

ESCAPE ROAD

The 'Buzzard Bar' Mercedes

La Carrera's challenge included more than Mexican roads

By Roger Barlow

The world now being full of 35-year-old drivers who weren't born when the 300SL sports racing cars were created or the Mexican Road Race was held, this seems a tale worth telling, or retelling.

Fact is, I actually drove the legendary "Buzzard Bar" Mercedes—though, I'm sorry to say, not in the 1952 Carrera Pan Americana. But I *did* drive it.

Anyone who has traveled on highways outside our cities has surely seen hawks, crows, even eagles, feeding on small animals killed by cars—and may have noticed how nicely these birds time matters by flapping warily off to one side or upward to let a car pass before circling back onto the road to resume their meals.

In the Southwest, and especially in Mexico, you can add vultures (buzzards) to the list of roadway diners. These big birds are most impressive as they slowly lift a few feet into the air to let an oncoming car whoosh through their al fresco dining area and then float down for another helping. Over the years, and generations of eating well while avoiding cars, these birds have developed impeccable, if instinctive, timing.

But their conditioning is based upon normal traffic moving at normal speeds. In the '50s when the cars of the Carrera Pan America reached the desert-plains of Mexico and began to cruise along at speeds of over 130 mph, drivers reported some hilarious occasions when the big birds delayed their lift-off almost too long and only managed to gain sufficient altitude to clear a car by a foot or two...then were spun about, swirled and tumbled by the violence of the air displaced by the car they had just avoided.

Thus, at something like 160 mph, the Mercedes with Karl Kling at the wheel bore down upon a vulture that was enjoying Conejo de Camino, fully anticipating that this bird would rise to the occasion as had all the others encountered thus far. However, this one had, perhaps, dined too well, or may have been a slow-witted avian tourist from Texas where the speed limit was 50 mph, and so never got to more than hood height before (as the Pentagon might report it) impacting the Mercedes, smashing into and through the windscreen. Fortunately on the co-driver's

side, otherwise the car would surely have left the road with devastating results.

Actually the buzzard didn't just smash through the windshield. Such was the force of the impact that the poor creature also took out the rear window as it exited the car after bouncing off Herr Kling, having raked him with talons, flying glass and bones—



'Buzzard bars' and all, car #4 makes national television debut

leaving a trail of blood, feathers, entrails and a very nasty odor. However, Mercedes #4 completed the day's part of the course.

But before the race restarted the next morning, M-B going on to finish 1-2, their mechanics made automotive history by fabricating metal tubes to protect the windscreen from any other birds that might be struck. "Buzzard Bars" had been invented!

How did I get to drive Kling's winning car and actually see the world from behind those bars? Easy. We, as M-B distributors for Southern California and adjoining states, cabled a request to Stuttgart to have one of the cars for a week or two for publicity purposes and it was immediately flown to us from Texas. But with instructions not to use

it for our pleasure or for demonstration runs. My partner drove it in from the airport and a couple of nights later it was on network TV. Neither Gable nor Cooper were in Hollywood at this time so we never had to deal with the ethics of forbidden demonstrations.

When the car was to be sent to New York for display, I drove it to the airport. To avoid traffic, and the obvious risk of damage, I did as Robert Frost once did: Where two streets diverged, but making do without Frost's yellow wood, "I took the road less traveled by." And, like the poet, now "till of it without a sigh." For this less traveled road wound up a made-for-sports-cars canyon and snaked along a twisting ridge for a few miles. On the way to the airport. Of course.

I never saw the road from behind the buzzard bars at 160 mph, but I did get to sample something of the acceleration and handling of the car that had set the automotive world on its collective ear. For a full-race sports car it was surprisingly tractable, civilized and well finished. Once inside, the high sills imparted an unusual sense of security. I'm sure its 0-60 time was not equal (by two or three seconds) to the supercars of today and its rear suspension not as effective as that of the latest Ferrari. Or, indeed, the latest Mercedes. But it had just trounced the best cars in the world on the roads of Mexico. And it was streets ahead of an XK Jaguar or Aston Martin on all counts.

Every auto writer (including me) has at one time or another commented disparagingly about the poor, even dangerous, handling characteristics of cars with swing axles. God knows they had shortcomings, but even in '52 the swing axle used by Mercedes on the 300 Series and the SLs had far more virtues than vices. The car I drove through the curves of the less traveled roads on the way to the airport (of course), clung to

the bends, especially the roughish ones, better than anything I had yet encountered. But I was not such fool as to try those corners at the break-away point—for I had no way of knowing what it would be and no intention of risking the car to find out the hard way. Steering was a quick two turns, lock to lock.

Oh yes, the buzzard bars, were they disconcerting? Not at all. Because the car, and one's head and body, constantly make small lateral movements, one's eyes, in effect, see around the bars which, like windshield wipers, never obscure anything in front. No, the bars didn't get to show how well they could do their job, for that day no buzzards were lunching on the road.

To the airport. Of course. ■