

DAYTONA ALCHEMY

PART 1



THE 3 AERO CARS THAT WENT FOR OE GOLD AT THE 2012 MOPAR NATS

What's better than gold at the Olympics? Gold at the Mopar Nationals! Once a year, folks bring out their rides to compete in the OE judged class. Only five cars per year are chosen to compete in this "best of the best" show class because it takes over four hours for the judges to inspect each car. The car is placed on a lift and the fun begins. It's an in-depth analysis of every (and I mean every) aspect of the car with a point value assigned to each tiny part. The level of detail checking is truly intimidating, requiring not only correctly date-coded components, but also requiring the judges keep in mind how the car was produced. Owners usually have a book that documents the entire restoration process, so if any question should arise, it can be proven that the car was produced in a particular way. Most of the cars are all-out, restorations, but the competition also allows unrestored cars exhibiting the same level of detail. Prior to the show, the judges do their homework and prepare for each car they will judge. Judging is based on a 2200 point scale. Cars receiving 85% earn a bronze, 90% a silver, and for 95% and up, the coveted gold certification.

This year, we saw something real-

ly memorable. Among the five cars, there were three 1969 Charger Daytonas in the hunt for gold; one was white, one was yellow, and the other was red. As I looked around, the judges really had their work cut out for them. To say the cars were breathtaking would be a huge understatement; each of these Daytonas were downright beautiful.

The white Daytona is owned by

longtime member of the Mopar community Tony D'Agostino. Being the owner of Tony's Parts, he's had the opportunity to help many Mopar owners restore their rides. Over the years, he has accumulated a vast collection of unique Mopars of his own, but one car eluded him until 2005, when his dream came true and he purchased the 1969 Charger Daytona you see here.

The history of this car starts when it was delivered on September 3, 1969 to St. Ann Dodge in St. Ann, Missouri, just outside of St. Louis. The first owner lived on Deer Park Avenue in Louisville, Kentucky, which meant it only traveled a couple hundred miles from St. Ann. Not

much more is known about the first owner, but he was the recipient of one of only two Daytonas built with a 440, automatic tranny, white exterior, red stripe, and a red interior. This car was a dead ringer for the pre-production mockup in Dodge's press releases and on the cover of the September

1969 Hi Performance Cars magazine. The first owner drove it until 1972, when he placed an ad in the paper to sell it.

Rusty Cummings owned a Superbird at the time, and his friend, Ernie Bingham, really liked the big wing car. As

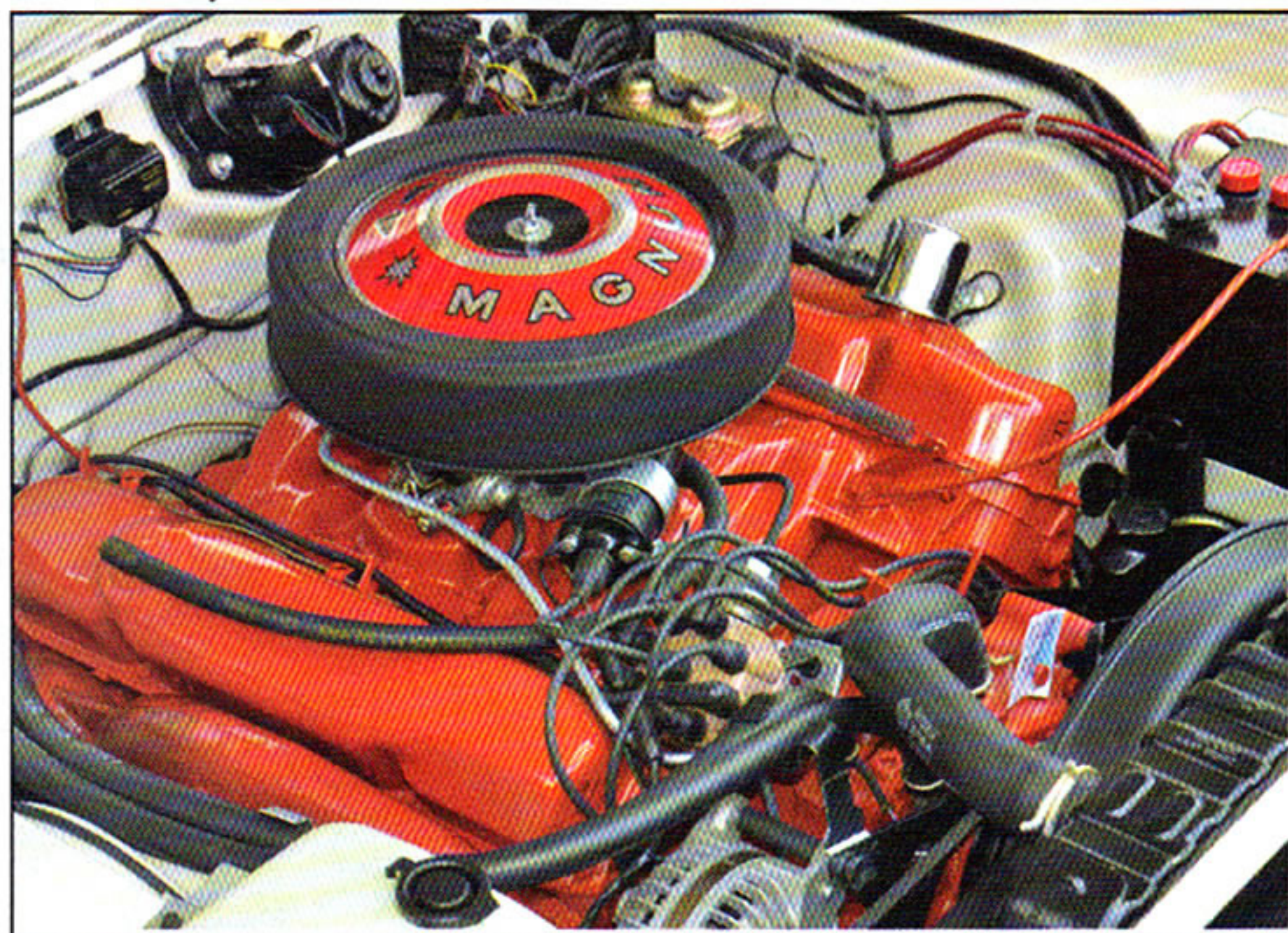
LOOK-A-LIKE PRESS KIT DAYTONA



STORY: Tim Costello

PHOTOS: Tim Costello

Photographed @ Mopar Nats & Carlisle



the two talked, Ernie expressed an interest in having one too. Rusty, being the good friend, was reading the local classifieds and showed the Daytona ad to Ernie. With cash in hand, they were soon on their way to have a look. When they got out of the car, they were really impressed with the Daytona. It was still in stock condition, very original, and just what Ernie was looking for. For \$1,200, a deal was struck and Ernie drove his new ride home. Shortly thereafter, he made some good friends at his local Dodge dealer and started to gather up some of the unique parts for spares - he figured that, before Chrysler discontinued some of the rare stuff, he would pick up a few pieces just in case he ever needed them.

While waiting at a stop light, on the eve of the Kentucky Derby in May of 1974, a drunk driver hit the side of the Daytona. Not wanting to stop, the drunk backed up and sped away. Ernie chased the driver for over a half hour! When Ernie finally stopped the hit-and-run culprit, Ernie had to restrain himself from beating

the guy senseless. After the police were called, Ernie assessed the damage. The Daytona suffered damage where the quarter met the door, which caused the door to have issues closing properly. Shortly thereafter, Ernie decided to part ways with the car and placed it up for sale.

The third owners were two brothers, Terry and Larry Denny. After driving the wounded winged car for a little while, they decided to park it in a barn near Louisville. Over the years, the two brothers kept the car out of the elements amongst a pile of other cars, which included a Z/28 Camaro, a van, and few other odd rides. In 2005, a friend of Jack Rawlings was looking for a Z/28 and stumbled upon the two brothers. Having really no interest in a Charger Daytona, he asked Jack if he was interested, since he knew it was something really special. Apparently, the brothers were behind on their taxes and needed to clean out the garage to help pay the bills. Jack figured he could buy the car and sell it quickly, but not being an expert in Charger Daytonas, he was hesitant to lay

out very much cash. This led him to contact Tony to help verify if it was the real deal. Tony told him what to look for to make sure it was legit, and as they talked on the phone, Tony's excitement began to build. When Jack mentioned the color combination, it sent him over the edge; not because of the rarity of combination, but the white-and-red combo happens to be Tony's favorite colors on these cars and Tony had wanted a Daytona ever since the age of thirteen! In 1977, he put a deposit on one, but the deal fell through. That one got away, but he never forgot about it. He was going to do everything in his power to get this one if he could. Tony told Jack that he was seriously interested in buying the Daytona. Jack had a ton of potential buyers already waiting for details, but being the good friend he is, he agreed to give Tony the first shot at the car. So, after many years of lying dormant in a Kentucky garage, the Charger was finally pulled out into the daylight.

On April 27, 2005, Tony drove over to Jack's home and inspected the car. As he looked around, he saw the minor damage on the driver's side from the accident, but overall, the car was in good shape. As he poked around, he found no rust whatsoever. Amazingly, the car had remained largely original and unmodified, with the exception of some 1970 Rallye Wheels and a funky aftermarket steering wheel. It still had the original spark plug wires, air cleaner, and even the original exhaust tips. So, before this one could get away, Tony made Jack an offer he just couldn't refuse, and thus, became the proud new owner.

Tony hauled the car back to Delaware to start the restoration process. Being in the business of vintage muscle car parts has its advantages. Not only did Tony have some trick parts stashed away for this rare winged warrior, but thanks to his business, he was able to check out virtually all the major swap meets as well.

Over six years, and more than twenty-five swap meets per year, he was able to collect a large number of NOS parts for that really over-the-top restoration he envisioned. He was constantly on the phone making contacts and raiding peoples' prized collections of NOS parts. Tony had to admit that a few of the parts were lunch pail parts straight from the assembly line in Detroit! For those of you who haven't heard of this before, line workers might, accidentally, take home items such as clamps, tie rods, lug nuts, hoses, wheel weights, or anything else which, might, totally inadvertently, have fallen into their lunch boxes. These little details helped make this car not just a pretty face, but a heart stopper.

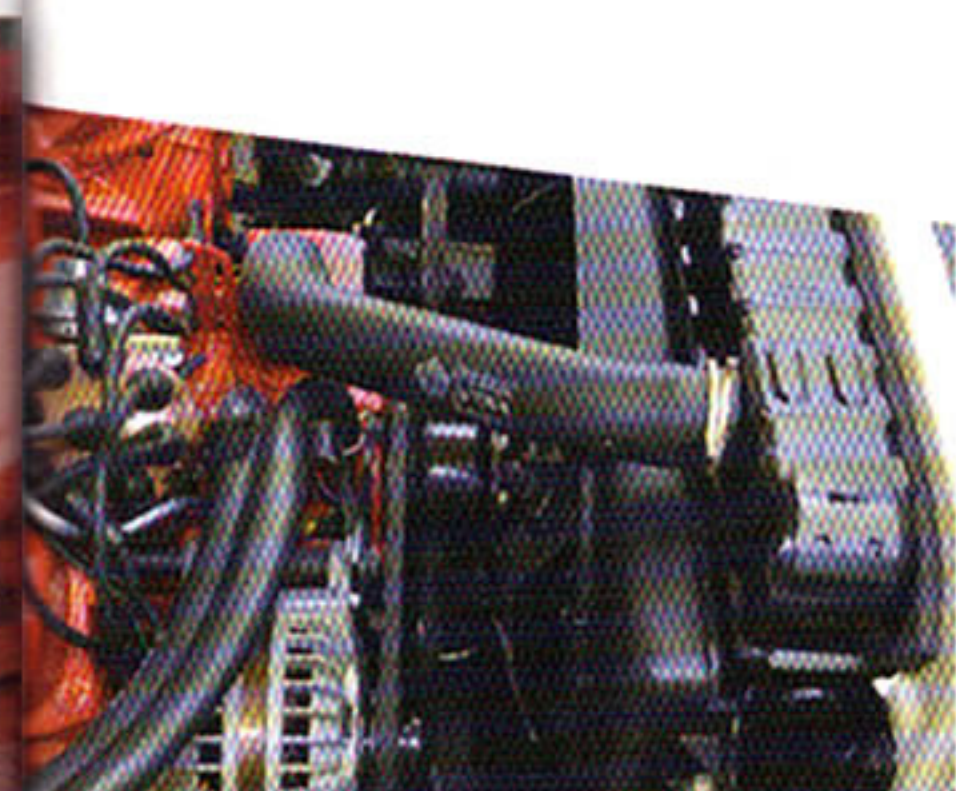
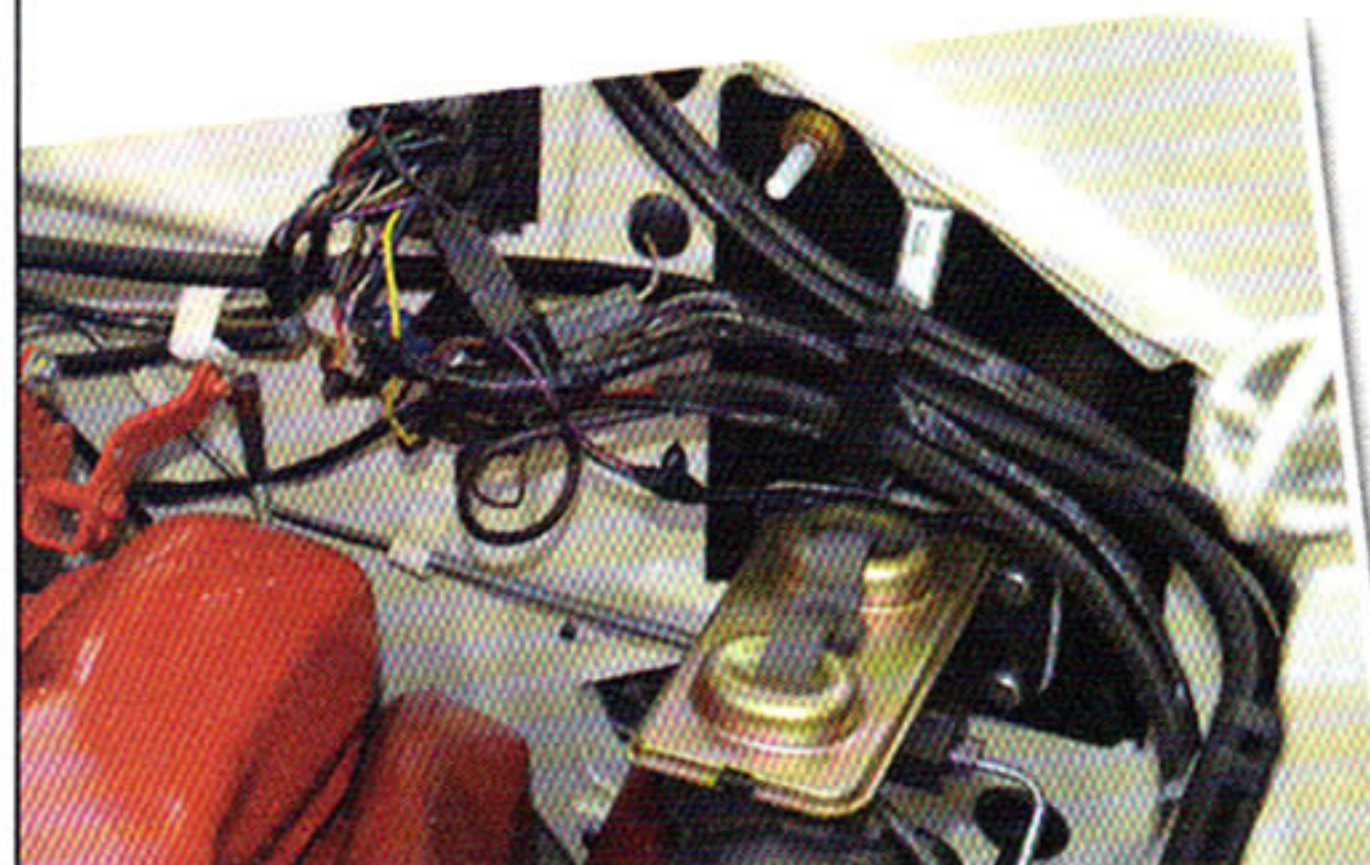
Tony turned to Mike Mancini's American Muscle Car Restorations (AMCRI) to help "go for the gold." Most recently, he won gold in 2011 for the very plain (but ultra detailed) 1970 Duster from both of the two OEM judging bodies - the ICCA and the Mopar Nationals. I had a chance to admire Mike's work, and it was incredible. Mike's shop is founded on four basic principles; quality, research, organization, and customer care. Mike told me they give it everything they have on each and every job, and never compromise or cut corners in any way. They take the time to research and find the most authentic products. Those little details make the difference. His shop is very well organized and the work flow is focused on each project through the various departments ensuring the most efficient job possible. Customer's cars are very important to AMCRI and Mike stresses that the customer's satisfaction is a priority to him. He enjoys working intimately with customers to realize their individual goals.

Tony had known Mike from when he worked at another restoration shop, and they had talked on the phone for years. When Mike opened up his own shop, it was a natural fit. Mike has amazing attention for detail and is capable of doing the type of restoration that Tony was hoping to achieve.

Tony told me that "many shops do nice work, but very few know how to do OE restorations correctly, and Mike seemed to be in touch with the nuances of this type of work." I asked Mike how did you get started with OE restorations? "I grew up on classic cars and hot rods. I was exposed to cars at a very young age and just became obsessed with them." He started off building cars with his family, and then later worked at a local restoration shop after college. He wanted a shop of his own so he could do things his way. That set the wheels in motion to make his dream into his livelihood. He started building the shop in 2008 and the doors opened in March 2010. They handle every conceivable aspect of the restoration process. They offer complete rotisserie restorations services, done to the highest quality available anywhere. All of their mechanical, metal fabrication, body work, and paint, are done to the strictest standards. Their sister company, Instrument Specialties, Inc., affords AMCRI the ability to handle all aspects of the interior portion of the restoration process in-house - something no other shop can claim.

When speaking with Mike, you can really hear his passion for cars. He told me, that he loves the challenge involved and the "thrill of the hunt" for rare parts, which all play into the fun factor. He said, "most of all, it's the satisfying feeling of taking a used and abused piece of history and making it look brand-new again. When we finish a car, we can stand back and say, 'Wow, we did that!'"

So, in the spring of 2010, the Daytona headed over to Mike's for a complete tear down. Mike was pleasantly surprised that the car was so complete and had never been apart. This is a huge treat for any restoration shop, as sometimes they get cars that have been apart for many years. It becomes a huge task of figuring out "what went where?" and "where is that missing part?" These cars were converted from regular 1969 Charger R/T's at Creative Industries back in the day, so each one has



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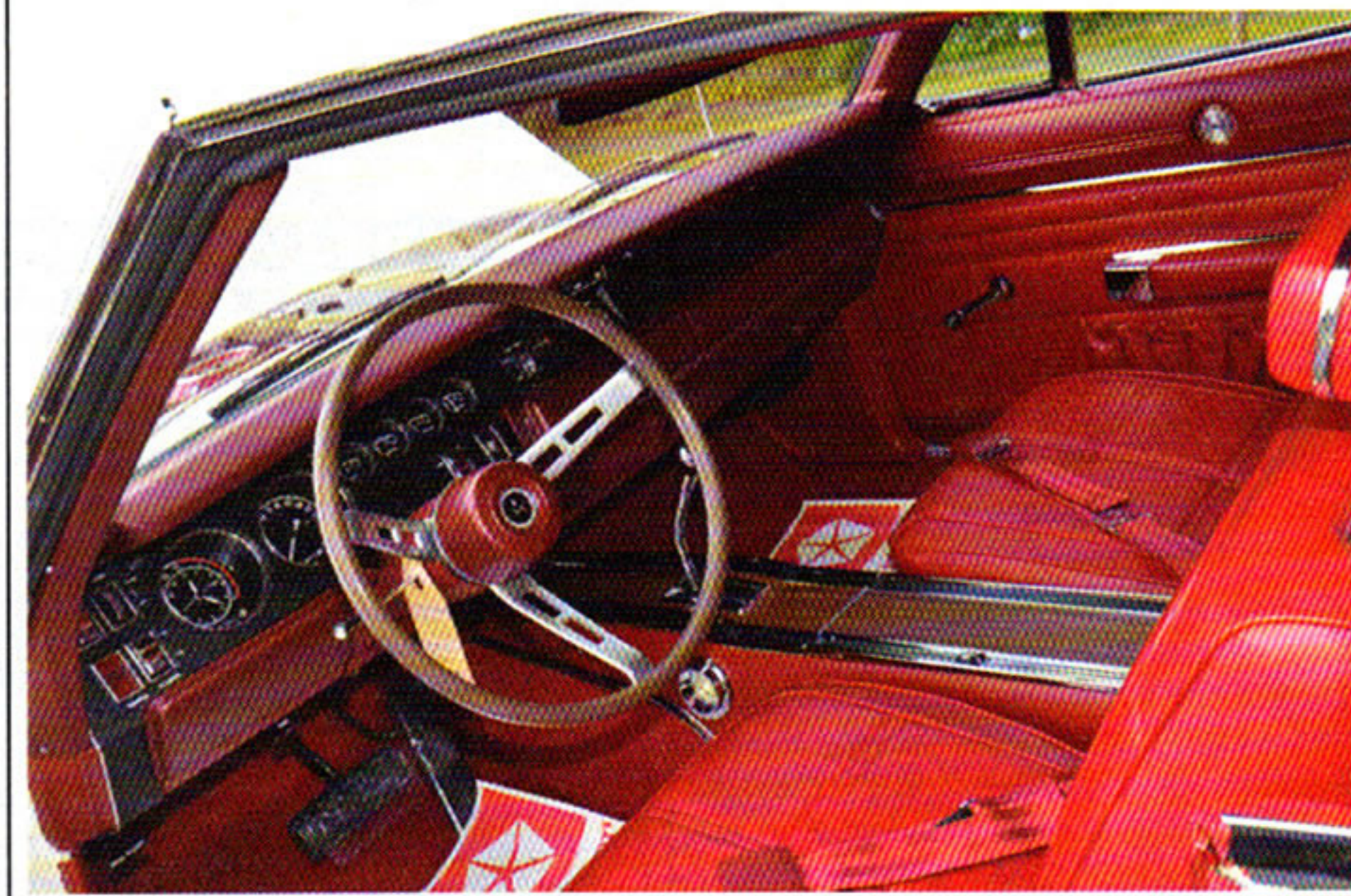
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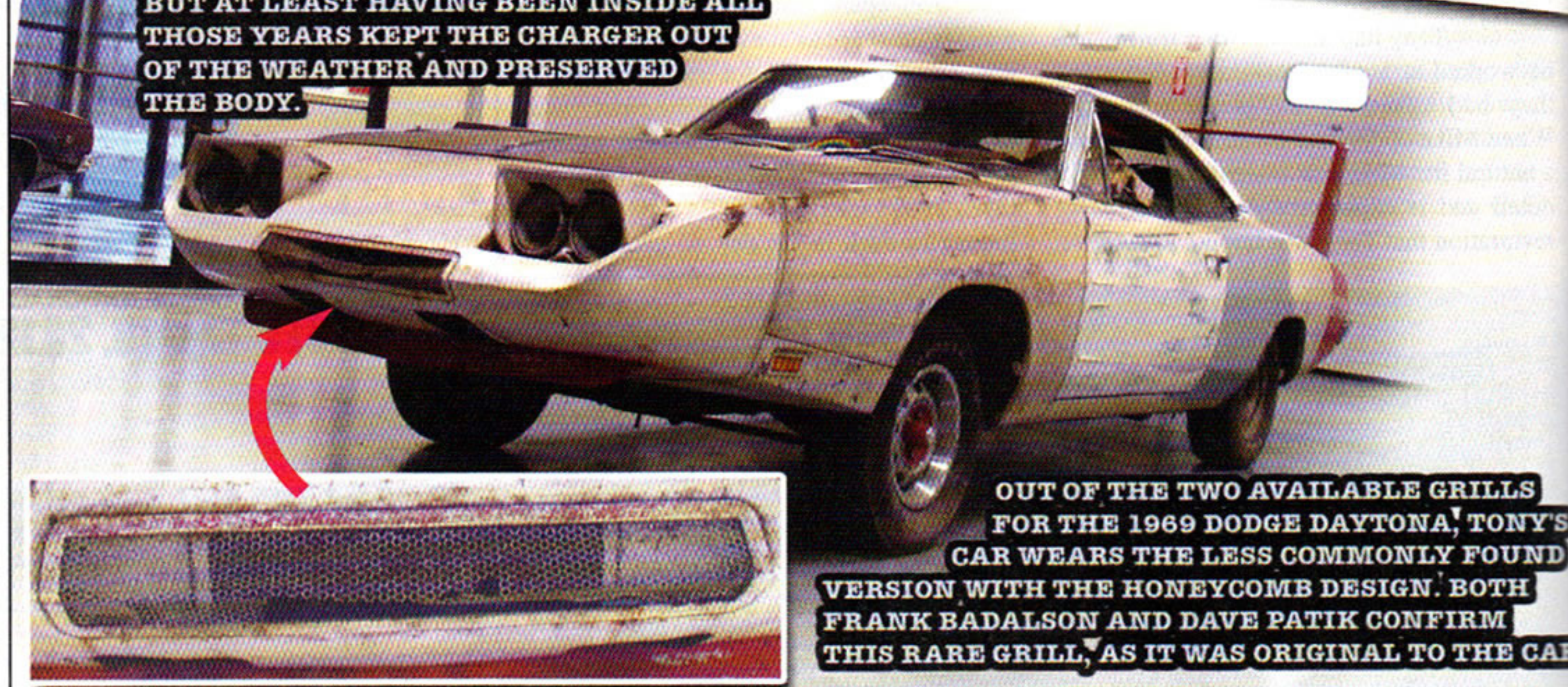
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THIS IS HOW THE DAYTONA LOOKED WHEN IT ARRIVED AT MIKE MANCINI'S AMERICAN MUSCLE CAR RESTORATIONS AFTER DECADES IN A KENTUCKY BARN. IT WASN'T PRETTY, BUT AT LEAST HAVING BEEN INSIDE ALL THOSE YEARS KEPT THE CHARGER OUT OF THE WEATHER AND PRESERVED THE BODY.



OUT OF THE TWO AVAILABLE GRILLS FOR THE 1969 DODGE DAYTONA, TONY'S CAR WEARS THE LESS COMMONLY FOUND VERSION WITH THE HONEYCOMB DESIGN. BOTH FRANK BADALSON AND DAVE PATIK CONFIRM THIS RARE GRILL, AS IT WAS ORIGINAL TO THE CAR.

slight differences. They're not your typical Mopar, and having an untouched car is the best research you can have. Mike even got a surprise when he found the original build sheet taped to the back of the glove box liner! This gave him all the features offered on the car and added to the documentation collection.

When you start looking at an OE restored car, you might think these guys have gone off the deep end, but really, they've fallen into the abyss! Their attention to detail is overwhelming. Every single component needs to be assembly line correct - not always an NOS part off the dealership's shelf, but instead, it has to match exactly what was installed the day the car was built. Very often, dealer-sold replacement parts and assembly line construction parts were entirely different. Every part has a date code that must match the car. The shocks, plug wires, hoses, control arms, wheels, exhaust manifolds, and the radiator, are all checked in the

quest for gold. The great part about this Daytona was a lot of the parts were original and didn't need replacing. All they needed was Mike's magic touch to restore them. Mike and his crew painstakingly refinished each and every component. This included angled dip lines, which duplicate the factory process performed on the bare body of the car and can only be seen in a few places once assembled. The body restoration process replicated all the various original over sprays exactly as if it had been painted at Chrysler. Mike even installed ordinary Charger fenders so that the undercoating process would result in an authentic appearance. After the undercoating was completed, the Charger fenders were removed and the Daytona fenders installed, just like they would have done during the original conversion at Creative. The entire interior is either original or has been replaced with NOS date coded material. An incredible amount of time was spent refinishing the bare metal components, and every nook and cranny of each piece was painstakingly massaged to remove any slight rust pit, so that every item (even hidden ones) were perfect. Every component, down to the internal door components, were restored and plated to look 100% factory fresh. He went just as far to restore the internal rear differential parts to look exactly as they did, even though those components will never be seen.

Tony is just as inventive as Mike in the mission to receive OE gold for the Daytona. Finding assembly line parts can be very difficult, and sometimes you have to think outside the box. One of the date coded Polyglas tires on the car was bought out of a trunk of another person's car! Tony told me he saw a car at a show that wasn't restored or in mint condition, and he offered to buy the car's original spare tire. The owner had no problem with that since the other four didn't match anyway. Tony said the hardest part to find was assembly line mufflers that are date coded correctly. A friend of his had a set and really wasn't ready to give them up. Tony exhausted every possible avenue he could think of, and finally, the friend came through.

It took about two years to complete the Daytona, but as you can guess, it can be a slow process to get everything correct. If a certain part couldn't be obtained, that portion of the car was placed on hold until it could be found. Mike told me that working with Tony was also a pleasure, because Tony had acquired some of the rarest and most sought-after parts which could then be used on the restoration. Mike felt like a kid at Christmas every time a new box of parts arrived from

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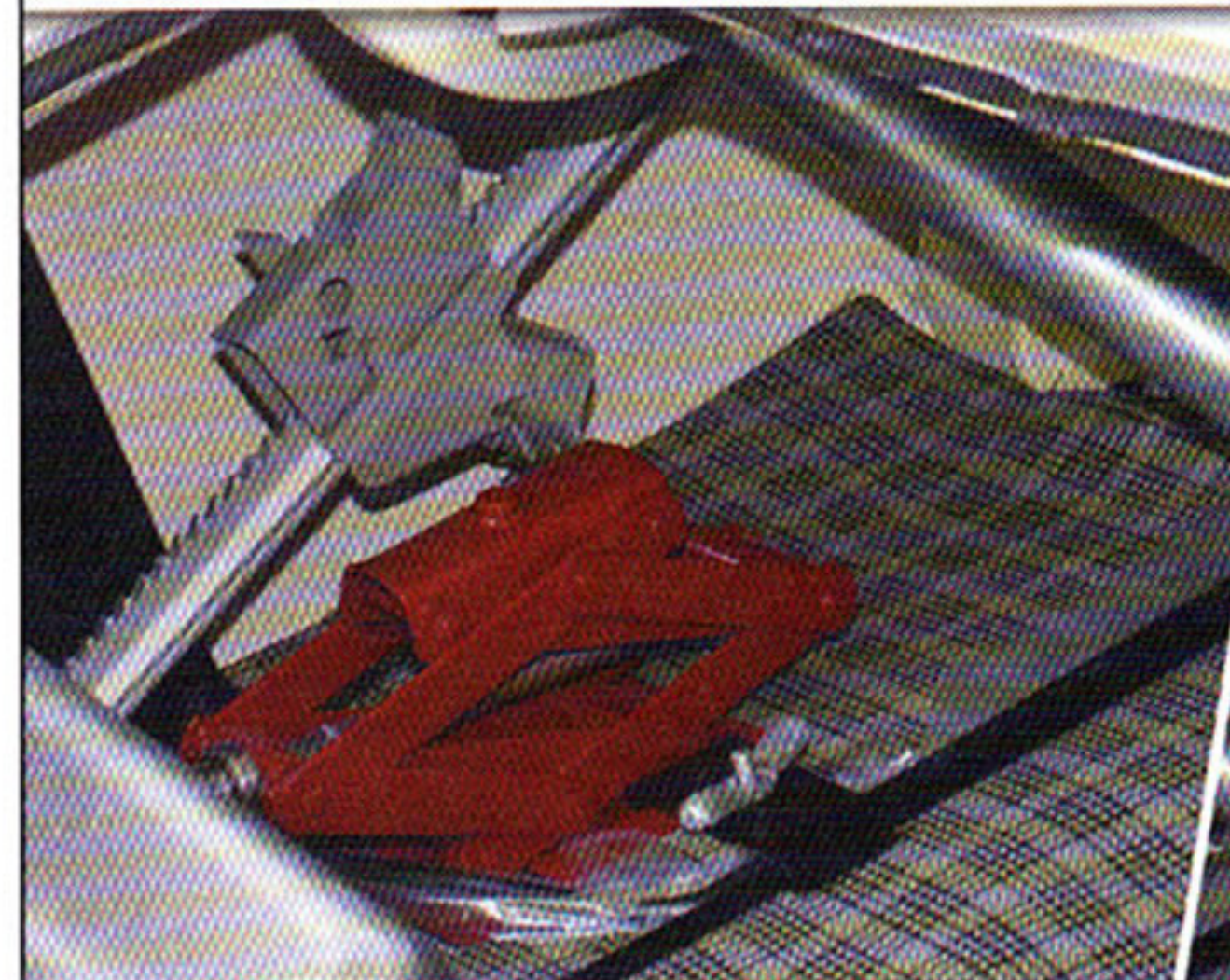
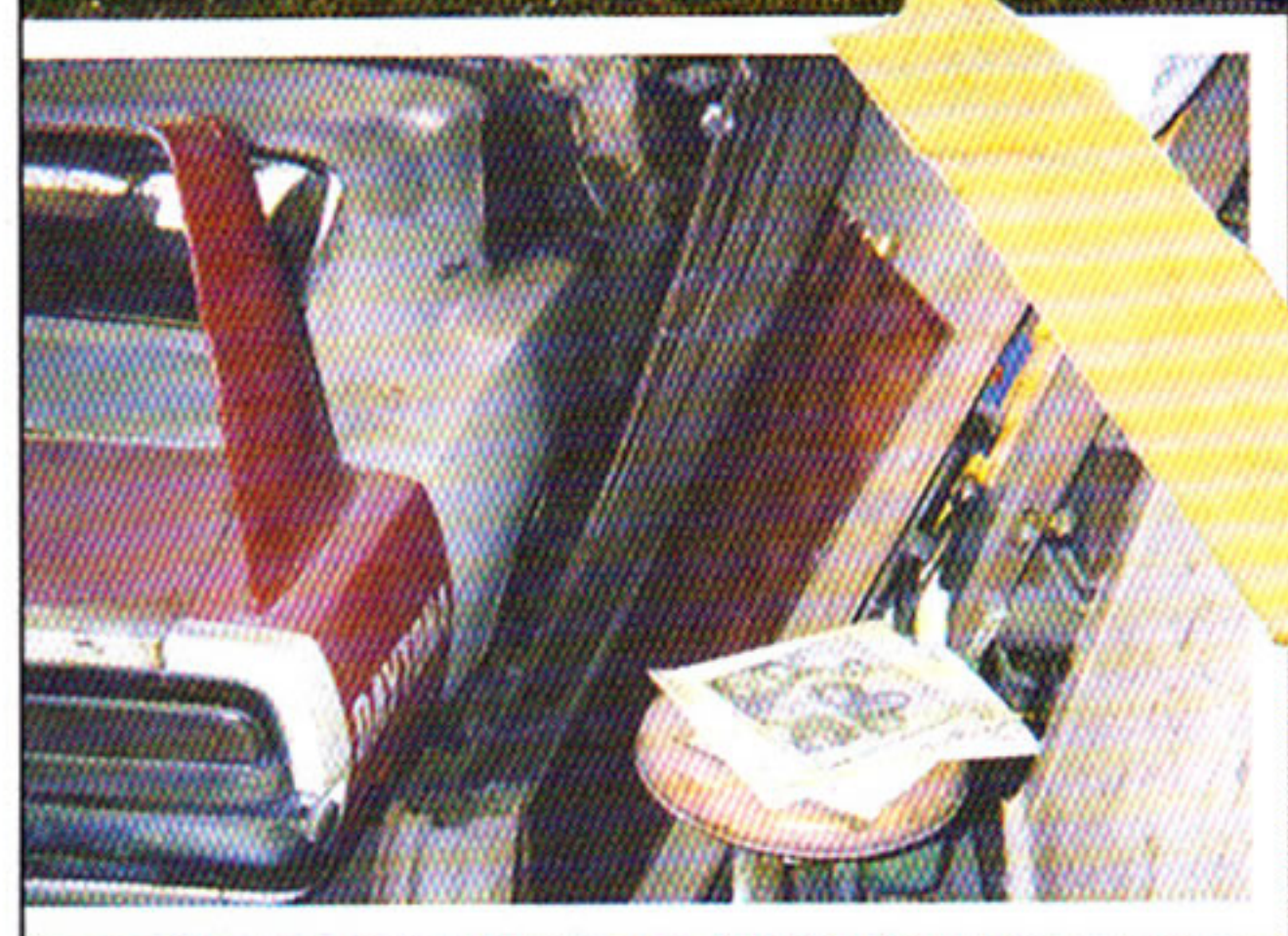
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Tony - those carefully hoarded spares made the job much easier!

With all the hard parts accumulated, they really kicked the project into high gear earlier this year, so they could showcase the Daytona at Carlisle in July and then the Mopar Nationals for OE judging. The assembly progressed rapidly, and the day finally arrived when the Daytona came to life in the shop. The sound of the big block roared and a huge smile graced the faces of everyone in the shop - they knew they had done something very special.

On August 9, 2012, the Alpine White Daytona arrived at the Mopar Nationals to see where it stood with some of the best-of-the-best builders across the United States. How did it fare? For that answer,



SHOP TALK

The shops behind this Daytona, AMCRI and Instrument Specialties currently employ sixteen restoration specialists to help make ordinary vehicles extraordinary. They operate in a newly-built 15,000 square foot facility that owner Mike Mancini personally designed to cater to the restoration process. The shop is compartmentalized into different sections for each phase of the restoration process. They have separate rooms for disassembly/assembly, metal fabrication, body work, paint work, and interior work, etc. They have state-of-the-art equipment throughout the shop that helps put out the highest quality possible. The shop is complete with a downdraft spray booth, mig, tig, and factory spot welders, hydraulic lifts, media blasting cabinets, and more. They use PPG paint systems, and have in-house mixing banks for base/clear, enamels, and lacquers.

we'll have to wait a little while. The story continues next month in our three part series of the OE Daytonas with John Antonelli's car. That story will lead into the following month with John Antonelli's yellow Daytona and the unveiling of which Daytona, or Daytonas, received the gold.

Tony would like to thank a few of the people who helped him with the car. His good friend, Steven Juliano, provided a lot of guidance and some very trick assembly line parts. Frank Badalson helped with the correct detailing of the car. Jim Drain from Florida provided some other cool NOS parts. And, of course, thanks go to Mike Mancini from American Muscle Car Restorations. Mike didn't just restore the car, but took countless hours of his own time researching and doing whatever he could to get the best results on the car. Tony told me he never felt like a customer when working with Mike, but more like a partner in the restoration. "I can't see how he would have treated the job any differently if it was his own car." Now that's an endorsement! ✱

ERNIE BINGHAM WAS THE DAYTONA'S SECOND OWNER, PURCHASING THE CAR IN 1972. HE WAS REUNITED WITH HIS OLD RIDE AT THE 2012 MOPAR NATIONALS, HAVING LAST SEEN THE CHARGER IN THE MID-SEVENTIES!

