

The Motor Trend Secondhand Sentinel

A Buyer's Bulletin for Previously Owned Sheetmetal



Used Car Sales Continue at Record Pace

This year, approximately 25-30 million autos will change owners here in the U.S., and roughly two thirds of them will be of the pre-owned variety. While these road veterans range in character from the legendary school-teacher's specials to the equally notorious ramblin' wrecks, four out of five will share one common trait—namely serving as the primary form of transportation for those who purchase them.

The sustained popularity of used cars is attributable to a combination of economic factors, primarily the perpetually spiraling sticker prices on new models, and brutal interest rates. Since most new cars lose a far greater proportion of their original value during the first two years of their lives (in some cases, over 50%), a quality used-car not only offers substantial savings going in, it also permits a smart buyer to enjoy the secondary benefits of lower monthly payments and decreased insurance costs.

Hertz, America's largest rental-car company, regularly publishes extensive data on the entire used car market. The company's latest figures, which cover model year 1980, found the typical used car to be 3.23 years old and have about 32,000 miles on the odometer. In 1980, Hertz pegged the cost of an average specimen at \$3794. Despite a projected rise in mean age, the firm now estimates that the cost of a vehicle on today's market would be between \$4000 and \$4500, and may go higher. New or used, the motorcar remains the second largest single investment many of us will ever make.

The Hertz study indicates that a vehicle changes hands three times during its lifetime, first owners usually parting

TODAY'S
TEX
SPECIAL

USED-CAR INDEX

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company with their cars sometime during the middle of year three. Statistics show that 40-45% of all new cars sold (except those stolen or wrecked) continue on the road for at least 10 years after their original purchase. Ownership and operating costs on a used car generally run anywhere from 12% to 50% below those incurred with a comparable new vehicle, and maintenance costs don't start to rise disproportionately until the car nears its seventh year or 70,000 miles of service. In many cases, these costs comprise such a modest and relatively stable segment of total operating outlays that even a few fairly aged candidates may still warrant your consideration.

See SALES, pg. 80

A Question of Values: What's It Worth?

The value of a used car, its worth on the market, is not something that can be determined with absolute precision. It is a function of the car's make, age, condition, and your desire to own it. Aside from these factors, the price of a used car will fluctuate in response to such intangibles as the price of gasoline and the public's taste at a given moment. For example, after the gas crunches of 1973 and 1979, big cars dropped in value considerably; in the late '70s, convertibles jumped in cost because they weren't making them anymore. Economic and political events have as much of an impact on car prices as they do on the stock market.

Prices will vary from day to day, and it's important to be armed with the latest information if you're contemplating buying a used car. The easiest way to begin gathering the comparative figures you'll need is to follow the ads in your local newspaper and to check the prices on nearby car lots. See VALUE, pg. 80

☆ Secondhand Sentinel ☆

VALUE, from page 79

It is also advisable to consult one of the used car guides on the market. Some of these are regional, the *Kelley Blue Book* covers the West, for instance; but there is one publication, the National Automobile Dealer's Association (NADA) *Official Used Car Guide*, which is available nationwide. The NADA book comes out every month and its 350,000 copies go out to lending institutions, insurance companies, government agencies, and car dealers. They are also available in many public libraries.

The NADA book goes back seven years and, in the words of a spokesman, "tries to cover anything sold in any quantity at all." Car prices are determined by monitoring 150-200 wholesale auctions each month, canvassing dealers, and personal contact with sources throughout the country by NADA staff people.

As comprehensive as it may be, the NADA book and others on the market make no claims to being the final word on the price of a car. "All the guide books will be fairly accurate for the average car," one knowledgeable source says.

In the end, price will be determined by a specific car's condition, option package, and, not least of all, the buyer's ability to bargain.

—Fred M.H. Gregory

SALES, from pg. 79

Buying rationale remains as wide-ranging as the number of individuals in the market. Everything depends on one's particular needs and ability to pay. Solid values can be found scattered throughout the entire used-car spectrum. You can opt to ante a slight premium for a bona fide cream puff or substitute a measure of elbow grease for cash and take on a promising fixer-upper. Either way, there's always going to be some degree of calculated risk involved. By putting forth a modest effort you can minimize your vulnerability and maximize your long-term enjoyment.

Planning is the most critical part of any used-car deal. The first step involves determining what specific types of cars will conceivably meet your criteria. The size and body style of the vehicle, primary intended purpose, and mpg considerations should all shape your thinking, along with the questions of future parts and service availability. At the same time, you must realistically appraise the level of monthly payment or lump sum cash outlay you can take on. Locating outside funding is a year-round pastime; haggling over used-car prices is best done by shopping at times when the normal sales vol-

ume is low and commissions harder to come by—specifically in the late fall or winter months, or after a major run of bad weather.

A thorough researching of promising vehicles and specific financing opportunities is then in order, because in this poker game you play far more effectively when you know who's holding what before any money changes hands. Buying a used car naturally involves some compromises, so it becomes doubly important to explore all possibilities before committing to a specific vehicle or sales contract.

The MT Secondhand Sentinel is designed to enlighten you in the fundamentals of operating within the used-car market. To stack the odds in your favor and remove some of the unnecessary risk, we'll examine each major functional area, and offer some basic advice along with a number of less obvious suggestions for beating the system. Every transaction is unique, and striking the best bargain will require paying attention to all the details. Just remember that the guiding tenet is to shop diligently every step of the way, because the ultimate success or failure of your quest depends to a great extent on how well you do your homework. Happy hunting.

How To Rd a Wnt Ad

The quick answer, of course, is with skepticism. Those cryptic little mousetype messages, reduced to the comprehensibility of Gaelic or a set of military marching orders by the classified advertising encoders of the *Daily Bleat* (or *Reaper* or *Claron-Bugle-Watchdog* or whatever), often make promises they can keep. But just as often they emit a powerful odor of mendacity. Or perhaps an even more common odor, the one associated with barnyards and pastures.

By applying a jaundiced eye as you sift through the disemvoweled language of the used-car wants, you can, at the very least, save yourself a lot of telephone message units and, at best, a lot of money and/or headaches.

For example, if the ad is down there among the ordinary private party listings but concludes by offering "E-Z Credit," it indicates the presence of a low-end dealer who makes his money by sharkish interest rates and marginal cars. Avoid these operators; strictly sleaze city. A variation on this theme is the dealer who uses the classifieds to announce he's loaded with inventory due to new-car trades and is slashing prices "to the bone." Not only is this heavy new-car action unlikely considering the kind of years most new-car dealers have been suffering lately, but these guys are simply not there to give cars away. Any time you deal with a dealer, you must consider not only his own profit motive but his apparatus as well. The private party has no showroom

or lot overhead of any kind, and consequently you're likely to find yourself a better buy in this area.

This requires a bit more patience, of course. And it also requires timing. Although you'll probably be screening the classifieds daily, the best editions are Friday and Sunday. Friday papers usually get all the new ads that will run through the weekend. If it's an a.m. paper, you can usually get a first edition Thursday night early enough to jump on anything that sounds particularly juicy (although you should be cautious about making a final decision at night). Sunday wants will carry a few additional ads, and you can usually get hold of these classifieds quite early Saturday. Don't be afraid to call at

marginal hours—11 p.m. or so. The good stuff is going to disappear pronto, so the earlier you're on the scent the better.

Then there's the matter of employing your jaundiced eye to good advantage. After all, the seller wants to present his offering to best advantage, and just might exaggerate the virtues of his old sled. No rules are universal in this business, but there are some classified entries that ought to set off your personal alarm bells. A few suggestions follow.

RNS GD, NDS MINOR BODY WRK—Good chance it looks like it was customized with a ball peen hammer or, more likely, by a bus.

LOOKS GD, RNS FAIR—No longer a question of whether major engine work is imminent but when. Could be something as simple as a valve job, but more likely the main bearings are on the verge of becoming Wheaties.

RNS GD, USES SOME OIL—Good bet only if you need something capable of laying down a smokescreen.

RBLT ENGN—Rebuilt by whom? The seller's brother-in-law Clyde? Using kitchen implements? And when? If the seller lists a rebuild as an incentive, make sure he's got documentation.

DRVN ONLY WKND—Probably a recent retiree from the local half-mile oval. **STORED LST 5 YRS**—Maybe so, but why? Was it because that's when it stopped running? Also, find out how it was stored. Was it prepped for long inactivity? Or merely parked? →



Dealing With the Dealers

If the saying, "A fool and his money are soon parted" had been coined in this century instead of the 16th, it might have gone on to say, "especially at a used-car lot." Here the used-car shopper comes up against the pros, and they will rarely show mercy to someone ill-prepared to deal with them. At the same time, there are distinct advantages to buying from a person who sells cars every day. You're not likely to find a spectacular bargain, but if you proceed cautiously, you may well find a good car at a decent price.

Two kinds of dealers handle used cars:

WNT AD, from pg. 80

MUST SELL—Swell. But for how much? And why? This entry is frequently just a come-on and does not necessarily indicate a desirable level of desperation on the part of the seller.

\$5000 FIRM!—Check the paper again in a week. If he's still there, that firm \$5000 could have softened by \$500 or so.

\$5000 OBO—We think this probably means the seller may take a musical instrument in trade. If you don't have an oboe, maybe he'll take a lute.

ASKING \$5000—Meaning he'll take substantially less.

MK OFFR—Can be a good opportunity, if you're solidly in touch with the market, but quite frequently the "MK OFFR" advertiser has a solid figure in mind. Save yourself some time by exacting this number *before* going out to see the car.

DIVORCE FORCES SALE—You may find yourself dealing with a committee: the seller, his lawyer, and *her* lawyer. Usually the opportunity for a bargain is limited here.

ALL-NU RBBR—Make sure you're not paying an unnecessarily high premium for a set of chain-store bias ply cheapies.

NU PAINT—Don't expect 10 coats of hand-rubbed lacquer. And what is that NU PAINT covering up?

NDS NU BRAKES—Knock \$300 off whatever he's asking right now.

TRNSMSSN NDS WRK—This usually means the inside of the transmission, auto or stick, looks like the bowels of a trash compacter. Ad should read, "TRNSMSSN NDS REPLCMENT."

LO MILES—Behind "the check is in the mail," this is the biggest lie of all. Check the service stickers on the inside of the door, if they haven't disappeared (the stickers, not the doors), or check the service record, if there is one, against that "LO" odo total. Does the appearance of the car tally with the claimed mileage? If you have any doubt, take a walk.

—Tony Swan

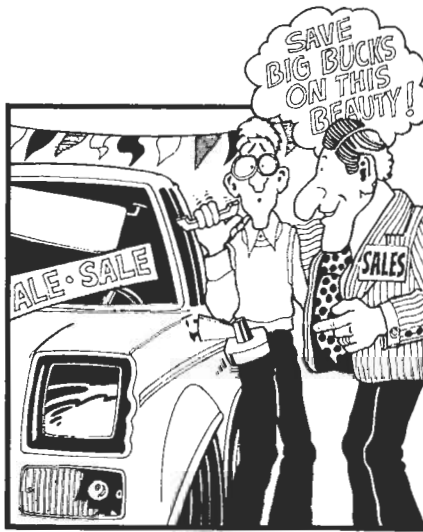
new-car dealers, who have manufacturer affiliations and are forced into the used-car business by the trade-ins they accept; and independent used-car dealers who buy and sell only pre-owned automobiles. To the shopper, there are some differences between these two types of dealers, but they also have much in common. Most obviously, any dealer is in the busi-

ness of selling cars; he wants to be in that business tomorrow; and he must have at least some sense of future accountability. That's not to say there are no sleazy types at used-car lots. But no merchant can play too dirty for too long and remain afloat. As a local business, a dealer of some size will likely have a history you can research by telephoning the Better Business Bureau or a consumer affairs agency.

One good reason to get a car at a dealer is the relative convenience of the transaction. These guys know everything involved when a car changes hands, and they can do a lot to facilitate the process. Licensing and registration are handled as a matter of course, and any inspections of the car the state may require will be taken care of. Also, dealers have close contacts at banks and finance companies, and some even carry their own contracts—although their rate to you will hardly be the most favorable.

New-Car Dealers

Prices tend to be the highest here, but the potential benefits may compensate. For the new-car dealer, used cars are merely



Dealing for Dollars



With the cost of money now hovering stubbornly between the ridiculous and the absurd, it's become absolutely imperative to explore every possible avenue for funding your veteran vehicle. The first rule of applied used-car financing stipulates that the recipient of a loan never enter into any time agreement without knowing exactly how much is being borrowed, from whom, for how long, and the rate at which it will have to be paid back. To any borrower, the most significant figure is the annual percentage rate (APR). This dictates the amount of interest dollars per year that one must pay on the principle borrowed. The APR is computed by multiplying the stated monthly finance charge by 12. In today's world of 16%-plus prime rates, you can expect APRs on used-car loans to run from about 17% (if you're lucky) to over 25%, depending on the source of financing.

A corollary to this axiom is that you should never seek to finance a downpayment. The additional interest charges incurred by floating 100% of the purchase price pushes the real cost of borrowing so high that you're better off postponing the transaction until you can amass a suitable cash supply.

The specific terms of a used-car loan will be determined by your financial status and cash flow capabilities as well as the price of the vehicle itself. The more you put down at the time of purchase, the lower the total cost of the car will be

when measured in absolute terms. Unfortunately, few buyers in today's market can afford 4-digit cash outlays, and many of those who can are better off buying on time for personal tax purposes.

Anyone who does plan to seek outside financing should first inquire about borrowing against some type of personal asset, either a savings account, life insurance policy, or real property. Using any of these channels may require your willingness to lock up specified assets during the loan period, but those who qualify can generally borrow at "bargain" rates.

For many people, credit unions have proven to be excellent sources of used-car financing. These organizations are known for their relatively liberal lending policies and favorable interest rates. Depending on the union, loans can be of the secured or unsecured variety, but the latter will add several percentage points to the APR in order to compensate for the added risk. Besides offering interest rates that are preferable to virtually all other outside financing sources, credit unions usually allow a borrower to pay off a loan early without incurring any penalty. Besides the normal membership requirement, a credit union will often require a slightly larger down payment in order to secure the deal. For the moment, the biggest problem faced by most credit unions is that the high prime rates have made it

See **DOLLARS**, pg. 84

a sideline; he takes trade-in cars as a convenience for his new-car customers. He then has the option of wholesaling such cars to independent used-car lots, or re-tailing them himself to used-car shoppers. This dealer will usually keep on his lot only the very best of his trade-ins. He must be particularly sensitive to the image his operation projects, and because of the high labor rates he must pay his service personnel, he cannot invest much time in fixing up thrashed cars. So the new-car dealer will wholesale most of the used cars he takes in; what you find on his lot will be the cream of the crop—the more popular models, in better than average condition, with low mileage, and well-stocked with options.

A new-car dealer's on-site service facility puts him in a good position to follow up his sales with maintenance and repair in the future. You may find this handy. More important, such a dealer will almost always offer some kind of warranty (even if it is short, like 90 days), which is good insurance in the used-car gamble.

Don't let the higher asking prices at a new-car dealer intimidate you; there's always room to haggle. Though a big, modern operation has high overhead and every sale must contribute its share to the expenses and profit, the dealer still wants

to move a trade-in off his lot. As long as you offer him more than he can make dumping the car on the wholesale market (your *Blue Book* research will indicate how much that is), he may accept.

Though getting a straight deal is never assured, you're generally on pretty safe ground buying from a major new-car dealer. He is, after all, the public representative of one or more big-name manufacturers, and his standing in the community matters to him.

Independent Used-Car Dealers

In this category, generalization is harder because establishments vary so in quality and dependability. We may be talking about a huge suburban complex—with nearly the facilities and services of a big new-car dealer—or a one-man operation that could be gone from its chain-link-fenced, inner-city corner by morning. That means you're much more on your own in ascertaining the enterprise's honesty. A call to the Better Business Bureau should be mandatory before any serious dealings, though a small dealer may not

be well-known around the business community. (He could also be operating under various names.) So take a good look around and trust your instincts. Be suspicious of a shabby looking lot, high-pressure salesmen, and "unbelievable" prices or terms.

A wider range of cars in a wider range of conditions will appear on the independent lots. This is where those less-than-perfect trade-ins from the new-car dealers end up. Used-car dealers also get their wares at auctions; direct from previous owners, for cash or as trade-ins; and from police forces and taxi companies (don't let a quick paint job fool you into thinking these are anything but used-up cars). Therefore, the stock on an independent's lot may run the gamut from dogs to gems. All the caveats about a thorough inspection before buying apply.

Used-car dealers normally have no real service facilities, but the better established firms will offer some kind of warranty on the products they sell. The lower overhead should give the independent more flexibility to come down in price compared to the new-car dealer, though as one who always deals in used cars anyway, he may not have the same motivation to move a pre-owned automobile off his lot.

—Kevin Smith

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One-on-One—You and the Private Party

Chances are good you'll buy your used car in a personal transaction with a private individual. Nearly half of all used-car sales happen that way. The combat here is hand to hand, with none of the polished guile of the white-shoed salesman or the showy hype of the auctioneer. It's honest one-on-one, each participant fully aware of the other's tactics and weapons.

Basically, the other guy has a car he wants to turn into cash, and you're looking to trade some money for a set of wheels. Sounds like the two of you could strike up a friendly deal. How friendly? If both parties wind up happy, that's fine. The critical point, however, is to be sure *you* don't get taken in the deal, right? And if you happen to pull a fast one on the other guy, well hey, it's a jungle out there.

Finding used cars for sale is almost unavoidable. Ads for cars appear on bulletin boards in supermarkets, laundromats, student unions, and employee lounges. And automobiles with For Sale signs show up everywhere, on the road and parked along busy streets. News of available cars also gets around by word of mouth.

Listing services are adding a new wrinkle to the car-hunting game. These are agencies that bring together buyers and sellers. For a small fee, a seller gets a listing of his car (with photo) displayed in the company's office. Prospective buyers call or visit the office, tell what they're looking for, and are referred to the appropriate sellers.

Still, the champion source for locating a used car remains the classified advertising in local newspapers and "shopper" sheets. Classified ads must never be taken as the whole truth and nothing but the

truth (their labyrinthine character is explored elsewhere in this section), but they do provide leads and at least some basic information.

Dealing with non-professionals in obtaining a car opens a whole world of opportunities—for both bargain and misery. On the plus side, shopping among private sellers makes available the greatest variety of hardware, improving your chances of finding the car you want, at the price you want. Since a private individual doesn't have the overhead of a car-selling business, prices should be better than what a dealership can offer. And since most cars are sold to pay for a replacement, which may already be on order, a private party will often be in a hurry. Advantage, buyer.

The drawbacks to buying privately include some matters of convenience, like financing (you'll probably have to pay cash) and registration (you get to deal with the Department of Motor Vehicles). But the biggest risk, of course, concerns the recourse you'll have should a problem come up later: probably none in some cases, definitely none in the rest.

It's imperative that you examine the car completely (we strongly recommend that unless the car you're considering is a Disposable, you have a professional mechanic do the same) and that you know all there is to know about the car's health before you strike a deal. Even if the seller is too honest to knowingly unload a disaster, he may not be aware of some impending problem that a full physical will turn up. In any case, be thorough now because once the deal is closed, you're on your own (unless the original warranty is still in force and can be transferred to you as a subsequent owner).

Another good reason for a rigorous in-

spection is the ammunition it may provide you for negotiating on price. Point out enough trouble spots and you may get the seller thinking he really does have a clunker and *any* deal would be a good one.

Before reaching the final handshake, you might be wise to confirm that the guy offering you this car is in fact at liberty to sell it. Most state motor vehicle departments will run a check on I.D. and license numbers you submit, for a small fee and a good reason why you're interested.

After you've come to satisfactory terms, the actual exchange must be accompanied by certain documentation. (Beyond a modest good-faith deposit, *never* turn over any money without taking immediate and physical possession of the car and its title.) Different states have different procedures for handling a car sale, but basically what you get from the seller is his signature on the certificate of ownership, releasing his interest in the vehicle. You present that to the motor vehicle department (along with the inevitable fee) to have the title recorded in your name. Depending on your state's requirements, you may also have to show evidence of insurance coverage, pay a sales tax, and have the car's safety and emissions equipment inspected. (By the way, the seller will in most cases have a form that he mails to the state announcing that he released ownership to you, so don't use the car as a getaway vehicle thinking it's in somebody else's name.)

One item of documentation that may or may not be required by law, but which you should insist on anyway, is a bill of sale. This lists the vehicle make, model, year, and identification numbers (engine and chassis), shows the date of the sale and the amount paid, and is signed by the seller, buyer, and sometimes a witness. In states that require a bill of sale, there may be an official form available. Otherwise, standard blank forms can be found in stationery stores, and you can even write one up yourself, as long as the necessary information is there. As the buyer, you want to keep the bill of sale as a receipt in case there's ever a flap over title or the terms of the deal. If the seller wishes, give him a photocopy of the document.

Falling under the general heading of private-party sales is a special case that deserves a few words. Hertz Corporation statistics indicate that fully 11% of all used-car transactions occur between friends and relatives. Such deals should be stamped, "Handle with Care." True, buying from acquaintances may mean you know more about the treatment the car has had. But it could also put your relationship in jeopardy. What if the engine shucks its innards right after the sale? The wise man who said, "Never sell a horse or a car to a neighbor" was always well liked in his community.

—Kevin Smith

DOLLARS, from pg. 82

difficult for them to justify any used-car loans.

Banks are the most widely known sources of used-car loans. For the most part, bank policies and practices are regulated at the state and local level. As a result, the interest rates charged by each lending institution—and even each individual branch—may vary considerably. The only way to find out who's got the best deal in town is to ask around. Plan to set aside plenty of time for inquiries.

Most banks that write used-car paper do so at an APR that falls between the rates charged by credit unions and those charged by dealers. Many banks view a one-year-old used car as they would a new vehicle for the purposes of setting interest rate. But as the average age of a used-car increases, so does the interest rate charged. In most cases, you can pretty much forget about borrowing to purchase a vehicle that's been on the road five years or longer.

Both new and used dealers represent slightly less desirable channels for securing used-car financing. Captive finance companies (like GMAC) are not presently offering the same kind of low-cost financing on used cars that they often extend to new models. Dealers may either borrow from banks or carry their own contracts. While this service is convenient, it ends up costing the buyer more in terms of higher interest rates. It would be far better to do a bit more shopping for funds, then apply the savings to the cost of the car—not to the cost of the interest.

The last place you should consider looking for a used-car loan is a finance company. Interest rates on any funds borrowed from these institutions are certain to be higher than any source this side of your friendly neighborhood loan shark. In many instances, finance companies also require you to put up a certain amount of personal property as collateral. Historically, they have shown little compassion for those who are tardy with payments.

—Bob Nagy

Getting the Pick of the Pack

One of the most critical aspects of any used-car negotiation is the pre-purchase inspection and test drive. Contrary to a popularly voiced opinion, not all sellers are out to stick it to unsuspecting customers—but some may try. Even basically honest souls are inclined to hedge on telling all to prospective buyers. Properly protecting your investment—particularly when it's a more expensive late-model car—entails checking it out as completely as possible before making any commitments. During the course of the evaluation, your guiding precept should be: anything that looks like trouble probably is.

The only time to even consider looking at a vehicle is during daylight hours. We suggest the following checklist as a starting point for methodically inspecting all major component systems. As part of your examination, ask to see any maintenance records that may exist (but don't let them influence your decision too heavily). Check the car's vehicle identification number (VIN) tag and the surrounding area for signs of tampering. It may even be a good idea to run the I.D. number against a police hot sheet, especially in cases where the deal sounds too good to be true.

After finishing your personal evaluation, it can also pay to take a promising candidate to a mechanic you trust and get a second, professional opinion. The cost of his services will be minimal compared to those of the potential problems he may uncover.

The Inspection

Exterior:

- Inspect along all body and trim panels for poor alignments, ripples, or mismatched paint. These often indicate a vehicle that has been damaged or pieced together from other wrecked cars.
- Look closely at all body panels and chrome for bubbles or any other signs of incipient corrosion. Bubbles under vinyl tops are also a tipoff to rust.
- Check areas around trim, rocker panels, and door frames for rust or rot.
- Examine all window glass for cracks, chips, or other damage.
- Inspect all lights for damaged or missing lenses and bulbs.
- Check weather seals around doors and windows. Pay close attention to weather-proofing strips around roll-up windows for signs of rust or deterioration.
- Open and close all movable body panels and note fits. Binding or sagging could indicate a tweak in the unibody structure or a twisted frame.

Interior:

- Check headliner, seat coverings, and carpet for rips, tears, stains, or evidence of mildew or water damage.
- Sit in all seating positions to ascertain whether there is unseen damage to the frame rails, springs, or cushions. Pay particular attention to the adjustability and comfort of the driver's seat.
- Raise and lower the side windows to

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Insuring Used Cars

Old sheet metal may need a new policy

Unless you're foolhardy or just plain dumb, you will be insuring that used car you just bought—in many states you may not have any choice. This also goes for cars that have been financed. For the most part, there's no difference in the kinds of insurance available for new and used cars, but there are some ways to cut down the amount of money a policy on a used car will cost.

You should be aware that insurance companies base their used-car rates on a car's original price, not the amount you paid for it. Consequently, you'll pay more to insure a used luxury car than a used mid-line model. So, if you're just looking for transportation, stick with cars that were low priced when new and you'll save on insurance premiums.

Insurance companies also consider the loss experience on individual cars and models when figuring their rates. Try to pick a used car that's had a good record over the years. Ask an insurance agent to

advise you on this before you buy.

The major differences between new- and used-car insurance are in the areas of collision and comprehensive coverage. You'll have to balance the worth of these coverages to you against the worth of the car. It's a simple matter of comparing the amount of money you'll pay in premiums against what the car is liable to bring on the open market. If the insurance costs exceed the car's value, or the two sums are fairly close, you might just be better off without these types of coverage. Here again, you should discuss the issue with your agent.

Also, don't forget the various discounts that you may be eligible for. If the used car is an additional vehicle, check into multi-car discounts with your agent. You might also save if the car is a compact or if you use it for carpooling. And if you don't plan on using the car as your primary transportation, ask about low-mileage discounts. —Fred M.H. Gregory

PACK, from pg. 85

- check for broken or binding mechanisms.
- Operate all accessories to see if they are functional. Don't overlook things like directional signals, horn, and high beams.
 - Check pedals for signs of wear that don't jibe with the odometer reading and for excessive free play in the linkage.
 - Depress brake pedal and hold for about a minute. If pedal sinks to the floor during that time, consider major brake repair to be imminent.
 - Look under dash and note the routing and appearance of the wiring. Loose or hanging wires usually indicate a non-factory job—and trouble.
 - Check trunk for the presence and condition of the spare and basic tire-changing tools.

Underhood:

- Scrutinize any newly welded or repainted areas closely—these are often signs of major repairs. Pay special attention to the fenderwells, radiator supports, and suspension towers.
- Check all fluid levels. Note condition and appearance of oil. Look for signs of dirt and water contamination. Examine radiator for corrosion, and coolant for possible oil residue that could indicate a blown head gasket or worse.
- Note levels and conditions of transmission and rearend fluids. If either carries the telltale odor of overheating, take a pass on the car.
- Pull air cleaner. Check for general condition of the element. If carburetor throat is coated with dirt or sludge, a rebuild will probably be required in the all-too-near future.
- Check all belts and hoses for signs of heavy wear. Frayed belts and squeezably soft hoses will soon need to be replaced.
- Assess condition of battery with a pocket hydrometer. Look for excessive white, crumbly corrosion around the terminals—it could mean a faulty voltage regulator.
- Wiggle all accessory drive pulleys to check for excessive play, indicating worn bearings.
- Inspect all electrical connections and plug wires. Pull distributor cap and check for cracks, dirt, or moisture.
- Note any oil leaking from around valve covers or other seals.
- Have someone start the engine and rev it a few times. Watch for any pronounced rocking that could indicate a broken motor mount.

Undercarriage:

- Bounce each corner of the vehicle to check the condition of the shock absorbers. More than two rebounds means trouble.
- Visually inspect shocks for any signs of damage, including leaks or binding caused by a bent main shaft.
- Inspect springs and torsion bars for

- breaks or sagging.
- Check all rubber bushings for general condition and signs of dry rot or heavy wear.
- Examine all underbody panels for evidence of repairs that may have been necessitated by damage to the suspension, frame, or unibody.
- Inspect tires for indications of odd or excessive tread wear and/or ply separation. Check sidewalls for cuts, tears, and dry rot.
- Grab each front tire and shake briskly. If it moves more than ¼ in. off axis, the wheel bearings may be worn excessively.
- Check condition of exhaust plumbing by using fingers or pliers to gently squeeze any suspicious area in pipes or mufflers. Soft spots mean internal rot and rust—and replacement.
- Visually inspect brakes and brake lines. Fluid leaks generally indicate the need for a costly overhaul of the system.
- Examine all gaskets, seals, and freeze plugs for any signs of leaks.

The Test Drive

Following your initial inspection, it's time for the all-important test drive. As you start the engine—from cold, if possi-

ble; a warm car can hide many ailments—note how much cranking is required. Listen closely for any unusual noises, specifically those that vary with engine rpm. They could signal problems with the water pump, lifters, or engine bearings. As the engine warms up, make sure that it can hold a normal idle speed without stalling. Periodically check to see whether all of the gauges in the instrument panel are operational.

As someone else revs the engine, watch the tailpipe for signs of heavy smoking. Black exhaust means a carbon buildup or too rich a mixture, both easily fixed. Blue smoke, on the other hand, is caused by burning oil. Whether it occurs on acceleration or deceleration, those big billows can mean expensive internal repairs.

A test drive is meant to familiarize you with the ride, handling, and performance of a car, so pick roads that match your typical driving patterns. If possible, include a smooth, deserted stretch of pavement for your more critical evaluations. As you drive along, accelerate briskly to check for engine responsiveness. Hold a constant 35 and 55 mph cruise and see if there's any roughness or stumbling.

If the car has a manual transmission,

Recycled Renters: They M

If you're in the market for a good, clean, low-mileage used car that's only about a year old, the best source available, bar none, is the retail car sales division of one of the big national rental-car chains like Hertz, Avis, National, or Budget. Between them, the four major companies turn over about a quarter of a million cars a year onto the used-car market. Hertz alone accounts for about 80,000 used cars a year, making it the single largest used-car retailer in the world.

As a general rule, the cars selected for retailing have between 12,000-25,000 miles accumulated, and have had meticulous maintenance applied to them during their short lives in the rental business, with maintenance records for each car usually open to inspection by prospective buyers. Most of the major rental companies make it a policy to retail only the best cars they have, and will not retail cars that have been involved in accidents, storms, fires, or floods. Those units are either wholesaled or auctioned, leaving the cream of the crop for the retail used-car market. And, while each of the rental companies aligns itself with a Detroit division (Hertz features Fords, Avis GM, National GM, and Budget Lincoln-Mercury), they have all expanded their fleets to include a variety of domestic and import nameplates, manual transmissioned cars as well as the more popular automatics, luxury cars, station wagons, and even a sprinkling of sports/specialty models, not to mention light trucks and vans.

Circumstances of sales of used rent-a-

cars do vary, of course, from chain to chain, and there are some differences between policies of sale between company-owned rental locations and those operated by franchises or licensees. Prices are usually set locally, according to nationally recognized used-car pricing services plus the influence of the local market area and the desirability of the car involved, but the prices are generally lower



☆ Secondhand Sentinel ☆

shift up and down through the gears, listening for any odd noises or grinding caused by tired synchros. Slipping, shuddering, and excessive clutch play are tip-offs that a potentially costly fix may be in the works. To test an automatic, manually shift it and look for an overabundance of slip or overly harsh changes. Put it in drive and accelerate up to freeway speeds, again noting any slipping or strange noises. To ascertain the condition of the U-joints, bring the car to a complete stop and put it into reverse. If you hear a loud clunk when the vehicle first starts moving, the U-joints are heading south in a hurry. With the radio off and the windows up, accelerate to a constant 30 mph and lift off the accelerator. A prominent whine or drone coming from the rear end could indicate severe wear problems. While you're at it, listen for any strange drivetrain or suspension noises in the passenger compartment and check for wind and/or exhaust leaks.

Use a smooth, uncrowned road surface, preferably a big parking lot, to check the steering and brakes. Accelerate to a steady 30 mph and take your hands off the wheel. If the car veers off to one side or "crabs" sideways, it suffers from

alignment problems, often the result of major impacts. While thumping and vibration are often caused by flat-spotted tires, chronic shake, rattle, and roll in the front end are generally the work of worn out bushings or out-of-true brake rotors. Cut the wheels to a full-lock position and see how the car tracks in both directions. Any noticeable difference in turning radius should be viewed as a major trouble sign. And see how the car navigates through corners. Blatant instability can have a number of causes, all of them bad for the pocketbook.

Last but not least, check the brakes. Again, on a straight, uncrowned road surface, accelerate to about 30 mph. Take your hands off the wheel and gently depress the brake pedal. The car should slow evenly and in a straight line. If it pulls to one side, beware. Any rhythmic pulsation in the brake pedal generally means an out-of-round drum or warped rotor.

If the vehicle in question still makes a favorable impression after the test drive, it's time for the final stop. Take the car to a reputable mechanic and have it thoroughly inspected. If the seller refuses, take a walk.

—Bob Nagy

Just Be the Best Bargain of All

than those commanded for similar hardware by new-car dealers and used-only lots. In all cases, prices are set and non-negotiable and sales are made for cash, with no trade-ins taken. Usually, if a used rental car does not move at its set price, it will be wholesaled or auctioned, but occasionally it may be repriced and sold at that lower price after a couple of weeks or a month. Some of the Big Four rental companies offer financing through local lending institutions, and all of them stand behind their used rental cars with substantial warranties, either 12/12,000 or 24/24,000, not including mileage already accumulated on the cars. Warranty claims are handled either directly by the sales location or indirectly through the nearest appropriate dealership service shop.

The advantages of shopping for a used car at a rental car retail location are pretty obvious. The cars are low in mileage, have had well-above-average maintenance (both in quantity and quality), model selection is good to excellent at most locations because of the constant turnover, and prices are both reasonable and fair. The problem is that because the cars are so new, the gross dollar amounts are generally high. For those looking for a higher-mileage older car, though, the leasing branches of the national rental companies have thousands of two-year-old leased cars that are retailed in pretty much the same way as the rental units, for lower prices. What follows is a set of brief descriptions of how the four major

national rental car chains sell their first-line cars.

HERTZ The oldest and largest rental car company in the world, Hertz turns over 80,000 rental cars through retail channels every year, about 60,000 short-term rental units, and 20,000 long-term lease cars. Hertz operates more than 150 used rental-car retailing centers in the U.S., most of which are at or near their airport rental locations. The cream of the Hertz rental fleet averages 9000 miles of use, while the average rental car has accumulated 15,000-18,000 miles. Lease cars are turned in with mileages ranging from 20,000-60,000 miles. Hertz can arrange local financing, and offers a 12-month, 12,000-mile limited warranty on its rental cars. The Hertz fleet is dominated by Ford products, but virtually all U.S. makes are available, and about 10% of the total Hertz fleet is made up of imports, many with manual transmissions. Cadillac, Lincoln, and Mercedes-Benz luxury cars are available, as are 4-wheel-drive specialty trucks, passenger vans, and trucks up to and including heavy duty. Some 80% of Hertz locations are company owned, and the balance are licensed. Licensee locations also sell used cars, and many are owned by or affiliated with new-car dealerships. Prices for used Hertz rental cars are firm, and average \$400-600 under dealer lot prices. For the location of the nearest Hertz retail sales operation, dial 1-800-654-3131.

See Renters, pg. 88



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RENTERS, from pg. 87

AVIS The No. 2 company in its field operates 1200 rental locations in the U.S., and there are about 170 sales locations, half company owned, half operated by licensees. Avis turns over 55,000 cars a year, and about half of them are good enough to be retailed through the system, while the balance are wholesaled or auctioned. The Avis fleet mix is more than 50% General Motors cars, but beyond that minimum, local outlets control the fleet mix according to local market demand. Imports included in the Avis mix: Toyota, Datsun, VW Rabbit, and Volvo. Used Avis rental cars average 12,000-25,000 miles of use and are backed by a limited 12/12,000 powertrain warranty. Prices are set by the Avis zone manager for corporate-owned locations, but independent licensees set their own prices for used cars. Prices are firm in either case. Corporate locations can arrange local financing, and though some licensee operations may take trades, none are taken by Avis company-owned retail outlets. Avis is currently contemplating an offer of additional warranty protection, for a fee, through one or more of the national car warranty companies, but that program has not been finalized. Avis does not retail collision-damaged cars, and their pricing is generally about \$2000 under the price of an equivalent new car with the same equipment level. To locate the nearest Avis used-car retail outlet, call 1-800-331-1212.

NATIONAL Minneapolis-based National Car Rental has the most extensive warranty of all, 24 months or 24,000 miles on its used rental cars. The chain is composed of 70% company-owned rental locations, 30% licensees, and there are about 1000 rental locations in the U.S., but only a dozen or so "dedicated" retail locations are solely for the sale of used rental cars. On average, National keeps its renters in service 12-16 months, and the odometer mileage runs 16,000-24,000 miles on used cars put up for sale. The National fleet is 75% General Motors cars, with 15% assorted other U.S. makes and 10% imports, mostly Toyotas and Datsuns. Local fleet makeup is determined by the company's city managers. Pricing policy guidelines are set by the corporation, and may be altered by the city manager or used-car manager in a given zone, depending on local market conditions. Prices are "wholesale," or between wholesale and retail, averaging \$300-1200 under local retail prices. National policy requires that no car damaged by collision, storm, or flood be retailed; and National supplies a complete maintenance history with each car sold. Financing, up to 80% of the purchase price, is available through local lenders and credit unions. National publishes a listing of all its used-car retail locations and a 16-page booklet on used cars, both available by writing to NCR's public relations department at 7700 France Ave. South, Minneapolis, MN 55435. The toll-

free number for National locations is 1-800-328-4567.

BUDGET Chicago-based Budget operates only a few corporate locations with the remaining 97% run by licensees. There are about 1800 Budget locations worldwide, 880 in the U.S., and in Budget's case, the car prices are set individually by the management of each location that retails its used rental cars. Budget's turnover is controlled by time, not mileage, and most cars are retailed after 6 months, with a maximum age of 18 months; average mileage on a rental unit for sale is 20,000 miles. Budget has no retailing locations, and some portion of each rental site is used for retailing. The Budget fleet is very heavily populated by Ford and Lincoln-Mercury products, so Budget may be the best of the big four for locating a slightly used, well-equipped luxury car. As with the other chains, though, the mix of cars other than Lincolns and Mercurys is controlled locally, including a small number of specialty cars at some locations. Warranty limitations are similar to those of other companies, as is Budget's policy on pricing and financing. Prices are to be considered firm on all cars being retailed, and financing can be arranged locally through licensees, many of whom are Ford or Lincoln-Mercury dealers. For location information, call 1-800-527-0700.

—Jim McCraw

Repossessions: How to Buy From the Lenders

Banks, credit unions, finance companies—anyone who lends money for automobile purchases—must occasionally repossess a car for failure to make payments. Maybe the buyer had some unforeseen financial setback, perhaps he was overextended in the first place, or he might just have been irresponsible with his affairs. Since most long-term financing arrangements name the object purchased (in this case a car) as collateral for the loan, the lender can—if more polite measures fail—take it back and recover at least some of the money owed by reselling it.

One advantage for the used-car shopper is that these financial institutions are not really in the business of selling cars. They want to lend money. Repossession, their last resort, is a nasty event for them, too; and carrying a car on the books that is not generating payments does them no good at all. So to some extent it's a buyer's market in dealing with these sellers. Loan officers needing to unload a car will naturally refer to the *Blue Book* for an idea of its value, but they will be amena-

ble to any offer that gets the thing off their hands. And, of course, financing for the purchase may be available on the spot. If you can find a car that looks like a decent buy, and if you can be fairly confident of its condition, ask what the original buyer was paying on it, then make an offer of a small cash down and reasonable monthly installments.

The principal caveat in buying a repo involves those two if's in the previous sentence. A financial institution is in no position to warrant—or sometimes even *know*—the condition of a car it's selling. You will be completely on your own in determining its cosmetic and mechanical order. And once you sign on the dotted line, any problems the car has or develops will be yours and only yours. Inspect the car carefully before buying; just as when dealing with a private party, a few dollars to a knowledgeable mechanic for his professional judgment is a wise investment.

For at least one reason, that professional inspection may be particularly important in the case of a repo: There's a good chance the car has not been treated

kindly by its previous owner. Someone who was irresponsible about car payments may well have been rather casual about car maintenance, too. Clearly, that other driver didn't think enough of the car to work out a way to keep it. Can you expect it's had loving care?

Repos for sale will generally be listed in the local paper's classified section. Most credit unions have a newsletter that will include their available repos. You can also call finance companies and bank loan departments for leads on cars in need of new owners.

As a footnote here, cars can be in need of new owners for other reasons. A court, a bank, an attorney, or an executor may need to liquidate one or more automobiles in the settlement of an estate or bankruptcy. Liquidations are similar to repossession sales in that the seller just wants to be rid of the thing, and the buyer takes the car strictly as is. These sales will almost always be cash only, and are frequently conducted by sealed bid.

—Kevin Smith

Fixer Uppers: Spend a Little, Save A Lot

If the primary attraction of a used car is a low price, then it follows that the lowest prices should be on the most-used cars. But since owning almost any used car involves some repairs, you can expect the most-used cars to need the most fixing up. So the question is: To save money, what things are reasonable to consider fixing—by spending money?

Three major areas of repair concern most used-car deals: mechanical/electrical, exterior, and interior. Before deciding what condition you can accept or must reject, you first have to determine exactly why you're contemplating that particular car. Let's break those possible reasons into two main categories: (1) You need the car for transportation. (2) You're buying the car out of a particular interest, to keep, perhaps to restore, and



you won't have to depend on it for daily transportation.

Here's the important part. If you need the car for transportation, you absolutely must look for sound mechanicals first; it has to run dependably. But if you're buying a fixer-upper as a project and keeper, the sky's the limit. In either case, you have to decide exactly what kinds of things you can, in fact, fix.

Consider first a transportation car. Be primarily concerned with engine, transmission, steering, brakes, tires. Suppose the mechanical side is okay, but it doesn't look so wonderful. If, for instance, the carpets and upholstery are worn, you can haggle on the price considerably by using the car's condition as the bargaining point, because new seat covers and carpets or floor mats will cost less than you should be able to save.

This is the idea: Suppose a car in generally good condition will bring \$2500. Maybe the one you're looking at needs some work, just cleaning up and minor parts or repairs you can handle yourself. If repairs will cost, say, \$200, but the car

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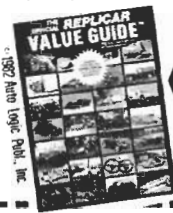
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Buying a Used Specialty Car

There are three reasons for buying a used—rather than new—car. First, you can't afford a new one. Second, it's a "smarter" buy—you escape a heavy depreciation penalty and the price differential between new and used can be frittered away on non-essentials like food.

The third reason, the one that concerns us here, is that what you really want is no longer made, so buying *used* is a foregone conclusion.

Unlike the guy who's buying used only for transportation, the buyer of a specialty car fixates on one particular car. That is to say, the victim of a seduction by an MGC-GT is in no mood to trifle with a Triumph GT-6 or a Datsun 240Z. God help him, only the MGC-GT will do.

Unless the car desired is so—uh—unique that no owner's club exists, that club should be the first stop. Friendly fellows, club members bubble and seethe with enthusiasm, like nothing better than talking about their prides-and-joys, know where most of the warts are hidden, and are excellent sources for cars, parts, service, prices.

Car clubs can be found through classifieds in most auto magazines, specialty publications like *Hemmings* and *Special Interest Autos*, and sometimes through the public relations offices of the manufacturers of a current product (i.e., Ford can tell you about owner's clubs for T-Bird, Edsel, Mustang, Continental, etc.). England is a real haven for nutball specialty cars and their attendant organizations. *Thoroughbreds & Classic Cars*, at big newsstands or through specialty booksellers, is helpful.

Okay. Now make sure that you can really *drive* the sucker. Do you really want to crisscross west Texas in a Morris Minor woody or an oval-window V-Dub? Will you be afraid of traffic in your newly restored and oh-so-lovely '63 XKE? You're a fool if you're *not* afraid. Can you afford to leave it parked for relatively long periods waiting for parts or the One

True Genius who knows (insert here: Mercedes air suspension/Maserati-Lucas F.I./Citroën SM timing chains) to get around to fixing it? Will Allstate wrap loving hands around it? Most classic/antique/special interest insurance companies don't want to know about cars driven daily. Most regular insurance companies don't want to know about anything that doesn't slip easily into their actuarial tables.

If your lechery runs toward '60s musclecars, or Porsches, or Corvettes, and you're attracted because, while you're driving, they appreciate, there's an additional caveat: counterfeits. A GTO was really just an option box on a Pontiac Tempest order sheet, but it was Pontiac's job to turn the bare-bones Tempest into a sought-after GTO—not some swapmeet habituë with time, storage space, and a venal streak whose assemblage may or may not approximate the original. By any genuine collector's standards, such a machine is amusing but hardly valuable.

Ed Barker's axiom, "There is no such thing as a stock Porsche," was originally applied to the bathtub 356 but should apply as well to the 900-series cars. There are more 911 Carreras on the road today

than ever left Zuffenhausen, more 914-6s, more Shelby GT350s, more Cobras, more anniversary Corvettes, more NART Ferraris, Daytona Spyderys, more F.I. '57 Chevys. The general rule is that when the price gets high enough, or the fakery is easy enough, somebody will go for the buck; and somebody else gets stuck. Again, the relevant car club and its attendant expert one-make fanatics are your best defense.

Too, while contemplating GTOs, Hemi-Challengers, Z-11 Impalas, and the odd 429 Mustang, consider this: No amount of ignition retarding, lead/no lead mixing, or feather footing will allow 11:1 compression and decade-old combustion chamber technology to co-exist with today's excuse for gasoline. Av-gas and octane boosters may get you by on the weekends.

The last wart on the otherwise lovely backside of your automotive love is financing. Unless you're one of those fortunates who can use the two-step (Step 1: You hand the seller the money; Step 2: The seller hands you the keys) purchase plan, you'll find most specialty cars won't appear in the *Kelley Blue Book* or NADA orange book. Specialty guides like the Gold Book or the Kelley version simply fall outside the guidelines—usually age related—set up by most banks. In some cases the bank may be willing to lend you the money. Though they may also want the car for additional collateral, it's really a personal loan requiring more personal worth and better credit than a regular dealer-underwritten car loan.

The faint glimmer of hope is the liberal leasing company. If sufficiently well-financed, a leasing company isn't fussy about what it leases, only about to whom it is leased. If you are one of those able to put the right numbers in the little boxes on the credit application, leasing is a way to go. Remember: Most leases terminate with the option to buy. And things are bound to be better then. —Len Frank



FIXER UPPERS, from pg. 89

sitting there looks bad enough that you can chisel the price down to \$2000, you'll end up \$300 ahead, with new seat covers and floor mats besides.

Generally, the more accessories on a car, the more likely some of them will fail, and luxury and convenience items tend to be expensive to repair. If you're in the market strictly for a transportation car, stay with simple, common models. Our ideal has a conventional layout with front-mounted, inline, 4- or 6-cylinder engines. It has rear drive, live rear axle, disc brakes on the front only, preferably a manual transmission, and few accessories. A cast iron engine block is best, and

avoid fuel injection. For an overhead camshaft, a belt drive is easier and cheaper to replace than a chain. It should be a car that was built in large numbers so that replacement parts are easily available. Finally, stay with American or major Japanese brand names.

On the other hand, if you're buying a used car for interest, all this changes. We have one piece of advice: For a project, restoration, collector's item, or keeper, look for straight body work first, a clean interior second, and good mechanicals last. The reason is a sound one. First-rate body repair is difficult, expensive, and time-consuming. Frustrating, too. But even if the engine is thoroughly destroyed, with rods poking through,

wrecking yards and parts houses will provide everything you need to assemble a replacement and bolt it into the car. This is the easiest—and best—way to get a car that both looks good and runs well.

If you need a runner, get one that runs. If you want a project, opt for appearance.

Realizing the entire used-car market is a horse trader's delight, the arena of fixer-uppers can be a pirate's den. It can also lead to some terrifically good bargains. If you're after a fixer-upper you have to rely first on a solid judgment of your own repair capabilities, second on an accurate assessment of the car in question, and third on the keenness of your own haggling skills. You have nothing to save but your own money. —Don Fuller

How to Buy a Disposable Car

Lucky you, the hapless klunk buyer. Lucky because—in spite of your temporary poverty—you don't have to go through *half* the nonsense those other buyers do. While they're all rolling marbles down the cracks between hood and fender to make sure of perfect alignment, you're going to be looking for important stuff, like how many wheels the car has and if the front crossmember is still there. What you're after is maximum service for minimum dollars. So let's put some limits on how much you'll spend and what you can expect to get for your money.

Suppose you have somewhere between \$200 and \$600 to dissipate (try not to think of it as an investment) on a car; you have no sinking fund with which to maintain it; and if it lasts you six months to a year and a half, you will feel you have had your money's worth. Any use you get beyond that is a bonus, right? But wait, you ask: how many *miles* will I get? Ah, here is a matter of some inscrutability. The cars with which we are dealing here are beyond used—they are essentially used up. They do not have much life remaining and any they do have will be greatly shortened not only by being driven far, but also by being driven fast. So, if you plan to commute between two towns 50 expressway miles apart, and you always sleep through the alarm, forget about it. But if you're the student who needs to move with short spurts of alacrity between school and a part-time job, the ex-wife who must now go back to work, the car enthusiast who needs something in which to chase parts for the restoration project that is really his "first car," or the counter-culture freak who really hates cars but simply must have one in order to attend Nuke-the-Whales



rallies, have we got some cars for you!

Before starting your search, abandon all brand loyalties and prejudices. You're not out to buy the best Chevy or Ford for the money. You're out to get the most *car* for the money. And there go the imports. Current consumer perception in the U.S. (excluding southern Michigan) is that imported cars get better gas mileage, last longer, and prove their owners are chic. So long as this foolishness persists, the imported car worth having doesn't fit our budget, and the one that fits our budget isn't worth having.

By now you begin to realize that the least popular brands and models are what you should be looking at. And while tire condition is far more important than paint and body work, it is a sobering fact that the better-looking old cars are almost always the *better* old cars. So, if the fenders are about rusted off, the headliner is hanging down like Spanish moss, and the interior smells like the south end of San Francisco Bay at low tide, don't expect a smooth idle, brisk acceleration, and impeccable brakes.

It is easy to say what you should avoid. If there are any obvious functional discrepancies like slipping clutch, cylinders

that don't fire, excessively smoky exhaust, or obviously inadequate brakes, you're going to have to pass, no matter how swell the stereo or cute the cut crystal bud vases.

It is not so easy to say what you should seek. Obviously decent tires are desirable, since replacements are pricey; reasonably clean coolant is a virtue, as is an engine that doesn't shed a lot of oil. If it burns a little, never mind. That's no big deal. Look at the car. Listen to what it whispers to you about itself. Old cars are poor liars. Lift the hood and look around the engine room. Ditto the trunk. Open and close the doors. Peek under the carpets. Roll the windows up and down. Sniff the radiator water. We're not sure how it is supposed to smell, but the seller will expect this as buyers have been doing it for decades. A noisy transmission or differential may not be a disqualifier. In an old klunk, it depends *how* noisy. Poor shocks are no big deal, either. Sears loves to discount them. But beware thuds up front and vague steering. Go look at something else.

But look where? This is a problem. Unlike cars of substantial value, cheap old cars often never make it into the Sunday Classifieds. The best ones change hands in a tight circle. Ask around. Look for signs on cars in the street, on supermarket bulletin boards, and in the back lots of new-car dealers too classy to retail such junk. Avoid dealers who specialize in "Transportation Cars." They have to double their costs just to pay the rent.

You're gonna be disappointed unless we give you some brand or model to get you started, right? Well, this author has a fondness for the Oldsmobile Ninety-Eight; and the Dart/Valiant Slant Six cars have probably amazed and delighted more owners with their amiable durability than anything else that comes to mind. Go get yourself one.

—T.C. Browne



The Good, The Bad, and The Iffy: MT's Official Selection of Yeas, Nays, and Maybe's



In the course of an average week, the *Motor Trend* phones are swamped with hundreds of calls from readers wondering, "What kind of used car should I buy?" Our usual response is to find out what kind of car the reader really *wants* to buy, and then, unless it's a real long shot, tell him or her that is indeed the car to buy. This article is not for those folks. They've been told how to spend their money. So if you've called us in the last year, stop and go on to the next article.

This segment of the Used Car Spectacular is for all of you who are clutching the phone receiver and ready to squander

this week's pay on a hideously expensive long-distance call. (Or, worse, planning to call us collect. It happens; we say "no.")

Since cars are primarily used for transportation by right-thinking people, and transportation, or rather the need for it, is a constant for most, the cars we'll list are the type you could rely on for years of regular driving. This reliability will be reflected in prices. If you're looking for a \$200 car to get you by, it won't be here.

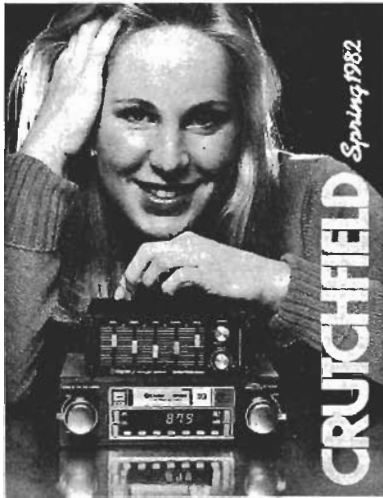
We've compiled a list of 36 used cars, dividing them into three categories with 12 suggestions in each: The Good (cars

you can expect to provide years of economical motoring); The Bad (cars we suggest buying only after your doctor told you, "You've got two weeks to live!"); and The Iffy (cars that may be something of a gamble or may not offer the value of those on The Good list).

Remember, economy, as in "economical motoring," doesn't necessarily mean fuel economy. Not long ago, gas mileage was confused with economy, and anything that promised 30 mpg was worth its weight in Exxon debentures. Heavy iron







See *GOOD, BAD, IFFY*, pg. 94

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GOOD, BAD, IFFY, from pg. 93

was as popular as OPEC. A semi-tragic Rabbit or over-the-hill Honda brought bags more cash than a newer, better-maintained AMC Matador or Buick Electra. Amortized over four years, considering the depreciated state of the land yacht against that of the econobox along with the shorter theoretical life expectancy of buzzy, high-revving engines, the out-of-pocket gas costs of the Nash and the Deuce-And-A-Quarter became more a mere annoyance than anything else.

Using extreme examples, the difference (calculated at \$1.35 per gal driving 15,000 miles annually) in fuel costs for a 15-mpg car and a 30-mpg car is \$900. Will the decreased maintenance and repair costs, lower initial price, and higher overall mileage capability offset the difference in fuel economy? Usually, yes, and by a considerable margin over the life of the car.

Another consideration: None of the "like-nu" beauties on the list should be considered as investment buys. Buying a used car, especially one to be used for daily transportation, for its investment potential is one of the biggest long-shots in the business. In most cases, you'd be better off playing Russian Roulette with a Walther PPK.

The cars on the Iffy list are ones we might consider buying with our own bucks. Usually these are sportier than those on the other two lists. And in most cases, the listed cars have no glaring reliability problems. They are dedicated to the principle of *caveat emptor*.

Here's the list. We'd like to suggest you tear it out and pin it up next to your telephone. Whenever you're overcome with that burning desire to "ask us what to buy," relief will be as close as the phone, without those annoying long-distance charges.

The Good



FORD LTD and MERCURY MARQUIS, 1974-1980—Big and really worthy of the appellation "Road Sailor," these beauts should be good for years to come, especially models equipped with the 351-cid V-8.

CHRYSLER LE BARON and DODGE DIPLOMAT, 1978-1980—Gilded-lily versions of the Aspen/Volare, the Le Baron/Diplomat series seemed to hold up better than its progenitor. Models with 318-cid V-8s are preferable over the larger 360-cube engine and even the durable but underpowered Slant Six.

GENERAL MOTORS A- and A-SPECIAL BODIES, 1973-1977—These are the mid-sized Malibu, Le Mans, Century, Monte Carlo, Regal, Grand Prix, and innumerable Cutlass variations. Top choices for engines would be the 250-cid Chevy-built Stovebolt Six or one of the

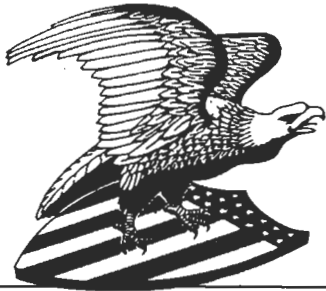
corporation's 350-in. variations on a V-8 theme. The '78, '79, and '80 versions may also be acceptable when fitted with V-8 engines and THM 350 automatic or any manual gearbox.

FORD FALCON, FORD MAVERICK, and MERCURY COMET, 1966-1977—One of the original troopers, the Falcon/Maverick/Comet was a favorite of the "over 50" set. As a result there are still a lot on the road that haven't been thrashed within an inch of their lives, or driven an astronomical number of miles, or both. The indestructible Ford inline six is the engine to look for, preferably a 200-cid version. Try to skip the V-8s unless you find a 289 with a 2-bbl carb.

PLYMOUTH VALIANT and DODGE DART, 1967-1976—If ever an indestructible car was built, this was it. Also included with the Valiant and Dart are the Plymouth Duster and Scamp, and the Dodge Demon and ironically named Swinger (could it have had something to do with the suspension?). All should be considered prime examples of used-car value. The most desirable of these offerings would be one equipped with a 225-cid Slant Six, Torqueflite automatic trans, power steering, and disc brakes. These cars were very popular with older buyers (especially the Swinger, strangely enough), so low-mileage, gently driven examples are still readily available.

TOYOTA COROLLA, 1969-1980—The biggest selling car in Japan (5,008,877 vended in its country of origin since its introduction in 1966) has always been one of Toyota's most popular lines in this country as well. It has also been one of the firm's most reliable models. With rust a potential problem in a large part of the U.S., we'd recommend a newer Corolla in the Snow Belt. As with most small imports, the used prices are inflated by the car's EPA ratings. Corollas with automatic gearboxes, especially high-mileage samples, should be avoided like blowfish sushi.

GENERAL MOTORS B-BODIES, 1973-1980, and C-BODIES, 1973-1979—GM's version of The Big Car is known by many names: Caprice, Bonneville, Catalina, Delta 88, Le Sabre, Centurion, Impala (all B-cars), and the larger-yet Olds Ninety-Eight, Electra 225, Cad de Villes, and Fleetwood Brougham. As with the General's mid-sized cars, the company's ubiquitous 350 V-8 is always a sure thing (especially if it's a Chevy-built example). Most of these models were made with THM 350 or THM 400 transmissions, so there's little fear of getting one of the infamous THM 200 "grenade gearboxes." Avoid the various and sundry V-6 engines in the B- and C-cars—the engines were okay but were usually hooked up to the previously mentioned "cellophane" transmission.



Recalling Recalls

How to find out if the car is on the list

Car recall campaigns are in the news all the time. We're familiar with what the process involves (a car owner gets a letter from the manufacturer telling him something is wrong with his car and that a dealer will fix it free of charge), but the fact is that only about two out of three people bring their recalled cars in for service.

When you buy a used car, make sure it doesn't have an uncorrected flaw for which it was once recalled. There's no time limit on having a recallable defect fixed, and it's easy enough to check on your particular car's record. Just send the car's VIN (Vehicle Identification Number) to the Consumer Services Division of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), 400 7th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20590. They'll tell you.

—Fred M.H. Gregory

VOLKSWAGEN BEETLE, 1966-1973 (ex. 1969)—They run forever without changing the spark plugs, or tune-ups, or fixing the burned exhaust valves, or fiddling with the carburetor. The Beetle just seems to plod along. In the event anything does incapacitate one of these VWs, the car can usually be put back on the road using everyday utensils found in the average kitchen. While most corner gas station mechanics can keep the engine slogging along for years, the optional "Automatic Stickshift" was one of those mechanical wonders a score of "factory-trained" technicians and the GNPs of several Third-World nations couldn't keep on the road for more than a couple of weeks. The prices are inflated for Beetles due mostly to the vehicle's "cute" factor and the preponderance of VW-based kit cars on the market.

DATSUN 1200, DATSUN B210 and 210, 1971-1980—These were all Datsun's variations on the Corolla theme. The 1200 was a sturdy but dull econobox. The car will probably be difficult to find out of the Sun Belt. The B210 should be even more plentiful than the 1200 and the newer 210. As durable as the 1200, the B210 was ugly enough to be nicknamed "The Atomic Cockroach." But then

we're talking economical transportation here, not beauty contest winners. The 210 is the most sophisticated of the three but also the most costly, being the newest. Like the Toyota Corolla, 1200s, B210s, and 210s with self-shifting transmissions are best avoided.

FORD FIESTA, 1978-1980—The Fiesta was one of Ford's best cars, and if the company had been able to squeeze an automatic gearbox in it the little Ford might still be sold here today. But Ford's decision to cease importation of the car has driven the used car prices for a Fiesta into the basement. Many folks have interpreted this to mean the Fiesta was a junker. Not so! The car's 1.6-liter Kent push-rod engine is one of if not the most durable engines Ford has ever built. Unfortunately, earlier Fiestas are prone to debilitating rust in the rocker area and should be avoided in the Snow Belt.

SUBARU DL, GL, GF etc. 1973-1981 (ex. 1978-1980)—We've called Subarus "sensible shoes" and said they were as "glamorous as turnips." And like shoes and turnips, they seldom break down. Truth be known, Subarus are essentially Japanese Valiants, and that is a compliment. Aside from models built between '78 and '80, the horizontally opposed 4-cylinder engine has been remarkably trouble-free. The same cannot be said for the optional 3-speed automatic. Stick with a Subaru with a clutch.

GENERAL MOTORS X-BODIES, 1973-1979—Predecessor to the front-wheel-drive X-car, this group includes the Nova, Ventura II, Phoenix, Omega, Apollo, and Skylark. Any one of these with Chevy's 250 six will run from now 'til the cows come home. Hooked up to a THM 350 automatic ('73-76) the six is a more than adequate powerplant. Models with the Chevrolet-manufactured 350-cid V-8 are desirable as well. This larger engine has shown signs of longer life than the 305- and 307-in. versions of the V-8. Novas with the 9C1 police package are especially fast, especially rugged, and therefore especially desirable.

The Bad

CHEVROLET VEGA and PONTIAC ASTRE with 140-cid engine, 1971-1977—They rust, they overheat, and that engine has the durability of a potato chip.

PORSCHE 914, 1.7-liter, 1970-1973—The targa-topped car with absolutely no ventilation. It's okay though; with the all the fuel-injection problems the 914 had, you probably won't be going anywhere.

HONDA CIVIC, 1973-1974—Ever wonder why new Hondas are so good? The company built what seemed to be a series

See **GOOD, BAD, IFFY**, pg. 96

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GOOD, BAD, IFFY, from pg. 95

of practice cars about 10 years ago. Iron-block CVCC engine cured problems of aluminum-block precursors.

VOLKSWAGEN DASHER, RABBIT, and SCIROCCO, 1974-1976—After all, water-cooled engines were new to the folks at Wolfsburg.

PLYMOUTH VOLARE and DODGE ASPEN, 1976-1980—The most recalled car in the history of such things. Need we say more?

GENERAL MOTORS X-BODIES, 1980—The General's first shot at a compact front-wheel-drive car, the early X-cars were plagued by scores of teething problems. Better to get an '81.

PORSCHE 924, 1977-1978—Early models suffered from serious ride problems and seemingly indifferent assembly. 1979 and newer models were vastly improved.

GENERAL MOTORS DIESEL-POWERED CARS, 1978-1980—Apparently another case of building cars, or rather engines, too early on the learning curve, then selling them.

VW TYPE 3, 1968-1973, VW TYPE 4, 1971-1974, and VW BEETLE 1974-1979—Imagine, Volkswagens too complicated to keep on the road. It boggles the mind.

AUDI 100 LS, 1969-1977—Unique in all the world. Multiple fuel system problems, injected and carbureted alike.

TRIUMPH TR7, 1975-1977—The archetype of almost everything that used to be wrong with English cars.

GENERAL MOTORS H-SPECIAL BODIES, 1975-1980—With V-6 and V-8 engines, these Monza variants (Sunbird, Starfire, Skyhawk) had plenty of go. Unfortunately, they also had weak automatic transmissions and differentials. Clunk.

The Iffy



DATSUN 240Z, 1971-1973—The Z-car's purest incarnation, but watch out for signs of thrashing.

FORD MUSTANG, FORD FALCON SPRINT, 1964-1966—A modern classic, zippy performance, and reasonably sized.

BMW 2002, 1969-1974 and BMW 2002 Tii, 1972-1974—Built when BMWs were fast and relatively cheap.

GENERAL MOTORS F-BODIES, 1966-1980—So many good ones. The staff favorites: 1969 Camaro Z28 and 1979 Trans Am with the T/A 6.6 engine.

PORSCHE 911, 1972-1974—With Bosch CIS injection, these were tractable machines, as pretty today as they were when new.

AMC AMX, 1968-1970—Not the Javelin trim package but the original 2-seater. Rare and quick.

JAGUAR XJ6, 1969-1978—Merely the prettiest 4-door sedan you can buy. And at bargain prices.

PLYMOUTH BARRACUDA and DODGE CHALLENGER, 1970-1974, 340 V-8—The brawnier '70s musclecar. Decent handling with the relatively lightweight 4-bbl 340.

CHEVROLET CORVETTE, 1963-1978—In spite of a lot of bad press, there are a few variations of the 'Vette we're quite fond of. The '70 LS6 and '78 L82 are at the top.

VOLVO 1800 and 1800ES, 1969-1973—A swoopy if somewhat dated sports car, wrapped around indestructible mechanicals. The wagonized versions are true collector's items.

PLYMOUTH SAPPORO and DODGE CHALLENGER, 1979-1981—Maybe the best car built by Mitsubishi to date. Certainly the most underrated.

CHEVROLET COSWORTH VEGA, 1975-76—A mere 3155 built, makes them rarer than pace-car Corvettes. DOHC and 4-valves per cylinder are unique among American cars. Besides, feature editor owns two and is hoping this pitch will boost their current market value.

—Jim Hall

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