

—Robert Flora photo

HOT ROD IN MEXICO

PHOTOGRAPHED AND REPORTED BY DEAN MOON

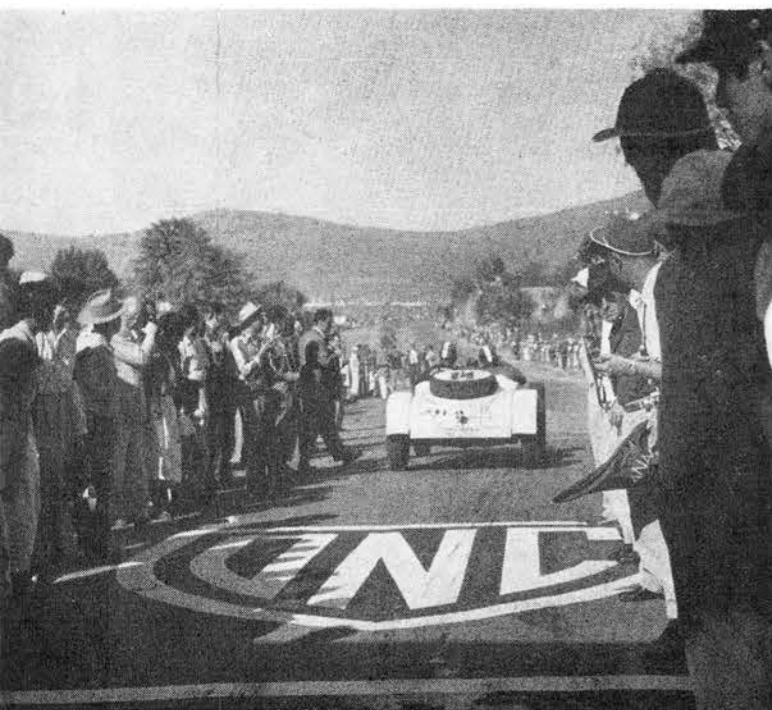
MOST SURPRISING story to come out of the 1953 Mexican road race was the performance of the hot rod, jointly built and run by Ak Miller and Doug Harrison, in the big sports car division. At the starting line, near the Guatemalan border, the home-constructed product from a Whittier, Calif., workshop, was the butt of many a joke.

But as the trim entry completed leg after leg of the rugged 1,933-mile race northward, the smiles of tolerant amusement on the faces of rival competitors were replaced by looks of respect.

Veteran observers began to point out that the non-professional drivers and their non-factory machine were the only amateur combination to keep pace with the expensive foreign machines and finish. Thus, despite the fact that their time of 22:07:36 was substantially behind that of other entries, they scored a moral victory.

Miller and Harrison, at the outset, were severely handicapped as drivers. Dry lakes and other straightaway competition is no substitute for road racing experience. Had winner Juan Manuel Fangio, 1951 world grand prix champion, been in a car similar to the hot rod, Miller and Harrison could not have matched him in skill and ability. If the time of the hot rod is compared with that of the Lincolns in the stock car

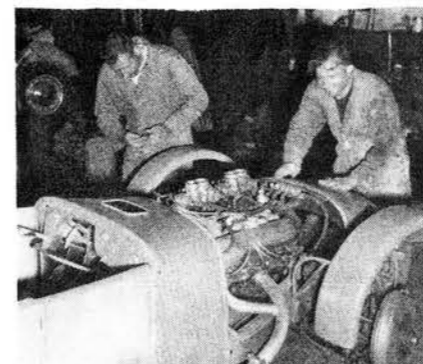
Hot rod, leaving starting line at left and finishing at top of page, was only homemade car ever to complete the road race



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Amid litter of final preparations, Ak Miller (left) installs outside headers, while Pinky Farina makes grille from strong three-quarter inch steel tubing

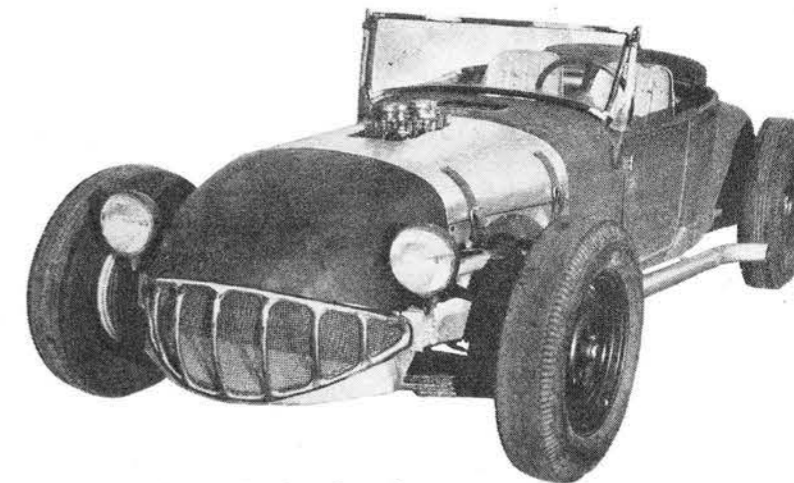


Miller and Partner Doug Harrison smile as completion of car is in sight. Engine is '51 Olds that is only slightly modified

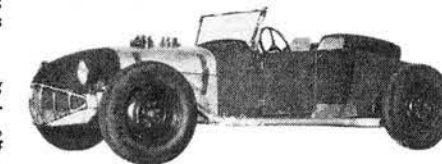
Harrison checks throttle linkage. Dual quadrijet Nison manifold was used with four model 97 Stromberg carbs on block



MOTOR LIFE, February, 1954

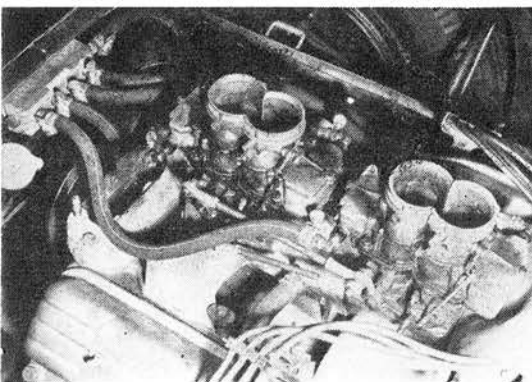


Views above and at right show how the body was adapted to conform to race rules. Wheels were Ford, mounting the 6.50 x 16 size Firestone racing tires

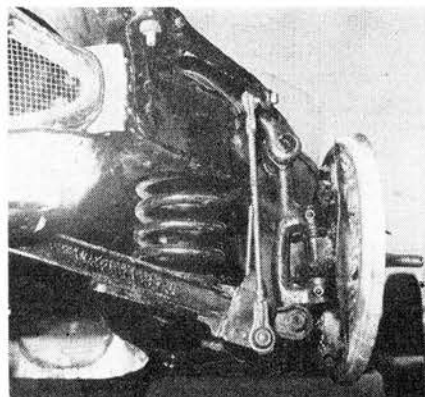


Overhead shot shows car in final racing trim. Total wet weight, including equipment, was just 3,000 lbs. Name of car, "The Iron Horse," is written on sides of hood in Spanish for Mexican spectators

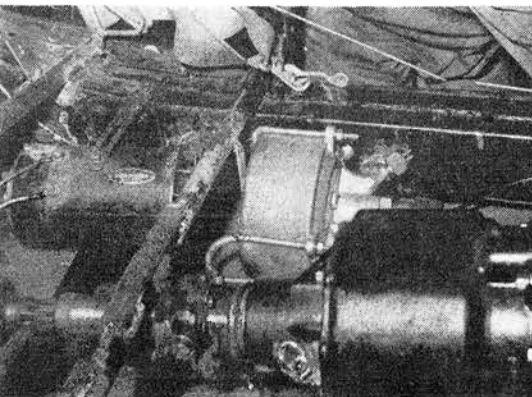




Complex carburetor setup was handled by using Moon fuel block feed system which allowed minor carburetor repairs to be made during the race in less time



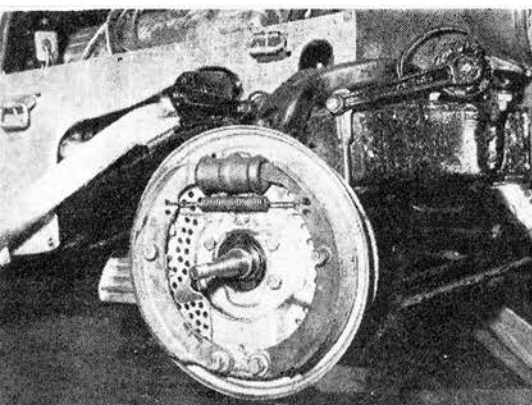
Shock links extend to lower A-frame for better actuation. Air scoop on backing plate was made from thin steel and then welded securely in proper position



Novel location of units is, from left, generator, vacuum power brake and overdrive. Area shown is that situated directly beneath the driver's bucket seat

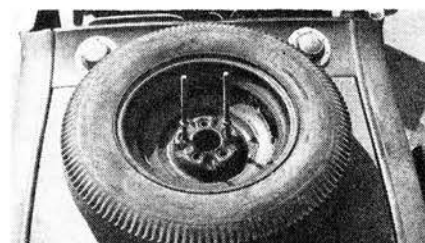
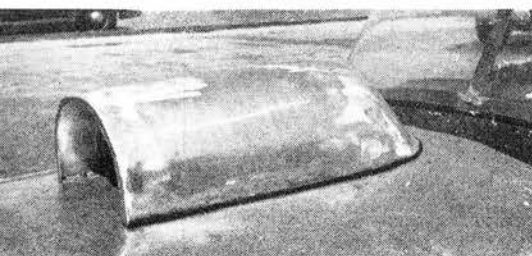


Instruments are on co-driver's side so driver could concentrate on road. Lever between seats operates overdrive, while handle atop dash is manual distributor control. Floor tach has chart, shows mph



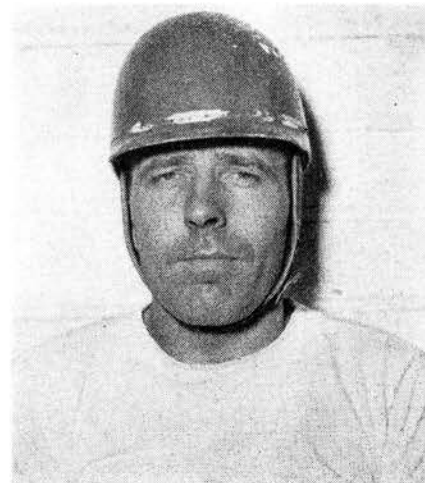
Brakes were 13-inch Chrysler Airflow with backing plates ventilated for cooling and adapted to Ford spindle

Carburetor height forced addition of hood blister. Front was screened for protection against dust and dirt on road



Two spare tires mounted on deck lid functioned as kind of "roll bar," with studs fixed to rear cross member

Official passport photo of Driver Ak Miller shows grim pose. He and Doug Harrison, co-builder of car, had run in Mexico previous year but were forced out by mechanical failure early in race



division, the same point holds true when considering the expertness of Chuck Stevenson, Walt Faulkner and the rest.

Nor did the hot rod team have the costly repair and servicing facilities of the big factory entries which were accompanied by huge vans, trucks and trailers. With time to work on cars at the finish of each day's running limited to three hours, speed was essential.

Yet, despite these limitations, the durable hot rod outlasted 50 other entries that dropped out along the way in the big sports car class.

Biggest difficulty was with the ring and pinion in the '50 Ford rear end. It constantly overheated, forced reduction in over-the-road speed and was changed five times, at each finish line. When removed for replacement, gear teeth were found to be worn to razor sharpness, which use of an unavailable lubricant would have averted. Next year Miller and Harrison will use larger teeth, as well as the correct compound.

The rough road and high speeds contributed to three other difficulties. Rear springs that were too stiff spoiled handling in 135 mph range. In addition, grease seals on transmission and wheels sprung leaks, while the trailer-type fenders, installed to conform to sports car specifications, vibrated loose and on occasion had to be taken off and carried in co-driver Harrison's lap. During the entire grind, however, the car handled well, spinning out only once and surviving the trip without major scratches or bumps on the body.

Peak known speed of the hot rod was 155 mph clocked during one stretch of the race. In fact, its acceleration was one quality which attracted the attention of the foreign drivers.

The essential components of the hot rod were a '50 Ford chassis, a '27 Model T body, a Nash overdrive unit and a moderately modified Olds 88 engine.

Fuel was carried in two 18-gallon tanks, although on one 320-mile leg, Harrison left the car and traveled in the following equipment vehicle to make room on his vacant seat for an extra can of gas. However, the reserve supply was not needed. The permanent fuel tanks, as a precautionary measure, were completely enclosed with Fiberglas as protection against broken seams. Only the filler caps were left exposed.

How do Miller and Harrison think a hot rod rates in the Mexican classic? Pretty good—good enough so that one will someday win. They are going back again next year to try. And although it is a little early to voice specific plans, they are figuring on two cars.

Will they get a pro driver to handle one of them and thus equalize one of the important factors in the race? It's not likely that they will. They are amateurs, competing for the sport of it. And they'll want to be in on the fun.