

TRI-FIVE BUYING TIPS

***Chevy Classics* shows you what to look out for when you buy your next '55-'57 and where to go shopping for its parts.**


By Doug Marion | Photography by the author

***Over the past 50 years, many of you have purchased** a pre-owned '55-'57 Chevy that ended up being, let's just say, not quite what you thought you were buying. That is not to say that any individual seller was dishonest, but stuff happens. During the last 25 years, the Chevy hobby has gotten so upscale and sophisticated that the cars and parts markets have both generally cleaned themselves up. But there are things to look out for.

In short, federal law today prohibits misrepresenting a motor vehicle. Sellers with experience know there is a huge gray area, however. As a buyer, if you do not secure a signed, exact-description Bill of Sale, along with the seller's legal address and driver's license number, you're in for an uphill battle if problems later arise. Been there, done that.

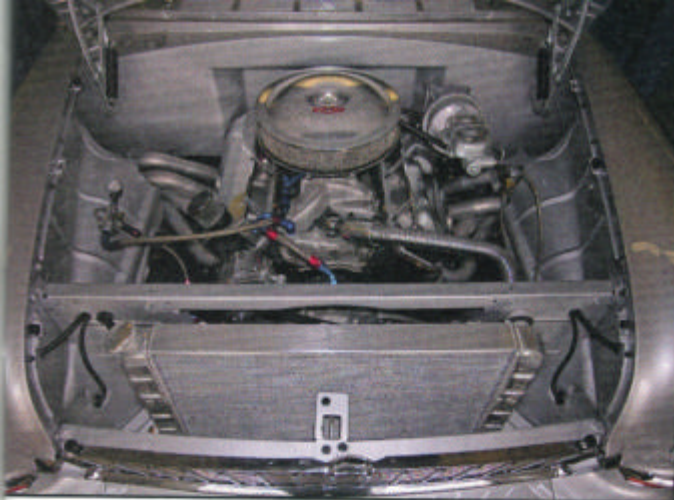
Buying tips do not vary a lot for either a stock or modified car. As a buyer, you need to

see if the car is as-described. In our opinion, this is where long-time, dues-paying members of the Classic Chevy Club and its regional clubs are vitally important. On the other hand, with cars for sale locally or at swap meets you have no real way of knowing what you are buying unless the seller has created a description list and he stands behind it.

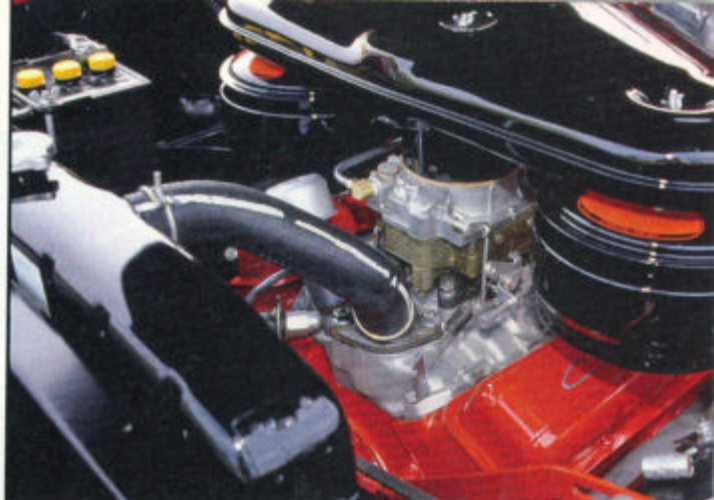
Still, buying a '55-'57 Chevy can really be a lot of fun. Read on and happy hunting. 



◀ Unless you know the car and its seller well, it pays to put the car on a hoist for a floor, chassis, brake, and suspension inspection.



▲ Whether modified or stock, a buyer should always ask for a signed/documented list of engine components, its age, mileage, and condition of all components. The reasons are obvious and many. What you see and think you get is not always the case. This one was 100 percent.



▲ If you desire a '56-'57 dual quad V-8, then you for sure must acquaint yourself with sub-assembly parts numbers and casting dates. This includes the engine block and heads. There are very few original engines like this one around today.



◀ If a seller says his engine has been dyno'd, he will also have a legitimate dyno sheet with all torque and horsepower figures. Feel free to contact the dyno shop as well. This 265 put out 58 more horsepower with a stock, unjetted WCFB carb, an increased lift, smooth-idle torque cam, minor head work and tubular headers. Credit Joe Sherman Racing Engines, Santa Ana, California.

► Always remember that talking is free. Don't be shy about asking a lot of questions. The more you ask, the more you will learn about the car and the owner/seller.



▼ If you plan to buy a stocker and modify it, it always pays to talk to other owners who have modified their '55-'57s. They are glad to share their info freely—which in turn will save you oodles of time and a potential headache or two. Jim Hix owned this show winner a few years back.





▲ Straight-axle cars look neat, but some tend to ride rough. We recommend an extended test-drive, as well as a complete list of components.



▲ If you plan to buy a supercharged '55-'57, don't expect a performance guarantee. A seller can surely guarantee the condition of the internal parts and general condition of the engine, but that's about it. Ever heard of a "30-30" guarantee? It means 30 feet or 30 seconds, whichever comes first.



▲ Kansan Bob Conklin owned this superb '55 Bel Air convertible back in the late '70s and early '80s (when this photo was taken). He represents one of thousands of veteran Chevy owners who are glad to help fellow enthusiasts in any way they can.



▲ When a '55-'57 sports a late-model crate 502, the block, heads, induction, and water pump will have specific numbers and dates which authenticate everything. Don't let the valve covers automatically make you think it's a 502. Yes, this one is legit. Carlinville, Illinois' Casey Boyett at Lou's Automotive did the work.

TOP 10 BUYING TIPS

1. KNOW WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING AT
In other words, study up and become knowledgeable—or else bring one or more friends who are. This will ward off buying an incorrect stocker or a problematical modified.

2. EXAMINE EVERYTHING THOROUGHLY
We think looking for the negatives is smarter than looking for the positives. If the seller will not give you one hour or more to examine his car and won't make arrangements to put it on a lift and won't let you come back the next day for a follow-up, then you might want to look elsewhere. Anyone with a good car who knows you are a serious buyer will oblige you 100 percent.

3. KNOW ACCESSORY DATE CODES & NUMBERS

If an engine horsepower code ran for a few years, you need to check the casting date if the seller says the engine is the car's original. Ditto on the transmission, rear end, generator, window glass, etc.

4. COWL TAG CODES FOR PAINT & INTERIOR COLORS

The last thing you want to unknowingly do is buy a car whose paint color does not match the paint code on the cowl tag. Do not assume that the seller knows. It's buyer beware.

5. ELECTRICAL WIRING, FRONT TO REAR
Today's replacement wiring harnesses are

almost always exact copies of the originals. Also know your wiring colors and terminals. Sometimes a small portion of a wiring loom was patched up, repaired and does not match the rest. Study everything under the dash with a bright flashlight. Some wiring looms are so hacked up it's amazing the car even runs. Lastly, test all accessories for perfect operation.

6. FRAME AND SUSPENSION

The cowl tag will state where the car was built. If Janesville, Wisconsin, or Flint, Michigan, the car might be a potential Midwest rust bucket. Is the frame pockmarked from rust? Is the top of the frame solid? Few buyers ever look there. This is why you want to examine the car on a hoist. Also examine



▲ Vintage drag cars are neat, especially those with a special history. Photos, e.t. slips, stories, and original equipment from the era make such a car even more valuable.



▲ When it comes to custom interiors, you need to study up on what select interiors cost to create and install. An owner's cash receipt usually seals the info deal.



▲ Modified Tri-Fives should always have pristine door surrounds and jambs. Stock originals may still have factory filler. From here, you want to examine the entire frame, chassis and suspension for rust and repairs.



◀ This black and white photo was taken years ago to exemplify sucked in body moldings due to over-tightening the fasteners. A restoration pro can straighten them out but it is money you should not have to spend. All the fastener nuts need are in-lb torque ratings, not ft-lb.

the body mounts on the frame. Lastly, do the front and rear tires line up? Gladly listen to the seller, but let your eyes and fingertips give final approval.

7. THE FLOORS

From underneath the car, know what the factory flooring should and shouldn't look like. We've seen smooth floors with gloss black paint (aka Bondo and/or fiberglass and resin). Experts know where all the hidden rust spots are. Pay them to come with you and help examine every inch of the car.

8. TRUNK EXAM

Not only do people not look under the rubber trunk mat, they also do not study the inner area of the wheelwells. One '57 whiz,

Barry Wallner, reminded us that each one has seven factory weld spots. He has seen plenty of Midwest cars with smoothed-over wheelwell metal and no weld spots. This usually means Bondo was used to cover up rust.

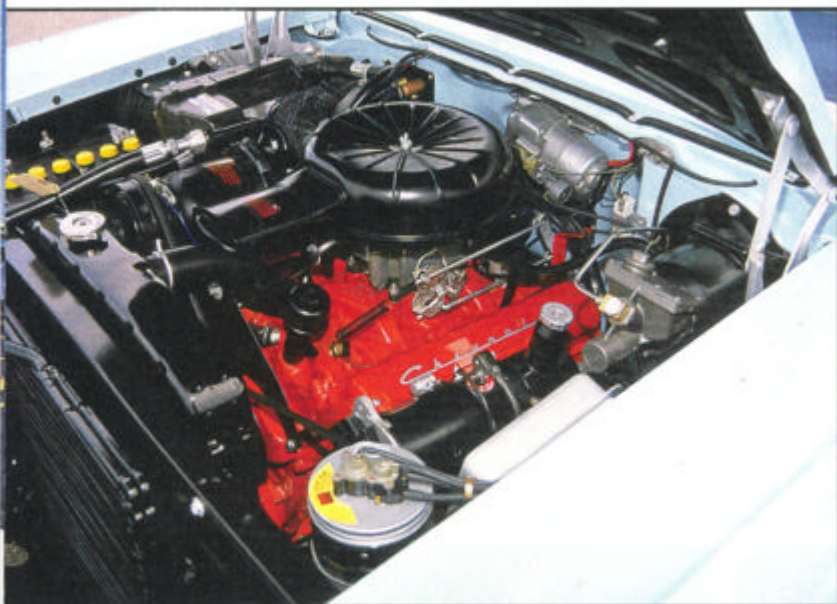
9. EXTERIOR TRIM

Over the years, we have been guilty of over-tightening the nuts that hold the metal trim in place. As such it now is wavy. A pro can straighten/flatten the trim pieces, but it's not cheap.

10. ENGINE EXAM

With the hood up and the engine idling, listen for any peculiar noises. Oil pressure should be no less than 20-25 psi at

idle-speed. Remove the oil cap on the valve cover, then plug the PCV valve (if there is one) with your finger. Note any oil blow-by smoke coming out of oil cap hole. Note the color of tailpipe tips. Black means too-rich jetting. If possible, remove all eight spark plugs. All should be clean and whitish-tan. Any wet or black calls for a compression and cylinder leak-down test as ring and valve guide wear is suspect. If the seller does not know the exact engine lineage, pull the valve covers and note the head casting number and casting date. Note harmonic balancer size, as well as the block casting number and date on the bellhousing pad areas directly below both heads. Note the internal condition and cleanliness of the radiator.



▲ Many high-end restorations today feature the air cleaner, radiator, and core support in black that is high gloss instead of satin/semi-gloss. This could cost you judging points at a 1,000-point club convention.

'55-'57 BUYER'S GUIDE: Get 'Er Done Tips & Tricks

For decades, General Motors had a policy of keeping replacement parts for every make and model available for 10 years. Oh, some unpopular nameplates saw their parts dry up in only seven or eight years. And rightly so. Who wants to spend money creating replacement parts that don't sell?

Many GMPD executives back in the day in the '70s and '80s were Chevy guys, so a whole bunch of rare Chevy parts stayed in production for a long time. But as interests change and these

execs retired, our factory parts supply dried up. But little by little and as profits and budgets allowed, many '60s-era guys who had started parts businesses essentially selling GM Chevy parts took the bull by the horns and began reproducing select Chevy parts—with emphasis on what was most popular early on: '55-'57.

Today, this is a multi-million dollar industry and it has never been easier to find most of the parts you need. Herein is a list of top '55-'57 parts manufacturers, suppliers, and outlets.

1955-'57 SOURCES

ABS Power Brake
714/771-6549
www.abspowerbrake.com

AMP Performance
800/454-8387
www.ampperformance.com

Art Morrison Enterprises
866/558-1693
www.artmorrison.com

Bob's Classic Chevy
866/57-CHEVY
www.bobsclassichevy.com

C.A.R.S.
800/CARSINC
www.carsinc.com

Chassisworks
888/388-0246
www.CAChassisworks.com

Classic Muscle/Modern Chevrolet
800/722-4828
www.oldmusclecars.com

Classic Performance Products
800/830-0952
www.classicperform.com

Cliff's Classic Chevy Parts
503/667-4329
www.cliffsclassichevrolet.com

Danchuk Manufacturing
800/246-7033
www.danchuk.com

Electric Life
800/548-2168
www.electric-life.com

Flaming River Industries
866/815-3678
www.flamingriver.com

GTECH Suspension Systems
704/545-0369
www.fatmanfab.com

Harmon's Classic Chevrolet
888/439-3510
www.harmons.com

Heidt's
847/487-0150
www.heidts.com

H&H Classic Parts
479/787-5575
www.hhclassic.com

Ididit
517/424-0577
www.ididitinc.com

Jeg's Mail-Order
800/345-4545
www.jegs.com

Jim Meyer Racing Products
541/994-7717
www.jimmeyerracing.com

Lokar Performance Products
877/469-7440
www.lokar.com

Master Power Brakes
888/249-9422
www.mpbrakes.com

Newman Car Creations
805/226-9201
www.newmancarcreations.com

O' 55 East Coast Chevy
215/348-5568
www.eastcoastchevy.com

Pacific Western Design
360/385-5493
www.pacificwesterndesign.com

Paddock Performance & Restoration
800/428-4319
www.paddockparts.com

Painless Performance
817/244-6212
www.painlessperformance.com

POL/Performance Online
800/638-1703
www.performanceonline.com

Pete's Fabrications
270/842-6016
www.petesfab.com

Sherman Parts
800/747-6015
www.shermanparts.com

Summit Racing Equipment
800/230-3030
www.SummitRacing.com

Total Cost Involved
800/984-6258
www.totalcostinvolved.com

Unisteer
800/338-9080
www.unisteer.com

Year One
800/932-7663
www.YearOne.com

1955-59

CHEVROLET

by the numbers

How to identify and verify all V-8 drivetrain parts, for small and w-blocks, on all passenger cars, including:

- Series 150 • Series 210 • Bel Air
- Impala • El Camino • Corvette

\$2048.00

The Essential Chevrolet Parts Reference

The Only Book Based on Previously-Unreleased Materials from Chevrolet Archives

BY ALAN L. COLVIN

▲ An authentic '55-'57 numbers book and more is Alan Colvin's "Chevrolet By The Numbers." All data is from Chevrolet's archives. It's fun to read, too. Buy a copy online or in bookstores.