

Bernardsville classic car-repair business experiences upward trend



Owner Ron Pace stands inside the paint booth of Somerset Hills Classics in Bernardsville, where the finish was just applied to a customer's 1971 Triumph TR-6. Business was down significantly during the economic recession, but has improved in recent months, Pace said. / Photo by Charles Erickson

BERNARDSVILLE — Five people were on the payroll of Somerset Hills Classics when it opened for business in 2006, restoring and repairing collectible automobiles. A few years later, after the economic recession softened demand for classics from Detroit, the building seemed barren of cars and personnel.

“We were down to one guy,” recalled Ron Pace, the owner. “Myself and one other guy.” He again has five employees, though one is a part-time worker. On a recent Tuesday afternoon, cars and trucks in various states of repair were parked under the shop’s fluorescent lights. “Things have picked up,” Pace said. “But I don’t know that they’re back to where they were, or if they’re going to get back to where we were.”

Beyond their sentimental value, antique automobiles are viewed as investments — particularly the “muscle cars” produced by Ford, Chrysler and General Motors in the late 1960s and early ‘70s. These cars were known for their masculine bodies and their giant engines, such as the 426-cubic-inch Hemi V-8 made by Chrysler.

“Before the recession hit, they were huge,” Pace said. “They were getting a lot of money.” All of the motor vehicles inside the shop belong to customers. Pace has never used the business to buy derelicts, restore them and then see what kind of a price he could get at an auction or private sale.

Somerset Hills Classics has always operated from a building located on the eastern corner of Center Street and Boylan Terrace. The old brick structure is separated from the borough’s

business district by a bridge over a NJ Transit rail track, and has had a variety of uses over the years. It was a storage warehouse, and also as the Bernardsville base for a utility company. “We’re here,” Pace said. “We don’t really need a storefront.”



This 1931 Chevrolet is undergoing a complete restoration at Somerset Hills Classics in Bernardsville. Owner Ron Pace stands next to the Chevy, which is being restored from the frame up. / Photo by Charles Erickson

He owns another auto-related business in the borough: Doug Lowrie Auto Body, a collision shop in which Pace began working in 1980. He purchased it about 20 years ago.

Other than having four wheels, the automobiles in the two shops normally are dissimilar. Most of the auto-body trade involves fixes to late models. Insurance companies typically pay for the work.

The vehicular metamorphoses undertaken by Somerset Hills Classics are almost always paid for with discretionary income. Industries dependent on these funds are the first to suffer during an economic recession.

“Folks want an idea of what it’s going to cost a little more than they used to,” Pace said, describing some recent customers. “Years ago, it was: ‘Do it. Just do it, whatever it costs.’ ”

There is competition in restoring classic cars, but not as much as Pace has with the collision shop. Most of his customers live in New Jersey, but he has restored cars for people in Pennsylvania, New York and even South Carolina.

“Word-of-mouth is very important in this business,” he said. “And we’ve done just about anything and everything, from a ’24 Model T to a mid-80s Cadillac.”

There is a paint booth inside Somerset Hills Classics, and except for the teardowns and rebuilds of motors and installations of custom interiors, all labor is normally performed by Pace’s employees.

“It’s just cost-effective for our customers to sub out the engine work to guys that are experts at that,” said the owner.

Sales are not limited to complete restorations in which the automobile is disassembled to its

frame and then rebuilt. Some vehicles require only mechanical attention, like the 1987 Mercedes convertible that was recently being repaired in the shop. The German car sat on jacks next to a boxy and black American coupe that had been manufactured 30 years earlier.

Others cars are brought in for the replacement of minor parts and components, such as molding.

Cars and trucks assembled in the early 1960s and before, while solidly constructed of steel and featuring little plastic, lack safety features that are standard on contemporary autos. Many owners have brought them to Pace for retrofitting.

“We’ve done a lot of seat belt installation for people that want to take their kids out,” he said. “Most of these cars don’t have seat belts.”

Two of his employees are younger gentlemen, and from the area. Pace said they are unusual finds, in traditionally white-collar Bernardsville — where many graduates from the high school later study at top universities.

“When I find guys like that, I want to keep them,” he said.

There were many days, Pace admitted, after he had let all but one of his employees go, that he had doubts about the future of Somerset Hills Classics. He credits some blunt advice given to him by a friend for helping clear away his entrepreneurial gloom.

“I was told, ‘Just quit feeling sorry for yourself,’ ” Pace recalled. “ ‘Get off your ass and get to work.’ So I did. And we’re coming back.”