

Find Your Lost Love

We've all heard the forlorn singer (or investor) lament about "the one that got away." As Valentine's Day approaches, car collectors may think longingly, not of the boy or girl they may miss, but of the beloved vehicle they long ago treasured and lost. Be it your first car, the car you worked the most on, or (as Tom Murray conveys so masterfully) the car you associate with a special time or experience in your life, you may often have second thoughts about having let it go.

But can you do anything about it? Maybe. It might actually still be intact—or even running—somewhere, and you might even be able to track it down.

From the beginning of the two years in which I have known my wife, she had repeatedly waxed nostalgic about the used car her parents gave her to drive during her senior year of high school. It was a pale yellow 1966 Pontiac Catalina convertible, a land-based "boat" big enough to carry a passel of her friends. That year with that car was, she reflected, just about the happiest of her life (until we met, of course). Following her graduation, her parents sold the car, and she never saw it again.

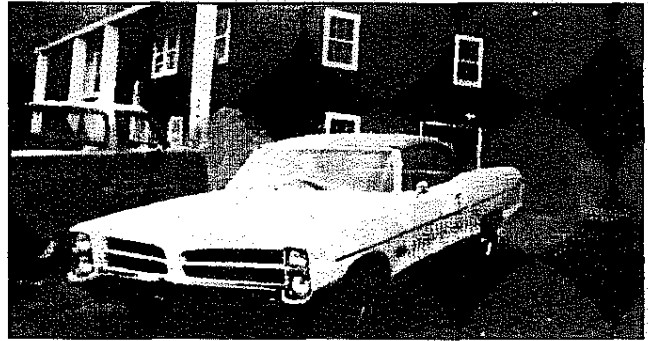
As 1999 marked (in addition to our marriage) a "milestone" birthday for her, it occurred to me that the perfect way to communicate to her that she was truly "ageless" was to find, obtain, and restore for her the Catalina—her exact Catalina, not just another of the same model and year—and give it to her.

How does one possibly accomplish such a feat after the years have passed? The critical first step is finding the car's vehicle identification number or VIN. That unique identifier is affixed to every car on a plate or label in one of several various places, such as on or adjacent to the engine firewall, the inside panel of the driver's door, or the driver's side of the dashboard at the base of the windshield glass. Without this number, recovery may be hopeless in most cases where a clear subsequent ownership trail is not known.

The VIN may also be recorded in your old records, such as title or insurance documents, if you kept them. Perhaps your lawyer or insurer from back then—if you recall who that was—might still have it in their files. My wife's parents, to whom I had confided my plan, very kindly plowed through their papers and eventually located the Catalina's VIN.

With the VIN, you can try to find the current (or at least a more recent) owner. There are two sources of information: (1) the department of motor vehicles for the state in which you had registered the car (and in which you hope it remained); and (2) one of the many VIN research services available on the Internet (which can be located by entering phrases such as "vehicle identification number").


The ability of state DMVs to provide such information may



be restricted by the provisions of the federal Drivers Protection Act of 1994, as well as by various state laws. Turnaround times from either source may vary from 24 hours to as many as eight weeks.

I utilized one of the web-based services, which charged \$35 but could not guarantee that the vehicle would be found in its privately-maintained database. However, within 24 hours I received an e-mail purporting to identify the owner. Unfortunately, the address provided was a post office box. The web telephone directories had no listing for the person in the town specified, but there were several people with the same last name. I called them all—and encountered a series of very pleasant old ladies who, while they had never heard of the person I was seeking, were exceedingly friendly and interested in hearing about my quest.

I ended up writing a letter to the post office box address, detailing my project and enclosing a copy of the latest issue of *Car Collector*. I eventually heard back—from the owner's executor—who advised that the owner had sold the car shortly before his passing. He very kindly located the buyer's name for me. I then contacted the current owners, a delightful young newlywed couple, and began negotiations, which culminated in a meeting at their home and my seeing and purchasing the car the night before my wife and I flew to Italy for her birthday.

The morning of her birthday, she awakened in our Lake Como hotel to two gift-wrapped packages. The first was a CD containing the Beach Boy-style song I wrote for the occasion, *Cathy's Catalina*. The cover bore several photographs of her car. She asked where I had found the pictures. I advised her that I had taken them. She gave me a quizzical look. I then handed her the second package, which she unwrapped to find the original 1966 license plate, which I had found dusty but safely resting in the glove compartment. She responded with a smile that I bet even outshone the one she must have had tooling down Main Street in her Catalina the first time around. 

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