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Mining for Parts Gold

Mention the phrase “doing inventory” to anyone in a wholesale or retail business and you’ll likely see eyes rolling and hear sighs of dread and even a profanity or two. That’s not necessarily the case at the Mercedes-Benz Classic Center. In fact, there’s a part of doing inventory that gives us great satisfaction, and even excitement. Yes, excitement from spreadsheets!

The excitement comes from discovering that within the vast MBUSA parts network there are still rare and much-needed parts just waiting for someone to order for their classic model. You might call this aspect of our work “mining for Mercedes-Benz parts gold.” Recent finds include treasures such as an original, uncut deck lid for a 300SL roadster. “Uncut” means it was never filed and trimmed to fit a car. We also recently discovered a lower rear bumper for a 300c “Adenauer” and a headlamp assembly for a 170 model. We’re making more such discoveries every month.

Here’s how we find those gems: Mercedes-Benz USA maintains several parts distribution centers (PDCs) around the country. You can imagine what a large operation that is, especially since MBUSA has nearly tripled its annual new vehicle sales in the U.S. over the past decade or so. Like many parts operations, our PDCs use a computerized inventory management system. They are always analyzing what parts are in demand and what parts are hardly selling, if at all.

Quite often, the slow sellers are the parts the Classic Center needs to be managing for out-of-production models. Now, you might think that a deck lid for a 300SL wouldn’t just be sitting on a shelf in a warehouse after all these years. But it was for the reasons I sited in my previous column: owners

just didn’t know that we might still have such a part and so didn’t think to ask a dealer to track it down.

When we make such rare finds, we have the parts sent to the Classic Center in Irvine and we keep them in our “vault” until someone places an order. We have also come across lots of small trim parts and model insignias.

Doing inventory at the Classic Center also means trying to determine future parts needs for soon-to-be classic models. For example, right now we’re looking at the 126 Series S-Class and the 201 Series 190E models. We need to figure out what parts owners will need in the years down the road. We also need to determine what parts should be stocked now and which ones we might reproduce in years to come. In our case, “reproduce” really means “revive production,” as I mentioned with the Rudge wheels in my last column, for example. Anything Mercedes has its suppliers put back into production will be an exact replacement and a genuine Mercedes-Benz part.

Here’s a shocker for some people: The Classic Center offers genuine replacement steering wheels for classic Mercedes models. Steering wheels can be expensive to restore and I’ve seen people try to restore them on their own, often with mixed results. A new one is still made to the same specs and standards as your original, so it is correct for your car. These kinds of detail items can make a real difference on any restoration.

It’s not all about just spreadsheets and inventory here. Because we maintain, repair and restore Mercedes-Benz vehicles at the Classic Center we have firsthand experience about which parts customers need most. And we also see firsthand that sometimes cars have been maintained or restored incorrectly over the

years. Truth be told, not even Mercedes “veterans” are immune to making mistakes.

For example, we recently had a 280SL in for a major overhaul, just about everything but the paint. An MBUSA oldtimer looked under the opened hood, pointed to some cadmium plating and said, “That’s wrong, it’s supposed to be silver.” Could we have goofed? We went through our archives and dug out sales brochures and other docs from the 1960s. Sure enough, we were correct. I don’t say that to sound boastful, but only to emphasize that at the Classic Center, we don’t take anything for granted. We make every effort to ensure accuracy.

We pursue that accuracy down to the smallest detail, not just as our business model, but as our passion for these wonderful cars. We also consider every classic part important. Consider the lowly rubber trunk mat. The Classic Center recently acquired a 300SEL 6.3 sedan. Opening the trunk revealed a pretty common site; the rubber trunk mat was brittle and falling apart. We’ve seen some owners install carpeting, which looks nice but is not correct for the car. And we’ve seen 190SLs with foot well carpeting instead of the original rubber mats. Why not go back to the original look? The mats are available and inexpensive.

I’ll close this column with some more dealer news: I always want to emphasize that the Classic Center, in addition to being its own business entity, also supports the classic parts business of our Mercedes-Benz dealer partners. By next year, we’ll have a dealer-qualifying process in place that will help ensure an even higher level of service for our classic vehicle customers.

And now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got some “treasure” to find. •