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Feature Cars



Sue & Joe Valenza's 1964 Dodge Dart GT Convertible

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story by owner Joe Valenza, photos by Michael B. Kelly

While I enjoy all makes of classic cars and street rods, I've always liked Mopars. I learned to drive in a '64 Dodge, and the Barracudas have always been my favorite. I bought a '72 Barracuda in 1999 and restored it, in between driving it and attending car shows, a little at a time over a period of 11 years. I sold it in 2011 to a gentleman who, as it turned out, lived in the same neighborhood two blocks from where I grew up in Baltimore, Maryland, and was a year behind me in high school. We had not met until he purchased the Barracuda.

This is the story of the car I said I didn't want. Back in November of 2010, I was on the way to a swap meet in Moultrie, Georgia with some friends to look for my next project. I wanted a '68 Barracuda convertible to build into a hot street car. On the way it was suggested that I look at an early Dart, as one of my friends had done several of these in the past. I said I wasn't interested in an early Dart. I was zeroed in on the Barracuda. End of story.

The first booth we saw at the swap meet had a Dart covered in boxes, with a for sale sign in the window. After a quick inspection it was discovered it was a '64 convertible GT with a V-8 and a 4-speed needing total restoration. It looked like it came out of a barn. I thought it would be pretty cool to drive, then I started looking a little closer. There was the usual rust in the quarters and floor, the interior was worn out and torn, a bad and not so recent paint job was peeling, but all the parts, trim and other items were there. We learned it had the original 273 cubic inch motor and 833 4-speed. I got a little more interested. A deal was made later that day, and I was able to actually drive it out of the swap meet and trailer it home.

I didn't know how my wife, Sue, would react when she saw it on the trailer, as she thought I was coming home with a Barracuda. Turns out she really liked it. The first thing to do was put it on the lift and power wash all the Georgia clay off the underside, and do a closer inspection. The front suspension was worn out, the rear springs were sagging, but all in all the car was pretty solid. The motor ran better than expected after a tune-up, and the transmission shifted fine. The stock, single pot brakes were a different story and needed replacing. We found the build sheet behind the back seat, and found that all the numbers matched.

The resto plan was to build a safe, nice handling, fun to drive cruiser for my wife Sue to drive. She claimed this one as hers. So no hot rod for me.

The first year, while we continued to drive it, I rebuilt the front end, and added Mopar disc brakes with the large bolt pattern rotors. The rear end was replaced with a 7-1/4 inch rear from a '73 Dart with the larger drum brakes and bolt pattern, and HD springs and shocks were added front and rear. I found a stock '64 4-barrel HiPo intake, valve covers, and air cleaner at a swap meet, and installed an Edelbrock 650cfm carb. The car really drives and handles nice now. It stops good now, too. After driving it around for a while I knew it was a keeper and needed to do a total resto. I totally disassembled the car and had it media blasted, finding the normal "surprise" rust and dents. The chrome was sent to Space Coast Plating in Melbourne, Florida to be redone. I also sent the aluminum grill and headlight trim rings to be chromed as well, and I think this really sets off the front of the car. The rear quarter panels were welded in, and the left rear floor panel had to be replaced. Other than that, there was no serious rust. All of the metal was epoxy primed, and after some body work the surfacer was applied, then came lots and lots of longboarding.

When we got the car it was painted black and had a red interior. As this was to be Sue's car, she picked the new paint and interior colors. Black and red just wasn't going to do it for her. My brother, Rick Valenza, gets credit for spraying the Glasurit base/clear in a custom medium blue, which I wet sanded with 3000 grit and then buffed. This took me weeks to accomplish. The special order Legendary White interior and new seat foam was installed, along with the new white convertible top. Mike Deegan of Vero Beach gets credit for installing the top. I disassembled the dash and all the gauges and rebuilt them, and the original steering wheel was restored.

The engine and transmission were checked out, and since no major repairs were needed they were repainted and reinstalled. I think the motor was rebuilt by the previous owner as it runs strong, has good compression, and does not leak fluids. The original points distributor was replaced with a Chrysler electronic ignition, and the orange box and wiring were hidden under the dash. Tom Crawford of Brake City in Sebastian, Florida installed the 2-inch dual exhaust and Thrush Turbo mufflers. This gives the car a mild rumble at idle, but is not too loud at driving speed.

I tried to keep the car as stock looking as possible, while only changing a few items for appearance, handling, and safety. The car is a blast to drive and handles great. After doing some research on the internet we found that according to Hemmings and a few other sites that they made less than 200 Dart GT, V-8, 4-speed convertibles in 1964. I didn't realize that it was that unusual when I bought it. I probably would have been a little more interested in it back then.

The resto took two years to complete. It was my first full resto, and all the work was done by me in my home garage. I finished just a few days before the 2013 "Mopars With Big Daddy" event in Ocala, where it drew a lot of attention. We have taken the car to several shows, and to see the response from other car builders as well as the smile on Sue's face when she drives it made all the work worthwhile.

I have to thank my brother, Rick Valenza, and my friend Darrell Zeran for all their help and advice, and for basically keeping me on track and out of trouble.

I finally did find a '68 Barracuda convertible about a year after I bought the Dart. Now that the Dart is finished I have been working on the Barracuda. It is getting a 408 small block, 8-3/4 inch posi, and a 4-speed. I should be done soon. Stay tuned... -Joe Valenza

