

Cars: The Search for That Perfect Part

In the past, finding the perfect part for a classic-car restoration meant joining enthusiast clubs, hanging around swap meets and pawing through junkyards. How the Web has revolutionized the hunt.



Joe Kahn

Joe Kahn with two of his eBay purchases: a '57 Thunderbird and a '67 Pontiac GTO

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Oct. 9, 2007 - While classic-car junkies have always relished the thrill of the chase, scavenging to find authentic parts for their rebuilds, some searches can really tax their patience. For, say, a 1963 Chevrolet Impala lowrider, a popular car in America that year, parts still abound. But for hot-rod dreams that are a bit more obscure, like ones involving the Chevy Monza, which had a small cult following during its brief life span (1975-80), finding those missing pieces has been a daunting challenge.

Now searches that used to last months or even decades can sometimes take only a few minutes. Joe Kahn of Gurnee, Ill., who trolls online every day for car parts and memorabilia, thinks shopping online has made it almost too easy. “The chances are pretty damn good you’re going to find what you’re looking for,” he says. “The Internet killed the whole obsession with the hunt.”

In the past, finding the perfect part for a classic-car restoration meant joining enthusiast clubs, hanging around swap meets and pawing through junkyards. Today tons of parts are on eBay—and if gearheads can’t find them there, there’s a good chance they can on one of the hundreds of other sites created by local and national retailers. Some, like ClassicJunkYard.com, are massive repositories for all brands and periods. Others, such as CJPonyParts.com (for Mustangs) or antiquedodgeparts.com (for old Dodges), are highly specialized.

The proliferation of these sites hasn’t solved everyone’s search problems. Mark Canon, chief product officer of automotive Web site [Autobyte](http://Autobyte.com) and a former search-engine guru at AOL, said a study of the search habits of 1,001 broadband Internet users conducted by his company in May indicated that two-thirds had spent two or more hours in a single setting searching for specific information. Not surprisingly, some 72 percent experienced something that could be called “search fatigue.” “They seemed frustrated because they’d get back 4 million results, but not what they were looking for,” Canon says. “Search engines like Google or Yahoo are not particularly suited to finding that sort of information.” To address that problem, the company has created a new site, MyRide.com, allowing searches to be far more specific about the desired brand, vintage, price and driving experience—like hot-rodding or off-roading.

Buyers and sellers began migrating online about a decade ago, and by now they’ve formed a substantial yet surprisingly intimate community. A search through the forums on enthusiast car sites—places like Hemmings.com or Datsun1200.com—reveals people who identify themselves by the list of cars they’ve worked rather than a more traditional signature. Although most of them never meet, there’s a sense that they know each other. “It’s like we’re sitting around a virtual garage drinking beers,” says Cecil Bozarth, a business professor at North Carolina State University’s College of Management who goes online daily to obsess over his Mustang. The auto world has also latched on to social networking: Edmunds’ Carspace.com caters to the “automotive lifestyle” with blogs, forums and member pages, and MyRide.com includes some social networking features, like members’ groups. As a result, tasks that once required extensive telephone and catalog research can often be completed with a single well-placed request on an online forum. David Santoro, who maintains a sporty 1980 Monza that his grandfather owned, doesn’t believe he would ever have found a passenger-side door lock in the pre-Internet days. “You can buy handles very easily from online suppliers, but I guess the mechanism inside is pretty special,” he says. But online, he says, people are identifying obscure but excellent sources. Santoro’s search kicked up a blog that located a man in Canada who delivered just the part he needed.

Car hobbyists' sense of familiarity extends to knowing their rivals at online auctions. Joe Kahn, who collects ultrarare Tucker memorabilia, like ashtrays and manufacturer license plates, says the field gets very focused. "You start to know the people you're bidding against: 'This guy's cheap,' or 'This guy's got loads of money and is never going to stop bidding,'" Kahn says. But some of the personal element is missing, of course. Rick Payne, who manages an automotive store and Web site, oldmusclecar.com, in North Carolina, says consultation and advice used to be a major part of the business relationship. But once his company added the Web site, the walk-in trade shrank and 80 percent of the business now comes online.

The emergence of Internet retailing has shifted the supply-and-demand curves for parts, driving prices up or down. Prices for fairly common parts have dropped, as the Web has made their commodity status more obvious. On the flipside, the Internet has driven up the price for more obscure parts. "If you take it to a swap meet, what are the chances that someone would walk by your table and need that part?" Bozarth says. Auctions now see premium prices for specialized parts, since not only are the sellers more informed about the value of their items, the buyers are competing with people from around the world. "It's harder to find deals," says Bozarth. Some older buyers still prefer to traipse around stores and leaf through catalogs, but younger customers expect instant gratification and are willing to pay for it. "Why would you shop in person when you can just get it on eBay?" asks Kahn, 28.



Courtesy Denny Aungst

Denny Aungst found a replacement hood for his '71 Olds

the style I wanted," Aungst says. After years of scouring every catalog and classified ad he could get his hands on, he finally spotted one in an Oldsmobile club newsletter and drove to Baltimore to pick it up.

But for his last hot search he went online, where he found exactly what he was looking for—a rare hood ornament—in Germany. "I thought it would be impossible," he says, "but you've got a worldwide database of parts available." Today his beloved car is finally

And then there are some who straddle this divide, maximizing their chances by using traditional sources as well as the Internet. Denny Aungst grew up in a tiny Pennsylvania town called Pine Grove, dreaming about cars. What started as a hobby grew into a career. Today he's a mechanic who fixes up vintage cars on the side. One vehicle holds a special place in his personal pantheon: the 1971 Oldsmobile Cutlass S he started restoring with his dad when he was 14. For 20 years one piece kept eluding him: an original '71 hood with chrome louvers. "That was

roadworthy. The thrill of the chase may have diminished some, but more people are finishing more cars in less time. And after all, the ultimate thrill is the ride.

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