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Finding One-of-a-Kind, 50-Years-Missing Specials Is Geoff Hacker's Kind of Fun

STORY BY JOHN WEBBER PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY UNDISCOVERED CLASSICS UNLESS OTHERWISE CREDITED





"I LIKE TO SAY THAT WE SPECIALIZE IN FINDING CARS NO ONE IS LOOKING FOR,

says Geoff Hacker, the owner of Undiscovered Classics. We believe him, because we've never met anyone who has sniffed out a Replac Debonnaire, an Allied Swallow, a Siebler Special or a Voodoo Gardner. And we've never met anyone who was searching for one.

Over the past three decades, this enthusiast has tracked down more than 250 rare, hand-crafted, mid-century, American-made sports specials and dragged them, sometimes in pieces, out of shadowy places.

Geoff and his team painstakingly research and document these relics' past lives, and in many cases, start the process of bringing them back to life. He insists he's a historian, an auto archeologist who seeks to unearth the stories behind these unicorns (often one of one; half a dozen would be a big run) and how they came to exist.

Through the years, he's demonstrated an uncanny ability to turn even a whisper of a rumor into a lead and follow it wherever it goes. He's worked from a faded photo, a 60-year-old for-sale

ad, a phone tip, an overheard comment, a reference in a musty book and a yellowed magazine article. He's spent months on the road and thousands of hours online or with his head buried in archives. His contact network stretches around the world.

If the builder of one of these cars was still alive, Geoff found them, conducted interviews, and became pals. If a builder was no longer living, Geoff met the family, become an honorary member, and, in some cases, returned a parent's beloved, long-lost creation to

If fiberglass was involved in the build, this sleuth located the original molds and learned what resin was used. He dug up the designers and fabricators and mechanics and peppered them with questions. He located previous owners, obscure sales and production records, blueprints, letters, books and posters and amassed thousands of period sales brochures and magazines.

And let's not forget the cars. At one point, Geoff owned 120 of them.



For Geoff Hacker, it's about putting these old specials back together. Before the two-tone blue 1953 Maverick Speedster collected honors at Amelia Island, it sat in Geoff's collection-the red car to his right below.



These days he's pared back to about 80 in various stages—from arrested decay to work in process to award-winning show examples—and often partnered in ownership and restorations. With help from a small, dedicated group, he's built an active community that appreciates and supports these obscure relics, and their efforts have created a buzz in the collector-car market and on showfields from Pebble Beach to Amelia Island.

Shark Attack

More than 40 years ago, Geoff was attacked by a Shark, and this encounter was to change his life. Although he lived in Tampa, near the Gulf of Mexico where treacherous Selachimorpha patrol, this particular Shark lurked on land, a derelict in desperate shape.

Geoff was 17 years old, driven by boundless enthusiasm for anything with

four wheels and an engine. When he was 14, his car-guy grandad gave him a neglected 1955 Cadillac and tutored him through its four-year restoration. So this lad grew up twisting a wrench.

Plus, his mom loved cars as much as he did. In fact, she encouraged her son's obsession. Call it a cosmic twist, but all these elements converged when Geoff stumbled across the remains of a hand-crafted, fiberglass-bodied El

Tiburon Shark roadster that St. Petersburg designer Henry Covington had conceived and constructed nearly 20 years earlier.

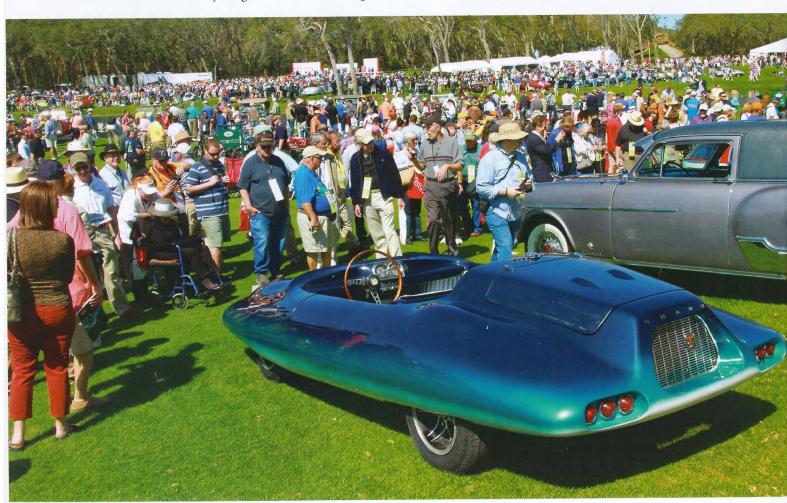
Geoff fell hard for this UFO-like creation. He was instantly, hopelessly smitten.

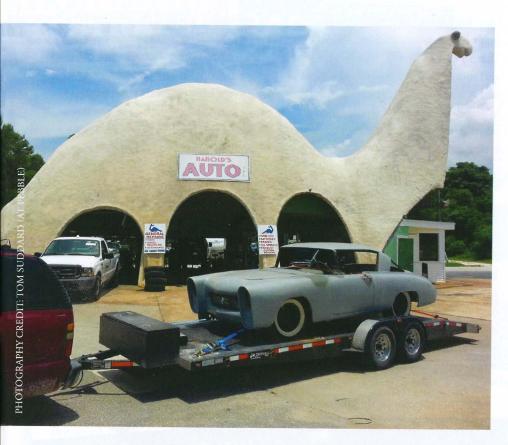
"I loved it," he recalls.

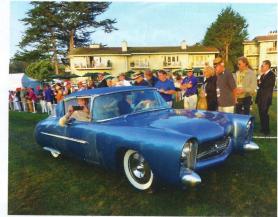
"It was strange. It was

Geoff showed his Shark long before its 2013 appearance at Amelia Island. After dragging home the 1950 Leo Lyons Mercury Custom, it took a victory lap at Pebble Beach.









exotic. It was futuristic-looking. And it was old." The Shark's nearly hopeless condition only added to its allure. Geoff simply had to have it, but its owner had other plans and flatly refused to sell. Months passed. Geoff pined and persisted, often driving by and stopping just to check it out.

Finally, fate intervened. Circumstances changed, and the Shark came on the market. "I started shaking when I read the ad," he recalls, "and I drove straight to their house."

The owners already had an offer of \$500, but they somehow understood that this kid really needed this car. His enthusiasm was infectious, so they let him have it for \$350-all the money he had. (True to form, he's still friends with this family today).

Joyfully, he and his brother Jon dug the Shark from the sand, winched it on a trailer, and hauled it home. He then began a laborious, two-year restoration, learning as he went.

He still owns this car, along with two more roadsters and a coupe, the last

known examples on the planet. In 2013 his first Shark was treated, with help from friends and supporters, to a hurryup, better-than-new restoration and proudly made its way to the big show at the Amelia Island Concours.

Forgotten Fiberglass

Geoff admits that in the years that followed, he became consumed with the stories and the chase. One rare and unusual car led to another. Then another. And so on.

We won't mention the numerous examples now displayed in museums, stored at his Fiberglass Farm, or in his backyard. We won't dwell on his several storage buildings crammed with cars and parts, or the three rooms of his home stacked to the ceiling with research files and boxes of records. Since Geoff holds a Ph.D. in industrial psychology and has taught the subject, he doesn't need us to point out how obsessive behavior might manifest itself. "I prefer to call it absolute focus," he says with a grin.

Shortly after that first Shark bite, his passion got an unexpected boost. An enthusiast named Rick D'Louhy called. He had learned that Geoff had acquired the Shark, and Rick wanted to share his trove of information on it.

They soon discovered they were kindred spirits. "It was like throwing gas on a fire," Geoff remembers. In 2006, after Geoff found his second Shark, the two researchers joined forces, determined to chase obscure, hand-crafted sports cars and the stories behind them. United by zeal, they became partners in an enterprise they named Forgotten Fiberglass. Sadly, Rick died in 2016 after complications from surgery. "He was the ultimate car guy...and my best friend," Geoff says. "I miss him still."

These days, with a plentiful supply of esoteric cars, Geoff concentrates on selling examples from his inventory and helping buyers explore options to get them restored. In 2018, reflecting increasing interest in metal as well as composite creations, Geoff consolidated his efforts under the Undiscovered Classics flag.

Today the Undiscovered Classics website, which gets 25,000 hits a month from around the world, features thousands of articles, tips, buyer's guides, images and artwork from past and present. It's become the go-to site for enthusiasts searching for information on these cars. Warning: This site is a cleverly disguised trap, a beckoning, bottomless rabbit hole. Once in, you may not crawl out for a week. Pack plenty of food and water.

Dr. Glass, as he's sometimes called, generates content without pause; his output is prodigious. He's written thousands of online and print articles, authored stacks of books, been featured in dozens of magazines and on shows

like "Jay Leno's Garage" (his Shark segment has been viewed 600,000 times), "Barn Find Hunter," "AutoWeek TV" and more. He has a YouTube channel and is active on podcasts and social media. Undiscovered Classics also offers automotive art and models of its cars. Always chasing information and contacts, Geoff belongs to 15 car clubs around the world.

'50s Fiberglass Frenzy

Think of today's carbon fiber and how it has revolutionized motorsports. In the early 1950s, fiberglass's "miracle" properties captured the imaginations of car builders, from backyard mechanics to designers in Detroit.

Compared to sheet metal, this stuff was inexpensive, lightweight and easy

to work, and it fueled the dreams of DIY builders from coast to coast. Enthusiasts, bored with heavy sedans and infused with hotrod fever, yearned to drive sporty roadsters powered by American V8s.

Seeing this need, innovative builders responded. Years before the big players rolled out mass-produced composite sports cars (the 1953 glass-bodied Corvette and the Kaiser-Darrin the next year), nearly 50 tiny companies offered



SCIENCE and



fiberglass specials, in kit or finished form. The rush was on.

WEEGEE TELLS HOW TO MAKE THOSE WEIRD PHOTOS

With no pesky government regulations to fret about, car building presented a wide-open market opportunity with relatively low upfront costs. Glasspar, Atlas, Allied, Victress and others offered a variety of glass bodies in some stage of DIY form.

Some also sold scratch-built frames, although many DIYers found it cheaper to modify an existing chassis, and 1940s Ford frames and drivetrains proved to be popular choices. In 1953, Victress offered a body shell for \$595 (\$620 with both doors), and its advertising claimed the average mechanic could build a car for under \$1000–not counting labor, of course, which might add up to 2000 hours or more.

Build instructions ranged from a couple of murky mimeographed sheets to detailed, well-illustrated booklets complete with measurements and diagrams. A Victress build brochure tried to prepare prospective builders for the challenge they faced: "It must not be expected that a car body can be made without a certain amount of determination.... A little knowledge of fiberglass and resins cannot but help the individual in their use."

Fiberglass allowed the dreamers of the '50s to become the carbuilders of the '50s. The decade's offerings promised jet age styling for anyone willing to invest the garage time, and the day's magazines gave these creations ample ink.

TURBINES-Full Story

Bucking long odds against completion, many builders were not up to the task. Geoff has recovered numerous unfinished builds, all displaying varying levels of engineering, craftmanship and materials. "Some builds were well executed and some were horrible," he says. "Each is a time capsule that reveals the builder's budget, tools available and skill level. They worked with what they had. Many display some really ugly stick welds, which we generally leave untouched because they're part of the charm."

Despite the low number built, top examples rivaled Motor City's finest in generating attention. During the '50s, they were featured on more than 100 magazine covers and viewed in person by tens of thousands at big shows, including the Petersen Motorama in Los Angeles and rod and custom exhibitions in Chicago and Detroit.

Other companies, including Victress and Bocar, gained fans by setting records and winning races. In 1953, a specially prepared, Hemi-powered Victress became the world's fastest sports car with a record-setting, two-way Bonneville run of 203.105 mph.

"A few of these cars equaled Detroit's concept cars for publicity. They became really famous for a short time," Geoff says, "and then they disappeared just as quickly." According to a 1977 letter written by Road & Track Publisher John Bond, from 1951 to 1957 (the period on which Undiscovered Classics focuses most of its efforts), as many as 1000 fiberglass and metal specials were built. Based on his research into production records and one-off builds, Geoff confirms this number and estimates that between 250 and 500 survive today.

Restorations, Today and Tomorrow

Undiscovered Classics and its clients have rescued and restored dozens of these cars. They currently have nine more in various phases of renewal and another dozen candidates waiting in the wings.

Geoff chooses his restoration affiliates carefully; most are one-person



shops. "Not every shop is qualified or even interested in working on cars like these," he says. "There's little reference material. Often we need to fabricate oddball components simply because parts are not available. I look for old-school knowledge and fabrication skills, someone who is able to analyze what we need and has the talents to build it."

SETTING THE STYLE IN THE CUSTOM SPORT CAR FIEL

Putting Geoff's Ph.D. and former corporate experience to good use, Undiscovered Classics has developed an elaborate flow process that outlines every step of a car's comeback, from research to restoration management to concours debut. Included are 3D preview renderings created by Dan Palatnik, an artist based in Rio De Janeiro, Brazil. For each restoration, Geoff develops and assembles

an online/print book that details each phase, along with press releases, magazine articles and specifications that support an entry's show debut.

We visited three Tampa-area shops and examined works in progress. At Corvair expert Jody Summey's garage, we found the Asteroid, a radical, one-off, show-circuit survivor based on Chevrolet's 1963 show car, the Corvair Monza SS. This center-driven creation was laboriously shaped in metal by customizer Bill Meador with an assist from Jesse Cochran, who contributed a donor car to the project in 1966.

Geoff tracked down the 82-year-old Cochran, who has helped with details of the original build. Retired after its show career, the Corvair spent 40 years in storage until it was discovered in rough shape. Now it's getting a complete restoration, and this shop had just finished rebuilding and installing the engine and transaxle.

TONY CURTIS

At Ralph Smith's shop we spotted a 1953 Grantham Stardust (12 were built, four remain) that was featured in the 1954 movie "Johnny Dark" starring Tony Curtis. This V8 Ford flathead-powered roadster now has a restored chassis and drivetrain. Bodywork comes next.

Ralph, who ran a hotrod shop for 30 years, is also refurbishing the shapely, Ford OHV V8-powered 1955 Siebler

Special prototype, which Californiabased creator Dick Siebler built from scratch in 1955. He spent, he told a local reporter, \$1200 and 4000 hours on the project. In the article, this builder also shared his dream of commercial production, hoping to sell his specials for under \$4000. Life intervened, and he was destined to finish only two. Geoff tells us he loves tracking down and sharing forgotten particulars like this, and supporters/of the Undiscovered Classics website agree.

In Rob Hernandez's shop, we found the Cannara I, a one-off, Chevy V8-powered wedge crafted from aluminum and fiberglass. It was conceived and built by teenaged Ray Cannara, who drove this topless creation from his home in Florida-his mom riding shotgun-to L.A.'s Art Center of California, where he was a design student. He completed the car in 1968, used it as his daily driver, and sold it years later.

When Geoff traded for the badly abused Cannara, he had no idea what it was or who built it, and neither did its owner. Undiscovered Classics spent months following a trail of clues before it was identified. Geoff was then able to track down the builder, who, after a design career at Chrysler, had retired to Florida. Remarkably, he lived just 30 minutes away. After 40 years, the creator was united with his car.

If a new-from-scratch, 60-years-outof-production fiberglass special rings your bell, Undiscovered Classics can sell you a body shell. In fact, it has six models available. For example, you can buy a new Byers SR-100 (in various stages) and mount it on a modified C2 or C3 Corvette chassis.

The first of these creations is now up and running with a Corvette ZR-1 engine and ZF six-speed. Back in the day, R&T called the Byers "the world's most beautiful sports car." Publisher John Bond built one of his own and, in 1957, featured another on the magazine's cover. Undiscovered Classics also

has plans to reproduce Allied Swallow and Victress S-1 bodies.

The Greatest Car Story Never Told?

It's 1952, and the builder of a Glasspar or a Wildfire or a one-off design of his own toils in his backyard garage, alone, late at night, dead tired and covered in grime. Is he dreaming of glory on the track or at the big show? Does he hope to get rich building cars? Is he worried about his family popping their stack when they learn he's blown the rent money on fiberglass?

We'll never know, but Geoff has tracked down dozens of these innovators and listened to their stories. "In those optimistic days in America," he says, "a lot of people believed there was nothing we couldn't accomplish. We had won the war. The economy and the do-it-yourself movement were booming. So why not build your own car? They each had a personal vision, and I love tracking them down." Thanks to his research, story sharing and parade of restored examples, today's devotees can summon up their own visions.

Maybe this uber-enthusiast is not quite an automotive Indiana Jones, but he's sometimes spotted wearing a Joneslike fedora. And doesn't he consider these cars treasures? Didn't he survive a Shark encounter?

Four decades have passed since he dug out his first relic, and he's still chasing phantoms. For example, he knows exactly what happened to the second Glasspar (it washed out in a Connecticut flood) but would love to discover what became of the first.

And he believes the elusive R-62 Edwards (only one built) may be out there somewhere. What about the Savage? That swoopy fiberglass sportster, designed and built by a precocious 17-year-old, was available in 1957 as a kit for \$595. If, by chance, you spot what could be the remains of one of these obscurities slowly sinking in the woods or piled in pieces in a crumbling barn, you know who to call.



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LIVING WITH EARLY GLASSERS

uy Dirkin, a lifelong gearhead from Clermont, Florida, who owns three fiberglass specials (down from four), believes these cars appeal to the enthusiast who is looking for something different. When he bought his Victress S-1 A, he knew little of its history but considered it an affordable beauty. "Its lines remind me of the 1938 BMW 328 Mille Miglia Bugelfalte," he says, "which sold a few years ago for \$5.4 million." Just as he closed the deal. Geoff Hacker called him with a research update. Turns out this example had been built in 1953 by Fred Bodley, technical editor for Motor Trend, and period pictures show it displayed in the showroom of the Motor Trend Building in Los Angeles. After passing through several owners and decades of abuse.

the car was in rough shape. Guy decided it deserved a complete restoration. Undiscovered Classics tracked down its second owner, and 97-year-old Chuck Glover helped with the research. Today, it looks exactly as it did when Fred Bodley finished it in 1953, down to the almost-unobtainium Studebaker hubcaps. The Victress sits on a modified Ford frame and is powered by a Ford flathead V8. "This car," Guy says, "is a strong representative of the early postwar sports car era. Its history is an added benefit." Guy's collection includes a 1956 Byers SR-100, its flowing lines uninterrupted by doors, that was built in 1956. Today an estimated 10 survive. This one underwent a frame-up restoration, sits on a modified 1949 Ford chassis, and is powered

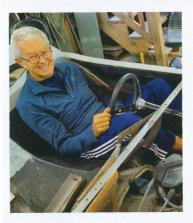
by a 265-cubic-inch Chevy hooked to a Muncie four-speed. Guy originally built it to vintage race, but it turned out so well he chose not to risk a chance encounter on the track, preferring his ex-Kelly American Challenge Cutlass for SCCA and SVRA competition. The Byers car has been showcased in several concours, won an award at Amelia Island in 2010. and was featured in the 2015 Amelia Island Concours show program as a prime example of 1950s glass creations. Guy also owns the Cannera currently under restoration. "I bought it because I thought t would be a fun, relatively quick restoration," he says. " However, when we reviewed wedge car history, we discovered this car was



an early design anchor. So we are getting a lot of expert attention." He and Geoff performed an extensive review and were unable to find any earlier car that displayed the purity of the wedge silhoette conceived and executed by Ray Cannera-extraordinary work for a 17-year-old designer. Raffi Minisian, a design analyst, Art Center graduate and Pebble Beach judge, wrote: "What is more and more apparent is that this design is clearly one of the earliest of its type." Another element that drew Guy to the car is the highly styled interior, which features contrasting curves and a finished look not often seen in hand-crafted cars of the era. Guy believes that Undiscovered Classics' research into these handbuilt specials provides a framework that highlights a significant aspect of automotive history. "The cars and stories of Geoff's focus may well be of interest to a broader base of autophiles," he says. "Timing is everything. Years ago, when Geoff started his research, a surprising number of players from the early '50s were still alive. He assembled and documented information from them that would most likely have been permanently lost."





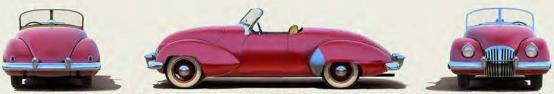


Guy Dirkin also likes '50s specials. He bought the 1953 Victress S-1A (top) due to its timeless lines that recall the BMW 328 Mille Miglia Bugelfalte. This car was built by Fred Bodley, technical editor for Motor Trend. Guy's collection eventually included the blue 1956 Byers SR-100-once shown at Amelia Island-and he's currently restoring a Cannera. The rendering shows what the car will eventually resemble.





AMERICA'S HANDCRAFTED CARS



1947 Kurtis-Omohundro Comet - Designers: Frank Kurtis and Paul Omohundro / Builder: Paul Omohundro - Aluminum - Wheelbase: 112 inches. One-off



1950 Leo Lyons Custom Mercury - Designer: Leo Lyons - Steel - Wheelbase: 114 inches. One-off



1953 Victress S1A - Designers: Hugh Jorgensen and Doc Boyce-Smith - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 99 inches. 125 produced



1954 Chicagoan "Lightning" - Designer: Frank Fisher - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 100 inches. 3 produced



1954 Replac Venture "Debonnaire" Designer: Philip Egan - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 114 inches. 6 produced



1958 Alken D2 - Designer: Bill Pierson - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 94.5 inches. 8 produced



1962 Shark Roadster - Designer: Glenn Gums - Fiberglass - wheelbase: 82.5 inches. 6 produced

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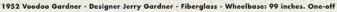


AMERICA'S HANDCRAFTED CARS



1948 Kurtis-Omohundro Comet - Designers: Frank Kurtis and Paul Omohundro / Builder: Paul Omohundro - Aluminum - Wheelbase: 114 inches. One-off







1951 Glasspar G2 - Designer: Bill Tritt - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 101 inches. 100 produced



1952 Maverick Sportster - Designer: Sterling Gladwin - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 126 inches. 7 produced



1952 Manta Ray - Designers: Glenn Hire and Vernon Antoine - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 115 inches. One-off



1954 Victress S4 - Designer: Hugh Jorgensen - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 116 inches. 25 produced



1955 Siebler Special - Designer: Dick Siebler - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 99 inches. 3 produced

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AMERICA'S HANDCRAFTED CARS



1952 Allied Swallow - Original design by Giovanni Savonuzzi for 1947 Cisitalia 202 Coupe - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 94 inches. 25 produced



1953 Sorrell SR-100 - Designer: Bob Sorrell - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 99 inches. 12 produced



1953 Meteor SR-1 - Designer: Dick Jones - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 100 inches. 25 produced



1953 Woodill Wildfire - Designers: B.R. "Woody" Woodill and William Tritt - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 101 inches. 100 produced



1955 Byers SR-100 - Designer: Jim Byers - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 100 inches. 35 produced



1956 Victress C3 - Designer: Merrill Powell - Fiberglass - Wheelbase: 99 inches. 25 produced



1963 Warrior I - Designer: Vanguard Industries - Fiberglass - wheelbase: 95 inches. One-off

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