

Backfire

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excerpted from the letter by Jay Miller

On the way to getting older this year, two things happened to me pertinent to the ongoing discussion of the future of our "old-car hobby." After a 10-year hiatus, I made a pilgrimage to the AACA Hershey Region Fall event. There I interviewed many of the young people I saw; a challenge as there weren't many. I wanted to get a sense of perspective on the future of the hobby. The second thing that happened to me was at a local car show here in New England; I learned that my '41 Packard 120 convertible coupe is a "carbon car."

At Hershey, there were plenty of the expected old cars. A joy to behold. But, there were a lot more old men than I recall. Although I'm usually not one of the youngest in any crowd, to my chagrin, I was at Hershey. Without any prior commitment and arrangement with my interviewees, I could get away with a bit of forward boldness because of wearing a "judges" cap and possessing a lot of grey hair.

"What brought you to Hershey," I asked the young men. One said he came to be with his dad. He said if his dad hadn't come, he wouldn't have

bothered. Another young man worked for a car restoration shop, giving me hope for the future. A third liked being the youngest in a group of old men. I felt akin to him. Seriously, he told me he owned a '60s-vintage Chevrolet and was looking for parts. More hope.

"What do you think will happen to the old-car hobby?" I asked. Their answers dismayed but did not surprise me. They unanimously agreed we're seeing the car hobby on its last legs.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," they said, "our generation isn't interested in a way to keep it going. We have other interests. When we want to find or buy something, we'll just go on the internet. And, who can afford these cars?" My hope was being dashed.

A hobby, according to Merriam-Webster is "a pursuit outside one's regular occupation engaged in especially for relaxation." I think that *relaxation* is the key word here. I was once very active in the hobby, amassing a collection of some noteworthiness. I had the joy of owning some wonderful cars,

many of a bygone era: Rolls, Allard, MG, Packard, Lincoln, Ferrari, Cadillac, and a Pebble Beach-winning Stutz LeBaron roadster.

But, it was a hobby and fit the definition. I wasn't stressed about the costs most of the time. I don't believe buyers to whom I sold were either. After years of enjoyment, I sold a gorgeous '67 Ferrari GTC for the same price I paid, \$25,000. If a 26-year-old wanted that same car, he or she would have to pay between \$800,000 and \$1 million. Only a handful of Silicon Valley 26-year-olds likely fit that bill. I sold an award-winning '33 Packard for \$75,000. That exact car is now being advertised for close to \$400,000 by a casino that owns it. I bought and sold a supercharged, Mercury-powered '49 Allard for one-fourth of what it would fetch today. And, I enjoyed and sold a '70 Olds 4-4-2 W30 convertible for a tenth of what a similar car brought at an auction a few years ago.

I didn't see the cars as economic commodities. Yes, they were "collectibles," but not in the same sense of the word as artwork or antiques.

Who can relax, using Merriam-Webster's definition of hobby, when paying the sums that are being asked today?

Part of the hobby, for me, has been the relationships that are built. I've enjoyed the stories told by sellers. I connected people with the great cars. I would walk away from a potential purchase if the seller had no such story. The stories that came with the cars sustained us. The tales infused a life spirit into the metal, iron, chrome, and rubber of the cars. You might say, in a sense, we chose the next steward of our favorite collectible.

At Hershey, this year, I came upon a lovely Packard for sale by a well-known name in the reselling business. It was similar to the one I sold years ago. The asking price was \$155,000. I later learned it had been purchased at the car corral the day before for \$105,000. One might say, the reseller was savvy, and "good for him." I say, "nuts." The car means nothing to the reseller except as a commodity on which to profit. It's another barrier to someone "being relaxed" about a "pursuit outside one's regular occupation." The reseller/speculators and auction houses have made a lot of money for themselves. They have taken the cars out of our garages, car covers, and protective bubbles, and put them into economic bubbles subject to collapse at any time when the speculators decide it's time to move on. That does not make for stability nor a hobby.

I mentioned that the other significant car hobby-related experience this year was learning that my Packard is a "carbon car." I drove the original convertible to a local car show. It was one of those casual, fun events where

everyone wins just by showing up. Meeting and talking with other "old car" people is the award. I was standing by my car and a young boy, not older than 15, wandered over to the Packard. I asked, "Have you ever heard of a Packard?" He replied, "No." I began the education process to a willing student.

His father and brother soon approached and we introduced ourselves to each other. The father said that he wanted to bring his boys to the show to show them some "carbon cars." Carbon cars. I felt like Lewis Black. The father explained that he and his wife drive Teslas, and their boys haven't had much up-close experience with "carbon cars."

I think it's a good thing, for our planet and the future health of all living beings, that we are on the verge of going electric or some other alternative fuel system for our transportation needs; that is, of course, assuming the source of the electric power is green as well.

But, that does not mean I will not miss the rumble of a big V-8 or the operatic and melodious tone of a classic Ferrari 12. I still smile when I see an old 'Vette, Cobra (usually a replica), or hot rod with lake pipes. I really like lifting a hood and seeing carbs all over the place, headers and pieces of hardware that I can actually identify or get close to doing so.

I will not, however, miss going to a gas pump and stepping onto the filthiest lot of earth anywhere, then inserting a credit card and listening to forced advertisements and reality TV emanating from a pump that could only be sending me gasoline.

Rather than skirting the

issue, I think the "old-car hobby," as we've known it (chasing, buying, restoring, driving, and showing old cars, as well as building friendships) is dying. If it will be replaced by anything resembling it is anyone's guess. And, we're partially responsible. As sellers, we've enjoyed seeing the prices, if not values, of our cars go to the stratosphere. As buyers, we've hesitated and sometimes decided not to buy and preserve another great car. As hobbyists, we've let the whole thing come to the precipice of collapse, except for the most valuable vehicles. It would have "taken a village," to prevent where we are today, and we were fiddling "while Rome burned."

What are we to do? I have a 1939 Packard sedan for sale. I received an email inquiry that was to the point: "How much?" That was all that was written. I think I'll wait for a buyer, if he's out there, who will ask me for the story behind an original '39 car. And, I will then tell him the car can be bought for what I paid 20 years ago. Then again, I may be the last owner of this Packard.

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