

El Caballa

The Iron Horse rides again.

By Ray Brock

PHOTOS BY ERIC RICKMAN, BRUCE GLASCOCK AND THE AUTHOR

Back in 1950, the original Carrera Panamericana was staged by the government of Mexico to publicize completion of their portion of the Pan American Highway, from their northern border across from El Paso, Texas, to the southern border at Guatemala. The pavement ran from Juarez to the sleepy town of Tuxtla Gutierrez, in the southernmost state of Chiapas, about 50 miles short of the border. From there, on to the border, the road was gravel. Following completion of the race, competitors made their way back to Tuxtla for hotels and auto repair facilities to prepare for the return trip.



Herschel McGriff won that first year in a 1950 Oldsmobile and post-race publicity of the event excited the imagination of drivers and racing teams throughout the world. The following year, the race course was reversed, with the starting line at Tuxtla and the

finish line at the airport just south of Juarez, so larger crowds could be accommodated and publicity better distributed worldwide.

Italians Pierro Taruffi and Alberto Ascari finished one-two with Ferraris in 1951, with an assortment of American stock cars close behind. The world was now aware of the "Mexican Road Race" and factory racing teams throughout the world made plans for the 1952 event.

A Whittier, Calif., hot rodder, Ak Miller, got the bug to race



and, with the help of his local Oldsmobile dealer, entered a 1952 Olds in the 1908-mile race. Ak and his co-pilot, Doug Harrison, learned the hard way that a completely stock sedan was not suited to the rigors of an international road race, especially when ricocheting off curbs, dirt banks and potholes. The Miller-Harrison Olds retired at about the halfway point, in Leon, with a burned-out transmission tailshaft bearing.

Despite the disappointment of not finishing, the team decided they would compete again the following year but this time in a car of their own design, a genuine hot rod. At that point in early 1953, I entered the picture, covering the construction of El Caballo de Hierro (the Iron Horse) in my new job as assistant technical editor of *Hot Rod Magazine*. It wasn't long before I was pressed into service to help and became an official team member.

When this creation—comprised of a '27 T-body, modified '50 Ford frame and front suspension, cross-leaf rear axle, souped-up '50 Olds engine, '37 Cadillac transmission and '35 Nash overdrive—reached the Tuxtla Gutiérrez starting line in 1953, the Mexican press promptly dubbed Iron Horse "Ensalada" (the

Salad), because of the wide variety of components that had been tossed together to build the car. The Mexicans loved the car because it was the way they would have built a race car—a little of this and some of that!

We had two service cars in '53, a Cadillac-powered '50 Ford with Dwight Phillips and Hal Powell, and me in Ak's '50 Olds

The '91 crew of Caballo de Hierro includes veterans Ray Brock (left), Ak Miller (right) and newcomer and car owner Bruce Glascock.



SON OF El Caballo

The reincarnation of a legend.

By Ron Ceridono

A number of famous cars have been rebuilt, or recreated, over the years. It's a process that Bruce Glascock knows all about, he being the man who tirelessly tracked down Spence Murray's long lost *Rod and Custom Magazine* Dream Truck, finally bought it, and then painstakingly restored it.

After that long, drawn-out process, Bruce sold the truck but evidently for him restoring famous cars is like eating peanuts, because once he started, he couldn't stop. Since his last project was a custom, Bruce decided the next undertaking would be the revival of a famous hot rod. He concluded there could be no better example of the genre than Ak Miller's El Caballo.

Originally built in 1953 to compete in the Carrera Panamericana road race in Mexico, El Caballo was hot rod through and through. The construction of the car was documented in *Hot Rod Magazine* by Ray Brock and upon completion, El Caballo's performance set the sporty car world on its ear. This American backyard creation, piloted by a couple of SoCal hot rodders, finished the race two years in a row on the heels of Europe's finest thoroughbreds. Bruce felt that a hot rod with such a dis-

Vehicle: 1927 Ford Roadster
Owner: Bruce Glascock,
San Francisco, Calif.



sedan loaded with spare parts, oil, etc. On the trip from Whittier to the starting line, El Caballo was driven rather than trailered, so we could determine if there were "weak links" in the parts mixture. We found and fixed a wide variety of problems on the way down, but learned we had a major problem that couldn't be rectified prior to the start of the race; the '50 Ford

ring and pinion could not take the horsepower and speed created by the big Olds and 30 percent overdrive. After a few hundred miles of high-speed driving, the gears became razor-sharp and a loud howl announced impending failure. Solution: One of the support vehicles would drive ahead to the next day's finish line, locate a new ring and pinion set, and stand by to install the gears after El Caballo crossed the finish line each day. Ak reduced speed to lessen the strain, and the hot rod entry managed an eighth-place finish in the large sports car category five days after leaving Tuxtla Gutierrez.

For 1954, we knew the car's weak points, so a stronger '53 Lincoln rear axle and '53 Lincoln 11-inch brakes with wider linings were installed. A few other minor changes were made and a bright *Hot Rod* Magazine-sponsored paint job covered the car. We felt we were ready to race the big boys. El Caballo made the trip to Tuxtla without a hitch, so we adjusted the valves, changed oil and drove to the starting line.

At Juarez five days later, Ak and Doug finished fifth in the large sports category, trailing four Ferraris. One morning when the race was leaving Mexico City, the major local newspaper had a head-on photo of Iron Horse occupying the entire front page. They loved Ensalada!

Plans for a sixth Mexican Road Race in 1955 were cancelled during that summer, but only after



Original crew consisted of (left to right) R.E. "Pete" Petersen, Clem Tebow, Ray Brock, Pete Coltrin, and Racer Brown. Pilots Alexander with Doug Harrison as Co-pilot.

tinguished history just had to be brought back to life.

Unfortunately, the search for Ak's car was a short one. It didn't take long to discover that El Caballo had been parted out in 1955 and nothing of the original roadster remained. Bruce, who was not easily discouraged, figured that El Caballo had been built once, and it could be built again.

A phone call to Ak was all it took to involve him in the project, and a little research produced everything ever written in *Hot Rod* Magazine about the car. With 40-year-old magazine articles, and the car's originator supplying a myriad of obscure details, Bruce set about recreating El Caballo. He gathered up a pile of early parts and pieces identical to those used to build the original car, and then enlisted Vern Tardell, a very capable Santa Rosa, Calif., hot rodder to help assemble it all.

Vern modified a '49 Ford chassis just as had been done umpteen years ago, then installed the running gear, and mounted the '27 T-body. Bruce hammered out the nose (made from two '39 Dodge rear fenders, just like the original), built the Kurtis-inspired grille insert, then finished the bodywork and applied a duplicate of the 1953 paint scheme.

Opposite, above: Between the '46 Ford taillights is the original Carrera Panamericana license plate worn by El Caballo. Ak donated the one-of-a-kind item because he felt the car had the heart and soul of the original and deserved to wear it. Rear end is a '53 Lincoln hung on a Ford transverse spring.

Opposite: Larry Spangler bored the 371-cid Olds Rocket motor .030 in. oversize, then fitted the '58 block with an Iskys cam of Ak's specifications. Other than that, internally the engine is basically stock. Weiland manifold now mounts a pair of Ford 2-barrels that replaced the troublesome Strombergs.

Once the car was completed, it was turned over to Ak, who made the car race-ready by tweaking El Caballo as only its original creator could.

Despite some problems during its initial outing, El Caballo needed only a few minor changes to get the performance to match the potential. A pair of Ford Motorcraft 2-barrels replaced the four leaky Strombergs, and a stock ignition system was substituted for the fried electronic components. Those changes made, El Caballo was ready to go. And does it go. Not a display piece requiring periodic dusting, El Caballo goes out in the real world and raises dust and gets dirty, just as it did in 1953.

As well as competing in the modern-day running of the Carrera Panamericana, Bruce has run the car at the nostalgia drags, and competed in the Silver State Classic, an annual road race held in Nevada. Considering the less than high-tech components and its 40-year-old design, El Caballo's performance is spectacular. Bruce and El Caballo averaged 120 mph for more than 100 miles in the Silver State, and finished second in class. In the same event, El Caballo was clocked at over 150 mph in the straights and Bruce says it's capable of going faster. Not bad for a hot rod built in 1953. Not bad for one built in 1993.

Bruce started out to build a copy of El Caballo, but has accomplished more than just building a clone. The car you see here is more than just a re-creation, it's a reincarnation. This car has all the attributes of the original—the look, the sound, but most importantly, the soul of the original. It has successfully picked up where the tire tracks of its predecessor left off.

Long live El Caballo!

Ak and the team had started a new car, featuring a Kurtis torsion bar chassis and an envelope aluminum body, which would give aerodynamics to match Ferrari. Brakes, rear axle, wheels, seats and a wide assortment of other pieces were cannibalized from El Caballo. Before long, the old hot rod was a shell of its former self, and Ak sold the remains to someone whose present whereabouts are unknown.

Enter a new era: Mexico's Tourist Bureau revived the Mexican Road Race theme by announcing La Carrera Panamericana 1988, a rally event. It followed the original route but with Transit, Limited and Speed sections instead of all-out racing of the early '50s where thousands of Federal troops closed the highway to all local traffic each day during racing hours.

This rally theme requires moderate speeds on Transit sections with penalty points for being too early or more than 15 minutes late for the time allowed. Limited sections require more aggressive driving, even though local traffic is also using the road. Hidden checkpoints along Limited sections penalize cars traveling too fast or too slow along the route or arriving at the checkpoint late.

Speed sections are just as the name implies ... all-out for 5 to 50 kilometers. Local traffic is stopped and the fastest car in each category establishes a benchmark against which other competitors are graded and penalty points given.

Coincidental to this race revival four years ago, a San Leandro, Calif., hot rodder, Bruce Glascock, had started construction of a replica of the famous hot rod entry in the 1953-54 races. Bruce had originally called Ak to see if he could buy El Caballo de Hierro. Ak didn't know where the remains rested, so Bruce asked Ak if he would mind if he recreated the car. Ak said, "Go ahead!" Bruce dug out everything that had been written about the car, plus made countless phone calls to Ak over the next three years asking questions about components.

By mid-summer 1991, Bruce said he thought he could have El Caballo done in time for the race in late October. Vern Tardell, a Santa Rosa hot rodder, was conducting major assembly of the salad parts with Bruce driving up after his job in downtown San Francisco each day.

Bruce asked Ak and me to go with him on the trip to Mexico and share the driving chores (Doug Harrison no longer drives and is retired in Leon, Mexico). We agreed! On Saturday, October 5, Bruce drove the replica up to Ak's shop in Pico Rivera with anti-freeze spewing from the radiator overflow. The car looked exactly like the original and was beautifully painted *Hot Rod Magazine* Special colors with original sponsors' names in place.

Vern had followed along with a trailer, just in case, and admitted that he hadn't had time to properly finish the car and that there were "a few things that should be checked out." We had already guessed that the radiator was inadequate, and over the next 10 days, Ak, his assistant Bradley Glaser and I found out what Vern meant about running short of time. We hurriedly revised chassis settings, added safety items, fitted Goodyear Gatorback 60-series tires and installed a larger-capacity radiator with an electric fan.

On Tuesday, October 15, we loaded the "fresh salad" on a transporter to Laredo, Texas, where it was to be driven across the border and then loaded aboard a Mexican car transport for the trip to Tuxtla Gutierrez. There, Bruce, Ak and I would



greet the car on October 23, two days before the start of the race.

We arrived on schedule in Tuxtla Gutierrez to learn that the cars had trouble getting through customs at Nuevo Laredo and the transport truck was running late. And, "By the way," an official said, "your car had a little engine fire crossing the border so is not in running condition." What?

It seems the day was quite warm at the border; traffic was heavy and the driver didn't know how to turn on the cooling fan. Result: The engine got very hot, causing the No. 4 Stromberg carburetor float to stick open. The overflow of gasoline covered the rear half of the engine and caused a substantial fire. When the transporter arrived in Tuxtla late the afternoon before race day, the three of us were there to meet it with great concern about what could be done.

We hired a taxi, tied El Caballo to the end of a rope and made for a local garage where we hoped to solve the problems. The electronic ignition wiring was badly burned, but we managed to splice new wires, then replace spark plug wiring. After a few hours, we got the car running and took off for our hotel near the starting line to get cleaned up, eat and sleep.

Traffic was jammed as all the locals were also heading that way to see the race cars. We had the electric fan on and had almost made the hotel when orange flames started coming through the porous firewall. Another engine fire! Ak and I jumped out, yanked off the hood and smothered the fire. Now we had to start all over again. Inspection of the antique No. 4 Stromberg disclosed that it had played lead in the Anvil Chorus sometime past as the cover was well-dented from frequent poundings to release a hung-up float. Primary ignition wiring was once again burned up, but the new plug wires were okay. Ak decided to eliminate the troublesome No. 4 carburetor, so a plate was made to fit atop the throttle body with the float bowl and cover discarded. We figured that the Weiand manifold design with an open plenum under the remaining carburetors would feed adequate fuel.

At 7 o'clock the next morning, Ak and I were in El Caballo awaiting our starting call. Bruce had arranged a ride in Charlie Rau's Corvette chase truck, which would follow after all cars had departed. Bruce also had our luggage.

Since our last trip to Mexico in 1954, their highway depart-



Carlos Lara (right) and Roberto Monje (left) came to the rescue when Ak (in car) and Ray (behind camera) became stranded in Acatlan. Carlos builds fiberglass Ford bodies and reproduction frame rails for export to the U.S. in a large, well-equipped facility in Mexico City.

ment has invented the "tope" or speed bump. Designed to slow traffic and theoretically prevent road damage from heavy, speeding trucks, these topes could better be described as "launching ramps," sorta like Evel Knievel used for his jumps at Caesar's Palace and the Snake River Gorge. Ak and I didn't even see the first tope a few hundred yards off the starting line and promptly went into orbit, to the great delight of thousands of sadistic spectators.

When we finally completed re-entry, we succeeded in cancelling out the extra rear end height we had added in Ak's shop. From that point on, every small bump was savagely transferred through thinly padded seats to our tailbones. The engine ran strong and except for the bottoming and frequently spaced topes (low gear and slow was the word now), things went rather smoothly. Oh, yes, there was one stop to pull off a dragging exhaust pipe and strap it to the roll bar. Then another stop, a couple of hundred miles later, to restrap the pipe that was now trying to beat the right rear fender loose.

The heat and humidity, as we dropped down to sea level along the Tehuantepec straightaway in our fireproof driving suits, made me yearn for my air-conditioned Lincoln. Then, later on, the overheating was replaced by a heavy rainstorm, which thoroughly soaked us. Boy, this racing stuff is sure fun!

At the end of Day One, in Oaxaca, 335 miles later, we discovered the battery was in very poor condition and we needed a push start after finishing. We guessed that first earth orbit plus the other topes and rough road had shaken loose a cell or two in the battery, so we bought a new one. The exhaust pipe was welded back in place and we sought some rest.

At the hotel, other contestants asked Ak how the road compared to that of the original races. He answered, "It was far better in the old days because the road was new and smoother. Also, topes didn't slow you down then. And since Federal soldiers kept all other cars off the road, you could travel much faster."

As an example, this year's time schedule called for eight hours of driving and service periods between Tuxtla and Oaxaca, whereas Ak's 1954 race time had been just under four hours.

The next morning, Day Two, we headed for the starting line at Oaxaca's picturesque downtown square. Just before arriving

there, we fueled the car, adding K&W's USA-1 Big Boost to compensate for the low-octane Pemex gasoline. Then, on restart, the battery once again couldn't do the job and we needed a push start. Since we had installed a new battery the night before, we now knew we had an alternator problem.

We passed up the start, opting instead to borrow a stall at the local VW dealership so we could solve our problems, then catch up with the race later that night in Mexico City. We sent Bruce ahead with our luggage, but did save out a pair of pants and T-shirt each so we wouldn't have to get our pretty red driving suits dirty.

The alternator was, as suspected, scorched. So while Ak went to work in that area, I got one of the local mechanics to drive me around to parts shops until I found a pair of Gabriel coil-over shocks to jack up the rear of the car. We got the repairs completed shortly after noon (with a fresh battery charge) and took off for Mexico City.

Now the car was really cooking. The ride was vastly improved and the car handled the corners real well until the front shocks got the vapors and the front end started skating on the rough corners. Boy, is that road rough in the two lower, poorer states.

About 200 miles north of Oaxaca, but still 150 short of Mexico City, we again stopped for fuel and once again had to get a push start because of a low battery. We were in the small town of Acatlan with a number of Mecanico Electricos on the edge of town, so we decided to seek help, since the battery would not last all the way to Mexico City and darkness would catch us well short of our hotel. Then, too, we certainly needed the electric fan for the traffic of a city with 25,000,000 inhabitants.

Luis, the mecanico we chose, was friendly but knew no English. Our command of Spanish was never great and had suffered much since 1954. His method of checking out the electrical circuit was to use a 3-foot length of wire, place one end on a terminal beneath the dash, then use the bared wire at the other end to strike an are somewhere on the engine, door hinge, body panel, etc. After numerous are strikes, the engine would no longer start and the fuel pump wouldn't work. Voltmeters do not seem to exist in lower Mexico.

With darkness approaching, we pushed El Caballo into our mecanico's backyard where it would spend the night amongst numerous non-operating old cars, tethered fighting cocks, a caged hawk, some 10-day-old kittens, month-old puppies and a mean junkyard dog. That pretty well confirmed what we already suspected—Luis was not a graduate of GM Tech. He ran a junkyard, and our steed was about to join the pile.

The next morning, as Day Three of racing was starting in Mexico City, Ak and I were sitting on the curb in front of the Barking Dog Hotel where we had spent the night listening to—you guessed it—three barking dogs outside our window all night. They let up only when the torrential downpour started at 3 a.m. and all the drunken hotel guests arrived from the local bars and started yelling and brawling. When the guests quieted down, the dogs resumed their yapping. Our bathroom was every bit as modern as the average motor home; you could use the toilet and take a shower at the same time. Yes, the water was cold, but what do you expect for 50,000 pesos? That translates to about \$16 U.S.

So there we were, on the curb waiting for Luis, who had

continued on page 58

El Caballo from page 31

suggested a 6 a.m. pickup. At 8 a.m., we found a taxi and went to Luis' house. He wasn't there, but finally showed up about 9:30 with our battery. We had asked that he put it on the charger the night before, but he had forgotten so had gone to get it charged when he awoke Sunday morning.

Luis found a local policeman who knew a bit of English, so we recruited him to convey our messages. Even with a charged battery (Luis proved it was hot by repeatedly striking arcs with his jumper cables), the coil emitted only a weak spark through the electronic black box that had been given the shock treatment the evening before. Here we were, Sunday morning, 150 miles from help, no parts, no communication, no clean shorts ... we needed a change of scenery!

At noon, we caught an express bus and five hours later arrived at the Mexico City terminal in a cloudburst. After a lengthy wait, we finally got a taxi whose driver couldn't find the hotel where we expected to find Bruce. The hotel was finally located, but guess what? No Bruce! He had checked out earlier that morning (with our luggage) and the phone messages we had been leaving from Acatlan crying for help had not reached him.

We rented a room, took showers and prepared for dinner. Our choice for dinner dress was between dirty, smelly, wet driving suits and dirty, smelly, dry pants and T-shirts. We opted for the latter and chose the cheaper restaurant in our upscale hotel where the maitre'd stashed us in a dark corner downwind from other guests.

The next morning, as soon as a respectable hour appeared on the clock, I called Tex Smith in Driggs, Idaho, to see if he could find us an English-speaking hot rod in Mexico City to help find parts. Thirty minutes later, Tex responded with the name of a Mexican who was building '32, 'A' and 'T' frames and fiberglass bodies for sale in the U.S. Tex had met him at the Minneapolis Street Rod Nationals, and recalled that he spoke excellent English. Hot Dawg!

We called the number given us and reached Carlos Lara. We explained our plight and Carlos said he would be happy to help us locate parts, then take us to the airport where we could rent a car for our rescue trip to Acatlan. We

took a taxi to Carlos' plant and were pleasantly surprised to find a large, well-equipped facility making excellent frames and glass bodies.

Carlos had asked another local hot rodder, Roberto Monje, to come meet us and help with the parts we needed. As we walked around the plant, Ak and I saw a red tandem-wheeled trailer and the light bulb went on in both our brains simultaneously. "Would you consider renting us the trailer and a tow car?" we asked. "No, but I will loan it to you, along with my driver," answered Carlos. Whoopee!

Rather than having to carry parts to Acatlan and avoiding the jaws of a junkyard dog, we would just take the trailer to the wounded machine, load it up and bring it back to Carlos' comfortable shop, where there were plenty of tools plus Carlos and Roberto to assist us. Ten hours later, after terrorizing the driver, Martin, when we commandeered the wheel of the Ford pickup and substantially increased our travel speed, we were back in Carlos' shop with El Caballo on the trailer.

The next morning, we hustled to Carlos' shop, where Roberto met us and we finally diagnosed our problem. The engine fire in Laredo had burned wiring between the alternator and the regulator beneath the dash, and the alternator was charging to ground. Also, Luis' circuit checking had burned a few contacts out of the ignition switch.

One of the problems with growing more mature is that neither Ak nor I could get our eyes to focus when lying upside down beneath the dash of a '27 T. Roberto's eyes were great and with knowledge to match, he soon corrected the wiring. In the meantime, Carlos contributed a used Corvette distributor, which we robbed of parts, then added a new coil and cap to switch the ignition back to the old familiar points and condenser variety to replace the electronics that had been zapped.

Now we were finally ready to head toward the finish line in Nuevo Laredo. Bruce had called in from Zacatecas the night before, and was greatly relieved to find us still alive. Fearing we were at the bottom of a canyon somewhere, Bruce had been trying to enlist the Carrera officials to halt the race and turn all the cars around to come back looking for us.

We told him to let the race go on, but to come back to Mexico City: "It's your turn to drive!"

So, on the morning of the sixth and final day of the new Mexican Road Race, Bruce and his girlfriend, Nancy Garnes, left the world's most populous city at 5:30 a.m. in El Caballo determined to reach Nuevo Laredo in time for the awards banquet that night. They didn't make it. Heavy rains started about 250 miles below the border, soaking them continuously for 100 miles, so they took refuge in a Monterrey hotel.

In the meantime, Ak and I had flown to Nuevo Laredo and were warm and toasty when Bruce called about 6 p.m. and told his horror story. "Tough luck, but it was your turn to drive."

The banquet/awards ceremony was noisy, smoky and beery. The original starting field of 110 cars had been pared to about half that number crossing the finish line, and all contestants were happy to see that the "old-timers" had been found. The race committee even gave Ak a trophy in recognition of his having driven in the original series.

If you want to have a great time, get yourself a 1954 or earlier vintage car and go racing. The rules are rather lenient. For instance, if you were to take a '54 Olds sedan, you could almost slip a NASCAR chassis and engine under the sheetmetal and get away with it. You are limited to 7-inch wheels and 60-series tires, but that combination gives you plenty of speed.

Take your own chase car, ample tools, spare parts, a Spanish-speaking crew member, a voltmeter, octane booster and get the names of all the Mexican hot rodgers you can find. You can't have Carlos or Roberto—they are ours!

Now, a word for our sponsors. There were four of them, all from the 1954 days, and their contributions helped Bruce finish the car in time to make the start. They are: *Hot Rod Magazine*, K&W Products, Sta-Lube Lubricants and Weiland Intake Manifolds. Thanks a lot, Pete, Dexter, Randy and Joan! We didn't do well this time, but you are all paid-up sponsors for the next time we run La Carrera Panamericana. ○