

Feature Car

The Sign of the Cat—submitted by Bill Bauer

My story starts in 1991; our oldest daughter was just turning 16, time for a car of her own. At the time the family car was a 1985 Mercury Grand Marquis wagon, not something a teenage wanted to haul her friends around in. I bought a 1970 Mercury Cougar 2 door hardtop, pretty used up but drivable and had thoughts that with a little TLC, it would be a good classic and fill the need for a high schooler's transportation.

Cougars were advertized as an upscale Mustang as they shared a lot of the same components. After a complete repainting, a new carpet, engine upgrade, it was ready. "But dad, it's too old", I was told, so on we went, car shopping again, together this time. We found a 1981 red Cougar XR7 with a white vinyl top, low mileage. This was the 5th generation Cougar based off of the Thunderbird platform. It had a V-8, bucket seats, stereo, automatic, air conditioning, and again, it was red, a good candidate for a young woman to drive.

I kept the '70 hardtop as my daily driver. I had caught the Cougar bug, I always like the big Merc's anyway. I wasn't planning on anything special, just keeping the old cat running, but in 1995, I found another '70 Cougar, sitting in a field behind a used car lot near Pontoon Beach, Illinois. The owner had it as a parts car, but this was a convertible and the price was low so I thought that I could rebuild it using parts off of my hardtop. My son at this time had the car bug as well and wanted to get his hands dirty.

I should have known better, sitting low in the field took its toll on the undercarriage, plus it



had some damage on the front end from a previous accident. The only parts that I could use off of my hardtop were the front fenders, front valance, front bumper and the drivers door. The convertible must have been a flood at some time. Besides the inner rocker rails being rusted through, the torque boxes, floor pan, rear quarter panels and rear wheel houses had to be replaced. Upon disassembly, sand and dried mud was found in various cavities. My son, Jimmy, is very capable with a power washer and Sawzall.

The good, most of the sheet metal and chassis parts could still be purchased, and the interior was in pretty good shape. At least all of the parts were there, except the rear quarter windows. The bad, Cougar specific parts are harder to find and more expensive, plus laying you backside welding overhead was no fun. It took thirteen years to get it drivable, working on it part-time when it was warm enough and money was available. But there was never a thought on stopping our project. I have told my kids more than once "to finish what you start".

This became a true family project working of the family garage. Disassembling parts for cleaning, paint stripping, sanding, and reassembly. Donna is still mad at me for using the kitchen sink as a parts washer. Once the mechanicals were good enough to allow the car to move under it's own power, off to Treppler's Paint Shop. In favor of a more modern color, a 1999 Ford color, Denim Blue was picked instead of the 70's Medium Metallic Blue. Back home for finish assembly. The transmission was rebuilt

and a TCI higher stall speed converter was added. The 351 Cleveland was replaced with a 302 small block. I figured that it was easier to modify with parts availability. I changed the cam, added a hi-rise intake, Hooker headers, ignition, fuel, and cooling system upgrades. We re-chromed the bumpers, rebuilt the suspension and brakes, reupholstered the seats, added a new top and back window, refinished the interior trim panels, added a factory Ford tachometer and of course, period correct mag wheels. My kids still think I'm stuck in the seventies.



Two more years have now gone by, but we are now ready to roll. After a wheel alignment at Ken Farrar's shop, it passed the Missouri state safety inspection the first time out. Now on to get the license plates. The first clerk at the DMV thought the title was fake because of how old that it was and the small amount of numbers and letters that were in the VIN number. And since it was un-drivable and in pieces for a lot of years, I failed to register the



title when I bought it. I had not paid the personal property tax on it for 15 years. No luck on getting plates that day. I had to get a corrected property receipt so on to the tax office. The clerk there was a motor-head, thankfully, and had a '67 Camaro so we talked about the old cars and to my surprise, she cut me a deal. I only had to pay for two years back taxes on the Cougar. Back to the DMV, all was good finally, we got the plates.



On the road, the first event that I took it to was the Ford and Mustang Roundup at the Museum of transportation several years ago where I hooked up with the nice guys from the Fords Unlimited Car Club. My Cougar is not the perfect show car, but the old cat was finally back on her feet. What's next? More go fast parts and an A/C upgrade. You are never really done. Sadly, the last Mercury was built on January 4th, 2001 with no chance for another generation Cougar. I give thanks to Donna, Jennifer, Jim, and Julie for putting up with an old car guy and you guys for reading.

Bill