

BUST OF CLASSIC-CAR THEFT RING REVEALS NEW TREND

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Article Last Updated: 04/09/2008 06:13:35 AM PDT

A 1957 Chevrolet Belair was seized on Friday as part of a classic car theft ring, with its polished chrome, whitewall tires and gleaming black-and-white paint job, the classically restored 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air drew lots of attention.

And among admirers of the \$150,000 beauty was Jerry Thompson - who police say made off with the Bel Air and at least six other classic autos in the San Fernando Valley and Santa Monica areas over the past several months.

On Friday, police arrested Thompson and found the stash of classic vehicles in what law enforcement officials said is just the latest in a growing number of classic-car thefts in the region.

Ownership of the Bel Air was tracked to John Perren, who leased the vehicle to rapper Mack 10. Perren declined to comment Tuesday. Mack 10, whose name is Dedrick Rolison, could not be reached for comment.

But so many thefts of classic cars have been occurring that police have created a network on the Web - at www.wsati.org - that posts fliers of stolen classic cars as part of the Western States Auto Theft Investigators.

"It's been coming to light so much that we had to start a Web site," said Jess Corral, supervisor of the West Taskforce for Regional Auto Theft Prevention, a county sheriffs' team of state and national investigators. "There's a lot of money involved."

The site, www.livecarshows.com, put up a notice telling classic-car owners about the rash of thefts across Southern California, and it posts fliers of stolen classics nationwide.

Officials said classic vehicles are targeted because they are easy to sell overseas and are difficult to track - they lack the more sophisticated and expensive security systems in current automobiles.

"Eight to 10 years ago, people in Japan wanted lowriders," said Richard O. Knapp, legal counsel for the Western States Auto Theft Investigators Association, Southern Chapter. "So they'd pop them in containers and ship them overseas. It creates a marketplace. That's what people like. A lot of these are almost a for-order situation."

The case involving Thompson began to develop March 12, when a victim reported his 1972 Chevrolet truck had been found in a garage behind a house in the 10600 block of Stanwin Avenue in Mission Hills, police said. They said a friend of the victim made the discovery while at the house to trade a classic car chassis for the truck.

"He thought he was going to do a swap," said LAPD Detective Ron Stilz, a Van Nuys Division auto-theft investigator. "Then he saw it and said, 'Hey, I helped my buddy build this truck.'"

"He stepped out and called his buddy and said, `Hey, I know where (your truck) is.'"

Stilz contacted the TRAP team - made up of sheriff's deputies, DMV officers and LAPD detectives specifically tasked with combating vehicle thefts across L.A. County.

Stilz, Mission Division officers and the team served a search warrant at the location March 13 and recovered the truck, which was valued at \$25,000.

Police also found a stolen 1970 Chevy Chevelle worth \$100,000, a door to a vehicle that had been stolen and a trailer that the suspect appeared to have used to tow stolen vehicles, Corral said.

Police also seized two other vehicles and evidence of more stolen vehicles, Corral said.

Police tracked Thompson, 42, to a location on Community Street in North Hills but couldn't find him. After days of surveillance, police on Friday followed him to a house on Haynes Street in Van Nuys.

Later that day, police took Thompson into custody at the house, where they also recovered four other cars including a 1971 Chevy pickup truck worth \$20,000 reported stolen from Van Nuys in January, a 1991 Honda Accord worth \$3,000 reported stolen from the Foothill area in December, and a 1965 Buick Skylark stolen in Santa Monica.

They also discovered the 1957 Chevy Bel Air convertible worth \$150,000 that had been reported stolen from the Devonshire area of the Valley last month.

Police described Thompson as a career criminal with a long history of auto theft and other convictions.

Corral said he was the ringleader of a classic-car theft ring and had a truck loaded with tools used to steal cars.

"Obviously, he's been getting away with it for a while," Corral said. "We're touching just the end of this. We don't know how many cars he's actually sold."

Thompson, whose listed occupation was handyman, is being held at the Los Angeles County Jail on a charge of grand theft auto.

Corral said for many classic-car owners, theft of the vehicles takes an emotional toll. "These guys put their money into it. They build it themselves, save money - all sweat and mechanics in it. It's their hobby."

Kris Shields, 46, of Granada Hills said his artesian turquoise 1965 Chevy El Camino was stolen last month. He said he had had the car - with a dual Demon carburetor and 15-inch Rally Rims - since 1982, and it had become like part of the family.