

## Guadalajara-Chapala bus service in 1917: fact or fiction?

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I have been fascinated by different forms of transport ever since I was a child. Steam locomotives? Count me in! Steamships? Count me in! Stagecoaches... you get the idea. Perhaps this is why this sentence in Antonio de Alba's 1954 history of Chapala jumped out at me:

"Around 1917, Messrs. Garnot and Maldonat, from Guadalajara, established a "Wichita" bus service between Guadalajara and Chapala."<sup>1</sup>

Is this fact or fiction, myth or reality? This article explores the key elements of this short sentence that so intrigued me: What is a 'Wichita' bus service? Was a bus service started in 1917? And who were Messrs. Garnot and Maldonat?

### Background

Antonio de Alba openly acknowledged that he based this part of his book on information shared with him by his parishioners decades after the events in question, a methodology which brought some serious limitations.<sup>2</sup>

In regard to the buses, de Alba explained that the vehicles were large, had solid tires, and could carry up to 40 passengers – five passengers to each transverse seat. The service proved to be unprofitable, because of the high price passengers were charged for each trip, and because the trip, supposed to take around five hours, almost invariably took longer due to frequent mechanical breakdowns. In addition, the rough road meant that passengers arrived at their destination bruised and shaken, so many preferred to use the stagecoach via Atequiza.

De Alba's description has often been quoted since in print and social media posts, without any meaningful context, analysis or critique. His entire description was incorporated, unattributed and with one minor change ('cinco personas' for 'cinco pasajeros') in a feature article in *El Informador* in 1991 about overland transport between Guadalajara and Chapala.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Original Spanish text: "Autobuses. Por el año 1917 los Sres. Garnot y Maldonat, de Guadalajara, establecieron un servicio de autobuses "Wichita" entre Guadalajara y Chapala. Dichos vehiculos eran unos carros enormes, de llantas sólidas, con capacidad para 40 pasajeros, con asientos transversales en que se acomodaban cinco pasajeros: pero no fue costearable su explotación por razón del elevado precio que se cobraba por el pasaje, amén de la duración del viaje que se hacía en cinco horas como mínimo; siendo casi siempre mayor a causa de las frecuentes descomposturas que sufrían los autobuses, y también por lo golpeado que llegaba el pasaje a su destino a causa del rodado tan duro que tenía, por lo que el público prefirió volver a hacer su recorrido en diligencia por Atequiza." (Antonio de Alba. 1954. *Chapala*. p 123-124).

<sup>2</sup> Tony Burton. 2022. "[Antonio de Alba and his landmark 1954 book Chapala](#)."

<sup>3</sup> Medina Loera, Javier. 1991. "Camino a Chapala: del trazo de carretas a la autopista." *El Informador*, 17 March 1991, 37. Social media posts include a [Facebook post dated 7 Oct 2022](#) by Miguel Angel Mendoza Sánchez.

## Wichita buses?

What is a 'Wichita' bus? The only likely candidate fitting this denomination appears to be a vehicle manufactured by the Wichita Falls Motor Company in Texas, which specialized in making heavy duty trucks. The company was very successful, and between 1911 and 1932 built trucks with an excellent reputation for strength and durability. Helped by high demand during the first world war, the company sold over 10,000 trucks to customers in more than 80 different countries.<sup>4</sup>



At least one of their early models was purchased in 1912 for use in Jalisco, presumably in Guadalajara.<sup>5</sup> According to Texan historian and author Hugh Hemphill, the company "introduced a road building truck in 1915 and a bus capable of seating 20 passengers soon after."<sup>6</sup> While this company clearly had a connection to Jalisco, no further details of their buses have emerged, and no evidence of them ever having been on the streets of Guadalajara.

On the other hand, a bus service to Chapala was started in 1917. It was provided by the Ford Garage in Guadalajara, a company unrelated to the Wichita Truck Company. The inauguration of this bus service followed significant improvements to the road between Guadalajara and Chapala. Early in 1917 federal President Venustiano Carranza had given the Jalisco State government 10,000 pesos towards the costs of repairing the road.<sup>7</sup> This kick-started a fundraising initiative which raised close to 115,000 pesos (\$55,000).

In late November, with road repairs complete, advertisements in *El Informador* announced a bus service between Guadalajara and Chapala, organized by Garage Ford, beginning in December. No reference is ever made to Garnot, Maldonat, or 'Wichita' vehicles, and it seems probable that the service utilized Ford vehicles of some kind. Passengers paid \$6 pesos each way. Buses (*autocaminones*), which took three hours each way, left from Garage Ford (Avenida 16 de Septiembre #311) at 8.00am daily and departed Chapala for the return trip at 3.00pm.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hugh Hemphill. Undated. "[Wichita Falls Motor Company, 1911-1932.](#)" [12 April 2018].

<sup>5</sup> Wichita Daily Times: 5 Dec 1912, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Hemphill. Undated. "[Wichita Falls Motor Company, 1911-1932.](#)" [12 April 2018].

<sup>7</sup> El Informador, 14 Nov 1917, 8.

<sup>8</sup> El Informador, 30 Nov 1917, 4. Between 1917 and 1920, there are various references to Garage Ford, S.A., in El Informador, in addition to those related to the bus excursions to Chapala. In 1917, the city council asked Garage Ford to coordinate with the municipal treasury to avoid the same car registration numbers being used on more than one vehicle. Garage Ford, S.A., changed its name in December 1919 to El Auto Universal, S.A. The company's Vice-President and General Manager remained A. Fernández, and J. de la Torre became the new company's assistant manager.

Ford buses?



Garage Ford advertisement, *El Informador* 2 December 1917.

In conjunction with Garage Ford, Alfredo Levy, owner of a steamship company, arranged Sunday bus excursions so that city workers could visit Chapala to "admire the beauties of mar Chapálico." These excursions quickly became popular; a report of the trip of 23 December 1917 describes how many "estimable young people took their seats on the buses" (note the plural), and were able to relax "at the poetic place from the fatigues of their week."<sup>9</sup>

### Garage Ford

References to Garage Ford, S.A., appear in *El Informador* from 1917 to 1920. In 1917, for example, the city council asked Garage Ford to coordinate with the municipal treasury to avoid the same car registration number being used on more than one vehicle.<sup>10</sup>

In 1918, Garage Ford was tricked by two polite, well-dressed, young men, who convinced the manager, Sr. Onesimo Arriaga, that they had permission from Sr. Pedro Viera to borrow his car (#89). Arriaga let them drive off at about 4.00pm. When their attempts shortly afterwards to fix a minor mechanical issue resulted in serious damage, a passing acquaintance towed the car back to the garage. The car's owner turned up the next day and was astonished to learn that his car was being repaired. Since he denied ever giving them permission to borrow it, the two young men were apprehended and held in Escobedo jail.<sup>11</sup>

In December 1919, Garage Ford, S.A., changed its name to El Auto Universal, S.A.<sup>12</sup> The company's Vice-President and General Manager remained A. Fernández, with J. de la Torre becoming the new company's assistant manager.

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<sup>9</sup> *El Informador*: 3 Dec 1917, 1; 24 Dec 1917, 1.

<sup>10</sup> *El Informador*: 25 Oct 1917, 2.

<sup>11</sup> *El Informador*: 4 May 1918, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *El Informador*: 17 Dec 1919, 2.

In these early years, bus service was seasonal, because the road was not always passable during the rainy season, and needed annual repairs.

In September 1918, Levy promoted an alternative means of reaching Chapala, starting with a scenic rail ride from Guadalajara to Ocotlán. From there, travelers could purchase round-trip "rapid steamship" tickets to Chapala on either the *Chapala* or the *Tizapán* for just 6 pesos, with overnight accommodation at Antonio Mólgora's Hotel Francés (formerly the Gran Hotel Victor Huber) offered at the special rate of 2.50 pesos daily for room and board.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Levy's advertisement appears alongside a much larger display advertisement in which Garage Ford offers for sale a used Ford automobile and a truck with a 'tourist' body, described as "in operation, with good profits." The bus service to Chapala—much faster than the route via Ocotlán—was reinstated in mid-October 1918, and expected "to bring higher demand for residences" and ensure a busy tourist season.<sup>14</sup>

Further improvements to the road between Guadalajara and Chapala in early 1919 reduced the travel time between the two places to about two hours each way. In March, Garage Corona advertised Sunday trips from Guadalajara by "rapid and comfortable bus with pneumatic tires." This specific mention of pneumatic tires suggests that earlier buses, Wichita or not, had solid rubber tires.<sup>15</sup>

Garage Corona buses left their office (Calle de los Heroes #125) in Guadalajara at 8.00am and departed Chapala at 5.00pm. Tickets were \$4.00 pesos each way, and available from their city office or at the Hotel Arzapalo in Chapala.<sup>16</sup> The frequency of this service increased from weekly to daily in April, and then to twice a day in December 1919.<sup>17</sup>



Garage Corona advertisement, *El Informador*, 14 March 1919

<sup>13</sup> *El Informador*, 6 September 1918, 4.

<sup>14</sup> *El Informador* - 8 October 1918, 2.

<sup>15</sup> In 1919, Garage Ford advertised Dayton Rubber Tires, which were solid (no inner tube), had an 8000-mile guarantee when fitted on light vehicles, and "ensured comfort, convenience and economy." (*El Informador*: 1 Jun 1919, 4.)

<sup>16</sup> *El Informador*: 14 March 1919, 2.

<sup>17</sup> *El Informador*: 10 April 1919, 2; 13 Dec 1919, 4.

Only in the 1930s was a truly dependable, reliable and relatively fast bus service, with several buses a day each way, established between Guadalajara and Chapala.<sup>18</sup> The Cooperativa Autotransportes Guadalajara Chapala y Anexas, S.C.L. (now Autotransportes Guadalajara Chapala, S.A. de C.V.) ran buses hourly each way from 7.00am to 8.00pm, with passengers paying 1.50 pesos one-way, or 2.50 pesos return.<sup>19</sup> A first hand account of this service was written by Leo Stanley in 1937.<sup>20</sup>

### **So, who were Garnot and Maldonat?**

The available contemporaneous evidence suggests that "Garnot and Maldonat" were Emile Garnot (1864-1937) and Adolphe Maldonat (1865-1933).<sup>21</sup>

### **Emile Auguste Garnot (1864-1937)**

Emile Auguste Garnot was born in Nevers, France, on 3 January 1864 to Paul and María Garnot. After he arrived in Mexico in 1898, he lived several years in Santa Rosalía (Baja California Sur) before moving to Guadalajara. He and his wife, Marie Louise Amélie Garnot (1874-?), had a son, Charles Emile Garnot, who was born on 6 May 1902 in Santa Rosalía and died in Paris, France, on 9 September 1955. The couple presumably had at least one other child, since Garnot's obituary refers to his wife and children (plural) living in Paris. Garnot's wife, known in Mexico as Amelia de Garnot, was an amateur concert pianist; she is mentioned in passing in a book by Lorella Castorena Davis.<sup>22</sup>



Advertisement for La Parisiense, La Paz. ca 1907.

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<sup>18</sup> La Esperanza: Vol3 #24, 12 June 1932, p 18.

<sup>19</sup> Javier Medina Loera. 1991. "Camino a Chapala: del trazo de carretas a la autopista." El Informador, 17 March 1991, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Tony Burton. 2021. [Physician Leo Stanley kept a detailed diary of his 1937 trip to Lake Chapala.](#)

<sup>21</sup> Antonio de Alba mistakenly spelled Madonnat as Maldonat, a mistake repeated in social media posts and print references to his work.

<sup>22</sup> Lorella Castorena Davis. 2000. Palabras e imágenes de la ciudad y puerto de La Paz. 1900-1959." Colegio de Bachilleres del Estado de Baja California Sur, p 110.

In Baja California Sur, by about 1907, Garnot appears to have owned or been a partner in a store in La Paz named "La Parisiense."<sup>23</sup> The same store was apparently owned at some point by Felipe R. Cota.<sup>24</sup>

Garnot is also registered as owning more than one boat in Baja California Sur. In her book about maritime trade in the ports of La Paz and Santa Rosalía, Karina Busto Ibarra names Emilio Garnot as the owner of a boat named *Dawn*, and Emilio Garnot y Cia. as owning a 7.55-meter-long, 1.4-ton *cano*a named *Amelia*. A footnote in her book refers to a 1903 document which says Garnot had an interest in the trading of henequen.<sup>25</sup>

By 1915, Garnot had moved to Guadalajara.<sup>26</sup> Given that there is no mention thereafter of his wife and children being in Mexico, it seems probable that Amelie had already moved back to Europe with the children some time earlier, perhaps when the Mexican Revolution began.

In Guadalajara, Emile Garnot was a prominent member of the French community, attending and helping organize events such as the ceremony in 1917 in Guadalajara Cathedral for allied soldiers who had lost their lives in the Great War, and a 1918 event to celebrate 14 July, just as the Allied counter-invasion in Europe was gathering strength. Garnot also attended a massive celebration in Guadalajara, following the end of the war.<sup>27</sup>

Garnot taught French privately, and in schools, including the Escuela Normal de Musica de Guadalajara.<sup>28</sup> In 1918 he opened a 'spacious and comfortable' Allied Reading Room in Guadalajara (at Portal Allende #91) offering free access to world newspapers, magazines and books—in French, English, and Spanish—and publicity material related to the allied case.<sup>29</sup> Regular advertisements for the Reading Room and Garnot's French classes appeared in *El Informador* for at least a year.

A news report from January 1918, relating to the tragic death of a child in Guadalajara after being struck by car #79 ("auto número 79"), claims that the driver was a Mr. Garnot.<sup>30</sup> This seems likely to refer to Emilio, as does a paragraph a month later saying that a "Mr A. Garnot" had been given permission to raffle an automobile he owned by selling 650 tickets for \$3.00 each. Assuming all tickets were sold, this would have raised \$1,850, the equivalent today of about \$38,000.<sup>31</sup> We can only suppose that Garnot's raffle was to raise funds for the child's family to help them cope with their loss.

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<sup>23</sup> Edith González Cruz. 2017. "[Modos de vida entre las élites porfirianas en la ciudad de La Paz, México.](#)" *Culturales*, vol.5 no.1. (Jan-Jun 2017). Mexicali.

<sup>24</sup> Lorella Castorena Davis. 2000. Palabras e imágenes de la ciudad y puerto de La Paz. 1900-1959." Colegio de Bachilleres del Estado de Baja California Sur, p 78.

<sup>25</sup> Karina Busto Ibarra. 2013. Comercio marítimo en los puertos de La Paz y Santa Rosalía, Distrito Sur de la Baja California, 1880-1910. La Paz: Gobierno del Estado de Baja California Sur, p 122, 191.

<sup>26</sup> Enrique Francisco Camarena. 1965. "¡Hace cincuenta años!" *El Informador*, 11 July 1965, 3-C. Garnot attended an event at the Guadalajara tennis club in July 1915.

<sup>27</sup> *El Informador*: 3 Nov 1917, 1; 15 July 1918, 1,4; 15 de julio de 1920.

<sup>28</sup> *El Informador*: 6 June 1924, 7; 24 August 1937.

<sup>29</sup> *El Informador*, 20 June 1918, 1.

<sup>30</sup> *El Informador* 6 Jan 1918, 4.

<sup>31</sup> *El Informador* 10 Feb 1918. (The "A." is assumed to be a typo for "E.")

Emile Garnot, whose Guadalajara home was Calle Escorza #414, died in a hospital in the city on 22 August 1937, at the age of 73, of complications from a pre-existing illness. His remains were interred in the French section of the municipal cemetery.

### **Alphonse Maldonnat (1865-1933)**

Alphonse (Alfonso) Maldonnat was a fellow Frenchman. Maldonnat, the son of Antonio and Paulina Maldonnat, was born in La Commune, Sisteron, Alpes-de-Haute, in 1865. Before moving to Guadalajara, he had previously lived in Mexico City, where he married Emilia Buxo (ca 1867-1931; born in Mexico City to French parents) in 1891. The registration of their marriage on 30 January 1891 gives Maldonnat's occupation as *sombrerero* (hat maker), and his address as Garrapata #8. Their marriage was a joint ceremony with Emilia's older sister, Angela, who married Alfonso Dabandes on the same day in the same church (Asunción Sagrario Metropolitano), with the same witnesses.<sup>32</sup>

Alphonse and Emilia Maldonnat had at least five children. Alfonso (Jan 1892-1920), María Adriana (Dec 1892-?), and Enrique (1897-?), all born in Mexico City; María Julieta (ca 1900-1988), born in Orizaba, Veracruz; and Paulina Hernanda (1903-?), born in Tlaxcala.

It is unclear when the Maldonnat family moved to Guadalajara, but they were certainly there by 1913 when Alphonse was on the board of the *Círculo Francés* in Guadalajara.<sup>33</sup> In 1919, Maldonnat attended a reception in honor of Mr Robert Cambonie in El Casino Francés, Guadalajara, at which Emilio Garnot was also a guest.<sup>34</sup>

At the time of the 1930 census, Maldonnat was one of the dozen or so foreigners then living in Chapala. The census recorded that he was 65 years of age; an industrialist, who had not worked in the past five years. Maldonnat was living with his wife, Emilia, and 35-year-old María Maldonnat at an address on Ramón Corona. All three were French citizens and French-speakers.<sup>35</sup>

In 1931, Alfonso Maldonnat 'and his family' changed their residence to calle Tolsa #665 in Guadalajara.<sup>36</sup> Emilia Buxó de Maldonnat died in the city the following year.

Maldonnat died in Guadalajara (at calle Morelos #1118) on 18 October 1933. The registration of his death described him as a businessman, aged 69, and the widower of Emilia Buxo.

### **Conclusion**

There is no clear evidence that Messrs. Garnot and Maldonnat had any connection to buses, whether in Guadalajara or elsewhere, and it remains unclear what is meant by 'Wichita' buses. But de Alba's sentence does include a grain of truth: bus services linking Guadalajara and Chapala did, indeed, begin in about 1917.

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<sup>32</sup> El Municipio Libre (Mexico City): 17 Jan 1891, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Sergio Valerio Ochoa. 2015. *Los barcelonnettes en Guadalajara, siglos XIX y XX*, Universidad de Guadalajara. Cuadro 8, p 120.

<sup>34</sup> El Informador: 4 Aug 1919, 6.

<sup>35</sup> Ancestry.com: 1930 Mexico National Census: Chapala, p 28/72.

<sup>36</sup> El Informador: 18 May 1931.