

## Auto Theft Prevention 101

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Technology and common sense are the enthusiast's best defense against losing a prized collector car. This was the consensus of a panel of experts hosted by the Peterson Automotive Museum for a September 18, 2012 presentation entitled "Car Collection Security - Fort Knox security for the enthusiast."

This panel from law enforcement and insurance investigative units, as well as security industry experts, was assembled in response to a rising number of collector car thefts. The Petersen's Checkered Flag 200 members combined with Hagerty Insurance Company to sponsor the presentation of information to help classic car owners avoid being victims of theft at home or while traveling.

Any discussion of car theft includes a reference to the cult movies "Gone in 60 Seconds (1974)" and "Gone in 60 Seconds (2000)." While they give a basic understanding of how thieves operated during times past, both in the theft and subsequent disposal of vehicles; today the crooks have become even more sophisticated. They now cater to a worldwide market, one where concealing a theft by vehicle identification number switching is further enhanced by border crossings.

If someone steals a classic car, it is unlikely to be for a "joy ride." Rather, classic cars are stolen by professional criminals who have researched your vehicle, planned the details of the theft, and made advance arrangements as to how they will profit from its disposal.

Organized theft rings based in Europe and the Far East specialize in targeting classic cars, and then getting them out of the USA. These "commercial car thieves" read specialty car magazines, hang around enthusiasts, and go to classic car shows. Once they have identified a target car they do surveillance to determine their best opportunity to successfully steal the car they want. This might be while the vehicle is unattended during an event, when the owner is enjoying a meal at a restaurant, or when the vehicle is parked in the "north forty to avoid dings" during an outing. Home break-ins during an owner's absence are often followed by rolling the car into a waiting enclosed trailer. More violent armed home invasion robberies while the owner is there, as well as carjackings during excursions, have unfortunately also occurred. Once taken, the vehicle might quickly go to a chop shop to be

disassembled and sold for parts, or it could be given new vehicle identification numbers and shipped out of the country.

Purchasing, restoring and selling classic cars are additional areas where the enthusiast is at risk. When buying a classic, you should never buy one sight unseen, and always have an expert check it and the title. VIN switched or salvage cars from other states are now joined in the black market by both complete and project cars stolen in Mexico and imported into the USA. Unfortunately the governments of many countries don't have computer systems or laws permitting the sharing of all relevant information about stolen vehicles. Insurance company systems are better, but still have large gaps in information. See the Western States Auto Theft Investigators Association website for a listing of stolen classic cars: <http://www.wsati.org/>

Before having any work done at a restoration shop, do your homework. What do previous customers have to say, what security is available at the shop, and what type of people are hanging around?

Just as emotion often blurs common sense during the purchase of a classic, it can hinder your best judgment during a sale. Don't be hurried during the transaction, and be certain by verifying with a bank that the compensation tendered is valid before you turn over the vehicle and title.

Sadly, California's current political environment enhances its attractiveness to thieves. While there is tremendous commitment and communication between law enforcement, auto security companies and insurance investigators in tracking criminals it is a fact of life that law enforcement resources are diminished by tight budgets. An unfortunate side effect of Governor Brown's "criminal justice system realignment" embodied in AB 109 is a lot of car thieves who should be incarcerated are now on the streets plying their trade.

Given these dismal facts, what can a classic car owner do? Advice and materials provided during the presentation covered three areas:

I. Use common sense to prevent your vehicle from being stolen.

- Keep your vehicle locked in a secure locked garage when home.
- Never leave the key in or near your vehicle when it is unattended.
- Practice situational awareness, and be careful about being followed home after attending events or driving your classic.

- Don't take your eyes off your car while at an event or when stopping to eat.
- Don't valet park, or leave it parked at a hotel unless there is security watching it.
- Register your car using a Post Office Box instead of the address where it is garaged.

## II. Install technology to deter criminals and hopefully prevent theft.

- Install devices to prevent the vehicle from being driven by a thief, such as a kill switch or a fuel cut-off device.
- Install an alarm in the car, as well as in the garage.
- Use a steering wheel, brake, or wheel lock.
- Post "protected by" theft warning signs outside the garage and in the car.
- Install good lighting in your home, garage and perimeter and consider installing digital cameras with a feed to a recorder at the points of entry.
- Buy a big dog.

## III. Prepare in advance to maximize your chances of getting your car back if it is stolen:

- Take lots of photographs of your car, giving special attention to those details which distinguish it from all others of the same make and model. That annoying unique scratch or coffee spill on the carpet could be the key to identifying your car if the VIN has been altered. Etch or engrave identifying information into visible or not easily accessible parts of your car.
- Prepare in advance a data sheet about your car to accompany the photos with the key information the police will need if it is stolen. Include at a minimum the make, model, year, VIN, engine number, license number, and insurance company contact.
- Install a vehicle tracking system to maximize the chance for recovery. The Lo Jack system is the most widely known, and has technology which allows cars to be located even if hidden in a concrete bunker or steel container. Other systems now available utilize the same technology used in global positioning systems, and these can give a read out of a vehicle's path and current location.

Technology is providing lots of amazing capability, so check to see what is best for your situation.

Should all these steps fail, and you become the victim of a vehicle theft, immediately report it to the police, your insurance company, and any vehicle security device company. Time is of the essence, and every second wasted decreases the chances of a recovery. Once reported, there are many resources available through law enforcement and your insurance company to make sure the trail doesn't go cold if the car is not immediately recovered. By taking advantage of the suggestions provided in the seminar, it is hoped that you won't be one of those needing them.

### Websites

Petersen Automotive Museum: <http://petersen.org/>

Hagerty Vintage & Collector Car Insurance: [www.hagerty.com](http://www.hagerty.com)

LoJack Corporation: [www.lojack.com](http://www.lojack.com)

Live View GPS: [www.LiveViewGPS.com](http://www.LiveViewGPS.com)

FFS (Building Safety & Technology): [www.firstfiresystems.com](http://www.firstfiresystems.com)