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## What to Keep in Mind to Avoid buying a “Lemon”

By Maria Erickson, Anoka Classic Car Show Staff Writer

I am very proud to announce that my big brother has gotten “the classic car bug”. However he, like many, many others, does not want to restore a classic car. They love and appreciate the legacies of these works of art; however, they either do not have the time or the knowledge or maybe even desire to do the motor, body or interior work. Perhaps, they are intimidated by the enormity of it all. They want to simply get into their car and drive it. I totally can appreciate this train of thought, as restoring a car is an expensive, immense and time consuming amount of work. That being said, after talking at length with my brother, he confessed his concern of purchasing an already restored classic car that is a “lemon”. That’s when I thought, “Wow, what a great idea for an article”. Yes, most of us are motor heads to one degree or another, but not everyone is. So what do THEY do? Where do they go? What do they look for? How will they know if someone is “taking” them to the cleaners? Come on, we have ALL heard the horror stories of good folks who have purchased a car either on eBay, Craigslist or just at an auction. When they get the car home to have it inspected, only to find out the car isn’t even “street or structurally SAFE” and they just laid out \$25,000!!! Even a car with obvious flaws, STILL can photograph beautifully, so attempting to ascertain value or condition from a picture is really futile. My desire is for anyone looking to purchase a classic car already restored, is that this article will take the mystery and fear out of purchasing a classic car and maybe empower you just a little bit.

When my husband and I purchased our total restoration projects, I must say that we were very, very lucky. We were as totally clueless as were the sellers who sold them to us. If there was anything terribly wrong with the engine, the seller wasn’t aware of it. For my husband, how lucky was he to begin to tear apart the engine of his 68 GTO, only to find out that it had high performance cam and heads already in there. The seller never told us that because either he didn’t know or didn’t think it was important enough to disclose, and we didn’t know to ask. For me personally, if it “looked” like a sweet ride, I only knew enough to kick the tires and to climb underneath to look at the undercarriage for extreme rust, and to make sure there was actually a trunk and floor pans, but that was pretty much it. We were planning a total restoration anyway. Knowing then what I know now, would I have still bought my car and my husbands? Yes, definitely. So then, what is it that we can do as consumers in an ever growing, explosive market to protect ourselves? You could hire someone to look at each of the cars you are interested in, but that can be pretty expensive. Unless you are looking at a Bugatti or vintage Rolls Royce, this is not very practical solution. So I decided



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to scope out some of the experts to see what they thought about this. There is always the obvious: check to be sure there ARE floor pans and for extreme rust, don't buy a car that they won't allow you to test drive, and if it doesn't have a clean/clear title, don't walk; RUN away. But they also gave me some extremely great ideas, some of which I personally NEVER even thought of.

1. First things first-Ask yourself: Do I want a car to drive and enjoy on a sunny Sunday afternoon and to take to the weekly car show? Am I looking for a "show car"; a car to trailer from show to show-in other words, a competition car? A car you won't be putting any miles on. There is a HUGE difference. In the price you'll pay AND the availability of the desired car.
2. Next-do your homework. I will say it again...DO YOUR HOMEWORK. Once you know what model/make the car is, check eBay, craigslist, and local websites to see how much that particular model with whatever options is going for so that you will know when you are getting a good buy or ripped off. Find out all the weaknesses for that particular model and make and look for them on the specific cars you are checking out. Your best source will be at your local car shows. These guys know EVERYTHING about their car. The good, the bad and the ugly. Find someone there that has the make/model of the car you are looking for. We LOVE to talk about our cars with anyone who wants their ear bended. There is your expert right in front of you. The car shows are free for the public; as it is the drivers who pay the operating costs of those shows, so you have a wealth of free information right at your fingertips.
3. Watch out for internet scams.....remember what your mother taught you. "If something a sound too good to be true, then it nearly always is". Do not give into the emails who ask you to send them money, and they will ship the car to you, and if you don't like the car, you can ship it back. Yeah...not going to happen.
4. If you are looking for an investment car. One to trailer and actually "compete" with, numbers MUST be matching on the engine block and vin#. If not, walk away. Don't simply take the sellers word. Everything should be concurs. (Exactly as it came off of the showroom floor) No extra whistles and bells added for any reason. If this car is not being used in competition, and will be your enjoying Sunday afternoon car, the experts say it really doesn't matter if the engine numbers match. The value is really not affected. If the numbers do match, great. But don't let the seller jack up the price because the



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numbers match” at that point it is just a perk not a necessity. In a lot of these cars, specifically muscle cars, the engines have been blown and have been replaced multiple times. That’s ok, unless you are attempting to compete with the car.

5. If you know someone who can appraise the car or can tell if the car has been in an accident, or if the transmission, engine or other vital components are not original, (this is providing the seller doesn’t have the documentation to back up his claims of “original”.) ask him/her to check the car out thoroughly.
6. HERE IS A BIGGIE—Run the vin# with your local police to verify that that car has not been stolen, and to check how many people owned the car prior to your purchase. Some states can give you that info. Then run the vin# with the manufacturer online. Each car manufacturer has a website for you to use their vin decoder, for you to prove if in fact this is a true GTO or is a modified LeMan’s or a true Shelby GT 500 or a modified Mustang fastback and the seller you are speaking to actually “cloned” the car. It can tell you where in the production line your car fell. It can give you the color, the engine size, what type/color the original interior came with and the option. If the seller cannot offer you the original window sticker there are companies out there that for a small fee can reproduce one for you.
7. Try to purchase a car with full documentation and full service records if possible. It gives you extra peace of mind. If they were conscientious owners, they should have receipts on all work done and records of fluid changes. Ask the seller how long he has owned the car. If he tells you he has had it a short time (1-2 years) then there is a good possibility that he is “flipping the car”. Buying them, throwing inexpensive parts and shoddy workmanship in effort to get a much higher return. You may want to seriously consider walking away from it, unless the seller can verify and prove that “Chip Foose” from “Overhaulin” has done the work for his show. Again, if you are planning to do a total restoration, not a huge problem, but for someone who is looking for a “maintenance only” classic car, you might be getting ripped off.
8. Next, the odometer. If the numbers are not matching up PERFECTLY centered and straight across....then someone has been messing with it. Now some people (me in particular) will do a rebuild on the engine and turn back the odometer so that they know how many miles on that new rebuild. My son Jesse spent over 3 hours getting mine to line up perfectly centered. Now this isn’t a problem if the seller is upfront and honest with you, but I can tell you



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personally, if you look at my car...there are definitely more than 6,097 miles that have been placed on that 1965 Mustang. Also, if it has lower mileage, check the brake pedal and look for excessive wear on the right side of the foot pedal. If there is, then there is a lot more miles on it than what the seller is telling you. They may have changed out that foot pedal, but then even that tells you exactly what you need to know.

9. Look down the side of the car. Are there ripples? Does it look as though you are on the ocean? Trust me, it isn't a getaway vacation. That car has bondo on it, and obviously not done well. Walk away. That surface should look like glass. Also, take a look into the trunk. Does the trunk compartment look like it has dropped ½ to 1 inch? Not a good thing. Why would they go to the trouble to restore a car and not have the trunk compartment lifted back into its proper place? Check all fluid levels. Look at the color and texture of the oil off of the dipstick. Ask the seller when the last time the radiator fluid was checked was. Ask how old the battery is. Also the obvious; check the tread on the tires. Replacement tires can run you up to \$750. An extra cost you don't want any sooner than possible. It also could mean that the seller likes to do burnouts, especially if it is a muscle car. That can play not only havoc on the tires, but the engine as well. The last thing you want to purchase is a car that's had its life beat out of it.
  
10. When you take the car on a test drive, make sure you drive it for 20 minutes at least. Turn the radio on for a moment to be sure it works, then shut it off and keep it turned off (it is most likely AM radio anyway) and listen for the noises. Most of the creaks, rattles and knocking will occur during that time. Bring someone along with you to listen as well. You would be surprised what two people listening for noises can hear. Bring a list of questions to ask the seller. There will be an attachment included on this article for you to simply print and bring with you. Feel free to jot down any additional questions that may not be included but that you want to know. If the seller is upfront, honest and really wants to sell his car, he won't be offended with a lot of questions. If he is, then ask yourself, what is it that he is hiding?
  
11. Next, the purchase price. Make sure you aren't paying for the seller's "sentimental" value. The bluebook value on my car right now is about \$8,500-\$11,000. I wouldn't even consider selling it for under \$40,000, because of sentimental value. My attachment to that car is worth over \$32,000. No person in their right mind would pay that for my car. Nonetheless, that is my asking price. Make sure when you are looking at the price tag, you are only purchasing the car for what its true bluebook value is.



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No more, even if you truly want that particular car, ask yourself, "If a loved one wanted to buy this car how would I advise him?" If your answer is, "keep looking", then follow your own advice.

12. Have the seller, start the car. See blue smoke? It is burning oil, walk away from that one.
13. Finally, be FULLY prepared to walk away. Take your time to find the right car for YOU. You will know it when you find it. You may kick yourself later for walking away, but trust me, better to kick yourself later than to take the chance. There are PLENTY of fully restored classics out there for sale and yours IS out there waiting for you.

Final thoughts: Keep in mind that this is going to be a HUGE investment of your money. You as a consumer have every right to ask as many questions as necessary to ease your mind. You do not need to apologize; your many questions show the seller that you are a very serious buyer. Also keep in mind, that quality does not necessarily mean "perfect condition". For example, a 1970 Hemi Cuda convertible can be beat up, rusting with a blown engine and still it will command over \$500,000 and a beautiful stripped down model of a 1965 VW beetle in mint shape be lucky to get \$10,000.

Also consider this: those of us that have these cars and are restoring them, all loving refer to them as our "money pits". There isn't just the initial cost of the vehicle to consider. The care and maintenance is expensive. The majority of these cars are 50 yrs and older. Those that are "muscle cars" have been pretty beat in years past, so they require a lot of maintenance and upkeep. That all being said, my husband and I both have considered this hobby to be the most fun and most entertaining of everything we do. It has brought us extremely close as he is attempting to instruct me on how my engine runs and I must say that I have become his little "grease monkey". The new friends we have made in the process and the networking we have accomplished in this hobby is immeasurable and well worth every penny we have put into it. We don't take luxurious vacations and I don't care about big gaudy diamonds, so for us, owning a classic car is more fun and rewarding than a barrel full of "grease monkeys". I have learned more things about myself and car engines than life has ever taught me. Who knew?