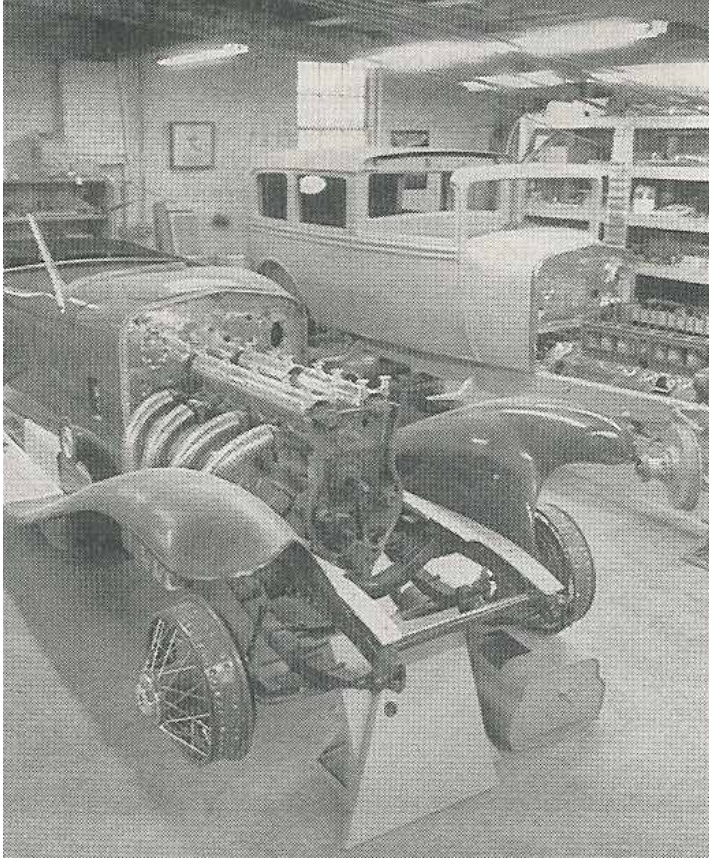


How To Pick A Restoration Shop

By Richard A. Lentinello



Clean, organized facilities are a clear indication that the shop will produce a quality end product, as shown by the tidy conditions surrounding these two Dusenbergs undergoing body-off restorations at Al Prueitt & Sons in Glen Rock, Pennsylvania.

Restoring old cars, regardless of make or model, is a very expensive proposition. It is also an extremely time-consuming process that requires a considerable amount of skilled labor. It's a big investment, eclipsed only by a homeowners mortgage and a child's college education.

Before engaging in a restoration, considerable thought must be given to the end product: what you want it to be and how you will use it. Are you looking for a 100-point, concours-perfect automobile or a really nice street restoration? Whichever you choose, you must decide how you want your vehicle restored before your search for a restorer begins. There are many different kinds of shops, each with a different level of work quality.

Ideally we would all like to restore our beloved cars

ourselves, but few of us have the necessary skills, tools, facilities and time. This is why most people commission shops to either carry out an entire restoration or perform several of the more specialized tasks involved that are beyond the scope of even the most experienced enthusiast. Your financial resources will dictate whether you can carry out a full mechanical rebuild at the same time as a complete body/chassis rebuild.

Let us assume that you are looking for a shop to perform a complete ground-up restoration to show quality. It is important to choose a shop that provides clear and accurate communication with its client and is aware of the many unique problems involved in such a venture. By doing so you will avoid conflict later on, or at least keep it to a minimum.

To ascertain which restoration facilities offer the best service and quality, you should visit at least three or four different shops during working hours. This will give you a good idea of how a restoration shop operates and the skill level of its work force. Soon you'll be able to separate the good from the bad.

Rule number one when looking for a restorer: Never, ever go to a local garage or body shop, even if they advertise a restoration service. They simply do not have the skill or knowledge necessary for such a job. They only know tune-ups and collision work. They haven't the faintest idea about the intricacies of a true restoration, especially if they try to assure you there is nothing magical about it. Always keep in mind that restoration firms are not body shops, and body shops are not restoration firms. They are two distinctly different types of businesses.

Like any business that relies solely on a skilled work force to produce a finished product (as opposed to a manufacturer or retailer) a restoration business is very difficult to run due to the extensive use of hand labor, which always limits the cash flow. By understanding the numerous problems that a shop proprietor has to deal with, you will be able to comprehend why he has to perform certain tasks accordingly and expect you to make payments promptly.

To get the best job for your money, it is important to deal with a shop that specializes in your particular car make and /or model. No one knows everything there is to know about a particular vehicle and its parts, nor can

they successfully solve all its inherent problems in a timely manner. If they've never worked on your type of vehicle before, your car or truck may be the experimental vehicle they are looking to learn on.

Dealing with non-specialists will result in higher restoration costs because they take longer to do things due to their unfamiliarity with the car. When you are being charged by the hour, every minute counts. Also, the end result will likely not be of the same quality, nor will the car be restored to the correct specifications.

To obtain the services of a quality restoration facility, see "Restoration Shops" in Section Two of The Hemmings Vintage Auto Almanac. There are more than 17 pages of listings to meet all your restoration needs, from complete body-off show quality restorations to partial driver restorations. Make an appointment to visit a few of the shops listed that are located near you to see if their work meets with your approval.

When you think you have found the proper facility to restore your car, don't be afraid to ask the shop owner questions about his experience and the tech- he uses. If he is honest and his business has a good reputation, he will gladly answer all your questions. Ask him about his background and how long he has been in the restoration business. Ask about his employees and their individual experience in the field. Take the time to inspect the workshop, and take a detailed look at the work being performed on the cars under restoration.

The ideal restoration facility will have all the necessary tools and equipment needed to carry out its work in the most efficient manner with the best results. Besides standard hand tools, a bead blast cabinet, lathe, half-ton press, metal brake, and a full complement of both gas and MIG welding equipment are essential items that every good shop should have. A self-contained spray booth is another crucial item. Not only will the paint-work be of a higher quality, but it also makes the work place safer for the employees and lessens the damaging effects of toxic paint fumes on our environment.

It is also important for you to inspect a couple of vehicles that the restorer has completed. Ask for at least three references from former customers. Call them and ask about their dealings with the shop. By knowing as much about the restorer as possible, you will know what to expect, which will let you negotiate the contract accordingly.

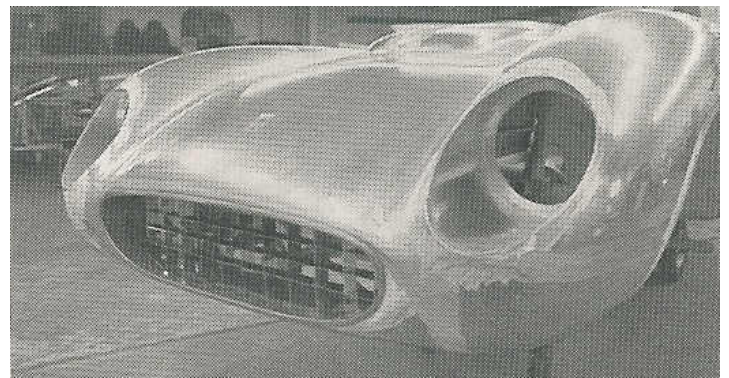
Because no two cars are alike and no two cars are in the same condition when their restorations begin, it would be unjust for you to compare your estimate with that of another vehicle. Because each restoration is unique, a program must be outlined that is tailored to the specific requirements of the car and its owner.

It is often very difficult for the shop owner to provide an estimate that will hold true throughout the length of the restoration process. Because the restorer doesn't have X-ray eyesight, he simply cannot judge the amount of rust and body repair that might be required without disassembling the entire vehicle and inspecting every component. And because they cannot foresee every single

problem, most restorers have a clause in their contracts that states an additional charge will be incurred if extra work is required.

Specialized restorers who have extensive experience with a particular model car or truck already know exactly how many hours of labor it will take them to strip and paint that vehicle, restore its frame and rebuild the suspension. This will allow them to charge a flat rate for each job because the work really doesn't vary much from car to car, no matter if it's a 1967 Camaro or a 1969 Camaro. However, if extra repair work is necessary to the body or frame due to a car's below-average condition, then the customer will be charged for the additional work.

Most of the big-dollar restoration shops that specialize in highly collectible cars, such as Bugattis, Ferraris and Packards, bill their clients on a time- plus-material basis due to their ability to pay for a true, perfect, 100-point restoration. Being charged an hourly rate is the most expensive way to pay for a restoration. But if you want the absolute highest quality possible there is no alternative, particularly from the restorer's perspective, since he will have to put in endless hours of labor until every single aspect of the car is perfect.



Some shops are more specialized than others, especially those that have coach building abilities. This hand-made Ferrari Testa Rossa body, and its egg crate grille, are outstanding examples of the panel beater's craft.

Be very skeptical of the shop that will restore your vehicle for a price that seems too good to be true. Once they have your car apart, if the work is much more extensive than they anticipated (and it usually is), you can be sure they will cut corners in places you won't notice. This can lead to a dangerous situation if they decide not to replace fatigued brake lines or a weak suspension support bracket.

After both parties have agreed to terms, you must provide a deposit so the restorer can begin working. This not only shows your genuine intention, but it lets the shop start ordering the parts and supplies they will need during the next few weeks. The better run shops will invoice you on either a weekly, bi-weekly or monthly basis depending on what you have agreed to. Each invoice statement should include detailed labor descriptions, a listing of all purchased parts and a brief outline of the progress

that is being made. Invoices will also vary in amount depending on how much time was put in and which parts were bought during that period.

Most restoration shops usually require a substantial deposit before work begins. This varies among shops, but it can be as much as half the total estimate. Since most people are a little wary of leaving such a large sum of money, finding a restorer who is understanding and flexible is almost as important as finding one who is qualified in the first place.

If you have any questions regarding the shop's invoices, inquire at once. If the restorer can not justify his expenses, order him to stop all work immediately and iron out the problem before the charges get out of hand. If all charges are realistic, pay your bill promptly. Should you fail to pay your bills in a timely manner, the shop has the right to stop work and your project will get pushed aside, only to lose its spot in line when you decide to pay what is owed. Up-to-date accounts always receive top priority.

Assuming the cost of a continuous restoration is beyond your means, you should set a budget with the shop owner prior to the start of the project. The restorer will then work against advanced installments until all the money is used up. Should you take more than thirty days to furnish additional money, a nominal monthly fee for storage and interest charges may be incurred. This is only fair, as space costs money.

One often-overlooked item is insurance. Although the law states that all shops must be insured, you really don't know how much coverage they carry. It is therefore wise, especially if your vehicle is rare and highly valuable, to carry full coverage on the car while it's being restored at the shop and while it is being transported.

It is also important for you to take photographs of the entire restoration. This documentation will be extremely valuable when you need to substantiate your claimed ground-up restoration should you decide to sell the vehicle at a later date or to make an insurance claim. Detailed photos showing the car before and during the rebuild are most important. The "before" photos will greatly assist the restorer later should any doubts arise about how to install a piece of trim or reassemble a particular component correctly. The photos showing the work in progress will prove how extensive the rebuild really was.

The photos will also provide documentation on the parts status. Prior to delivering the vehicle to the restorer's workshop, you should inventory each and every part and note if it is good, broken or missing. Take note of the condition of all the glass, including all scratches and chips. This will help avoid misunderstandings between you and the restorer later on.

Since restoration is a labor-intensive craft, most cars and trucks will take more than a year to restore. The vehicle with a solid, rust-free body will take less time, of course, but it all depends on whether you want perfection or if you can tolerate minor flaws. The final fitting

of the windshield, bolting on the bumpers and installing all the delicate chrome trim pieces are painstaking procedures that take a lot of time. One slip of the screwdriver and your new paint is ruined. It is also impossible to avoid delays waiting for parts that may be on back order. Searching for a rare part that is missing or not available as a reproduction will also contribute to delays. Parts are expensive and they add up rather quickly, so don't forget to include them in your budget.

When your vehicle is complete, it should be handed over to you after the restorer has given it an extensive road test to see if everything performs as it should. There should be no problems at all. The car must be satisfying to drive and provide the same level of responsiveness that it did when it was new. Only then will you know if the restoration was a success. Remember, a fine restoration is substantially more than just cosmetics.

In conclusion, whatever estimate you're given for the work, add a minimum contingency of 25 percent. This way when the time comes to pay the bills, you won't be surprised. During the restoration, keep in touch with the shop and try to visit as often as possible.

Be friendly to the people who are rebuilding your car and let them know how much you appreciate their work. Make sure everything you want is in writing and shoot as many photographs of the restoration as possible. You should also get some sort of a warranty on mechanicals and body and paint. It's usually 10,000 miles and one year, respectively.

And before you take your "new" vehicle out on the road, get it appraised by a professional, then have it properly insured. There are more than one hundred appraisers throughout the country listed in Section Two who will appraise your vehicle professionally. Then insure it for what the restoration cost, not its stated value. This way all your restoration expenses will be covered should anything unfortunate happen. There are more than a dozen insurance companies listed in Section Two that specialize in collector cars, trucks, motorcycles and street rods. They will gladly put together a liability package to meet your specific needs.

Good luck and happy motoring.

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