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The Journey of an 1800 Novice



BY SCOTT PINSKY

You know how it starts: I'll just clean this up, replace a couple of those, and then it'll be fine. Maybe it's a coolant overflow bottle or a seat cover. Even a radiator or a turn signal housing. That'll be all... I'll let it go after that. But then, well, what about the rest of the turn signals? And the other seat cushions; and backs? And, oh my gosh, what about the paint? Where do you draw the line?

For classic car owners, drawing that line has always been the hardest issue when it comes to restoration. Is this car going to be a daily driver with some modest improvements or a full-blown trailer queen? Is there an in-between? And if I'm doing a real restoration, will it be *The Full Monty*, a frame-off, nut and bolt, rotisserie job? Or something less arduous, costly, and time-consuming?

For years, like many, I've struggled with this dilemma on various cars and have resolved the challenge different ways with different projects. No one size fits all, to be sure. The sweet spot is an individual question and is driven by a host of factors, such as valuation, personal objectives, budget, time, and available range of psychiatric care options.

Newbie to the World of the 1800

Enter a 1971 1800E. Literally a sight-unseen, spur-of-the-moment eBay whim, I first looked at the car eight years ago since I needed a basic and fun driver to get me around while my '69 Alfa Romeo 1750 Spider was undergoing a full, painstakingly detailed restoration, which I knew would last at least a couple of years. (Try five!)

I knew zero about the 1800, apart from having seen a few around over the years (mostly the ES at that), but it always seemed like a cool little car. I also had a 12-year-old XC70 station wagon, and my wife had had Volvos for 30 years by then, so an early Volvo would not be a completely alien experience.

The one for sale online looked to be in decent shape; I liked

the non-OEM moss green color, and the price was right. So, I pulled the trigger.

The car came to me from Florida, which might raise concerns about rust, but I crossed my fingers and was lucky to find that metal issues did not appear to be a major problem. Instead, the main immediate weakness was the interior: sagging and torn seat webbing, cracked dash with peeling stock faux-wood factory decals, and pungent carpet.

The car as I found it on eBay in Florida.





The interior was the immediate weakness I discovered when the car arrived: sagging seats, cracked dash, peeling faux-wood decals, and pungent carpets.

The works! I promptly embarked on what was supposed to be a quick interior refurb, but which—once the seats and carpets were out—became a full-bore cockpit project.

Once I got going on this job, I decided to do it all: new seats, seat webbing, carpets, headliner, rear seat-back, interior panels, armrests, etc. This degree of involvement allowed me to inspect the floorboards and overall condition of the cabin structure, which I discovered was very good for a car of this age.

But the dash was a wreck, so I needed to remove and recover it. Of course, this entailed removing all the gauges, switches and controls, which in turn entailed knowing something about electronics. Oops! Oh well,

too late now.

Well, it all came out easily enough. The re-install, however, was another matter. After disassembly, the old vinyl covering came off (easily, as it turned out) and new covers were glued on. I now decided on two innovations: 1) replace the horrid '71 steering wheel with a good used one from an early car, and 2) replace the stock decal faces with actual wood veneer—available at any lumber purveyor or even hardware store. Although it was my first time working with this material, it was relatively forgiving and simple to cut, then sand and seal. I found



The planned quick interior refurb became a complete restoration and I ordered the works.

a flexible rubber edging to replace the cracked original.

Several of the gauges went out for recalibration and cleaning and then all the switches and gauges were mounted while the dash was still on the bench. Finally, I re-installed the whole shebang into position. Reconnecting ▶

Seat covers and webbing, carpets, headliner, interior panels, and armrests were replaced.





The dash came out easily enough, but I needed some help to get it back together.

everything was the tricky part and I ended up needing to enlist some help. Luckily, I was directed to Dan Stone, a superb Bay Area electrical specialist, who came to my rescue and made a trip over to my garage to right the jumble I had created.

I must note, the absolute worst part was rather a surprise—the headliner. It's mounted to a fragile, thin wood frame that snaps in place with a series of metal clips. Getting the headliner frame out in one piece proved impossible. Re-mounting the setup with the new headliner material fastened to the messed-up, poorly-repaired wood frame was worse. I ended up enlisting professional help, to no avail. Several upholstery shops either declined outright or failed after valiant ef-

I decided to replace the stock decal faces with actual wood veneer. It was relatively easy, sand, and seal.



forts. Ultimately, I was left to figure it out by myself. I ended up giving up on the clips and simply drilling into the roof and using small stainless screws to hold it all in position. At least I'm the only one who seems to notice the modification.

At that point, I ordered a set of beautiful custom CocoMat floor mats and considered the job complete.

Pelle Petterson

I guess I believe in serendipity... but this is ridiculous. Here I am, prepping my modest, newly refreshed 1800E for a trip down to Monterey for a car show when... But I'm getting ahead of myself.

As noted, my Alfa was in the shop, leaving me unable to enter it as hoped in the annual

Monterey Italian car-fest known as the *Concorso Italiano*. The *Concorso* limits participation to Italian makes, but I had an idea. My 1800E was actually an Italian car. Sort of.

In a nutshell, Pelle Petterson was working in Italy at Frua/Ghia when he submitted his design to Volvo for what eventually became the P1800. So clearly, the P1800 is actually a Ghia design, and thus should qualify as legitimately "Italian" for purposes of being displayed at the *Concorso*, right?

I contacted the *Concorso* and they agreed. So, I proceeded to prep my new 1800E for Monterey. One fine August day when I was working in my driveway, up walked a very nice lady named Ulrika "Icka" Cayard. Living on a quiet cul-de-sac as I do, this attention was somewhat unusual from someone I did not know. After saying hello, Icka told me she lived just up the street and had seen me drive by a few times in my Volvo and just wanted to look at my nice car. Taking her for the typical unacquainted admirer, I innocently asked, "Do you know what this is?"

"Of course!" she replied. "My father designed this car."

Now, I tend to take people at face value, but this was a bit much to grasp. Nevertheless, when she told me her Dad's name I just stood there stunned. Here was the designer's daughter—my neighbor—standing in my driveway looking at his handiwork. What were the odds?

I told her I was about to show the car at an Italian car event and showed her the poster I had prepared to display featuring her Dad's picture and a history of the car's design and creation. She immediately ran home to bring me a notecard autographed by her Dad, which I immediately added to the display to be shown with the car at Monterey.

At Monterey a few days later, I spent a good deal of time explaining why I was displaying a Volvo at a show with mainly Ferraris, Maseratis, and Alfa Romeos.

Some months later, I was invited to Icka's house to meet her Dad on the spur of the moment. I was joined by friends Lars Jansson (Volvo master mechanic) and Rick Palumbo of Marin Volvo-Saab. Of course, I drove the 50 feet to her home in my 1800E and brought a Sharpie in case the spirit moved Mr. Petterson to autograph his handiwork. He kindly obliged. I now owned a one-of-a-kind classic! The illustrious designer was our charming and unassuming companion for the rest of the afternoon as we all drank numerous toasts to his accomplishments, leaving me with a unique memory.

No Holds Barred

A few years go by. The Alfa is finally finished and the paint on the 1800E is starting to irritate me. Plus, by now I've joined VCOA and been to the Davis Show where I saw the ter-

rific restorations done on some cars. It was time to look at paint for my 1800E.

I liked my color, aftermarket though it was, and the interior was now in great shape; so, I didn't need to go beyond the door jambs. But the engine bay was horrid, in large part due to a really bad previous spray. The original factory gold was visible everywhere, and green overspray polluted half the engine components. I decided to have the engine pulled and remove as many engine components as possible before sending it out for paint.

I also knew I wanted to upgrade the suspension and freshen up the engine. I looked for a shop that was willing and able to undertake a time-consuming job like this on a car of my vintage. Through the online owners' forum, I located Sacramento Volvo Service. Robert Marcello, principal of SVS, is not only a Volvo Master Technician certified through the Volvo International Service Technical Association (VISTA), but has been collecting and working on classic Volvos for decades and remains an ardent enthusiast. (Robert became the youngest-ever U.S. member of VISTA in 1978 at the age of 23.) To my surprise and relief, he was as excited about my proposed project as I was, so I immediately knew I was in the right place.

Robert and his team began by pulling the engine, whereupon he immediately identified serious issues with the cylinders and pistons caused by faulty valves, liners, etc. The head also had a crack that turned out to be irreparable. Fortunately, the block was in decent enough shape that it could be sent out and ported and polished to accommodate available new internal hardware. Due to the cracked head, Robert elected to obtain a reconditioned B20B head (9.5:1 compression) and perfecting it. He spent 8-10 hours porting and polishing the runners, which added to the new-found torque the motor is now capable of creating.

A frame issue was also identified—the cross-member was damaged, bent long ago



I was invited to meet Pelle Petterson at his daughter's house (she's my neighbor) together with Lars Jansson (on the right) and Rick Palumbo (not in picture).

in a collision during a prior owner's tenure. A good used part was located and put in its place. Also, the rear differential was overhauled as were the brakes.

At this point, we pulled everything else we could out of the bay and got ready for paint. With the motor out, the bay's horrific state became fully apparent. I chose Andy Schank in Richmond, Calif. for the paint and bodywork. Andy has years of experience with vintage cars of this type, especially Alfa Romeos. He was willing to work with me on the few body modifications I wanted to make, which seemed minor to me at the time. Inevitably they became more complex in their

execution. For example, I decided to nix the four clunky side-marker lights as well as the front bumper. I also decided to eliminate the side trim along the fender and door. Little did I know the amount of welding I was committing Andy to, but he was behind me all the way. He also identified and tackled a few rust spots and body dings near the ground and worked it all into a good-as-new body with terrific lines as well as a pristine engine bay. Also, Andy's fine work was accomplished in under four weeks—a fraction of the time I've had other shops take to complete less complex projects. My hat off to him!

When we repainted the car, we decided to do the engine bay as well. With the motor out, its horrific state became fully apparent.



Back at SVS, it was now time to put the pieces back together. We began by finding a glass shop skilled enough to replace the 50-year-old windshield, gasket and trim, as well as the trim and rubber for the rear glass, which was in good shape. Meanwhile, Robert went to work completing the engine upgrade and assembly. A perfectionist, but one with a great sense of humor, Robert's precision in the measurement, calibration, and assembly of a motor is something to behold.

In addition to a new set of headers, Robert suggested I consider replacing the stock fuel delivery system with a Holley Sniper EFI system. This is a setup he has had success with before on the 1800, so I was not concerned about going down some rabbit hole of untested modification. I procured the unit, which is computerized with self-tuning software, and Robert set it all up. Since we were at it, a new radiator, overflow bottle, starter, water pump, fuel pump, battery, and heater valve were also installed. The brake lines and junctions were cleaned and polished and all wiring was cleaned up or replaced, then wrapped. The majority of the stock parts were supplied by the knowledgeable and ever-helpful Lennart Johansson of VP Autoparts.

New KYB gas shocks and sport coil springs were mounted, and the undercarriage was cleaned and undercoated. In place of the rather tinny '71 grille, I bought a new reproduction of the earlier model grille from the 60s, which is much more substantial. I said bye-bye to my front bumper for good but elected to get a new one for the rear and figured out that, with only slight modification, I could replace the '71 chrome and rubber parts with a new all-chrome rear bumper made for the earlier models. At this point, I decided that the new look of the car deserved the addition of a fitting tribute to the designer. Hence the new personalized plate 2PELLE. I also borrowed one other design cue from the earlier cars not found on '71s—the Volvo side badge behind the rear window.

One last aesthetic modification: I decided to go all out and replace the stock rims with wire wheels from Sports & Classics in Stamford, Conn. The switch necessitated employing a hub adapter kit to transform the wheel mounting method from the standard bolt-on to hub-and-spinner. Contrary to all logic, Sports & Classics offers a custom Volvo-badged spinner/hub adapter kit machined expressly for the 1800 to enable mounting of their wheels on the model. Apparently, a prior customer with an 1800 commissioned the custom-fabricated hub adapters and the company kept the molds and now offers the kit as a special-order item.

Almost there. We could have called it quits now, but Lennart from VP suggested that I consider replacing the leaky old 4-speed transmission with a Tremec 5-speed unit. He



Robert Marcello, owner of Sacramento Volvo Service, and his team rebuilt the engine, including replacing the cracked head. They also made a number of improvements, such as upgrading the stock Bosch D-Jetronic fuel injection to a Holley Sniper EFI system.

referred me to John Huizinga of Laughlin, Nev., who has done a number of these conversions on various Volvo models. John quickly set me up with a rebuilt T-5 unit from a 90s-era Mustang, which he fitted with an adapter plate, flywheel, and other modifications to enable the parts to mate up to the B20 engine. John is also a master Volvo specialist and we felt confident we were in good hands getting the system from someone with his experience in these T-5 replacements on the 1800.

The modification also required adjustment of the tachometer, some machining of the driveshaft, a new yoke, adjustment of the support bracket, and a change of the shifter knob. But none of this was major and the new unit was mated up to the rebuilt motor with no modification of the transmission tunnel.

Et Voilà

The car was completed in March, a little more than a year after we started the disassembly process. Given the amount and quality of the work done, to me this was lightning speed. Working with Robert, Andy, Lennart, and

John was terrific in all respects and I knew I was in capable and caring hands throughout the entire process.

The finished car looks and rides even better than I could have hoped. The engine and shifting performance is amazing—indefinitely more responsive than the stock set-up and with significantly more torque and power-band range. The car starts immediately, idles with stability, and the engine response is immediate and dramatic. Acceleration through the five gears is a night-and-day upgrade from the stock setup. The Holly injection system gives instant, even flow to the finely tuned motor, and, so far, I've experienced far better fuel efficiency. And the car looks... Well, you be the judge.

Many thanks to Robert, Chuck, Andy, John, Lennart, Dan, and, of course, Pelle! I now eagerly anticipate the next chapter: many years of fun with this rejuvenated classic beauty. ■

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