

KIDDIE CAR PEDDLER HE'LL RESTORE YOUR FIRST SET OF WHEELS

Arizona Republic - Phoenix, Ariz.

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Date: Jan 23, 1999

Start Page: EV.1

Section: Tempe/Ahwatukee Foothills Community

Document Text

Remember when you were 3, maybe 4, and finally big enough to drive a car across America?

You could cruise in your new red pedal car from sea to shining sea without leaving the back yard or steering too far from that glass of grape Kool-Aid and Mom's peanut butter sandwiches. And even though your first set of wheels have long since disappeared, pedal cars remain a symbol of childhood independence, a time when life's biggest achievement was pedaling to the end of the block.

Pedal cars, like many other childhood toys, now are hot collectibles, whether for nostalgia or investment. "We know people who have been collecting pedal cars for 15 years, but in the last six years, it really took off," said Dave Kleespies, 42, of Ahwatukee Foothills, who has been restoring these toys full-time for about six years.

"We've seen a tripling of price since we've been in business. . . . And it's not just Baby Boomers. We have customers from 18 to 72." Old pedal cars sell for \$50 to \$95,000. Metal pedal cars were made from the late 1800s until 1985, when mass production stopped. A few companies still make them, but they're pricey, from about \$120 to more than \$6,000. But these autos were never were cheap. In the 1930s, they sold for \$4 to \$7, with a few priced at about \$100. The first generation of pedal cars were luxury toys for the well-to-do.

Even today, Kleespies said, many of his customers are from the East Coast, where more wealthy families lived in the early part of the century. "Phoenix in the 1930s wasn't a place where you had pedal cars," he said. "There wasn't that kind of money." However, the less privileged kids got to ride pedal cars at carnivals or at road safety clinics, such as one conducted by the Phoenix Police Department in the 1950s. Children pedaled around short roads to learn about stop signs and the importance of looking both ways.

Eventually, the market shriveled because of competition from cheaper plastic toys, such as Mattel's Hot Wheels and the battery operated cars popular with today's technologically savvy kids. Put children in a pedal car today and they're likely to wonder how to turn it on, said Kleespies' wife, Sno. Actually, you just pump the pedals up and down, which moves the rear wheels. Another thing that hurt pedal cars, she said, was growing concerns about safety. Metal pedal cars contained spots where a child could pinch or cut a finger.

The charm of the older pedal cars remains, in part, because the body types imitated the styles of the pre-World War II cars. As real cars changed, so did pedal cars, many with period-revealing flat fenders, freestanding headlamps, curved grilles, covered real wheels, tall fins and back to rounded shapes.

Before World War II, the design of pedal cars was actually ahead of cars by several years because auto manufacturers would release the designs early. Thus, a 1933 Buick might resemble a pedal car built in '31. Models ran the gamut, from coupes and sedans to station wagons, trucks, tractors, airplanes, fire engines and police cars, boats and spaceships.

Dave began restoring pedal cars in 1992 after seeing one that his wife and three sisters had played with when they lived on a farm near what now is Ray Road and 56th Street. Sno, 34, said she vaguely remembers the car because her sisters would sit in it and let a pony pull them around. After restoring that car and several more, Dave was laid off from his job as a quality control inspector for AlliedSignal. He worked for about a year as an auto restorer, learned there was a growing demand for restoring pedal cars and went into it full-time. He runs D&S Pedal Car Restoration out of his garage.

Dave charges \$500 to \$5,000 for restoration, partly because parts can be expensive. A replacement windshield, for example, can cost \$200. There's a growing supply of replacement parts, including decals. To find out what the original looked like, Dave might consult old catalogs or even a 40-year-old photo of some little boy or girl with a new pedal car under the Christmas tree. Although some restorers will only fix up cars to their original condition, Dave will restore them however the customer wants. One woman wanted one painted raspberry to match her couch.

"We do whatever the customer wants," he said. "Our philosophy is, 'It's your money.' " In many antique and collectible fields, items retain their value only if they're restored to original condition or left untouched. "Pedal cars are one of the few toy areas where you can double your value by restoring it," he said. Another reason restoration can be expensive is, most mass-produced pedal cars were made cheaply and poorly, and they often were left in a garage or shed to deteriorate. It's rare to find one in mint condition.

Dave said he sometimes makes them better than the originals, painting the insides or hiding spot welds. It's tedious work. "Some days you don't want to go out and work on a rusted piece of junk," he said. "But when you see the look on their (the owner's) face when they see what you did to their junk, it's worth it, especially when it had sentimental value to that person."

When Dave began restoring, he and Sno discovered an interest in other collectible toys. They have miniature cars, pull toys and other riding toys on shelves throughout their home, as well as two shiny restored pedal cars in the living room, a white 1950 Garton police car and a 1937 red Steelcraft Auburn Streamline sedan.