

55 Buick Story

Whilst admiring a beautifully cared for late 70s Mercedes coupe one day, the owner came over and enthusiastically expressed his passion for the car. Into that conversation he inserted a question that quickened my future by at least a decade. He said “DO YOU have any toys?” The question was slightly embarrassing as it touched an unfulfilled part of my life. Afterwards I was questioning myself. Why at age 57 the answer was still NO. From early on I was hooked on the beautiful happy life of freedom and style that was promised in the ads of the mid-century American magazines especially the cars. Here I was a mechanic from age 16 using my life to make sure Mr & Mrs Jones’ daily driver worked 100% while I was still poring over car books and going to movies if they had early American cars in them, making car scrapbooks, getting excited whenever I saw one on the road, and never asking the question.... why I didn’t have one of my own?

That question was immediately escalated to top priority and within a few months I had some cash and was actively looking. I called a guy about a 55 Buick Roadmaster coupe and asked “is that model a variation of the 55 Chevy like the Pontiac is” he sharply retorted “nah mate, get on the net and have a look” That search immediately threw up Jay Leno’s highly modified but standard looking glamour machine portrayed through a series of lavish photos. Looking at those photos caused time to stand still, I had never seen a more beautiful looking car. I instantly emptied the stuff in my head that was blocking me from owning a car like that and replaced it all with a new declaration..... “I will do whatever it takes to bring a car of similar model and condition into my life”.



I grabbed my mate Craig with his 70 Camaro (badly in need of restoration) and went to see this thing. Imported from Canada, complete, unrestored and original, it stood in the dim light of a huge shed with dirt floor surrounded by many unrestorable American relics. The seller, with a pulsing heart for saving these cars, was part of a team that looks under tumble down lean tos and behind barns across the US and Canada and gets them into Australia for people like me mad enough to take them on.

He said "That's her, she runs, but I can't get her to pick up reverse, I can fetch a battery if you like". I thought he was joking "she runs?" The body was thick with dust and rust, upholstery growing with a sticky black mould, broken glass, and barely any floors left although the original carpets were still in place!! With the battery in I fiddled with things inside, indicators, electric seat adjustment, electric antenna and windows, whatever I touched it moved blinked or whirred just like it should. This abandoned rusty hulk from Canada still had a live nervous system. Blimey it looked like a car long dead but not so. I was impressed. The shed became filled with the strong smell of stale petrol as the motor started with a noisy exhaust, running on seven cylinders, squirting its very old fuel straight out of the pump onto the generator and I got six feet of forward motion before it was all over. That very brave glamorous and deserving old American dream car was still alive and had already got into my heart. When the man took the battery away I said to my mate Craig,... "this is my car"





Part 2

Craig is one of those blokes who would never question a firm choice I would make about a car in any form, but everyone else except my partner who saw it in my shed exhibited profound revulsion at the sight of it. Some of my commercial automotive colleagues slowly abandoned what I thought were reasonably good personal relationships. I did experience some pain in the loss of those connections but it made no difference to the adoration of the thing that had arrived in my business premises. I was in heaven, a rapturous boyish trance as I revisited the 1950s thru the numerous pieces of the car that were still unaffected by time and use. To me the spirit of the car was still there just hidden under masses of neglect and time. The dream that my 10 year old inner child had been lusting over for more than four decades was actually there in my shed, and I could touch it. The experience of that was ridiculously deep, unexplainable satisfaction that has barely diminished four and a half years later.

Of course I carefully scrubbed and washed all those good and not so good parts, colour matched and painted over surface rust, painted on fake whitewall tyres, ever teasing the layers of the original spirit of "50s American glamour car" to shimmer into view. Visitors who showed interest in what I was up to became perplexed as to why I was making this thing so important. I invited some to "imagine it is 1955 and this car is new. Imagine you are eight years old and seeing something for the very first time, evocative, glamorous, and unreachable. I don't think any of them got it and it didn't

matter. I was in a dream of my own, a gift beyond explanation that could only have come from myself.

Underneath this car was amazing, I had no idea how rusty it was, and looking back to the purchase point, I remember blanking out on this part. If I had stayed conscious, I reckon that car may still be in that dim shed with the dirt floor. I reckon the only other part I blanked out on was not realising that this car wasn't one of those beautiful Buicks I have always liked in those big thick colourful books of American classics. The model I mean is the 53 Skylark, I REALLY DID think it was one of those during those critical moments at purchase time!! Oh well, after all, I only paid \$7,500 for it. Even so, it certainly has a lot of the styling cues of the Skylark.

The rust repairs became a distant priority while I did what I know best, mechanical stuff. My apprenticeship very often included working on old worn cars belonging to low finance people in the 60s in New Zealand. At that time updating their car was not an option, so my training was how to keep these cars going indefinitely with little money. Those skills are what I still enjoy using the most, car maintenance without the bulldust. It reminds me of those years as an apprentice in my parents service station when I didn't have to deal with profit and loss or difficult customers, just learn the job the best way possible in a sort of protected haven of relative peace. That context has become the basis for the work on this old girl as every moving part of the suspension, brakes, steering, torque tube, diff and some of the engine got rebuilt. Two years of working every day in this way got the car to reliable driving condition. It was fascinating to discover every past repair that was made, how well it was done, and what was the actual fault that finally made the car undrivable. (rust hole in brake pipe). Also what was interesting is how little the car had been used. There is zero wear in the normal places with old high milers like driver's door hinges, pedal pivots, wiper spindles. What else amazed me was feeling my earlier declaration of "whatever it takes" coming through. Never before have I known such incredible patience and pleasure working on a car. Perhaps that was due to there being no deadline, no customer, and therefore no advantage in shortcuts or work that was just "good enough for now" If something wasn't right, I was free to do it again and again until it was. What a feeling to know that the only person who could influence the quality of this project was me. There is a strange and delicious kind of stillness that goes with knowing that. Then all at once the car is mechanically finished and ready to drive even though the body work was still very rusty.

With no floors to speak of, and a twenty litre can in the boot for a fuel tank, I got a 48 hour permit to drive to a place of repair. I was certainly very tentative taking it on the road, but that feeling was soon eclipsed by my enormous grin. I couldn't stop driving. It took about 300 km to find that place of repair which ended up being my own shed. It drove very well, I got bucket loads of grins in return from so many people who saw this awesome old car on the streets of Perth for those two days. Then it was time to settle down and put it back up on stands for the next phase of the work..... rust removal.

Part 3

With basic skills at gas welding from my years as a mechanic, I would sometimes weld a patch over a rust hole in the body of a car, but never replace floors, inner and outer rockers, boot floors, and certainly not body mountings. All this was needed on my car and even though I tried and tried, no one would step forward to deftly take over this part of the project. It was down to me, and I knew it was time to start. There was no freedom left to ponder over whom I might find to fix it, and so the method came clear all at once. Simple.... since the rust work is going to be down to me, then number one, I have to know exactly which piece of metal overlaps or butts onto what, and where the folds need to go. I need to be the one who is so completely clear about this that there was no need for any drawings. Number two, is to simply work out which metal is still okay and which is rubbish then remove the rubbish. After those two points were crystal clear the work became surprisingly easy. The car got lots of enormous new holes but became rust free, which created the all pervading feeling of no turning back . The bloke I hoped would come and do it for me never came, I got tired of waiting. In fact there was a bloke who did come but he only came to tell me that there was no bloke coming, in fact even that bloke turned out to be me as well. Once I had thoroughly gotten that, there was another spot of beautiful calm, the kind that comes when the white noise of self doubt ends and I just get on with it.

The structural work took about six months. I elected to rebuild the rotted body mounts while the body remained on the car. I had a local sheet metal company make up "U" sections to size which I carved up and re welded on the bench into exact replicas of the rotted body mount sections that I had sliced out with thin metal cutting discs in a 4" angle grinder. With floor pans out of the way, this worked extremely well and I saw no need for the body to come off the chassis. I made accurate wooden packing pieces to hold the solid parts of the body in the original position against the chassis while the new sections were welded in. Even the original body mount rubbers were reused and the overall result is, the mounting areas look as if they have never been rusty.

When all the structural work was complete then the outer skin repairs could begin. After working diligently to develop an excellent relationship with the local sheet metal shop during the six month period of the structural work, I managed to get them to extend their service to me way beyond their standard range. They made several curved pieces to patterns that I made. Before I cut away the rusting outer skin areas such as rear qtrs. and outer rockers, I tacked qtr. inch wide strips of thin metal across the affected sections following the body curves exactly, then welded a light framework onto the strip to hold the shape. When removed these became perfect gauges for the sheet metal guys to work to. Once their work was done accurately, then I cut the rotten stuff out of the car. The shape of the rusted area that was cut out was transferred onto the newly rolled piece of metal, and became the perfectly

shaped and perfectly fitting patch panel. By then it was quite clear, no other bloke could have done a better job.

I would not have got far with this part of the project without the experience and willingness of those sheet metal guys.

I have found a reliable system for receiving that kind of help from skilled people in the automotive world. I say automotive world because that is the area I am most familiar albeit confined to the mechanical aspect. As such I can relate to their work experience and what it takes to be at the job and turn out their trade day after day. Genuine appreciation from the customer is usually cursory or missing altogether. The secret I find is to start with personal acknowledgment somehow of their skill and service. Most people in fact are hungry for this acknowledgement and it very rarely comes. If the appreciation for their availability and service is genuine, it's not hard to find a way to verbalise it. When the guy has obviously got it, e.g. he relaxes into yakking happily with you, he becomes just like a bloke who knows he is appreciated for what he is doing. Once that piece is done, the relationship is ready to be put to work. Miss that ever vital piece of relationship building, e.g. start talking straight away about what you have come to get, and you become a sitting duck for an unsatisfactory result in one form or another.

When it came to the business of welding those perfect patch pieces to fit smoothly into the flowing lines of a Buick, I was out of my depth. I had to apply the above relationship building technology once more to receive the assistance of a very talented and experienced person. I heard of an older bloke with magic in his hands and I needed some of it. I had to make it well worth his while especially as I needed him to come to my workshop. He accepted and began to shrink and tap all the highs and lows out of those panels. My gas welding caused buckles that I couldn't fix. He was awesome and inexpensive and left me in the position that the body filler work could begin. But, I had no idea what I was in for.

Part 4

The body filler stage was some task, especially in my shed that would fly up well over 40 degrees on many summer days. Hot, arduous, and extremely dusty are the words to describe this work. I was told I would have to use many buckets of filler, that it would need a skin pretty much over the whole car, and that most of it would be swept off the floor into the rubbish. Despite me initially thinking that they were exaggerating, I found they were not. It took me slightly over 12 months to complete this part including metal preparation, body filler, spray putty, and primer. The thought of seeing my finished car at the end of a day with the sun shining low along the side of this gorgeous piece of Harley Earl sculpture displaying all manner of wrinkles and buckles, just wasn't going to happen. So I started, using as little filler as I could to avoid having to file too much and sweep too much out the door but I just couldn't seem to get it right. They were right, you do have to lay it nearly all over the

car and then take most of it back off. After many hours of tedious and inexperienced sanding it was clear I needed help. I needed to know that my methods would produce a top finish. Relationship technology came into play once more as I dared approach a panel beater painter who I knew was very skilled and thorough. I was relieved to find he was willing to give me information regarding the actual stage I was working with. He was hesitant at first and I could tell his concern was the risk that I would in some way trap him into being responsible for the result. I made a point in assuring him that wasn't going to happen and over time the information kept coming as I needed it.



Many slabs of beer went into his fridge also as he needed it! I had found a remarkable and generous guy and I was careful only to ask for info on what I was actually doing. I would only ask for the next part when the previous part had turned into a successful result. Sometimes the gaps would be months apart. This seemed satisfying for him as well as me and the project proceeded nicely.

The filler came off the car well using a 14 inch speed file as per his instructions. Many areas would not shape up 100% despite my best efforts. Because there was no more I could do, that became the signal to move on, trusting the work would be

acceptable. That system proved to be right and thank god for spray putty. I used Watty marine grade "epienamel" applied with an ordinary spray gun. After a dusting of guide coat the surface was sanded with 120 grit. What a relief to see the flaws in my previous filling work so graphically displayed thru the guide coat, and to see those flaws just file away so easily. After another guide coating, the grit was reduced to 320 grade and again more flaws now of a finer nature were being eliminated. The 320 grade was fine enough to see a shine begin to appear when viewed by looking along the surface. That was satisfying after seeing the car in such a flat lifeless look for so many months during the filling stage. This occurred like a shine being born from the bottom up and kept me enthused. Next came the final primer filler sprayed on with a gravity fed gun followed by guide coat again and wet sanded with a soft rubber block using 600 grit. This was slow work followed by more guide coat and a final rub with 800. Now that shine being born from the bottom up became way more obvious, and I was quietly excited.

The car was originally finished in a light blue middle section, dark blue below the chrome side trim, and off white on the roof. The light blue was a typical 50s colour and I wanted to replicate it exactly. This took some doing but I was lucky to find a section of original paint that had not seen the light of day since 1955, had never seen water or any dust on its surface. It was always my intention to have a skilled person spray the colour on but little by little it became obvious that all the spray work had been done successfully thus far by my own hand. My painting mentor instructor invited me to do the final colour work myself using his spraybooth with himself as overseer. That suggestion matched an earlier fleeting fantasy, and here it was coming true. He had read a part of my mind I had actually forgotten.

I was nervous as hell spraying that all important colour coat on my dream car. Instructions were coming from behind me but I couldn't take them in, I was way too busy just managing the basic job without tripping over the hose or spilling paint everywhere. But it went without a hitch - four coats of colour and six coats of clear acrylic lacquer. It was all done and it looked good. All that was needed now was wet rubbing with 1500, then again with 2000, then vigorous compounding with "T cut". I was asked by many why didn't I machine buff the T Cut? The answer is I was never told to by my mentor! I did everything he said exactly without question. The result is an amazing looking paint job, way more than I had hoped for and sporting the kind of deep shine that can only come from the bottom up. What a magnificent piece of training I had just completed.

Since then a new headlining has been made and fitted by my talented upholsterer friend using fabric identical to the original from SMS fabrics in the USA. Both windscreens with the very tricky chrome mouldings have been fitted also with help from another pair of friends who are the most fussy pedantic amateur car restorers I have ever met. Pedantic fussiness is a vital ingredient when fitting these precarious old style curved screens. Then it was time to fit the beautiful new replica original wire

wheels and whitewalls I had bought from USA and gather some mates round for a BBQ and beers to show off my creation and to say goodbye.



The car looked stunning and I couldn't stop looking at it. The upholstery, chroming, interior paint and final assembly was yet to be done but it made no difference to how beautiful it looked. My partner and I had been planning for two years to move to New Zealand where I would purpose build a hobby retro restoration workshop, buy a classic New Zealand kauri launch in the Marlborough Sounds, help her build her dream garden with a little New Zealand bach (kiwi for holiday cottage) and live happily ever after receiving visits from all our Perth friends and car lovers from time to time.

Currently the Buick plus two more of our classics are on the Port of Nelson wharf in storage containers.

We are still looking for our Kiwi bach and kauri launch.

The end

Mark Jarvis – Ex WA Buicks,
now a New Zealander.