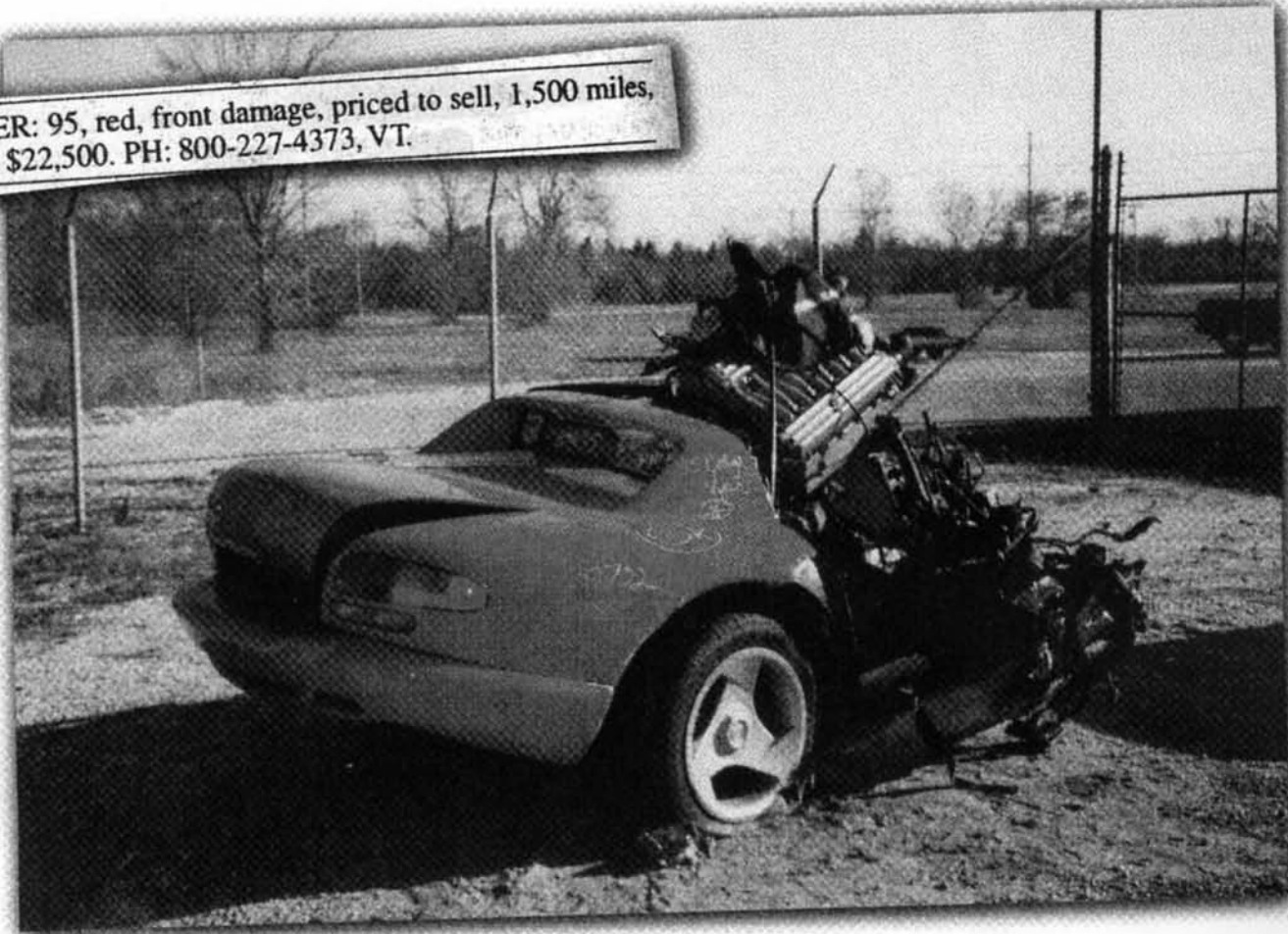


Don't Be a Victim

Common-sense thoroughness can keep you from getting ripped off

VIPER: 95, red, front damage, priced to sell, 1,500 miles, only \$22,500. PH: 800-227-4373, VT.



By Jim Donnelly

Your buddies might nudge you

toward it: There's an ad offering a very attractive car at a very attractive price. You're not stupid, but sometimes euphoria can trump your common-sense skepticism and push you into a sight-unseen purchase.

This is what can happen to you then:

In 1997, a *Hemmings Motor News* reader spotted a two-line ad in the magazine's thick monthly lading of classifieds. The seller was offering a 1995 Dodge Viper with "front damage" for \$22,500, a pittance for what was then the most feverishly lauded of American supercars. He called, and got a high-pressure barrage to cut a check immediately, because the Viper was already on a truck awaiting immediate shipment to another buyer. The reader bit.

Early the following morning, while he slept, the truck pulled up to a body shop that had agreed to accept the car, and the Viper was unloaded before the truck crew slipped away into the darkness. When the body shop owner arrived hours later, he called the buyer, telling him to come look at his new car, at once.

The damage to the Viper resulted when it smashed into an overpass abutment on the Cross-Bronx Expressway in New York City at an estimated 140 mph as the driver was fleeing from police. The Viper was unrecognizable as a Viper, or any other kind of car, from the C-pillars forward.

It started a five-year investigative and legal struggle that saw the buyer finally reimbursed for the Viper's cost, albeit after spending much more. The dogged pursuer was Bridgeton, New Jersey, attorney Ted

Ritter, a car enthusiast for most of his life, who agreed to take the case, and finally ran the seller to ground. His probe revealed that he had advertised cars for sale in *Hemmings* under at least 30 aliases before the publication barred him as an advertiser after receiving reader complaints, in keeping with *Hemmings* policy.

"My client was embarrassed to have been taken. He didn't follow his instincts; he went for the hype," said Ritter. "He wanted to get his money back, and he did, but he spent a lot more than he'd originally lost, probably at least \$50,000."

Ritter is known in South Jersey car circles as a lawyer who is friendly to car collectors in a jam. The man who sold the Viper is now believed to be deceased, Ritter said.

Most cases of fraud perpetrated during the buying and selling of collectible cars aren't as flagrant or outrageous as Ritter's.

But with six-figure prices for muscle cars now flipped from jaw-droppingly rare to so-what commonplace, the jackals on the hobby's fringes have more incentive than ever before. If the horror tales of what can happen to the unwary are anecdotal, so are the pointers on protecting oneself. Buying smart has absolutely everything to do with the intelligent, disciplined acquisition and application of information. Here's Professor Ritter's Lesson Number One:

"When it comes to buying sight unseen, I would say, emphatically, don't do it," Ritter implored. "Using someone else to look at it often isn't enough. I had a client who bought a Mustang out of Texas that another guy had supposedly examined, and told him it was a national trophy winner. Let's just say that it turned out that it wasn't. I would never, and I would underline the word 'never' three times, buy any car sight unseen."

Regardless of what kind of car you're looking at, muscle or otherwise, a very good first step in determining its authenticity is also a very simple one. You should go to the VIN tag, as well as the data plate and/or fender tag, and closely examine the rivets holding them in place. If the plates and tags are noticeably duller than the fasteners, that's highly suspicious, a strong indication that the plates may have been swapped from a different car. Also look for scratches or pry marks immediately around the mounting areas.

If you're in a position to spend \$50,000, or much more, on a muscle car and want a high level of assurance that the car is genuine, it is worth considering the expenditure of several thousand dollars to cover the fee and travel expenses of a marque expert.

Experts on American performance, though, say that readily available information, and some simple marque-specific tips, can guard against the most obvious muscle-car misrepresentation. Tony Branda, founder and owner of Tony D. Branda Shelby & Mustang Parts in Altoona, Pennsylvania, says a lot of the Shelby parts he sells are now fitted to Mustangs never originally modified by Shelby-American, growing the galaxy of Shelby clones.

"I normally tell people when they're looking at a car to buy the *Shelby-American World Registry*, 1,350 pages at \$125, or *The 289 High Performance Mustang* by Tony Gregory for \$21.95," he said. "I hate to say it, but yes, I sell both of these books, but I have people tell me, 'I'll buy the book after I buy the car.' That's too

late. You're talking, at most, \$125 for the SAAC book versus \$50,000 for the car. I would say that now, probably 70 percent of the Shelys just coming onto the market are replicas."

Branda has a couple of easily executed checks for uncovering fake K-code, 289-cu.in Mustangs or Shelby clones. With an early high-performance Mustang, the fifth digit of the car's serial number code indicates the type of engine that was factory-installed, and if that character is anything other than a "K," you're not looking at an authentic hi-po 289 Mustang.

Faux Shelys are a little harder to spot. Those built from 1965 through 1968 have a metal tag atop the inner left-front fender with the Shelby-American logo, held in place by two rivets. Underneath the tag, a separate Ford VIN number should be stamped into the fender, since the Shelby Mustangs were actually built by Ford and then modified before sale to the customer.



This VIN tag on a 1964 Pontiac LeMans clearly shows it's not a GTO, as the first number is a "6," designating that it was built with the 215-cu.in. straight-six, not a V-8

"What I'd do is ask to drill out a rivet and spin the tag so I could look for the Ford VIN," Branda said. "I'd offer [the seller] \$100 in cash and let him keep it, whether the car's right or wrong."

Another advantage of working with the Shelby-American Automobile Club (www.saac.com), which publishes the registry, is that only that club has access to all the VIN numbers for Mustangs that Shelby modified. As Branda says, "You can fax them a VIN number, and they won't tell you what the correct VIN number should be, but they'll tell you yes or no for the VIN you send them."

Pontiac aficionados get similar data when considering a car for considerably less money. Scott Tieman, founder of Supercar Specialties in Portland, Michigan, is WELL-known for turning out GTOs that win national awards.

"The biggest thing is, the buyer needs to verify the car's VIN through Pontiac Historic Services so they know what they're

looking at, whether it's a LeMans or a GTO," he said. "At least the Pontiac people have a leg up over the Chevy people, who have bogus cars all over the place."

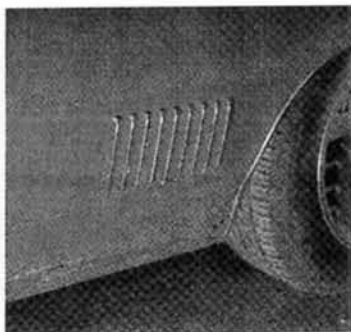
Pontiac Historic Services (www.phs-online.com) is licensed by General Motors to provide build data and other documentation on cars from the past. For \$35 and the VIN number of your interest, PHS will provide the most complete packet of VIN-specific background information offered for any American marque. The packet includes a copy of the factory invoice or billing history, a letter decoding the options installed on that particular car and a copy of the original dealer's order form.

The data makes it easier to spot a LeMans that's been surreptitiously turned into a GTO. It pinpoints discrepancies between options listed on the decoding letter and whatever's on the car. Tieman pointed up several physical clues to clones that a lot of fakers are too lazy or ill-informed to hide.

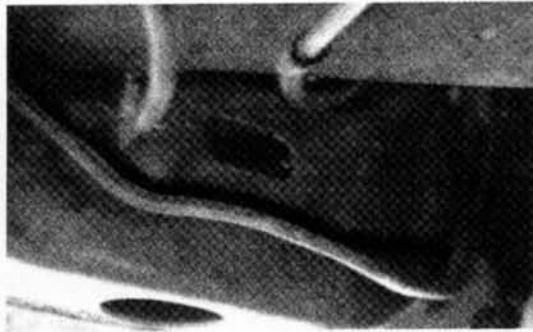
"The first thing you look for is emblem holes that were filled on a LeMans," he said. "You can roll down the rear windows and look inside the quarter panel for holes where the LeMans rocker panels went that have been filled. You can also look inside the fender and see where holes for the 326 or OHC 6 emblems, which the GTO didn't have, have been filled."

"The 1964 and 1965 GTOs are probably the most easily forged, because in those years, the GTO was simply an option. But on the firewall tag are the codes for both the body number and the options, and also the serial number on the bottom third of the firewall tag, except for cars that were built at the Fremont, California, plant, whose body-tag coding was completely different. Jim Mattison, who runs PHS, said he guesses that 50 percent of the '64 and '65 GTOs out there are LeMans models that never had the GTO option, so it's a huge problem."

There's another handy hint for checking suspect GTOs built during those years. A real thief-in-the-night type of reprobate may not bother thinking of this, but the serial number of every Tempest and LeMans built in 1964 and 1965 specifies the type of engine installed with its first digit. If the number starts with an "8," there's a good possibility you're on solid ground with the car—even though its V-8 could have been a 326; so still check thoroughly. If the number starts with a "6," you know you've got a scammer trying to trim you.



The LeMans' quarter-panel trim can be removed, but check for mounting holes



Steel brake line location identifies a bogus early big-block Chevelle SS

Performance Pontiacs from 1971 can be another problem; Tieman said he's seen more than his share of baloneyed-up '71 Judges.

"You can always just put a Judge emblem on it and claim they made a few more of them in 1971," he said. "But in the 1971 Judge, the 455 H.O. engine was standard; so for the Judge, Pontiac put in engine mounts that were about 4 inches longer than standard to accommodate it. If the car has the standard mounts, it probably means it's really either a standard GTO or a LeMans. For it to be a Judge, it also has to have the 12-bolt Chevy rear end, because that came with the 455 H.O. And you should also decode the casting date on the engine block; it should be (chronologically) before the car's build date."

Tieman's counterpart in the Chevrolet orbit is Gilbert Propes of Cornelia, Georgia. One common ripoff tactic he's seen is the cloning of early SS Chevelles from the remains of ubiquitous six-cylinder or small-block cars. He has a simple strategy for spotting them: Examine the right-front frame horn, and specifically, the location of the brake line mounted on it. On a six-cylinder or small-block Chevelle, the brake line passes directly behind the control arm. On a genuine big-block car, it's positioned 6 to 8 inches farther back for exhaust-manifold clearance.

"It's a dead giveaway," he said. "I looked up a Z-16 that had been in a basement for years, looked at the brake line, and knew I had an original car."

Another creator of prize-winning restorations is Julius Steurer, a Mopar specialist who owns Restorations by Julius in Chatsworth, California. Given the astronomical prices of some E-bodies today, he urged a very careful cross-checking of the cars' multiple VIN locations.

"The VIN will match the number that's also in two other locations on the car. To determine that somebody didn't just stick

a VIN plate in the dash, you need to look at the last six numbers, which are also on the cowl below the windshield and on the radiator support. On Chryslers, the VIN tells you everything about the car. For example, if you buy a Challenger, the first two letters on the VIN should be JS. The rest will tell you what type engine and what year it is."

Integrity in the buying and selling of valuable American muscle is a two-way street. Certainly, the buyer is being smart when he or she tries to learn as much about the car's background before agreeing to buy it. Yet both the buyer and the seller can benefit from availing themselves of data on the colors, options and build dates for cars that may end up changing hands. One of the most important pieces of data for authenticating a car is the build sheet, which listed the car's color, options, powertrain, build date and location, and the dealership to which it was shipped. A variety of marque-specific firms can provide this data for those willing to wait until it can be researched. That's another motivation to avoid rushing into a purchase.

Still, it's very important to realize that, at the end of the day, that old Latin bromide, caveat emptor, is still the rule of thumb. After explaining the location of Chrysler VIN codes, Steurer continued by readily conceding that it's not unknown for someone to create a clone by cutting out the cowl and radiator support and welding it into a different car, especially with a seven-figure payday on the line. Ritter agreed, and said rectifying a bad buy will invariably be costly, with no guarantee of ultimate satisfaction. He reiterated that no car can be checked too closely.

"There's always a risk the serial number's been monkeyed with, and the system isn't foolproof," he said. "If you buy the car from a dealer, there's a higher level of duty, but if it's a private sale gone bad, most likely you're going to be stuck." ❖

Chrysler "Broadcast Sheets" or "Service Records":

Chrysler Historical Collection
CIMS 410-11-21
12501 Chrysler Freeway
Detroit, Michigan 48288

Ford Build Sheets:

Ford Motor Company
Customer Assistance Center
PO Box # 43360
Detroit, Michigan 48243

1967-73 Ford Motor Co. VIN reports:

Marti Auto Works
12007 W. Peoria Ave.
El Mirage, Arizona 85335
www.martiauto.com

Chevrolet Build Sheets (U.S.-built car):

Chevrolet Motor Division
Customer Assistance Center
P.O. Box 7047
Troy, Michigan 48007-7047
800-222-1020

Buick Build Sheets (U.S.-built):

Alfred P. Sloan Museum
1221 E Kearsley St.
Flint, Michigan 48503
810-237-4350
www.sloanmuseum.com

Oldsmobile Build Sheets:

Oldsmobile History Center
920 Townsend St.
Mail Stop 489-111-040
Lansing, Michigan 48921
517-485-6967
www.oldsclub.com/histcntr.htm

Pontiac Build Sheets:

Pontiac Historic Services
P.O. Box 884
Sterling Heights, Michigan 48311-0884
www.phs-online.com

Vehicle reports for GM cars sold in Canada:

GM Canada Customer Communications Centre
Vintage Vehicle Services
800-263-3777 (in Canada)
905-644-4060 (from U.S.)

Corvette Build Sheets:

National Corvette Museum
350 Corvette Drive
Bowling Green, Kentucky 42101
800-53VETTE
<http://www.corvettemuseum.com/>