

Gold Coast Mansions & Polished Stainless Steel

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About two years ago, a retired auto glass guy up in Glen Cove, New York, who knows his way around old cars helped me install new frames on the side windows of my '64 Eldorado Convertible. The windows are still in the trunk, but that's another story. I now had some stainless belt moldings that needed to be polished up to match the shiny new window frames. The glass guy recommended Bobby Pagnotta to help me with the stainless steel.

My search for Bobby Pagnotta started with a phone number, which led to an answering machine, which led to a call back from Bobby and directions to an old house in Mill Neck, near Oyster Bay, on the north shore of Long Island. Mill Neck has the third highest income per capita in the United States.

I proceeded north on route 106 from the Long Island Expressway, past the elementary school, past the big pond, onto a dark, tree lined street, finding a stone gate with a plaque bearing the name "Wychwood." Wychwood, it turns out, is an estate that was owned by the late Henry Luce III, publisher of *Time* magazine and the son of its founder, Claire Booth Luce. Small world.



Wychwood

Bobby, a wiry, gentle and slightly shy fellow, is the caretaker of the estate and its 13 acres of grounds. He and his dog "Happy" greeted me at the parking lot. We entered the basement of the main house and walked through

a series of hallways and rooms leading to a workshop. In one large room there were tables set up with grinding and polishing machines, bright lights, compressors, wires and shelves, all neatly organized, with antiques, some old clocks and posters of old cars on the walls. Not exactly a dream garage from a TV show, but a cool place, equipped for all sorts of metal restoration and repair work.

I left my four belt moldings with their newly installed rubber strips in Bobby's care but didn't depart until I was given a tour of the estate and grounds. The living room was used in filming the movie version of "Hair" in 1979, and the dining room was decorated with hand-painted wall paper that Mrs. Luce had imported from Hawaii. Among other projects, Bobby was completely refinishing a set of stainless moldings from a '63 Eldorado, a car similar to mine.

In the garage, under a thick blanket was his meticulously restored 1968 442 Olds coupe in brilliant red with gleaming chrome mags. Bobby performed a full frame-off restoration on this car, which was stock except for a larger 425 cu. in. block. The car was perfection. Bobby is a member of the Gold Coast Cruisers hot rod club and the local and national Oldsmobile clubs. I felt I was in very good hands.



Bobby Pagnotta's '68 442

When I returned a week later, the four moldings were polished to a brilliant shine. I took them home and started installing them - the first step before putting the windows back in the car. Unfortunately, I damaged one while tapping it into position with a block of wood. I called Bobby and he offered to take a look at it.

That night, while I stood in the shop, he hammered out the dings and

refinished the piece so it looked almost new. As he graciously corrected my mistake, Bobby started showing me how he did his work. Fast forward to Fall of 2008.

Over the summer, I was restoring the cowl area on the Eldorado, and noticed that the stainless molding at the base of the windshield was dented and scratched, probably due to an incorrect previous attempt at removal. I put my little Dremel polishing wheel to the scratches, and managed to make matters far worse by scoring the finish. I tried, with the assistance of a friend, who happens to be a dentist to buff out the marks, but to no avail. I even set up a polishing wheel on a small electric motor and tried to copy Bobby's technique. But the scratches were determined to resist my efforts. Of course, this particular molding had to be installed *before* the cowl and grilles could be reinstalled.

Fortunately, I found Bobby's number and called him. I learned that the estate had been sold, and he was now helping the new owner restore the old mansion, and no longer had time for polishing moldings. However, he invited me to stop by and show him the damaged piece. I had also acquired a replacement molding, but it was heavily scratched, so I now had *two* damaged pieces to choose from.



High Speed Sanding Disc

Bobby moved his workshop across the parking lot from the basement to the garage, but had not finished setting it up, so he asked me to come back few days later. When I returned, two of the polishing machines were working. Bobby used a high speed air powered grinder with a three-inch disc to resurface the replacement molding. He restored it as I watched. The first cut was with a 400 grit disc, followed with a 600 grit pad and finally a 1000

until the surface was smooth but dull. Next came the big 1-3/4 HP Baldur polisher with 10 inch buffing wheels. These machines generate serious heat and energy and the operator must wear heavy gloves to hold the work securely and avoid burns.



Using the 10 inch Buffing Wheel

Emory buffing compound is used to smooth out the “fog” left by the 1000 grit polishing. Finally a white compound called “rouge” is used on a soft buffing wheel to bring the surface to a mirror shine.

The real skill here is in judging how much force to apply and how much material can be cut with the sanding discs, before damaging or wearing through the metal. Too much abrasion and the part can be ruined. Not enough, and you might stand there all day getting nowhere. It requires a very fine degree of control and a lot of practice to get it right.



Final Polishing with White Rouge

Just for fun, Bobby took the original, dented piece, and using a special tool flattened the dings from the back side. Then, he polished the metal down with the sanding discs and did a quick buff on the repaired area with the polishing wheels. What I had struggled with for two weeks, Bobby skillfully fixed in five minutes. Amazing.