



# CORVETTE RESTORATION MADE EASIER

## HOW TO FIND THE RIGHT SHOP FOR YOUR CORVETTE

**WHEN** *Corvette Fever* editor Alan Colvin asked me to put some thoughts together on this subject, my first reaction was that most everyone already knows how to go about selecting a restoration shop. But the point was made that there have been many folks who have either had poor experiences, or who are new to the hobby. While directed mainly to people new to restoration work, and possibly old hat to those having gone through a restoration, hopefully we'll touch on a few new ideas for both.

Having been in the hobby for many years, we've had our share of experiences with various restorers and shops for outsourced work—some were good experiences; some we'd like to forget. We've

certainly heard of many horror stories, but there are ways to reduce the potential of that happening to you. Some fortunate folks might be able to drop off a car, along with a blank check, and just want to be called when it's ready. Most of us either won't find ourselves in that position, or simply prefer the satisfaction of having done much of the work ourselves. Even if you are trying to do much of the work yourself, there's usually the need to have others involved for things such as the chrome work, body work, painting, upholstery or custom machine work. If you do need to find sources to do this work, how can you be best prepared and what are the things that you should look for? Both of those aspects are what we'll address based on our personal

experience. Here are some questions to ask yourself before you start looking for a restoration shop:

### OBJECTIVES

What are your specific objectives? Have you thought through what you want as an end product? Having a clear picture will go a long way in finding and working with a restorer for both your sake and theirs as well as achieving the end product you want. Do you have a good idea of the value the car may be worth, once the project is completed? It's not all that unusual for a large restoration project to bring your cost of the restoration work, when added to the cost of the car itself, to a level above the market value. For many folks that isn't an overriding issue,



Getting ready for the body drop on Split Personality. Note the use of two "post" lift and custom mounts for supporting the body when lowering onto the chassis.

as many projects are more focused on our emotional involvement, but it's a consideration to take into account.

### LEVEL OF QUALITY

What level of quality are you looking for? Are you looking for a "workman-like" job, or do you want it at a specific level such as for NCRS events, or a custom show quality job? I remember getting estimates to paint my mother's car a few years ago. It was in good shape, but in need of paint. I first went to several local body shops, and then decided to visit one of the major chain paint shops. In looking at examples of their work, I wasn't very impressed with what I saw. Being unable to restrain myself from pointing out what I thought, I heard words of wisdom from the young shop manager: "Hey, you don't go to Burger King for filet mignon . . ." He was right, and I'll always remember that.

### LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT

How much of the work, if any, do you plan to do yourself? For example, will you be doing some or most of the work to obtain the various parts needed, or will you rely on the shop to do that? There is more time spent in managing a project

than you might think. Do you plan to do that yourself, or leave it to the restorer? You could likely reduce your costs by at least handling those aspects. Do you plan to do some of the actual restoration work, such as the upholstery installation, mechanical restoration or assembly work yourself? Many shops will work with you to focus on just those jobs which you can't or don't want to do yourself, which would also reduce your costs.

### TIMEFRAME

What is your timeframe to start and complete the project? You may well face the reality that your timeframe and that of the shop does not mesh as well as you would like. Often the best shops will have a lengthy list of projects underway or scheduled. Frankly, shops that don't would raise a question mark in our minds. While there could be other factors at work, the best shops should be in demand, even in a tough economy. It's also a given that the larger projects are likely going to take longer than you thought. When putting our project plans together, I usually double the timeframe for long-term projects, as that has turned out to be closer to reality.

### FUNDING

Have you set aside sufficient funds to do the work? Having set your objectives, the next step is to estimate the costs for parts, materials and labor to get a ballpark figure to work with. That will be refined when discussing your project with the shops you visit. It goes without saying that the more extensive the job, the more difficult it will be to get an accurate estimate. You'll need to account for the unforeseeable issues your project will undoubtedly run into, as well as additional jobs you decide to do. A phenomenon called "project creep" is an all-too-common experience, especially in major projects. You can pretty much count on at least some level of your project expanding once you get into it. While it's hard to give a specific percentage to add to your baseline budget, it's not uncommon to see the final costs run 30-50 percent higher.

Often overlooked is the support of your spouse in a project. As expenses mount and time goes by, you may receive a few not-so-subtle hints from your family, whose patience and tolerance level may not be the same as yours. Are they prepared to be committed to the project, or more likely to commit you if it goes on





Preparation of a C1 body for painting in the body shop.



A full service shop will usually include a dedicated mechanical shop at their facility.

too long and costs too much? After reviewing my first draft of this article, Barb suggested I add this though, but didn't elaborate on why . . . there might be a message there . . . Following are some things to do and look for when selecting a restoration shop.

#### RESEARCH

Three great sources of information on restoration shops are your local car clubs, car shows and cruise nights as you can see the quality of work for yourself, and

obtain the owners' experiences with the shop they've used. Ask them if they were satisfied with the work quality, and did they feel they received good value for the cost? Was the shop's communication timely and well-done, or were they unresponsive? Those folks will likely also have other shops they recommend to help expand your options, as well as some to avoid. Two other sources are the Corvette magazines (especially *Corvette Fever*), and the many internet forums.

Many shops today will also have their

own website with an overview of their facility, their previous projects and an outline of their history, which can be very helpful. Their history should also tell you how long they have been in business, which can be a good indication of how good they are. It goes without saying that you should also look at their Better Business Bureau report.

One question you might ask yourself is whether the size of a shop matters. While it could be argued that this is an important factor in some aspects of life, it could work for or against you when it comes to a restoration shop. The larger shops may be more likely to have the experience, adequate staff, equipment and in-house capability to do most or all of the work necessary. On the other hand, smaller shops might offer a more personal experience, or be more flexible if those are aspects you consider important to your project. While size is only one factor in making your choice, it can be an important consideration.

There are many restoration shops that handle everything from muscle cars to hot rods to regular collision work, so another aspect to determine is if the shop specializes in Corvette restoration. Those that do should be well versed in what is involved with your project, and what will save you time, cost and headaches. The result of your research should provide a list of shops to look into further.

#### FIRST CALL

Call the shops on your list to discuss what you have in mind and, if what you hear sounds good to you, arrange for a visit. When visiting a shop, the shop owner should be willing to show you their works in progress and possibly completed projects. They should also be proud of their prior work. Projects which have gone on to achieve Top Flight or Bloomington Gold awards, for example, would be one indication of the work they are capable of performing, even if you are not looking for that level yourself. You'll then be able to narrow the list down to those you wish to pursue further.

#### VISIT THE SHOPS

For us it would be highly unlikely that we would select a shop that we haven't seen for ourselves, unless we've received a referral from a well trusted source. It's difficult to build a solid relationship at arm's length, along with the inherent difficulty to discuss the projects progress. When visiting a shop, here are some things to look for and subjects to discuss:

**Reputation:** Get references from their customers. Recognize that most shops are going to pick and choose which ones to give you so your initial research will help

verify that you are getting as much of the entire picture as possible.

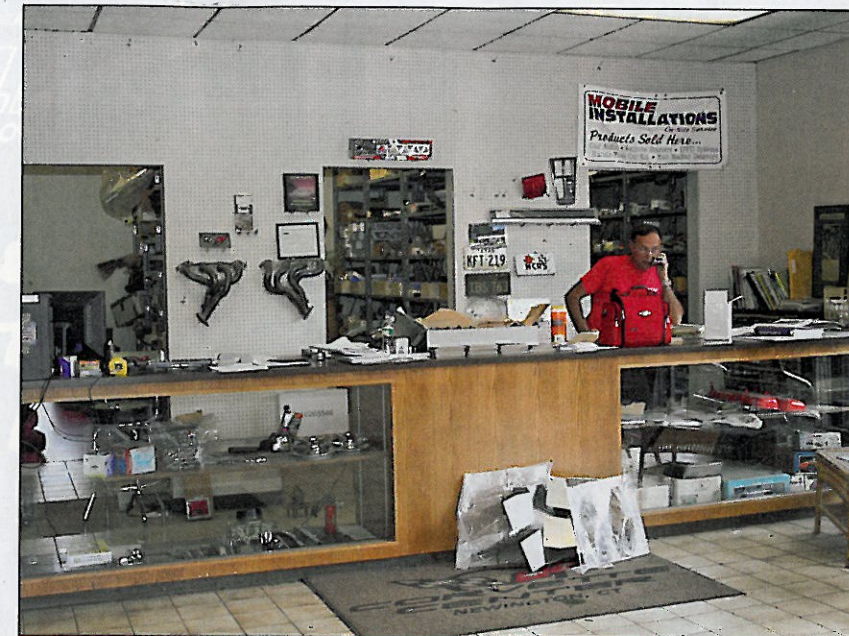
**Facility & Workforce:** Take a look at their facility and workforce. How does it look? Is it reasonably well organized and professional looking? Do the workers look like they know what they are doing? Does the equipment in the shop look to be extensive enough to do the job? The right equipment will usually produce a better result, while also saving you some expense. When taking the shop tour, ask how long the employees have been there. It can be a good indication of how well the operation is managed, the stability of their workforce, and the experience level of their staff.

**Working Relationship:** Consider your ongoing working relationship with the shop. Since this is a partnership, you will be forming (and maybe one of a long term), what was your impression of the shop owner? Does he come across as someone who listens to you and asks the questions which help further define your objectives and expectations? Do they seem honest and up-front? Does the shop have an interest in your project? Those who do are more likely to treat your car, and perform their work, at the level which best suits what you expect.

During the first discussion with the shop owner, let them know something about yourself, your own level of interest in the hobby and in this project. Doing your homework in advance regarding the car itself and the basics of restoration will give you a better understanding of what the shop is describing and they will also understand that you have put some thought into the project and know something about the work you want them to do.

As usual there are two sides to every coin and you need to have a good understanding of how to build a good working relationship with a shop. In preparing thoughts on this subject, I asked Ray Zisa of the Corvette Center what he feels are the keys to a good working relationship. His response focused on six aspects: clear objectives, personal involvement, realistic goals, avoiding major changes in direction, patience and, of course, prompt payment of bills. Having done the up-front planning for your project will place you in a good position to build the relationship that will work best for both of you.

**Insurance:** Ask if the shop has insurance coverage for the cars in their care, custody and control. Consider what could happen should there be a fire or other calamity at their shop, and who will pay for it. This is also the time to consider whether or not you should get your own insurance coverage. Some insurance companies may offer coverage



Shop management updating a customer on their projects progress.



A good example of a finished C1 restoration project.

even for projects in progress.

**Experience:** How extensive is their experience in restoring Corvettes? Not all shops are experienced with either your particular car or with the work involved in repairing and painting fiberglass. Do they specialize in restoration work, or do they also handle collision repairs? A specialist may be not only more experienced with the work involved for your project, but also less subject to having other work interfere with its completion. Ask them to show you examples of their completed

projects, as well as works in progress.

**Work Control:** Can the shop do everything you want themselves? Some folks like to deal with one shop which can handle the vast majority of the work themselves, and not require you to coordinate other work. The next best option is a shop which can handle the majority of the work, and has good working relationships for the specialty work that they outsource.

**Communication:** Consider how you will communicate with the shop. The ideal





Our '63 project (Split Personality) on display in Chip's Choice at Corvettes at Carlisle.

situation is usually finding a local shop which allows you to visit to see the progress, as well as be more involved. If that's not possible, find a shop which is willing to provide regular updates, including pictures of their progress. It's human nature to work harder to please a customer who they know will be involved, personally interested, and who expects updates on the project. Of course, that is only up to a point, as too much of that can be annoying for a shop owner, and might work in the opposite direction. When reviewing how things are progressing, be quick to praise good work, but also candid (but tactful) in asking questions and providing feedback on what you think. It's a lot easier to address issues at that point, rather than after the project is finished.

**Estimate:** Once you feel comfortable with a particular shop, it's time for them to look your car over in detail. Will they put their estimate in writing? Find out what their hourly labor rates will be. Those could differ between body and paint work versus mechanical labor. Also find out if there are additional charges for things such as shop supplies or storage fees. Recognize that a car restoration project isn't the same as getting an estimate on painting a house. Many times, neither the restorer nor you can know exactly what lies beneath the surface, or what issues you will encounter until the car is disassembled and stripped. Having a written estimate should provide a base for understanding both the cost and type of work originally intended. If you need or decide to do additional work, at least you have a starting point, and both of

you are working from a common understanding. Ask if a deposit is required, and at what stages additional payments are expected. Establish these in advance, so you aren't surprised and your project isn't interrupted. Also ask them about their standing behind their work. Do they provide a written warranty and, if so, for how long?

**Cost vs. Value:** When deciding on which shop to go with, our preference is to look for value rather than focusing mainly on the bottom-line price. As usual, "the devil lies in the details," and some shops might come in with a lower estimate, but be sure they lay out in writing what they will do, so you can be sure you are making an apples-to-apples comparison of each shop's estimate. Frankly, we would be wary of a shop which would be willing to settle for doing less than what they feel is necessary. That could work to the disadvantage of both you, as well as the shop. From your perspective, you might not get what you really want and, from the shop's perspective, their work on your project is a reflection of their quality and attention to detail. It wouldn't do either any good to have an example out there that is less than the best that can be done reasonably.

#### AFTER ALL IS SAID AND DONE

No doubt many of the projects a shop sees are those which have either been previously done poorly, or are half-finished by another shop or owner. Those can be expensive experiences for an owner, and a good example of doing your best to select the right shop the first

#### TOP TEN REASONS TO AVOID SOME RESTORATION SHOPS

- 10 Your first call was answered with "Ronnie's Restoration and Pawn Shop Emporium"
- 9 Their Better Business Rating said "run, and run fast"
- 8 Instead of spray guns all you see are paint rollers and paint cans from Home Depot
- 7 Their car lift consists of cement blocks and two by eights
- 6 When you asked for references you were handed a lengthy rap sheet
- 5 Their written estimate was done in crayon
- 4 When you mentioned NCRS they said yes, they were charter members of "Never Care, Repair, or Satisfy"
- 3 When you mentioned outsourcing, they pointed to the small building out back with the moon on the door
- 2 When you asked about insurance they pointed to the pit bull already sniffing your ankle, and, the Number 1 reason to avoid a restoration shop:

The shop manager named Larry and his worker are his brother, Dave and Darryl.

time. While there's no guarantee that every restoration project will go perfectly, doing the up-front work will help minimize that chance. It wouldn't be surprising, though, to find that a large project will take longer and cost more than you originally thought. A well-thought-out project plan will help contain the costs and time, but even the best plan is unlikely to foresee every contingency.

As with most good business relationships, both you and the shop owner are hoping for a positive experience where each party is proud of the end product, and happy with the results. You should feel that you've received good value for your money, and the restorer should be happy to use your car as an example of their workmanship, as well as having received a reasonable profit for their work. After all, we are in the hobby to enjoy the experience, and the personal relationships we form are a major part of our enjoyment. How good you feel about the finished product, and of your experience during the project, are key aspects to achieve. Hopefully, you will be as satisfied with yours as we have been with our many projects. Best of luck with your project. **CF**

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