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Get the Cows Off the Road! Public Safety, Right-of-Way, and the Creation of the Transit Police for Mexico's Highways, 1936-1955

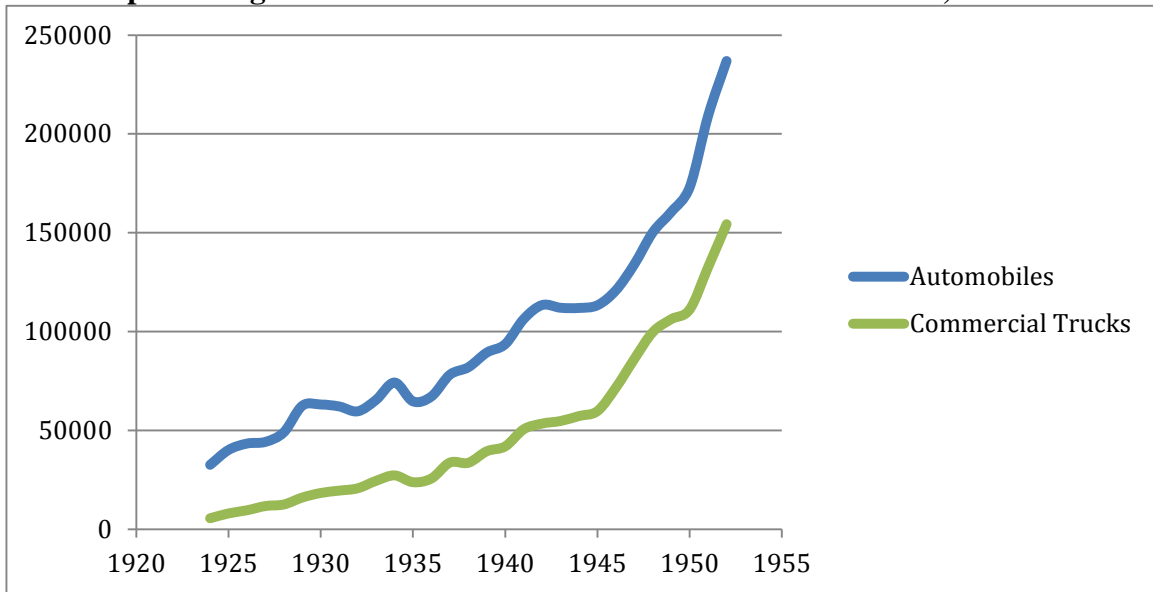
In June 1950, a family from Pennsylvania joined thousands of other American motor tourists when they embarked on a summer road trip, driving across the United States and into Mexico via the border crossing at Laredo, Texas. Their travel sadly made headlines when the group suffered a traumatic accident on the national highway outside of Ciénaga de Flores, in the northern Mexican state of Nuevo León. During the afternoon hours of June 4th, as their 1949-model Packard sedan negotiated a sharp mountain curve, the vehicle collided with a cargo truck travelling in the opposite direction. A young woman and a girl, eighteen and twelve years old, respectively, died at the scene, while Red Cross ambulances transported the remaining injured to a local hospital for treatment.¹

The public outcry that followed added more voices to popular concerns over motor safety. Mexican businesses that benefited from U.S. tourism feared similar cases could irrevocably tarnish the country's image as a desirable destination for foreigners. They joined automobile clubs and local communities that had long criticized the dangers of poor road design, reckless driving, and unconventional uses of motor routes. For years, Mexican local, state and federal officials had enacted new regulatory strategies that addressed these concerns with varying degrees of success. This paper briefly examines some key policies, including the establishment of the national highway police and the evolution of traffic ordinances and enforcement after 1930. It argues that political attempts to address road safety ultimately revealed complex underlying social tensions that marked everyday mobility in postrevolutionary Mexico.

In another case, in the same region where the first example occurred, residents of a small rural town, Paseo de la Loma, filed a formal complaint with the state road board over the impact of reckless driving in their area. In July 1945, a bus carrying tourists en route to the state capital of Monterrey from the U.S.-Mexico border near Reynosa struck and killed a six-year-old girl walking along the highway. In the grievance, the town's inhabitants stated that not only was the bus travelling at excessive speeds, but when they apprehended the driver, police learned that he also lacked a valid license to operate that class of vehicle. In response to this tragedy, the town called for the state to lower the regional speed limit and increase highway police patrols, noting this incident was not the first time they had suffered such an accident.²

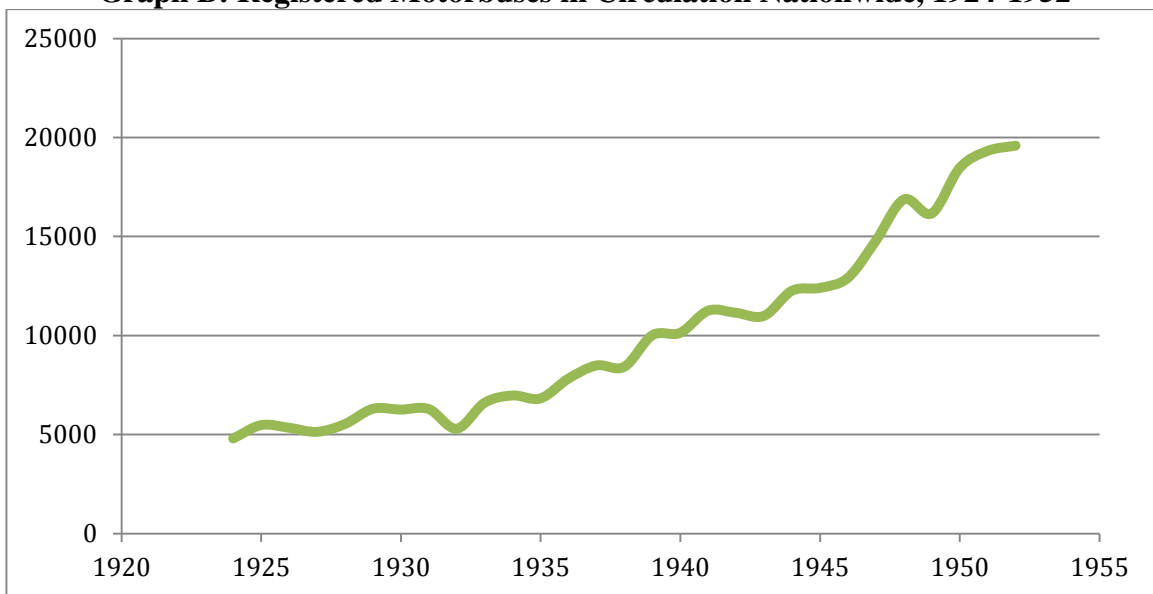
The juxtaposition of these examples indicates how concern for road safety was widespread in Mexico. Not limited to the middle-class Mexicans and foreigners who could afford to purchase individual sedans, in fact, many average people accessed motor travel through affordable bus fares, walked along the routes, and even used them to herd cattle in some instances. Motor roads were not remote fixtures within a modernizing state, cordoned off from daily life. Instead, they were important transit spaces that knitted regional markets into a national economy, and served as areas where citizens and foreigners came into contact with one another (the graphs below indicate rising motor vehicle usage). Given the key practical role that roads played in everyday economic interactions, the specter of motor accidents heightened general concerns about public safety and accessibility. As a result, the Mexican state acted to mitigate these fears through the application of new laws and police bureaucracies.

Graph A: Registered Motor Vehicles In Circulation Nationwide, 1924-1952



Source: 50 años de Revolución Mexicana en cifras, Nacional Financiera, S.A

Graph B: Registered Motorbuses in Circulation Nationwide, 1924-1952



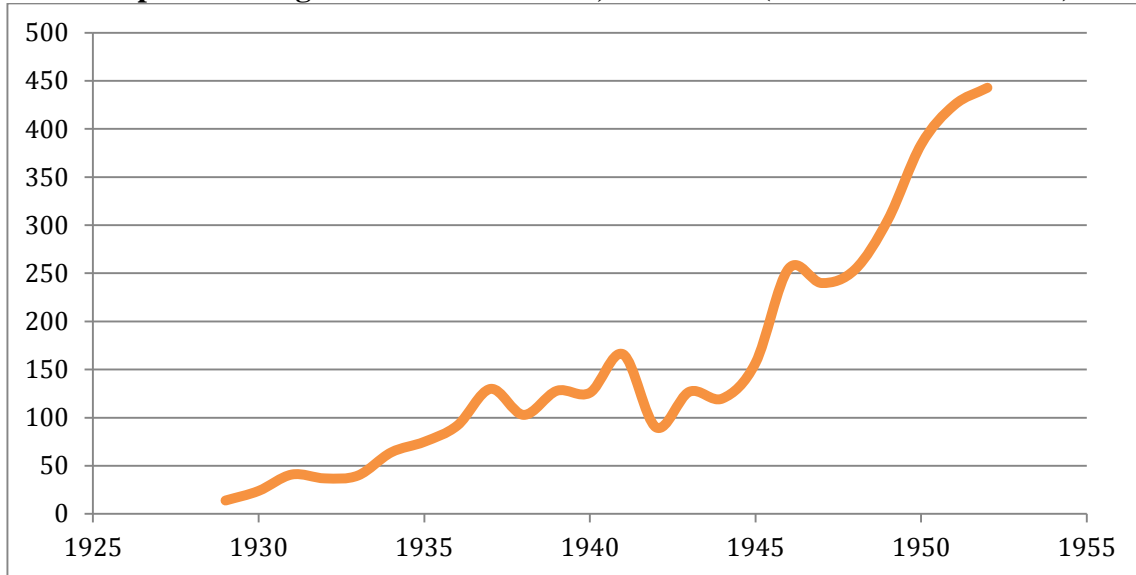
Source: 50 años de Revolución Mexicana en cifras, Nacional Financiera, S.A

The 1930s and 1940s saw a number of important strategies emerge to address questions of road safety. Formed in 1931, the Policía Federal de Caminos became the country's first professional police authority for highways. Initially part of the National Road Commission, the new agency was not only tasked with conducting highway patrols, but was also required to

protect federal road-building crews working across Mexico. For much of its first ten years, however, the *Policía Federal de Caminos* remained relatively small, employing typically between fifty and sixty-five officers to serve the entire country. By 1939, in response to public calls for a more robust police presence on the nation's roads, President Lázaro Cárdenas expanded the force and reorganized it with a new command-and-control structure. Later, in the early 1950s, with motor travel increasing during the postwar economic boom, then-president Miguel Alemán again increased the size and scope of the agency, and also established a permanent training academy to produce new highway patrol officers.³

The evolution of the *Policía Federal de Caminos* underscores Mexico's responses to safety challenges on the nation's roads. In the 1920s and early 1930s, even after the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution had come to an end, the government and opposition groups still clashed violently in some parts of the country. The need to protect construction crews was an important concern, and the PFC dedicated significant resources to guarding the engineers and laborers who worked for the National Road Commission. Over time, however, as economic and political change gradually occurred and the country stabilized, foreign tourism (see graph below) became an increasingly desirable potential source of income for communities, businesses, and the state. By touting new reforms and also expanding the highway patrol, both presidents Cárdenas and Alemán were cognizant of how the *Policía Federal de Caminos* could serve as a potent symbol to reassure travellers about their safety on Mexican roads.

Graph C: Foreign Tourism to Mexico, 1928-1952 (Thousands of visitors)



Source: *50 años de Revolución Mexicana en cifras*, Nacional Financiera, S.A

The public spectacle surrounding the opening of the Monterrey-Reynosa Highway emphasizes the importance of the highway police to help project an image of Mexico as secure for motor travel. In the summer of 1941, as state and federal authorities organized driving tours and bused people from all across Nuevo León to attend commemoration ceremonies in Monterrey, the *Policía Federal de Caminos* played a prominent role. Riding official motorcycles and wearing formal dress uniforms, the force led the opening parade that preceded speeches by the governor and other dignitaries. The squadron made for an impressive sight on the front pages of Monterrey's *El Porvenir* and other city newspapers. By having the PFC take such a central place at the start of the events, the Mexican government publically reiterated its commitment to road safety, promoting the strong visual message of a professionalized police force ready to enforce the country's traffic laws and protect travelers.⁴

Whereas the federal government funded the highway patrol, at the municipal level enforcement activities were usually carried out by traffic agencies that operated within the state road-building and urban development bureaucracies. By the early 1930s, traffic agents were giving out fines to individuals who committed minor infractions (usually in the amount of ten pesos---an estimated \$40 in 2014 dollars). In more serious cases, they detained the offenders and forwarded the matter to local magistrates for consideration. For example, in 1932, traffic officers in Xalapa, the state capital of Veracruz, apprehended three joyriders who were driving recklessly down the wrong way of a busy city street. In its report to the mayor's office, the head of the Department for Urban Development---which supervised the traffic agency---stated that the accused men had posed a serious threat to the safety of nearby pedestrians and drivers. At the time, the case was under review by a judge per institutional guidelines.⁵ In subsequent years, new reforms to traffic ordinances and enforcement not only increased penalties, but also streamlined prosecution procedures, allowing offenders to be processed more efficiently.

Transit authorities launched new initiatives to regulate motor traffic in an effort to reassure travelers and communities. In the mid-1930s, public authorities across Mexico began vehicle inspection programs, reviewing the maintenance records of commercial trucks and motorbuses. Administrators also issued new rules that restricted access for trucks weighing in excess of 12-tons from using some regional roads, in order to protect surface quality and reduce the possibility for accidents. Although it is unclear from archival data how well these statutes were enforced, they highlight growing official concern about increased motor traffic. In addition to these measures, state governments raised penalties for drunk driving, recklessness, and speeding, while municipal authorities installed traffic signals and improved lighting at night on city streets to assist motorists.⁶

By the 1940s, another critical area of safety policy dealt with the policing of local spaces around roads. The impact of the decisions public officials made to reduce roadside dangers for motorists, however, had a disproportionate impact on how rural communities used and accessed these routes. Automobile collisions with farm animals served as a potent fear for many middle-class and urban Mexicans and newspapers, at the time, reported this problem to be a growing threat to drivers. Although transit agencies did not keep detailed statistical data on the issue, thus making it difficult to ascertain the veracity of media claims about accidents involving livestock, state and municipal governments did enact strict new ordinances that prohibited farmers and ranchers from using highways to herd cattle, citing public safety concerns.⁷

So palpable was the fear of cattle lurking on the road that it made for an effective advertising message for headlight manufacturers and service companies. A 1942 newspaper advertisement for *Servicio Automotriz Nacional* offered practical advice in its pitch to consumers: “You shouldn’t drive at any speed if your car lights don’t give you sufficient visibility.” It invited drivers to come into the shop to ensure their lights worked properly and were leveled to maximize visibility. An accompanying cartoon image depicted a lone automobile at night on a highway with bright headlights that revealed a cow standing in the distance. The advertisement concluded, “Take advantage of the entire beam of light!”⁸

This fear of unfettered rural spaces played out in other ways that highlighted the complex nature state transit regulations and their impact life along highways. In some parts of the country, disputes over access to water collided with concerns over road safety. For example, in July 1942, the state road board in Nuevo León ordered local residents that lived by the highway between Monterrey and Saltillo to fill in the irrigation canals they had dug for their farms. The agency planned to widen the road, stating that farmers’ irrigation works were too close to the route and

thus endangered motorists. Arguing that highway improvements took precedence over local land use, the board ultimately prevailed against the farmers. In contrast, however, a separate case involving rancher shows how an individual, adversely affected by motor accidents, successfully extracted funds from the state road board to install pipes to move water from a nearby lake to his cattle. The rancher told government officials that his land had been divided after a new road was built and his herd could no longer safely reach their water source. When a motorist struck one of the cows, he reiterated his plea for something to be done; in response, state authorities agreed to finally pay for and build tubing to transport water beneath the road, bringing it closer to the herd.⁹

Savvy local residents utilized public safety concerns in ways that could challenge government road-building projects. For example, in 1941, in Xico, Veracruz, a wealthy landowner opposed a seven-kilometer stretch of road under construction that reduced travel times in the region, because the route cut through a ranch he owned, placing the entire investment in jeopardy if completed. In formulating his argument against the project, he complained that the road would be too dangerous for motorists due to the mountainous terrain. He also cited the lack of fences on properties owned by neighboring ranchers, saying this problem could increase the potential for collisions with livestock. The landowner proposed re-routing the road and also requested that the state pay an indemnity for the damages crews had already caused to his property. The state ultimately acquiesced. By citing concerns tied to prevailing fears about roadside dangers, particularly unfettered rural spaces, this case indicates how some residents affected by road construction could utilize the language of public safety, bending it to their advantage. As such, although state policy efforts tended to negatively affect

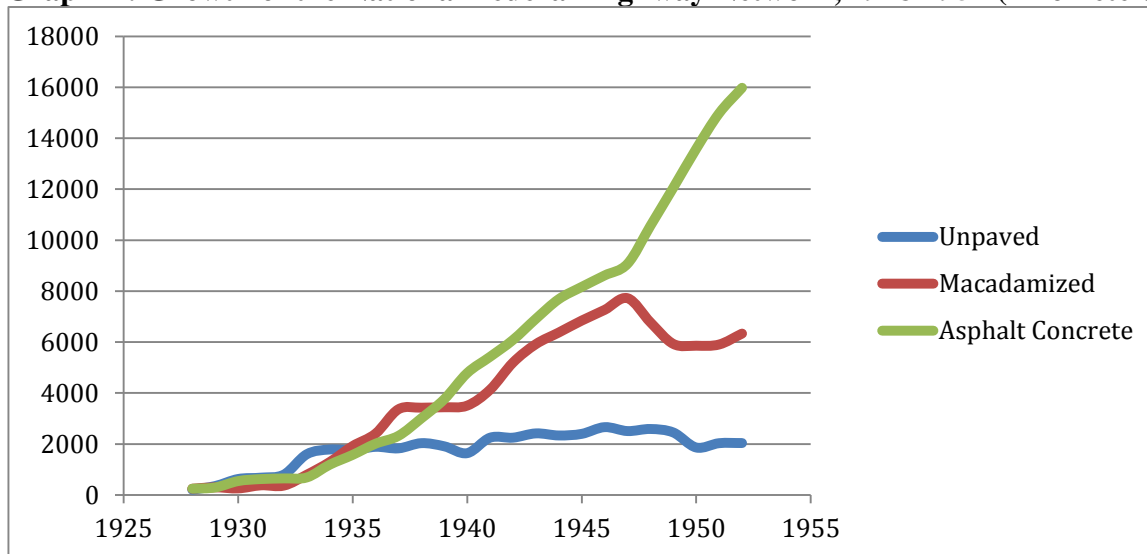
rural land use in favor of motorists, in certain situations, citizens could engage these rules in ways that forced governments to reconsider exiting highway blueprints.¹⁰

Beyond the spatial considerations of ensuring that land was properly fenced and neighboring residents did not build too closely to established thoroughfares, the impact of bad weather also brought road safety concerns to the forefront of regional political discussions. Due to budget constraints and planning decisions, in the late 1920s and early 1930s many secondary roads were unpaved dirt routes. Even regional roads between economically important cities could lack adequate macadam or asphalt surfaces, which became a significant problem for the buses and heavy trucks that used these routes during months of heavy seasonal rainfall. For example, in 1934, a municipal official from Huatusco, Veracruz, complained to the state government, “It is not uncommon for whole regions to be left impassable due to the heavy rains, which block the roads for cars and other vehicles.”¹¹

Increasingly, local residents lobbied federal and state authorities for better quality secondary roads. Archival data indicates that the Mexican government responded positively to these requests, using road bonds and foreign investment to boost road-building budgets that emphasized construction of asphalt routes. As the graphic below indicates, whereas the 1920s and 1930s saw the kinds of roads built to be relatively evenly distributed between unpaved, macadam, and asphalt, by the 1940s, a notable rise occurred in the deployment of asphalt roads that continued markedly into the 1950s. In certain respects, this shift in road-building policy addressed many of the same economic and political trends that had also influenced the evolution of the national highway patrol. The greater professionalization of road-building agencies, as well as the growth of motor tourism, regional bus transport, and ground shipping combined to

facilitate improvements to the network of secondary roads connected to Mexico's highways after 1936.¹²

Graph D: Growth of the National Federal Highway Network, 1928-1952 (Kilometers)



Source: *50 años de Revolución Mexicana en cifras*, Nacional Financiera, S.A

The examples cited above provide a glimpse of the often contentious politics that surrounded public safety concerns on Mexico's roads. The nation negotiated acute challenges that affected many aspects of daily mobility. For the government, new ordinances served as a means to project confidence to domestic and foreign travellers, especially as motor travel and tourism became more important to the business community. Implementation of these rules, however, could disproportionately affect how rural citizens utilized local spaces and also how they accessed modern thoroughfares. By prioritizing highway construction over other land use activities, and citing public safety concerns in the process, the Mexican state signaled its support for motorists at the expense of others. In this sense, traffic laws were closely bound to larger developmental themes that sought to illustrate a very particular image of Mexico as modern.¹³

National and state governments and motorists were not the only ones who voiced concern and directed policy goals, however. Rural communities also utilized the language of public

safety to demand state concessions in order to better protect their own living spaces. Local campaigns to reduce speed limits and increase highway patrols, along with popular demands for better driving surfaces, spoke to the reality that motor roads played an integral role in everyday life, regardless of whether someone could afford an automobile of their own. Ultimately, the economic opportunities that new highways brought also carried the concomitant challenge of rising motor traffic, which greatly affected how people could use roadside spaces.

In conclusion, there is still much more work that needs to be done in the study of Mexico's history of traffic laws and highway patrol. Historians have yet to fully examine the *Policía Federal de Caminos* to better understand the role this agency played, not only as an enforcer of national and state transit laws, but also as a social unit composed of professional officers that interacted with everyday Mexicans and foreigners. Likewise, further analysis of how traffic ordinances affected daily life, and also how transit policy reflected social, political, and economic negotiations over the use of space remains to be done. There is much to be learned from federal and state archives, which provide a wealth of official correspondence on the creation of Mexico's highway police and the implementation of new traffic management strategies. To date, many of these rich primary sources remain unexplored, awaiting scholars' attention.

¹ "Dos turistas muertas y cuatro heridos en colisión sobre la carretera México-Laredo," *El Norte*, 4 June 1950.

² Letter from residents of Paso de la Loma to Domínguez, 9 July 1945, JLCNL, box 40, Archivo Histórico (AH), Archivo General del Gobierno de Nuevo León (AGGNL).

³ Historia de la Policía Federal de Caminos-S.C.O.P.-S.C.T. (1925-1999), see "Creación de la DGAF," <http://www.sct.gob.mx/transporte-y-medicina-preventiva/autotransporte-federal/datos-generales/> [last accessed: 26 July 2014]

⁴ “Mañana se inaugura la carretera,” 18 September and “A las diez horas de ayer partió la comitiva inaugural,” 20 September, both *El Porvenir*; “La ceremonia de la Inauguración de la Carretera y los Festejos de McAllen,” *El Porvenir*, 21 September 1941

⁵ Secretaría de Gobierno (SEGOB), Departamento de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas (DCOP), Ref. II.O.34, Núm. 6, Presidente Municipal de Jalapa, Asuntos relativos a quejas del Ayuntamiento por infracción al Reglamento de Tráfico, Expediente 273.

⁶ Letter to Adolfo Ruíz Cortinez from the Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas (SCOP), 8 May 1946, Archivos Clasificados (AC), Expediente 317/0 R2, (Archivo General del Estado de Veracruz) AGEV; José Peña Avila, letter to the Junta Local de Caminos de Nuevo León (JLCNL), 20 June 1945, JLCNL, box 40, AH, AGGNL; Luís Benítez, *Gaceta Oficial del Estado de Veracruz*, June 1942, box 958, AC, AGEV.

⁷ “Recibieron orden de evitar que el ganado transite por las carreteras,” *El Porvenir*, 19 February 1949; “Deben retirar sus animales de la carretera,” 14 November 1950, *El Dictamen*.

⁸ Servicio Automotriz Nacional (SAN), “...Y debe usted creerlo!” (Advertisement) *El Porvenir*, 1 April 1942.

⁹ Domínguez, letter to Elíseo B Sánchez, 26 June 1942; Armando Arteaga y Santoyo, letter to Pablo Domínguez, 17 August 1942, JLCNL, box 33, AH, AGGNL.

¹⁰ Rendón, letter to Dario Soto Peredo, 23 September 1941; Peredo, letter to Rendón, 2 October 1941, caja 834, AC, AGEV.

¹¹ DCOP, Folder: Todo lo relacionado con la petrolización del Camino Carretero Cordoba-Orizaba, May 1934, No. 7, Ref. II.2.002, SEGOB, Fondo de Comunicaciones y Obras Públicas (COP), box 63; DCOP, Folder: Solicita que el camino de Huatusco a Puente Nacional, box 66.

¹² Francis Brown, “Mexico’s Season On,” *New York Times*, 3 January 1937; Russell Franck, “Good Roads in Mexico,” *New York Times*, 3 September 1939; Nacional Financiera, S.A., *50 años de revolución mexicana en cifras* (México: Nacional Financiera, 1963), 100; Lázaro Cárdenas, Informes Presidenciales (IP), Cámara de Diputados (CD), Dirección de Servicios de Investigación y Análisis (DSI), Mexico City (2006); “Las carreteras en México,” *Eco Xalapeño*, 10 December 1937. Virginia Lee Warren, “Mexico Expedites Highway Projects,” *The New York Times*, 3 February 1947; Miguel Alemán, I Informe de Gobierno, 1 September 1947, 32-34 and II Informe de Gobierno, 1 September 1948, IP, CD, DSI (2006), 63-65.

¹³ J. Brian Freeman’s work on international, cross-country motor races in Mexico provides an excellent study of motor mobility, highway usage, and the unintended consequences of media coverage within the context of modernization as public spectacle, see “‘La carrera de la muerte’: Death, Driving, and Rituals of Modernization in 1950s Mexico,” *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture*, Vol. 29 (2011).