

RESEARCHING YOUR COLLECTOR CAR





Photo by Mike Mueller

Research can be really useful whether you're preparing to purchase a car, simply want to know more about the car you already own, or if you plan on restoring your vehicle and want to ensure that you do it right.

By the time most of us acquire a collector car, it's been around for years and has passed through many hands. The last owner may have told you that the 1957 Corvette he sold you started life as an Inca Silver Fuelie, but wouldn't you like to be sure? Researching your car can help you determine exactly what it is, whether it's worth restoring, how much it's likely to be worth, and what events it will be eligible for.

WHY RESEARCH?

Buying and restoring a car is very expensive, and doing research can help you save money and protect your investment.

It's best to start your research before you close the deal on a car, just to make sure that it's real and as represented. And once you have the car, research will help you determine the correct way to restore it. In the case of a hand-built, limited-production car, each example varies. As a result, it takes quite a bit of digging to find out if your car started with portholes, came with discs over the wire wheels, or was originally fitted with the bold rocker-panel trim that some cars wore and others didn't.

Careful research can also uncover important and unusual history that can send the value of a car soaring. One collector with a small Italian sports racer had owned the car for years before his research proved conclusively that his was the Index of Performance winner at Le Mans.

Not doing your research can also cost you money, as in the case of an owner who sold his battered old sports car to a broker for several thousand dollars without realizing that it was a factory Sebring race car. The broker made a profit of five times the purchase price, despite the car needing a comprehensive restoration.

When research goes well, it adds a great deal to the ownership experience. Finding the original owner, or even his or her children, may help you locate photos of your car when it was new. It may also substantiate that very low mileage reading when you find out your newly acquired Camaro Z-28 was off the road for 25 years.

There are many benefits to be gained from research:

- Determines exactly how your car left the factory
- Helps you to carefully restore it to original specifications
- Uncovers important history or ownership details that may influence the restoration or value
- Determines market value
- Helps you decide how much money you should invest in the car for restoration
- Gives you an additional activity that extends your hobby and collecting interests

Don't keep on wondering; get to work and start tracing your car's history now. The sooner you start, the more likely you'll achieve good results.



Old snapshots of your car can be a valuable resource when it comes time to restore or sell it.

KEY POINT

Start your research immediately; with each additional day, records are lost, people move and former owners pass on.

WHERE TO START

When ready to buy a car, nothing beats being well-informed about the type of car you're considering buying. There are many great ways to find out more about the make and model of the car that's exciting you.



- **Marque or model history books**
Start with an online search at www.google.com, www.amazon.com or go directly to www.motorbooks.com.
- **Marque or model Internet discussion groups**
A search at www.google.com is a good start, although you might have better luck going straight to <http://autos.groups.yahoo.com> to see an index of Yahoo discussion groups.
- **Marque or model clubs or websites**
The first step is to search www.google.com for information regarding clubs for a specific marque or model. Most often, the club will have its own website listing. You can also go to www.hagerty.com/resources for a listing by state or to the Hemmings club directory at www.hemmings.com.

- **Marque or model experts**
Find them through clubs and owners of similar cars.
- **Original sales literature, ads, owner handbooks, service manuals and parts manuals**
An online search for literature and dealers may provide results, although perusing display and classified ads in *Hemmings Motor News* is likely to be more fruitful. Such materials are sometimes offered as part of automobile auctions or in stand-alone automobilia auctions.
- **Period magazine road tests**
Some magazines, such as *Sports Car Illustrated* and *Car and Driver*, have complete indexes that will tell you when your car was covered. You can also turn to literature dealers via online or through *Hemmings Motor News*.

All of these sources are equally useful when you want to learn more about vehicles you already own or dream of owning.

GATHERING INFORMATION

When you acquire a car, be sure to ask the owner or seller for every piece of documentation he or she has about the vehicle.

Work orders, bills of sale, parts receipts, manuals, sales literature, plus period and recent photos can all be helpful in learning about where your car's been and what's been done to it. It also pays to ask the seller for any information about former owners. Maintenance and restoration will be much easier if you know what's already been done and by whom. The longer you wait, the harder it will be to obtain paperwork or jog fading memories.



Very often, some of the most useful information about your car is on your car itself. Not only does the serial number identify your particular vehicle, but it often tells you where it was built, the model, the body style, what engine was fitted, and the market for which it was originally intended. Sometimes, even more information is included, right down to the original color.

First find the serial number, which can be in many different places, depending on the car. Often, the number is on a plate in the engine compartment, but check with a marque expert or a book about your particular type of car if you can't locate it. That same book will often help you decode the serial number. Until the standardized Vehicle Identification Number, or VIN, was introduced in 1981, every manufacturer used its own unique serial number, so there really is no standard method for decoding the number.

Most people think of research as something you conduct in a library or at home on the Internet. However, an important part of the research process starts when you get your car home. Most people like to clean a newly acquired car inside and out, which is a very good time to examine it for hidden paperwork, traces of the original color and signs of what engine, transmission and other equipment originally came with it.

KEY POINT

Some of the best clues to your car's past may be found on or in your car. Be sure to search it carefully for serial numbers and old documents.

Bills of sale, old registrations and service records can tell you everything from when a car was modified to the names of past owners. More often than not, the serial number and written documentation will prove that your car is pretty much what you expected. But sometimes, the numbers simply don't make sense when compared to the actual car. In this case, you may find that the engine and transmission or other equipment has been changed. It's best to find any discrepancies before buying a car, but that isn't always possible. If you discover early on that your newly acquired car isn't exactly what you expected, you can alter your plans for the vehicle before spending thousands of dollars on its restoration.

TRACING YOUR CAR

After reading the readily available books on your car and studying both the car and the documents that came with it, you should have the following basic information:

- Year, make and model
- Serial number or VIN
- Knowledge of the equipment currently on your car
- The name and address of the seller

If you're really lucky, you'll also have additional information about the car, including:

- Service or restoration records
- The names of prior owners
- Old photos

The more information you have to start with, the easier it will be to continue the job of unearthing your car's past. Sometimes the most interesting part of a car's history is the very beginning. What equipment was fitted, where was it shipped and who bought it? Fortunately, many factory records exist for a variety of cars. Visit www.hagerty.com/library/library.aspx for a listing of many organizations offering build records. Networking

may also lead you to a formal or informal registrar for your chosen marque or model. Some of those individuals have access to build records. In many cases, these records will tell you the build date, body style, color, specifications and options.

KEY POINT

Although your car may have been built 30, 50 or 70 years ago, factory build records may still exist. Be sure to check with marque clubs and experts to learn what's available.

Another part of getting to know your car is building an ownership chain. For example, if you have the name of the owner prior to the current owner, that's the first place to start. If you're missing an address, there are several ways to track down the former owner:

- Directory information
- An Internet white pages directory
- Club directories
- Networking through owners of similar vehicles
- Networking through marque specialists and experts
- Old newspaper or magazine classified ads for the car



As you make contact with former owners, continue to work backward. Along the way, you may be able to collect photos and service records. Once in a while you'll discover that your car was featured in a book or magazine, and you'll be able to find a copy. With this information, you'll find out what modifications and restoration took place over the years.

CASTING A WIDER NET

Sometimes the information you need applies to all similar cars, not just yours.

For example, you may need to find a complete vehicle of the same type in order to have parts made or to accurately replicate details. Other times you may be after factory documentation.

To find a car like yours for historical or technical reference, there's no substitute for a club, registry or online discussion group. Unless your car is incredibly rare, the chances are you'll be able to find someone who will either send you photos and drawings or allow you to come see his or her car. There are several easy ways to find such groups:

- Doing a Google search for the marque or model at www.google.com
- Speaking to people at car shows
- Visiting www.carclubs.com/carclubs.htm or www.hemmings.com/clubs/ to network within the appropriate club
- Going to the Hagerty Resource Directory at www.hagerty.com/resources

Club publications and collector automobile magazines can also come in very handy when it comes to lining up a car or part for reference. Sometimes these sources can also lead you to professionals who specialize in your type of car. Once in a while, the path will even take you to original factory drawings, or reverse-engineered drawings, which will facilitate having accurate reproduction parts cast or fabricated.



Sometimes there is no substitute for an excellent specialty library, such as the AACA Library & Research Center in Hershey, Pennsylvania.

If you don't have the magazines or books necessary for research, head to a library. Your local branch may have some useful research tools. For example, the complete archives of *The New York Times* Automotive Section is often available on microfilm, or you can scan through back issues of *Automobile Quarterly*. Also helpful is the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, which is a great tool for identifying potential sources. And if your community was the site of automotive manufacturing, the library is likely to contain information about local enterprises. The larger the community, the more likely the library will be equipped to help you. Smaller libraries can often assist with inter-library loan of materials held by other facilities. Don't let the term "library" throw you off. Historical societies, museums and auto clubs often have excellent archives that shouldn't be overlooked.

Whether you're working in the library or working with a library by phone, a good librarian can make a big difference in your research. He or she can point you in the right direction and can also help you find specific materials at other libraries. To find a listing of some of the larger automotive libraries in the United States, go to www.hagerty.com/library/library.aspx.

KEY POINT

If you're researching a particular make and model of car, you'll definitely want to get involved in a club dedicated to your type of car.

THE FRUITS OF RESEARCH

Researching a car can take months or even years. Sometimes the mysteries of that old Studebaker are lost forever; then again, you may get lucky and manage to trace all 17 prior owners, ending up with photos and records dating back to the day the car was new.

Many people don't go far researching their cars for one simple reason – it's a lot of work. Hundreds of hours can be spent going to libraries, searching for back issues, locating out-of-print books and networking by phone and e-mail. Sometimes the work can seem fruitless, while other times the information comes pouring in. But the benefits of charting the history of your car are many, especially when the work you've done is responsible for increasing the value of your car – either to you or the general market.

But when the car is fully restored and on the show field, you'll be able to substantiate every decision made along the way. You'll also know that you're the one who performed all the research to uncover the truth about your Auburn, Maxwell, Aston Martin or Studebaker.

Some auto museums, such as the Auburn Cord Duesenberg Museum in Auburn, Indiana, below, offer excellent research facilities.



Hagerty is the premier source for safety and protection information about the collector car hobby. For more information on enhancing your collector car ownership experience, log on to **www.hagerty.com** or call **800-922-4050**.



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