, 'It wasn't cheating. There was nothing in the rules about stopping for tires!'"

In the end, the Lincolns finished one-two-three, with drivers Stevenson, Mantz and Faulkner crossing the finish line in that order. It was a remarkable achievement, and Lincoln's public relations people made the most of it.

For 1953 the rules were changed, to require that cars used in the race must have been in production during the year of the event. No longer would it be possible to employ models yet to be introduced in the showrooms. So once again, 1953 Lincolns were used. This time the team had five official cars, and Stroppe and his crew prepared one ad-



Above: The car as displayed in Reno today. **Below left:** Extra safety catches were installed on hood and trunk. **Below right:** Backup lamps were removed for racing.



ditional machine for Ray Crawford. Known as the "Flying Grocer," Crawford had been a participant in each of the previous contests, though he had not been conspicuously successful. To all intents and purposes his car would be a member of the Lincoln team, although it was funded by Ray personally, rather than by Lincoln-Mercury.

Bill Vukovich, fresh from his victory in the 1953 Indianapolis 500, was added to the roster of Lincoln drivers, along with Jack McGrath, another Indy veteran. Classes were further refined that year, with large and small cars — both stock and sports — being separately categorized.

Three hours were allowed each night for the cars to be checked and repaired, and put in order for the next day's race. So refined had the Lincoln team's procedures become that during that brief period tires and brakes — and even rear ends and transmissions, if necessary — could be replaced with new stock. And as a final precaution Stroppe and Smith brought along a

self-contained food wagon, insisting that each driver and crew member take all his meals and beverages from that source. Johnny Mantz had very nearly been laid low by a digestive upset during the 1950 race. This time the team would take no chances with food poisoning or contaminated water.

Perhaps the results were predictable: Team Lincolns placed First, Second, Third and Fourth, with drivers Chuck Stevenson, Walt Faulkner, Jack McGrath and Johnny Mantz arriving at Juarez in that order. Bill Vukovich, unfortunately, had bombed out on the first leg with a blown transmission.

But tragedy had stalked the 1953 race. Mickey Thompson, swerving to avoid hitting a child, careened over an embankment and killed four spectators. Six more deaths occurred when a Lancia team driver lost control coming through a corner. And driver Antonio Stagnoli lost his life when his Ferrari crashed in flames. Bill Stroppe later recalled the foolhardy chances taken by the crowd: "Going into Mexico City, the people

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would stand in the roadway, inches from the cars, and try to touch them as they went by at 120 mph." Perhaps the wonder is that the carnage wasn't even worse.

Tragedy struck even closer to home as preparations were being made for the 1954 race. Working an AAA big car race at DuQuoin, Illinois, that year, Clay Smith was killed instantly when a race car spun out of control and careened into the pit. Stroppe was stunned, for Clay, in addition to being his business partner, was Bill's best friend. The question became, could the Lincoln team recover?

It could, and did, although things were never again quite the same. A full team of six Lincolns appeared under the Ford Motor Company banner, along with two Fords. Stroppe, already bowed down by grief over the death of his friend, was worried about the risks posed by the race's ever-increasing speeds. Four drivers and co-pilots were killed in practice. The omens were not good. Several changes characterized the 1954 contest. For one thing, the term "stock" was more closely defined than before, with the result that solid valve lifters could no longer be substituted for the factory-installed hydraulics. As matters developed, however, the change made no appreciable difference in the cars' performance. To make sure that no unauthorized modifications were made, all cars were impounded about three weeks before the race commenced. "I don't think there has ever been a race that was so tightly controlled," Bill Stroppe recalled in a recent conversation with this writer.

Other changes for 1954 included the use of tubeless racing tires, and the addition of a small European stock car class. Meanwhile, at Lincoln an important modification was made in the factory specifications: Ribbed, 12-inch brake drums replaced the previous 11-inch, plain type, and the lining surface was increased from 202.3 to 220.1 square inches, a difference of nearly nine percent.

But the luck of the Lincoln fleet had run out. Four of the six company-sponsored cars fell by the wayside on the very first leg of the race, leaving only Bill Vukovich and Walt Faulkner to represent the factory team. Within the first 72 miles Leeuw Murphy's engine blew, Jack McGrath's car went off the road and Chuck Stevenson burned a piston. Then toward the end of the first leg Johnny Mantz crashed off the road. Nor was that the end of the bad news. On the second day of the race Vukovich spun out and went over a cliff. Of the

PEPITO
LA AMENAZA



Above: A Spanish-speaking Dennis the Menace adorned the hood as a good-luck mascot. **Below:** Driver and navigator were securely belted into Lincoln's slick seats. Huge fuel tank occupies rear seat area.



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Almost any way you look at it, 1954 has to be considered a landmark year.

Well, maybe not in the automobile industry, for with the exception of the senior General Motors cars, the '54's were essentially carry-over models, displaying only minor differences from their predecessors. But consider what was happening elsewhere:

- The United States Supreme Court, in a rare, unanimous decision, declared racial segregation in the public schools to be unconstitutional.

- The Senate, in an almost unprecedented action, censured Senator Joseph McCarthy for the smear tactics he had employed as head of an investigating subcommittee. McCarthy's once-powerful influence faded rapidly thereafter, and by 1957 he was dead.

- The now-familiar controversy over the connection between cigarette-smoking and lung cancer erupted.

- And the United States launched the *Nautilus*, the world's first nuclear-powered submarine.

Still, taken all in all it was a tranquil time. The Korean War was behind us, and hardly any of us could have found Vietnam on the map. The economy was prospering, and Americans were content.

It was a prolific year for writers of fiction. Irving Stone gave us *Love Is*

Eternal, a biographical novel based on the life of Mary Todd Lincoln. From the ever-popular Daphne DuMaurier came the thriller, *Mary Anne*. Mac Hyman amused us with *No Time for Sergeants*, and A.J. Cronin followed his many earlier successes with *Beyond This Place*. William Faulkner's *A Fable* would receive the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1955, but it was Lloyd C. Douglas's 1953 novel *The Robe* that continued to head the best-seller list.

Hollywood's top money-maker that year was *White Christmas*, starring Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye. Other notable films included *The Caine Mutiny*, with Humphrey Bogart; *The Glenn Miller Story*, with Jimmy Stewart and June Allyson; *Magnificent Obsession*, with Jane Wyman and Rock Hudson; and a re-make of 1938's *A Star Is Born*, this time featuring Judy Garland and James Mason.

On Broadway, two outstanding musicals came to the end of their long runs: *South Pacific*, after 1,925 performances; and *The King and I*, after having been staged 1,246 times. Other Broadway hits included *Witness for the Prosecution*, *Caine Mutiny Court Martial*, *The Saint of Bleecker Street*, and the rollicking musical, *The Pajama Game*.

Meanwhile, popularized by band leader Perez Prado, the Cuban mambo had become the latest dance craze.