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Project Gift Horse

In the last issue, I relayed the story of a new (to me) W126 sedan that was added to my stable – for free. In closing, I asked if anyone had a good name for my newest project because I was having trouble coming up with one. I received many excellent suggestions but, in the end, an MBCA member from the St. Louis area suggested the winning name: Project Gift Horse.

When I got the car home, I still did not totally believe in my good fortune. I told my long-time tech and sidekick, Art Vaandering, that I wanted him to put in an hour or so each day in an attempt to identify what I really had. By decoding the VIN, he was able to tell me the car was a European 500SEL and not the American 560SEL that I thought I had. Art then asked me where I wanted him to start and I replied, "Let's find out why the driver's window fell down inside the door when I tried to lower it when I picked up the car."

After a bit of dismantling, he reported that the nuts that bolt the window glass to the window track had come off the studs. Better yet, the nuts were lying at the bottom of the door and he had already reinstalled them. Wow, I thought, this might not be a half-bad deal after all. However, when we tried to start the car again, there was no response. That seemed strange because the day before, I drove the car home from the Kalamazoo area, a distance of approximately 50 miles. We installed a new battery and the car started but it didn't run very well.

Under the hood, it looked like the Fourth of July because sparks were flying everywhere. We ordered and installed a new coil and, just that quickly, Independence Day was over. The car ran a lot better, too. I then decided to address the exhaust system because the noise was quite obnoxious. After inspecting the car, the technician told me that he could order and install all the factory components for about \$700, or for \$120, he could cut in a couple of pieces of pipe that repaired the defective area. Needless to say, I told him to cut away.

Next I decided to address the a/c problem. One of the reasons the fellow member chose to give the car away was because someone quoted him a \$2,700 price to replace the a/c evaporator. For those who don't know, the evaporator is located between the dash and the firewall and plays a very important part in making the air conditioning work. It is also one of the worst jobs to repair that there is on a Mercedes-Benz – or any other vehicle, for that matter.

Because the a/c system had been empty for so long, there wasn't a trace of where the leak in the system might be. We began by filling the system with three cans of R134 refrigerant. Then Art began using his scanner – a kind of Geiger-counter-sounding device – to look for leaks in the interior compartment with the a/c operating. Unable to get his scanner to emit even one chirp inside the car, he then moved under the hood – immediately the scanner went crazy by the a/c compressor.

Near the compressor is a tube where the a/c lines go in and out of a manifold. After a thorough disassembly and inspection, Art discovered that one of the o-rings that sealed an a/c line had blown. We replaced the o-ring, reassembled the system, added another three cans of Freon, and the system has operated flawlessly ever since. The total cost for everything, including \$5 worth of o-rings, six cans of freon, and labor was just under \$400, which was a far cry from the \$2,700 the previous owner was quoted to repair his evaporator. Interestingly, if he had repaired the evaporator, he still would not have had air conditioning because the evaporator was not the problem.

Continuing to work on the interior, I noticed that the console had an unsightly three-inch tear in one of its outer edges. We tried gluing the



Rather than repair an unsightly tear in the console of Project Gift Horse, I applied gray ColorBond to the console out of one of the W126 parts cars in my "bone yard."

damaged area back together but the end result was not satisfactory. Of the eight cars that are in my "bone yard" two are W126 sedans, including one that is an exact color match in and out for the car we are working on. Unfortunately, its console was not usable. However, the console that was in the other W126 was perfect, it just wasn't the right color.

I found a product called ColorBond that can be used to change the color of interior parts. Since they don't offer Mercedes-Benz interior colors I studied their color chart and selected a Ford color that was very close to my interior color. The product sprayed on easily and worked exactly as promised. Once installed a person could never tell that my console did not come gray to begin with. For more detail see www.bryndana.com or major retailers like Summit Racing Equipment.

Next issue we return with more updates on Project Gift Horse. To date I have spent about \$1,000 for parts and labor. I have been around the car enough now to know that some really expensive repairs are coming. I've taken off my rose-colored glasses but still remain happy to be involved in this project and learning the things I have learned.

Jim Luikens is director at large of the MBCA and a member of the Western Michigan Section. He has been writing columns on his project cars for The Star for almost six years. Questions and comments can be sent to him at juke@risesales.com.

Jim's "bone yard" of parts cars hidden behind a tall white picket fence is an endless source of hard-to-find trim parts, connectors, brackets, and fasteners.

