

## **What If... the Carrera Panamericana, 1954**

*by John Kuhn Bleimaier*

The Carrera Panamericana is a road race across Mexico from south to north. The original and legendary races took place in the early 1950s and burnished the reputations of the postwar European grand marques. Now, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century the Carrera Panamericana is a serious motorsports event for classic cars, running virtually the same route as its namesake, with superannuated, vintage racing machinery.

I ran the course of the Carrera back in 2006 in a press, chase vehicle following, and sometimes leading, the historic competitors on the rallye route between flat-out timed stages which took place on closed sections of road. The Mexican byways are fiercely challenging from a driver's perspective and scenically enchanting for a photographer. I will never forget the experience. Perhaps some day I will go back south of the border again for this event, this time as a competitor. After all, I have a 1964 bull-nose SAAB under restoration as we speak. But that is another story.

The 1952 Carrera Panamericana was of pivotal significance for sportscar enthusiasts. That year a Mercedes-Benz 300SL gullwing won the event outright across 2500 miles of perilous Mexican back roads, beating out Detroit competitors with twice the engine displacement and Ferraris with double the number of cylinders. The '52 Carrera reestablished Germany as an engineering and motorsports powerhouse.

When Mercedes went on to concentrate on formula one with their desmodromic valved 300SLRs, it was Porsche's turn to take center stage at the Carrera Panamericana. In 1954 Porsche swept the under two liter class in the Mexican road race and established itself as the giant killer in motorsport. In addition to the class win, the four-banger Porsches took third and fourth places overall, behind a brace of twelve cylinder Ferraris. This was critically important for the little Zuffenhausen firm because Porsche had just launched itself as an independent sportscar manufacturer. To this day the moniker, Carrera, is proudly affixed to the hottest Porsche models, commemorating that epic 1954 achievement.

As an amateur historian I am fascinated by the great "what-ifs" of history. What if William the Conqueror had stumbled at Hastings? What if the Hessians had not partied so intensely on Christmas Eve 1776 at Trenton? Well, here is an automotive "what-if" for you. What if Karl-Günther Bechem had not crashed his Borgward on that twisty Mexican back road back in '54?

You see, the leader in the small displacement class in the 1954 Carrera Panamericana was a Borgward RS55 during critical stages of the 2500 mile race, with the gaggle of mid-engined, air-cooled Porsches trailing well behind. Karl-Günther Bechem crashed the lone Borgward racecar and Porsche went on to sweep the small sportscar class in the Carrera and gain enormous international publicity. After the "DNF" in the Carrera, the plucky Borgward car company of Bremen, Germany sputtered on until

bankruptcy in 1963. Porsche, on the other hand, went on to glittering solvency and multiple competition successes.

If Bechem had not misjudged that fateful curve and had not crashed his Borgward; if he had gone on to win his class in the 1954 Carrera; is it possible that Borgward would today be the car of choice of the sporting set, the darling of dedicated drivers and dilettantes? Might Borgward today be marketing a fleet of big bucks vehicles with sporting pretensions, while continuing to contend with the other big boys at LeMans and other storied tracks? Conversely, might the Porsche firm have ended up as an intriguing, air-cooled footnote in the history of motorsports? Who can tell?

There is an old saying, “You cannot out run your fate.” In 1962 and ’63 a pint-sized Swedish company called Svenska Aeroplan AB won the world class Monte Carlo Rallies outright, back-to-back, beating Ferrari, Mercedes, Jaguar and Porsche. Those Swedes from Trollhattan went on to build a creditable line of motorcars for the enthusiast market. But they never did break into the big-time. In 2011, SAAB finally went bankrupt. Who’s to say if Borgward might not have met a similar fate, even if they had won the ’54 Carrera Panamericana?

After all, it’s marketing folks and bean-counters who make for success in the global automotive industry. Porsche has had some of the best in the business. Porsche also happens to continue to build fine motorcars.

*Below a Borgward poster commemorating participation in the 1953 Carrera, “the most deadly race in the world.”*

