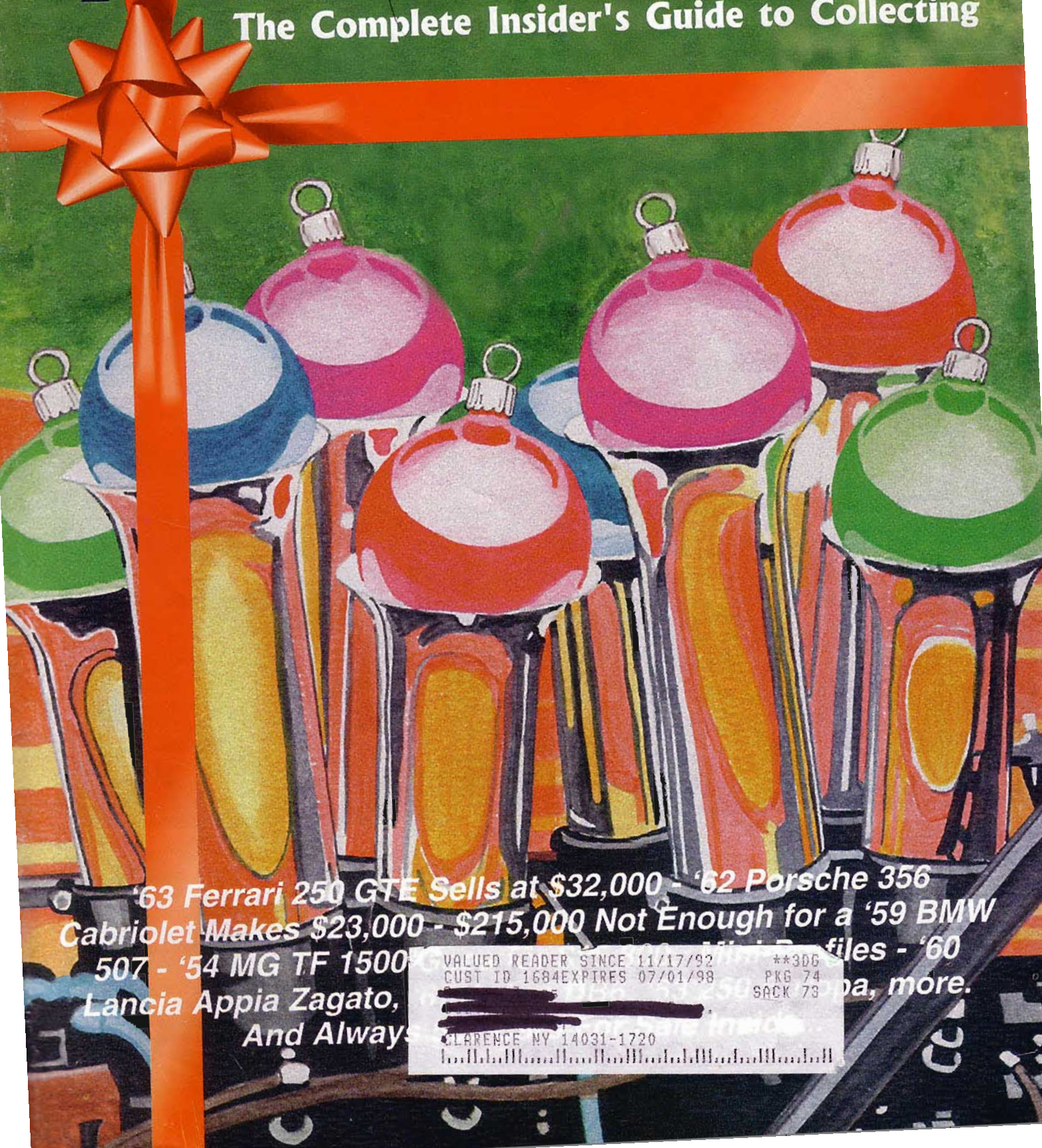


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The Complete Insider's Guide to Collecting



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Tall Tales & War Stories

The Ferrari on the Hillside

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Photos okay, send SASE for their return.

by Lyle Tanner

In the late 1960s, I purchased a 250 GTE out of Europe. It was to arrive by ship to the Port of Los Angeles. As I prepared to go down to the docks, which were just a few miles away, I was told by the shipping agent there was a small problem called a "dock workers strike."

I was notified by the shipping company that the ship could not be unloaded in the U.S., and that the car would be "unloaded" and waiting for me in Ensenada, Mexico. I loaded up some tools and supplies and headed off south of the border.

Let me first mention that Ensenada in the late 1960s was little more than a sleepy tourist town located on the Pacific coast about sixty miles south of San Diego. Prior to this dock strike, it had probably never seen this much freight in its previous 200 years.

My first observation upon viewing the docks in Ensenada was a 36 foot Choy Lee yacht sitting crosswise in its cradle; this large, expensive new boat was sitting on its side at a forty-five degree angle. I began to wonder how my Ferrari had been unloaded.

As I approached the entrance to the docks, I was met by two very young men in blue uniforms with machine guns slung over their shoulders. Not speaking very much Spanish I simply asked, by name, for the agent handling my car. They pointed towards downtown.

When we finally arrived at a small office in the downtown area, we couldn't get in the door. There were a fair number of very upset Americans ahead of us. Many seemed to have new Mercedes and other cargo about which they could not get any information.

While standing in line, we found out that some of these people had been here for as long as two days with still no word. We eventually got to the agent who said that he needed \$23 to process our information. I knew it was hopeless to protest and simply paid him.

Please keep in mind that the Mexican authorities had no space to store the thousands of tons of freight and automobiles that were arriving daily.

After taking my fee, they informed me that they had no idea where my car was located.

I mentioned that it was metallic green. Adding that it was a Ferrari seemed useless.

Somebody then remembered a metallic green car parked on a hillside outside of the town. We found the 250 GTE sitting at a

steep angle on the side of a hill with the windows open and a large piece of hemp rope protruding out from the front underside of the car.

This part of Mexico is covered with very fine silt like dirt. It is also very windy. It took me the better part of an hour just to get enough dirt out of the car so that I could bear to get in to it. I tried to start it to drive away.

I then understood the reason for the 2.5-inch diameter rope. The key had been left on, and the battery was dead flat. The dock workers, using whatever they had available, had towed the car off of the ship.

It took another thirty minutes to cut the rope free, as it had entwined its way into the suspension. The steep hill turned out to be a blessing in disguise. I kick started the car. It ran fine so long as I kept the revs up.

We had been instructed by the agent to meet him on the docks with the car so that he could sign off on the paper work. We drove down to the docks, stopped at the guarded entrance, and mentioned the name of the agent. The guard pointed to a location on the docks. We drove both cars down to where he pointed and found out that the agent had gone home for the day.

As we try to leave the docks, the guard blocked the way. I started to argue for the two obvious reasons. One is that when the key is turned off, on flat land there is no way to easily restart the car.

The second is that we had just had his go-ahead to enter the docks five minutes before. His argument was that he was instructed not to let anything off the docks without the proper clearance papers.

I decided not to press my point when he pointed his machine gun directly at me in an assertive manner.

I turned the key off as 'instructed.' He then decided I should drive the car away from the dock entrance. Of course, the car would not start. This made him angry, but at least he didn't start firing. He got four other guards who eventually pushed the car over to the side.

Now I needed a battery. No problem, I thought. Wrong again. There was not a single battery available in Ensenada. I was not the only person who had this problem.

I left the car where it sat for the night, and came back the next day with the agent who was very apologetic and helpful, and signed off on the car. I was able to borrow some jumpers and got the car started.

Now the battery search began. In those days Mexico had only nationalized service stations, usually manned by people who were not automobile knowledgeable.

I stopped at one just outside of town. Inside the office was a rack of new Delco dry charge batteries, including one that would fit the Ferrari. Finally, I thought things were turning my way.

Wrong. The attendant couldn't find the battery acid. I searched around and located it for them.

Keep in mind that these helpful young men had never seen a dry charge battery or been instructed how to fill it. The bottles of acid are made of sealed polyethylene plastic. I snipped off the tip with the side cutters I had in my toolbox.

The battery was located on top of a three-tier battery stand made out of metal. One of them started to pour the acid into one of the battery cell compartments. Without a funnel, battery acid cascaded down the three metal layers, sizzling as it went.

I took my side cutters and cut out the bottom of the now-empty bottle. I then flipped it over and used it as a funnel for the next cell.

They had never seen a funnel in the station and called in a couple of others to show them my technique. The balance of the battery-filling went uneventfully. As I was leaving, I did see them punch a hole near the upper lip of the new funnel and carefully place it on a nail hammered into the wall.

I arrived at Customs at about 4:30 PM. "Sorry", said the custom agent, "formal customs closed thirty minutes ago." So now I drive back to Rosarito Beach to spend the night.

Very early the next morning, I pulled up to U.S. Customs. The customs man carefully looked at the Ferrari and declared that he could not possibly clear this car for admission into the United States.

"Why," I asked.

"You're bringing in too much foreign soil," he replied.

So, I began my soil removal routine, again. But then, finally, my first good luck. A supervising inspector came out who happened to be a sports car enthusiast. He took pity on me, signed off on the car and allowed me to enter the United States. At this point, I almost got out of the car and kissed the ground, but I was afraid I might suffocate in all the Mexican hillside dirt that surrounded the car. At last, I was finally heading home. ♦