

## ***WHO WILL THEY BE?***

When you go to any car show, be it for hot rods, sports cars, classic and vintage cars, American muscle cars or antique cars, you find that the average age of the owners is probably post 60. And, don't be surprised to find that many of the owners and spectators are septuagenarians. Is this a problem? This age demographic poses a dilemma for the continuance of these special cars.

*Who WILL THEY BE*, where will they come from and why aren't they here now? These are questions that some of us oldsters who love classic cars are asking. Are we and our cars the end of an era and why aren't more young people becoming involved in owning, restoring, maintaining, preserving and driving these cars that we think so highly of?

There are some unique aspects to this question. The word *classic* will be used throughout this article and is meant to encompass all the categories of cars that are of special interest. Because of their age, uniqueness, rarity or beauty, we have set these cars apart from the average car to be taken care of in a special way. While the DMV registration says that we own them, we are more their caretakers for preserving them and their unique history for others to enjoy.

A question frequently asked about such cars is do you really drive them? The very nature of these cars that we call classic gives credence to this question. The dichotomy is somewhat complex; do you risk something of this age, beauty rarity and value by exposing it to road dirt, possible collision damage or wear and tear or, do you put it away behind wall and glass to be ogled from afar like a Rembrandt or Picasso? Do you treat this car as the piece of purpose-built machinery to be used as its manufacturer intended; or do you revere it like a beauty queen to be looked at but not touched? The answer to this question is a personal choice and may well be part of the issue of why more young people are not involved. Let's break the answer down into four main subject categories; drivability, emotional attachment, cost and time.

### **DRIVABILITY**

Classic cars are not exactly easy things to drive. Most of them have manual shift transmissions. Many don't have synchro-mesh gears. This fact alone is almost the game changer because relatively few people under the age of 50 have driven manual shift cars. Also, non-synchro transmissions require special shifting techniques that are not so easy to learn unless one started using them at an early age. Many of these cars require very slow determined movements when upshifting to allow for the rev matching of the gears to avoid grinding. Downshifting requires double clutching and rev matching to get into the lower gear with any hope of avoiding the grinding and gnashing of gear teeth. It doesn't come as naturally to them as it did to us when we were young.

### **EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENT**

This leads to what might be the core of the issue, which is that people over 60 grew up with these cars at the time the cars themselves were also young. If you were a teenager in the 1950's, 60's and 70's the cars you could afford were from the 1930's, 40's and 50's; today's classics. They were all cantankerous things that became mastered through a normal progression of experience. A younger person buying such a car today does not go through that progression.

A subtle, but strong adjunct to this is that the period in which we older types learned to drive was also the time of the emergence of the automobile as the tool for mobility of teenagers. This produced an emotional intimacy with cars because they became so engrained into a lifestyle of independence and freedom that young people had never known before. Children growing up in the 30's, 40's and 50's stayed close to home because of lack of mobility. You had your bike, a bus or your parents to drive you somewhere. As a seventeen year old it would be pretty hard to smoke a cigarette, drink a beer or make out with your honey in the back seat of the car driven by your mother. Children of the 60's and 70's, however, ranged out by themselves and with their buddies into the world on their automobile magic carpets. This emotional tie to the car is a phenomenon that cannot be underestimated or readily understood by those who have not lived it. These cars are at the very essence of who we are as Americans.

Equally as strong, was the image we imagined the cars gave us when we saw that famous people drove the same or similar cars as we did. James Dean drove a Porsche. In a perverse way, Dean's early death at the wheel of his 550 Spyder assured both his and Porsche's image in our psyches. His movie, Rebel without A Cause, was all about teen rebellion and freedom from an older way of life made possible by cars. Steve McQueen drove and raced Mg's, Triumphs, Jaguars and motor cycles. Phil Hill drove the wheels off everything he touched. If one of those brands happened to be the same as what you were driving, a very strong self-image bond was formed between you and your car. As a teenager, my heroes were sportscar race drivers like Stirling Moss, who drove an Austin Healey similar mine to a 6<sup>th</sup> place overall at Sebring in 1955, (arguably the second most prestigious sports car race in the world). This occurred just 5 years before I was driving almost the same car as a daily driver and then racing it on weekends. This image implanted in my mind still exists 60 years later as I drive my Healey. We, through our cars, are kindred spirits with these famous people. These emotions cannot be easily replicated.

## **COST**

Anything of age whose numbers diminish over time becomes rare and rarity escalates cost. An Austin Healey 100M like the one I had in college sold recently at auction for approximately \$175,000. I paid \$1500 for my own Austin Healey 100M in 1960. Inflation is not the only factor in this disparity. Preservation and rarity are the bigger factors that have driven costs. As a college student in 1960, I could muster \$1500 to buy my Healey which I used as a daily driver and a race car on weekends, but who today can pay \$175,000 for the same car, a car that is not for practical use, but is purely for limited pleasure. Not a teenager! Not a college student! Not a young professional with a growing family and the financial struggle to buy a house! Who then is the buyer? An older person, probably retired or if younger, a person of considerable means with disposable income. But, even then this person who has the money to enter the game, probably does not have the experience and driving skill or the emotional attachment to really care for and to perpetuate these cars to take them on for another 50 years.

## **TIME**

When we grew up with these cars, life was relatively simple and slow. No cell phones, no Internet and obviously no diversionary things like Facebook, Twitter and other so called social media. As we hear in the news every day, Twitter provides the opportunity for bored people to twitter away valuable time. Sadly, this and other technology innovations have become very strong competitors for young people's time and attention. Ironically, car enthusiasts have eagerly embraced technology in the advancement of

cars, yet it is possible that newer forms of technology may render modern cars non-useful, never reaching the category of *classic*. And, it may be that this very technology, which has created somewhat of a throw away mentality, simply will not be worth saving because of the newer technologies that pass yesterday's by. It's hard to picture the Porsche of today being sought after like the Porsche of the 50's and 60's in 50 years. It's obsolete, non-working, expensive or unavailable computer parts will render the car useless in the minds of young people.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is easy to identify a problem, but far more difficult to solve it. A group of us in Marin County, California who are a part of a rally organization named, Shifting Gears, have decided to take positive actions to address this situation. We are entering into a partnership with the Marin County School District to initiate an in-depth program that goes beyond the typical "car shop" by creating a curriculum that includes auto history, the cultural impact of cars, the technical developments that contribute to safety and comfort in modern cars, the benefit and value of maintaining classic cars and the restoration of such cars. By bringing in local auto industry businesses that do mechanical, body and paint, restoration and upholstery work, plus auto dealerships and specialty entities such as a local racetrack, our intend is to provide a broad spectrum of experience with cars for young people of high-school age. Another significant aspect of this program will be the opportunity for summer and part time jobs and internships with the participating business. Additionally, we hope to develop an advanced driver program utilizing the facilities of a race track.

To further these objectives, we are working with an organization named the RPM Foundation, from Chicago, that has developed a rather sophisticated program of car restoration and preservation for high school and college students. Part of their program consists of a track day, where the students experience an inside look at the exciting world of classic car racing. RPM is running such a program at our own Sonoma Raceway this coming June 2nd that we, Shifting Gears, will be participating in.

To the degree that one considers this waning interest of young people for cars a problem, this issue is large and deserves focused attention and a concerted effort by those in and around the car industry to keep the "spirit" alive. The effort described above is a drop in the bucket in terms of the numbers of young people it will reach. However, if our program is successful we believe it can be modeled by any other groups of like-minded people and by school districts around the country. It may be a small effort now, but it is one that we have the capability to initiate and it is a start! We encourage anyone who hears of this venture to contact us, share your thoughts and ideas and join with us to preserve these cars and culture that we love and believe have intrinsic value to maintaining American cultural values.

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