

Reality Check – Get Moving, Or Move On

by Frank Ambrogio

I bought my first Studebaker in October 1983. It was a complete car, but it needed to have everything rebuilt or replaced. The previous owner bought it in 1961 and stopped driving it in 1968. The car sat for the next fifteen years. His plan, like so many owners of old cars, was to restore it someday when he had time. Well, someday never came for Tom. He finally accepted that fact and sold the car to me. It took a year from the day I first contacted him until I made the purchase and towed the car to my home.

After a few years of work and money, I had the car painted, the interior completed, and I was ready for the shows. The car is not a 400 point show winner, but I like to think it would score at least high enough to earn a third place award at an International SDC Meet. I will never know because I sold the car in 2015. It was, however nice enough to be competitive in local shows as well as any Studebaker gatherings. It was also mechanically sound enough to drive on a regular basis.



My point here is that far too often, old car projects sit for decades waiting for their owner to get started on the restoration. In my experience, ninety percent of the time, that will never happen. If you've had your car for more than five years and haven't made an honest attempt to get it on the road, you're probably never going to get there. There are exceptions of course, but they are rare.

I've heard most of the excuses: *Once the kids are out of school. When I retire. After I cash in my CD.* These are all valid sounding excuses, but the real truth is that the owner just isn't motivated. After completing my car, I believe there are only two things needed to restore a car, motivation and money. Many people say they just don't have time, but if you have the money, you don't really need a lot of time.

Need the engine rebuilt? Get the car towed to the shop and give the owner/mechanic a list of parts suppliers along with any parts you've already procured. Use the same process for the transmission, exhaust, brakes, etc. Not much of your time involved in either case, just money. If you want to save time

and keep the shop folks motivated, spend the money and try to have as many or all of the necessary parts on hand and deliver them along with the car. Once the shop personnel stop working on your project and wait for a part, it might take some time to get back to it again.

You only need time if you plan to do all or most of the work yourself. If that's the case, the extra time means you can get by with a lot less money. Either way, you still need to be motivated.

I think too many owners lack the motivation because they think they have to do a total frame up/body off restoration. That is simply not the case most of the time. That was my original plan but after removing the hood and lower air panel and getting them dipped in an acid tank, I soon realized I could not do that with the rest of the body panels.

This full restoration mind set is probably the biggest stumbling block of any restoration project. You don't need to spend \$90,000 restoring a car that will be worth \$45,000 when finished. A less ambitious plan of attack would save a bundle of money and that same car will probably still be worth \$30,000 to \$35,000. Can you say, No Brainer? I don't mean to put any restoration shops out of business. I've seen some top quality restorations and they are impressive. On the other hand, if the car just sits in the owner's barn, the restoration shops aren't making any money on it anyway. So, why not at least try to get the car road worthy? You can always continue to improve it as you enjoy using it.

Unless you are really into awards and high end judged shows, you're just wasting a lot of time and money on a full blown restoration.

More importantly, you're depriving yourself of the fun of enjoying the car. I think the best question to ask yourself is, what will you do with the car once that expensive, total restoration is finished? I love to see a beautifully restored car that will achieve a perfect or near perfect score, at a show. I applaud anyone who can do this. That is not only motivation, but dedication. But I



Brother-in-law, Ed, offered to do the brake work, but he thought I was wasting my time.

ask you, is that the position you are in, with your car? For the average person, the answer is no.

So, what do you want to do with the car once it is restored? Do you want to keep it in a controlled environment, trailer it to shows, and win best of show awards? Just remember, once the car is done, it will require dedication and vigilance to keep it in that condition in the future. Are you prepared to do that?

But if you want to drive the car to nearby shows and be somewhat competitive, drive it on weekend mornings to keep it running, and enjoy participating in other old car functions, maybe you should take a more sensible approach. Very few spectators at car shows get down on their hands and knees to look at that glistening frame. Is it really that important to remove the body and powder coat it? At my age, it's far too much work to look under there, but even in my younger days, the only time I ever looked at the undercarriage was when the owner placed mirrors on the ground under the car. Then he had the added problem of hauling the mirrors to the show, and remembering to remove them from under the car before leaving. Oops!

Most people only look at paint, chrome, and interiors while a few check out things like weatherstrip, fit, finish, and other details. If you opt to raise the hood, they'll look at the engine compartment. I'd guess the average spectator spends less than a minute looking at most of the cars in a show. They probably spend a little longer looking at a car that has special appeal to them, and even more time if they get into a conversation with the owner or other spectators.

If doing a full restoration is your plan, more power to you. But don't wait too long. The longer it takes to get it finished, the less time you'll have to enjoy it. I have known several owners who kept procrastinating and fell ill or died before they ever got their project started, or only got to enjoy it for a short time.

In my particular case, the watch phrase was simply, "one step at a time". Despite sitting for fifteen years, we got the engine started in about fifteen minutes and waited for the tow truck to arrive. During the next week, I replaced the hoses and belts and then tackled the ignition system. I did each one separately and started the car to make sure it ran before attacking the next part of the ignition. If it didn't start at any point, I'd know which component was the culprit.

Next came the brakes with my brother-in-law doing the work while I played the role of the gopher. In two weeks, I had a car that didn't look so good, but it started, ran, and stopped. More importantly, I felt it was safe to drive.

After that it was just a matter of attacking one thing after another. Front end rebuild, exhaust, tires, etc. were all attended to and completed in short order.

I repaired a few small holes in the trunk and floor pan, that would be covered by a carpet or mat, so the job didn't have to be perfect.

I did get the engine rebuilt, but I'm not sure this was necessary for a car I drove about 1,200 miles a year. But I didn't know any better at the time.

It's funny! I spent more money on the car getting it ready for paint and upholstery, yet the car didn't look much better than it did the day I had it hauled to my home. Painting cars in the 1980s was not the involved process it is today. The body shop repaired the few rust spots and smoothed out the body. The \$2,200 paint job which included re-chroming the bumpers, was the most dramatic change in the car.

Suddenly, it looked absolutely stunning, even without the wheelcovers and side trim. Once those items were added and the interior finished, the restoration was basically complete. Through the years, I've upgraded some items such as the steering wheel, but the basic restoration still took less than two years.

Something else to consider, and probably most important, is the fact that the longer you wait, the less likely you will be able to tackle some of the simpler jobs as they arise. Thirty years ago, I crawled under the dash board and replaced every gauge. Today, I'm no longer physically able to do that and I eventually had to sell both my cars because I simply could not take care of them any more.

But, I enjoyed driving and showing this car for over three decades. Many owners have spent as much time, and more, planning to restore their car someday! I can't put a dollar value on it, but I wouldn't trade those years for anything.

Even though it was not a super restored show car, it was good enough to have its photo appear on the back cover of *Turning Wheels* in October 1996 as well as to appear in nine calendars, two magazines, and three books. It also graces the cover of the 1956 Golden Hawk Chassis & Body Parts Catalog and images of the car are plastered all over the internet.

So again I ask you, how good does your car have to be? I read somewhere a long time ago, that of every ten cars that are waiting for restoration, only one gets done. If that's true, I'm happy I was able to land in that ten percent group.

If you're not ready to get moving on your project, it might be time to do a reality check and move on! Maybe the next guy will be motivated to get it done!



The most dramatic change took place when the car was finally painted. It looked beautiful, even without the side trim, wheelcovers and bumper guards.