

Commentary – by Edgar A. Jurist

You think problems with incorrect options, clones passed off as real, and generally misrepresented collector cars are something new to our generation? Everyday, online discussion forums are filled with these topics. While spending some quality time in the bathroom, I came across this article published in Car Life magazine, in January, 1968. (By the way, I've been told by more than one member that the bathroom is a popular place to read our newsletter; in particular the ad page.) It's amazing how little has changed in nearly 35 years. The author, Edgar Jurist was proprietor of the Vintage Car Store, in Nyack New York – one of the first collector car dealers in the United States.

Skyrocketing values of vintage and classic automobiles have drawn to the market predators who make what the big money wants to buy. These men are forgers.



THE FRONT PAGES of newspapers across the U.S. recently carried stories on the wealthy Texan who had bought many costly works of art from Europe—only to find that many were fakes. I'm going to tell you about some very similar deceptions that are less notorious today but are likely to be the front-page stories of the very near future. They have to do with cars, not paintings, though I find that the two fields are very much alike.

As a hobby, and now as a profession, the collecting of automobiles is relatively new. Before the last war there were a few men of taste and discretion like George Waterman, Cameron Peck, Briggs Cunningham and Henry Austin Clark who began to acquire fine cars that they personally liked. But since 1948 and a conflict that drastically depleted the ranks of the great cars, with their aluminum and bronze melted down to make planes and shell casings, the collecting of antique and vintage cars became a highly popular pastime. In the two decades since, the hobby has passed through many phases, reaching its almost incredible culmination in the vast and perfect Harrah's Auto Collection.

Until about five years ago the great cars, like the J Duesenbergs and S-Type Mercedes, were still priced in the range where the "average" collector could afford to buy one, perhaps un-restored. And there are still great "finds" to be made in this country and abroad. But recently it has become clear that important cars will only in the future be owned by important money.

I wouldn't deny that The Vintage Car Store has played a part in developing this market. What value would securities have without a stock exchange where they can be bought and

sold? Our store has provided such a central clearing house. I well recall the comments, not all favorable, I received late in 1962 when I offered a Duesenberg J Murphy roadster for \$12,500. Sure, it was high for that time, but I was certain the car was worth that and later events have more than proved me right.

Whatever the impetus, the prices of the great historic cars are high and rising ever higher. As I mentioned, I find that the values vary much as they do in the art world. Like a painting, an automobile is valued in proportion to its rarity, its beauty, and its historic importance. Age, as such, is not really a factor. Some of the oldest cars, the antiques, are losing favor among modern collectors, who like to have a car that they can drive on a tour like the Glidden without breaking down or falling behind.

Again like a great painting, the restoration of a great car is to be encouraged. True restoration to original condition definitely enhances the value of an historic car. Discretion and taste are needed here also, however. A conventional restoration would not have suited the Harrah Auto Collection's famous New York-to-Paris Thomas Flyer. And a famous competition car, like Peter Helck's Locomobile or Wilbur Shaw's Maserati, should look the way it did when it was raced.

Also to be encouraged, I feel, is the reconstruction of famous and perhaps unique automobiles of which major components have been lost over the years. Such a reconstruction must be carried out with reference to original drawings and data, using the materials and fabricating methods of the time when the car was first built. Such reconstructions, as of Ed Roy's Grand Prix Delage, are major and conscientious contributions to the preservation and maintenance of the automotive breed, which is, after all, the whole purpose of this hobby.

But today there are more and more individuals who are no longer content with discovery, restoration and reconstruction. They want to go a step farther, to simulation, falsification and outright forgeries of the most coveted

cars. These are the predators who emerge to prey on the unwary or inexperienced buyer in any field when the monetary reward becomes sufficiently high. Such men are *forgers*, as much as if they were counterfeiting 20-dollar bills or Picassos. They are criminals, and they deserve to be punished as criminals.

Most widespread is the dodge of building a new and desirable body, say a boat-tail roadster or phaeton, on a fine chassis like a Rolls-Royce Ghost or Phantom that originally carried a far less appetizing sedan or limousine body. Such work, which raises the *apparent* value of the car to the inexperienced buyer, is being done quite expertly today in Great Britain and France. I recently bought two such cars myself. Both were represented as Rolls Phantom boat-tail phaetons, and in the pictures from Paris they looked great. I requested and obtained chassis numbers, however, and learned that these chassis had originally been bodied as "saloons." So before I imported them I knew they were, at best, replicas, and I have one in my showroom now, for sale as a replica. A friend of mine was less lucky. He bought a third such car from France under the impression that it was the real article.

Such replica or spurious coachwork definitely does *not* enhance the actual value of a car. In some cases a body change is all right because it was done in the car's early lifetime, and the bodies fitted were true to the times in which they were built. But a replica built today remains a replica and must be identified as such when a car changes hands. The Classic Car Club of America clearly stipulates that such replicas must be made known.

Some of the forgers go much farther than a mere body change. One of the most desired cars in the world is the Mercedes-Benz SSKL. Only one is known to exist, it is in a museum in Dresden, it is not for sale and if it were its value would be astronomical, beyond price. Only slightly less rare is the genuine SSK Mercedes. In the Midwest a man is doing a thriving business sawing up the K, S and SS

Mercedes models and making SSKs, and even an occasional SSKL. The first owner of one of these replicas undoubtedly knows it is a replica, but the second or third owner of such an expert forgery, complete even to drilled frame members and reworked engine numbers, is often under the impression that he owns a rare and extremely valuable car. But its true value is less, substantially less, than an ordinary S roadster. In fact such a car is a tribute only to its owner's poor taste and lack of sophistication.

Since they are made overseas, cars like the Rolls-Royce and Mercedes-Benz are among the easiest to forge. The Duesenberg J and SJ models are so valuable that they would be candidates for the forger if it were not for the excellent records kept by Duesenberg historian Ray Wolff. In the same way cars like the Mercer Raceabouts and Bugatti Royales are so few in number and so well known that a forgery would be easily spotted. Competition cars are also difficult to duplicate, because each has a unique, one-of-a-kind history that is on record.

The salvation of the historic car buyer is and will remain the new and growing registers being kept by clubs and individuals around the world. Bugattis, Aston Martins, Frazer-Nashes and others are recorded meticulously in published registers. Jackson Brooks in Colorado has compiled a fine register of the 8C2300 Alfa Romeos, and an individual in Germany is developing a Mercedes S-series register. These are excellent and essential to the continuance of this hobby. In addition the major one-make clubs need to form validating committees that will investigate and identify specific cars. (This is similar to steps now being taken in the art world.) The details of their deliberations should be available to all collectors, the old-timer and tyro alike.

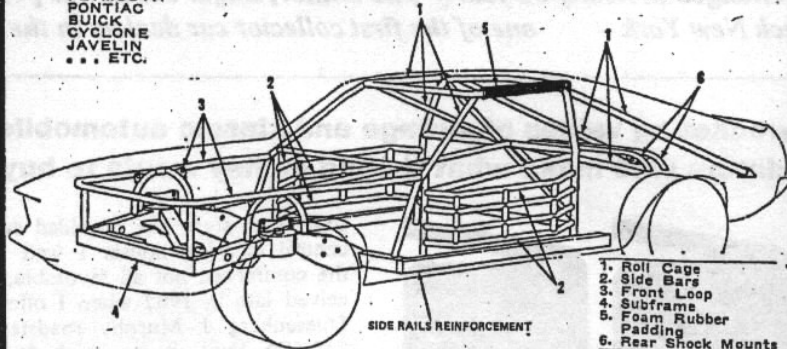
The admonition remains, now and forever: Buyer beware! In only a few more years, when values of specific cars rise above \$100,000 and reach for \$200,000, you'll see metallurgists brought in to check the age and composition of alloys used in a suspect automobile. That's not quite necessary yet, but take it from one who knows: The replicas are all around us. Don't park one in your garage.



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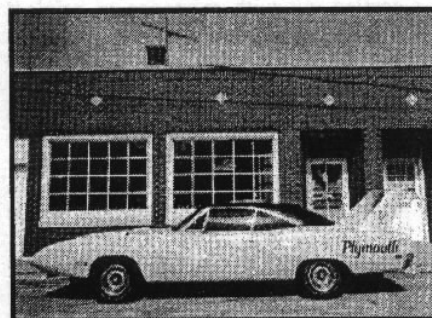
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