

## CLASSICS

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"Keeping the car in original condition had to take a back seat to just keeping the car."

# Archeology in Irvine

In my previous column, I likened combing through parts inventory lists at the Mercedes-Benz Classic Center to discovering buried treasure. After a year and a half in operation, with a number of restorations completed, I can also say we feel like archaeologists here, too.

With each car we work on, we are digging into history. Sometimes, we discover a good, solid life marked by the signs of caring ownership. Other times we find the consequences of neglect, carelessness and even abuse. In all cases, peeling away the layers of time gives us a unique chronicle of the past and the integrity of Mercedes-Benz core values.

An archeologist may unearth ancient texts that fill in missing history. At the Classic Center, one of our most powerful tools is our access to a truly amazing archive of factory information, engineering drawings, photos, marketing materials and so much more. With that invaluable resource, when we take a car in for restoration, we already have a clear picture of what it *should* be, a factory baseline to aim for.

I say *should*, because as any restoration business knows, clients' cars are often far off the mark, often in ways that are not always immediately apparent. Even cars that look correct on initial inspection can reveal a history of incorrect maintenance, repair

and service, not to mention aftermarket modifications.

The good news for Mercedes-Benz enthusiasts is that, as a result of our "archeology" at the Classic Center, we are adding to the Mercedes community's knowledge base and also making business cases to put more parts back into production. Some parts, however, especially from the pre-war period, may always be difficult to find. I'll give you an example:

One of the Classic Center's earliest projects has also been one of its most demanding. A customer asked us to work on his 1936 230 Cabriolet A, making it mechanically sound but retaining the patina of its age. It was not a full restoration, and we did not take the car apart. He was so pleased with the results, however, that he later returned the car for a full restoration.

We knew going in there would be challenges; one being that the 230 has a wood-framed metal body. The Classic Center can access tens of thousands of classic Mercedes-Benz parts, but not new wood frames! What we cannot get, we must make. The work required meticulous removal of rotted sections and fabricating replacements to original factory specifications. We have been doing all the work in-house. Again, access to factory archival documents has proven indispensable for this work.

As we dug deeper into this car—which had to be done in stages—we discovered its past and could see all the places where incorrect parts were used, perhaps when a previous owner did not know original replacements were still available. At one point in its life, the car had acquired bumpers from a different model. The incorrect bumpers were attached with incorrect brackets and mounting hardware—one thing always leads to another. We located correct bumpers but had to fabricate new brackets. More digging revealed a history of repaints, and with our archival information we managed to identify the most plausible original color to recommend to the owner.

Archeology also reminds us that classic Mercedes models that today enjoy a pampered, garaged life may have at one time been daily commuters. We can see that in the choice of aftermarket accessories that we must often remove. While restoring a 280SE Cabriolet, we had to take out an old alarm system with miles of wiring and haphazard soldering. Understandably perhaps, for the long-ago owner that had the alarm installed, keeping the car in original condition had to take a back seat to *just keeping the car*.

As the archeologist will celebrate finding the smallest item in a dig, we know that some of the small details often make a big difference in the appearance and function of the finished car. A car we recently restored looked for the entire world like it had just been dealer-prepped for its first retail sale, except for the worn but functional original reflectors we had to re-use. The U.S. specification factory installed reflectors were no longer available. One outcome, however, was that we were able to make a business case for putting new U.S.-spec reflectors back into production. One reflector would have been used across model lines, so we are looking into offering a kit that would include different body mounts.

These are the kinds of things we know the Mercedes-Benz community is looking for. So we'll keep on digging. •



**The All-New Mercedes C Sport Coupe:** Caught during road testing in the south of Germany, here is the latest picture of the upcoming, all-new Mercedes C Sport Coupe with almost no disguise. It will replace the current model, which underwent a facelift in 2004. One can expect the successor to launch in 2008. U.S. marketing plans are uncertain although the previous model has been gone from these shores since 2005. While the styling is completely new, the car sits on the current C-Class platform, as before. Actually the C-Class Sport Coupe had already been abandoned by the car maker, but the company's new chief, Dieter Zetsche, voted for its revival. The new C Sport Coupe will have to beat very strong rivals like the new BMW Series 1 Coupe and the Audi A3.