

Barn Finds and Junk

In the old car hobby many have been attracted by the stories of the car of their dreams being found at long last in some forgotten corner of the country in an old barn or garage. Often the car is being sold because the owner has passed away. Sometimes a car has no paperwork to identify who owns or owned it. A lot of sleuthing is needed in this case to make the car yours! Wikipedia defines a barn find as “A barn find is a classic car, aircraft or motorcycle that has been rediscovered after being stored, often in derelict condition. The term comes from their tendency to be found in places such as barns, sheds, carports and outbuildings where they have been stored for many years.”

If one has watched Tom Cotter of the “Barn Find Hunter” videos they have seen lots of interesting finds. These are usually collections of cars, trucks, and many other mechanical conveyances that one has accumulated over a lifetime.

Sometimes he visits a wrecking yard that has a lot of vintage iron in it. So, perhaps that is not a “barn find”, but close enough. I have been visiting wrecking yards since I was a kid and some of these were abandoned, so, one could explore all the old cars. Most of these were in very sad condition. Of course, those vehicles that are stored indoors fare better than those out of doors and the climate of the location plays a big part. I once had the opportunity to buy an MGA that had sat out in the desert for years. There was only metal left, but all of it in near perfect condition with only a little surface rust. No rubber or fabric was present at all! Now, just because a car meets the definition of a “barn find” does not necessarily make it worthwhile. Sometimes the car is just a pile of parts from a “stalled restoration” where the previous owner got it all apart but never progressed into the restoration phase. Most of these just become parts cars or “junk”. Let’s talk a little about time. When most cars are manufactured the intent is that it will last at least a few years until a new model comes out and the buyer wants the “latest and greatest”. The used car is sold onto to someone who perhaps has always wanted this model, but could not afford it new. Then, perhaps when it is beginning to look a bit tatty it gets an Earl Scheib or MACCO paint job or perhaps the new owner just wants a different color.

So, once a car is past about 20 years old it is just an old car and is pretty much fully depreciated (unless it is a real exotic car). Now perhaps it has a mechanical problem like the electric fuel pump goes out and it gets parked in a barn or garage (or heaven forbid, in the back yard under a tarp). And it sits for a number of years.

Or even worse it sits for 30 or 40 years! Along comes the person looking for one of these cars and, Wow! There it is! According to the definition, this is a “barn find”, but is this the best you can do? Of course, the “Gold Standard” of a “barn find” is a car with low mileage, original paint, interior, engine, etc., even tires! And it is being sold CHEAP! A car that has not been run in that many years will require extensive refreshing of everything mechanical and many other systems (depending if there were rodents involved) and perhaps it will become a “survivor” with some patina but a fun driver. To take a “barn find” of the non-gold-standard and restore it can be very costly.

Getting back to time: if the car is 40 years old (making it a 1985 model as of this writing) and it sat for 30 years in a barn and is now going to be put back on the road then it meets the requirements of a “barn find”. But. Is it worth the effort? For exotics I am sure it is. It is up to the person who wants that car. Given that many of our MGs are at least this age or even 70 years old or older and that many have been previously “restored” (whatever that meant to the person plastering Bondo onto the rusty spots and repainting it some godawful color with a vinyl interior, no hood, and a wrong engine). Even a “barn find” can be a “pig with lipstick”. But I have seen on the MG Experience website many stories of people finding a “one owner” MGA that has sat for many years and is in reasonable condition considering its age and also sitting unused for a long time. Sometimes it is better to find an original car that has been well maintained all its life and driven on a regular basis than to try your luck with a “barn find”. But, just because it is a “one owner” or “single family” car does not necessarily translate into “unmolested”. I, personally, have never owned an unmolested MGA but have bought and sold many MGs of various qualities and have seen a lot of abused cars. Perhaps, someday, I will find a “Gold Standard”, but I am not really looking! One last note about barn finds: Jan and I met Don Tremblay back in 1988 when we responded to an ad in MGA! about a “barn find” in Amesbury, MA. There was still one car left in the barn that had had 18 or 20 MGAs in it. Don, Carl Meyer, and Andy Frink had gone in together to buy this group of cars. Some could just be dusted off and driven away. When Jan and I got there the one car left was an MGA Coupe outside with one wheel missing. It was an orange/yellow color, so, obviously not original. You will have to talk with Don to get the rest of that “barn find” story.

A molested Bar Find MGA

