

Cecil's Garage



Helpful hints and tips on restoring and maintaining collectible automobiles.

Why Disconnect the Battery?

I've always believed it was a good safety procedure to disconnect one of the battery terminals on a vintage automobile when it is stored. Another reason to do this on automobiles older than the eighties is that they likely have electrically wound mechanical clocks. You really don't want those things running 24/7 because they do wear out. However, if the wiring is in excellent condition one may ask, what can possibly go wrong, and is it worth the trouble to disconnect and connect the battery over and over again? Let me tell you of a real life experience I recently had with my 1966 Mustang.

I backed it out of its storage space one morning to paint the floor and left the car sitting in the sun. I returned in the afternoon to check on the floor and as I stood at the side door of the building I heard a most unusual start up sound. I thought it was my air compressor coming on and something was loose as the sound was not a pretty one at all. I immediately went around to the front, so as not to walk on my newly painted floor, to check on the compressor. To my utter dismay, it was the Mustang making all the noise and smoke was coming out from under the hood and dash. I opened the hood and disconnected the battery and the noise, smoke and flames ceased. WOW! This was the most bizarre incident I had ever experience in all my years of fooling around with automobiles. How could the engine start by itself? What was the awful noise? What was burning? After several hours of pontification and examining the wiring harnesses, I reached these conclusions:

A short occurred in the main wiring harness. The short applied voltage to the "start" circuit and the "ignition" circuit simultaneously. The awful noise was due to the starter being continuously engaged while the engine was running at fast idle. A small wire, embedded in the wiring harness, apparently was the one that shorted the two circuits simultaneously, and it burnt to a crisp all the way from the starter solenoid to the dash instruments.

Even though the wiring on this 1966 automobile appeared to be in excellent condition, the elevated temperature apparently broke down insulation in a harness that bundled about a dozen wires.

At the end of the day, I wondered how unlucky and lucky I was at the same time. Unlucky that such a weird thing would happen to my nice little Mustang and lucky that it happened while I was standing right around the corner.

I have made a resolution to be more diligent in the future about disconnecting the battery. More Tips Later

Cecil