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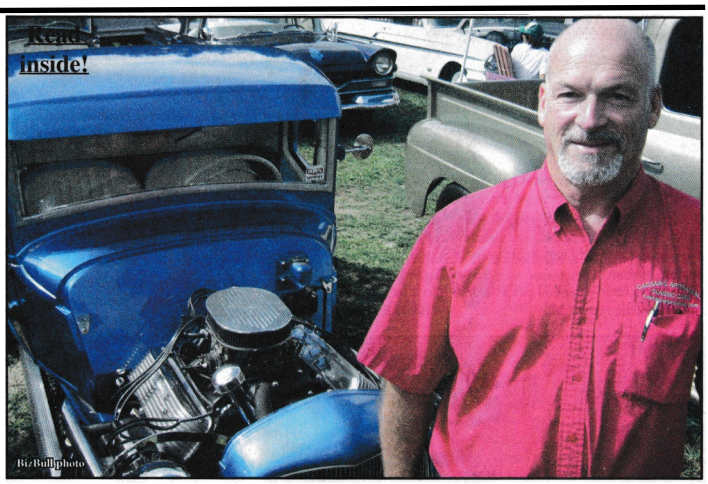
Pricey to Priceless

John Caesar of Harriston will tell you what your collector car is worth even if it's a 1906 Brush. John is seen with a 1932 Ford truck owned by Don Yungblut of Port Elgin



Priceless

By Campbell Cork

So, you held onto your very first car. It's your prize possession. You have so much love oozing over this babyyou need a sponge to soak it up.

You remember the day you bought it. You remember polishing its gleaming body. You remember the first spot of rust and the day it went into storage in the back yard. Or if you were really smart, in a heated garage.

So many memories tied up in this hunk of tin. In your mind this car is absolutely priceless. And it is ... to you.

but if you get it appraised, say for insurance purposes or for sale, don't expect the appraiser to take into account your sentimental soft spot.

"its appraisal value is what it will get on the open market from a willing buyer and a willing seller," says Harriston antique and classic vehicle appraiser, John Caesar.

He's seen a few sad faces in his years of appraising vehicles.

Some guys build a car and put $100,000 into it in terms of time and material.

"If you think you're going to get every dime back out of it, you are mistaken. It is very unlikely," John says.

He quotes Jay Leno, a well known celebrity car collector. "If you think you're going to make money in this hobby, you're doing it wrong."

"I try to communicate this up front," John says.

There are exceptions to the rule. Some cars are unusually desirable and their value is on the rise. The Volkswagon Westfalia with its pop-up camper top is one of them.

Another is the 1997 black "Smokey and the Bandit" Pontiac Firebird TransAm.

"I've seen them selling for $40,000," John says.

He had a buyer in New Zealand who asked not for an appraisal but for a 'verification of condition' for a 1979 TransAm in London, Ontario. The car had just 10,000km. John confirmed its all-original condition and the buyer paid $37,000 for the car plus another $7,000 to have it shipped to New Zealand.

Another guy in northern Alberta called to have John verify the condition of a 1940 Chev hotrod. The collector bought the car, flew to Ontario and drove the car home.

He does appraisals for some celebrities such as NHLers Paul Coffey and Rick Nash, Scotty Bowman and CFLer Blaine Schmidt (president of Boot Hill Auto Resurection).

He is also the main appraiser for three of Ontario's best known high end hot rod builders: Boot Hill of Erin, Hot Nights of Caledon and Hit Men of Cambridge.

John Caesar grew up in the Moorefield area and began an apprenticeship with Harriston Motors, graduating with an interprovincial licence as a collision repair technician. He later had a stint with other car dealers and then returned to Harriston Motors as body shop manager. He was familiar with damage appraisal from his years in the body shop, and in 2005 he was asked by a local insurance broker to consider being a classic car appraiser. He became licenced as an appraiser through the Ministry of Finance.

In 2011 he left the body shop and went full time as an appraiser.

He now appraises about 300 cars a year. He does cars, motorcycle, tractors and trucks, even old snowmobiles from the 1960s and 70s. One-third of his appraisals are from 1985 to 1995.

John speaks only in general terms abut individual collectors. Collectors have a habit of wanting their collections to remain out of the public eye.

A big part of the business is his assurance of confidentiality.

He does quite a bit of work for estates and divorces.

It's amazing when it comes to a divorce, the value of the vehicle depends on who's getting it. Both sides can up with any number of reasons why a particular vehicle should be valued lower or higher, he says.

One of his customers has 70 Ford cars from 1918 to 2003.

John charges about $150 for an appraisal, depending on how far he has to travel. "I don't think I can do many more than that in a year," he says.

He is also the official appraiser of the winner at the Toronto Invitational Motorama car show. The winners have ranged from a 1937 Ford Cabriolet to a 1956 Ford pickup.

There's a lot of pressure to come up with the correct value.

As one insurance company executive told him: "You're writing a blank cheque that is just waiting to be cashed."

He is also called upon by insurance companies to speak to them about classic cars.

When he's not busy with appraisals he is a member of Clifford Rotary and runs the car show for the Harriston Fall Fair.

The thing he likes best about the job is meeting the everyday people, seeing their cars, hearing their stories, getting to know what they are like.

These days, a lot of people are finding I very affordable to buy a $10,000 classic car, he says. He likes to see their garage, how they look after the car.

One collector he works for lives on a 150-acre estate that's gated and you have to be buzzed in.

A Desoto that John appraised at Hitman Hotrods in Cambridge. The car was purchased at Barrett Jackson.

The next guy will have his first car lovingly tucked away in his garage.

He appraised a 1906 Model T Ford in Elmira that originally belonged to the man's grandfather and he still had the original bill of sale.

It brings together all kinds of people, he says.

"It's fun. I'll never retire. I like what I do."

Then there is John Willoughby of Walkerton who in 1974 was the seventh owner of a 1932 Ford Roadster "The T Bird Deuce". It had been turned into a hot rod and John got it in 1963. He dated his future wife in this car, hitting the drive-ins and the A&W. A few years later he traded it for a 1964 Ford XL convertible. Then 47 years later he bought it back from the current owner living in Michigan, after a grueling search and documenting all 24 owners and even holding a reunion. See the whole story at tbirddeuce.com

That's a story-and-a-half and John says it's that kind of a well-documented story that can add value to a car. So while sentimental value doesn't often add value, if the story is good enough, it can, John says.

John Willoughby with his T-Bird Deuce, 2011 Mount Forest Fireworks Festival.

Which gets back to the main reason for collecting old vehicles. It's the memories.

"You can have an oddball car with no particular market value, but it's loaded with sentimental value. It's a car that represents a good time in your life. That car is priceless," he says.

The toughest appraisal is on a very rare car. There are few if any other sales to compare it with. What do you add for historical value?

He recently got asked to do an appraisal on a 1906 Brush automobile.

"I never heard of it before," he says. He's still working on that one.

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