



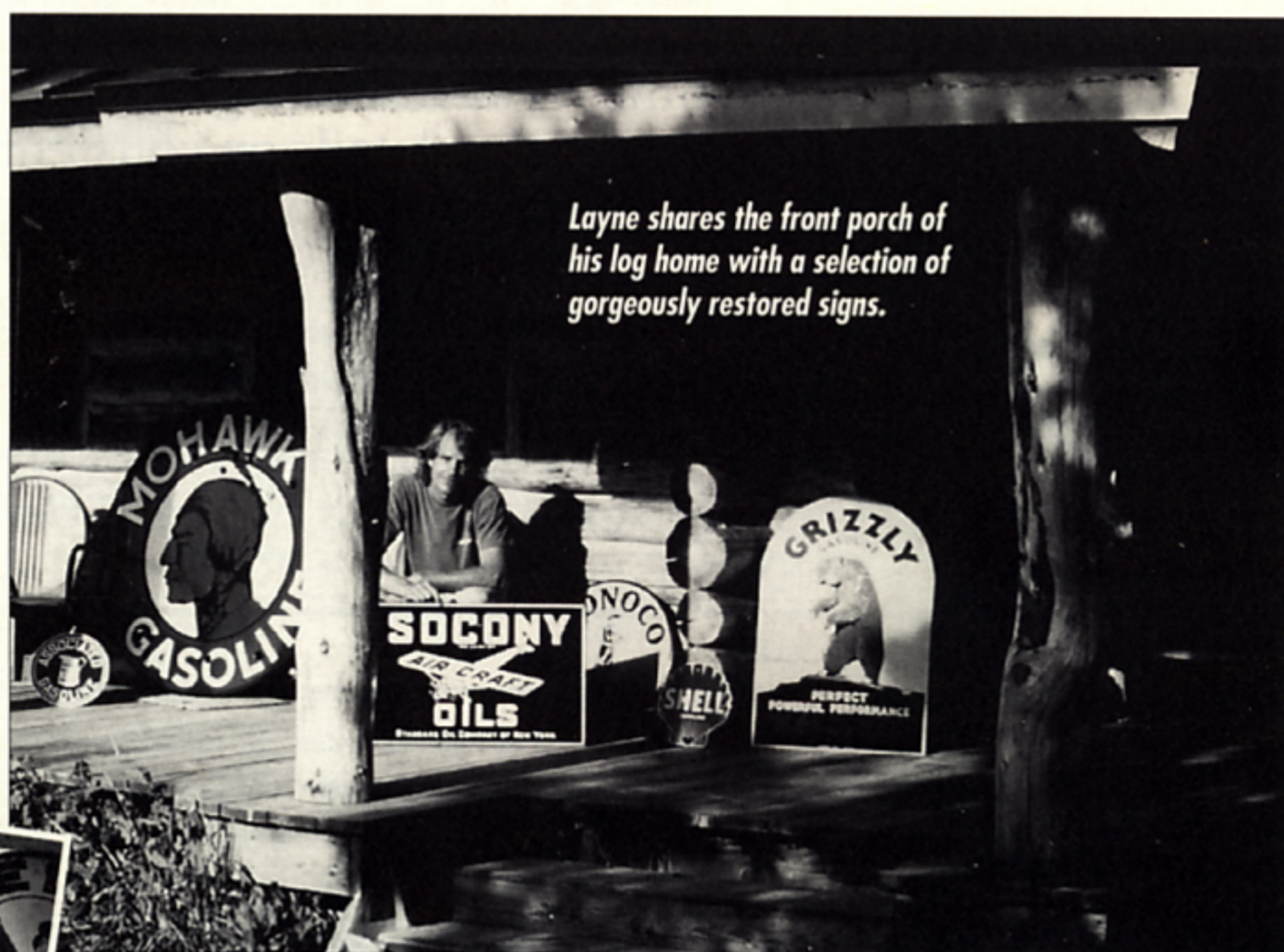
WHERE'D THAT COME FROM?

The worst thing you could do," says veteran collector and porcelain sign restorer Layne Christensen, "is show up in a new truck with California plates."

If you are planning on buying anything in the way of automotive memorabilia, listen to these words of wisdom. Over the years, Christensen has collected some of the finest porcelain signs, gas pumps, and other petroliana on earth. Much of his finds are overlooked, unappreciated, junked, all-but-invisible artifacts—collectibles that can still be had at attractively low price-tags. That is, if you don't give yourself away by a high-profile approach.

With his hulking 1945 Diamond T flat bed truck, low-key demeanor, and nose for out of the way stashes, Layne is a powerful force in the competition for the

ON THE HUNT FOR OVERLOOKED TREASURES WITH PORCELAIN SIGN RESTORER LAYNE CHRISTENSEN—MASTER OF "THE APPROACH"
DUANE CARLING



Layne shares the front porch of his log home with a selection of gorgeously restored signs.



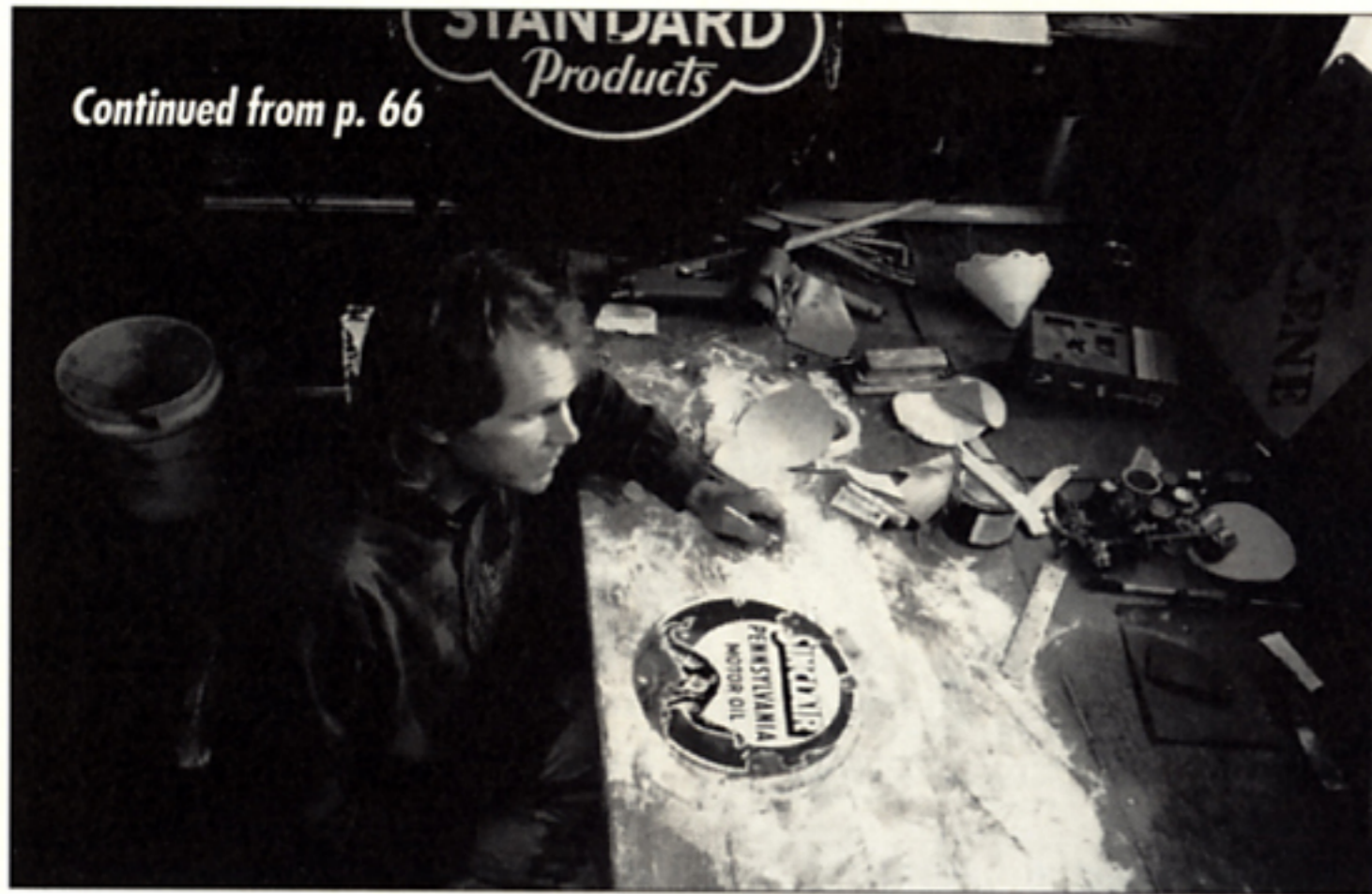
A collage of porcelain signs, some restored and some in war-torn original condition, testify to the impact of the sign-restorer's craft.

remaining "deals." "I found the Diamond T in Idaho, way back in the farm land, and knew it was perfect just as it was. It was sitting in an old corral, and the earth had literally grown up around it. I found out who owned the land, and the guy turned out to be a relative. We made a deal, and when I got it home, I didn't even wash it, it was so perfect. I bought a Chevy one-ton extended cab dually, because it had the right wheelbase, drove it into the garage next to the Diamond T, and 2 months later drove it back out with the old body on the Chevy chassis. It has the 454 engine, automatic transmission, power steering, all the nice stuff, and is the perfect vehicle for approaching someone who is not necessarily interested in talking to you."

A master of the "approach," Layne was once a bellman at the Hotel Del Coronado in Southern California and

did so well at that occupation that he considered writing a book on how best to deal with customers to get bigger tips. One example of how he deals with people: "I was way back in the mining country of Montana last summer, eating breakfast in the town's one cafe, when the lady editor of the local newspaper came in and asked who owned the truck outside. She spent the next two hours interviewing me for a story about the business of collecting gas pumps, and, in the process, told me a lot about the town. I found out where an old Ford dealership used to be and drove out there. It is now a repair shop, if you could call it that. The guy who owned it was standing out front in filthy coveralls. The place was dark inside and old parts were stacked in every corner. I told him what I was after and he gave me the

Continued on p. 67



Continued from p. 66

Layne Christensen at work in his studio, restoring a rare and damaged Sinclair motor oil sign.

standard answer, 'Don't have any of that stuff and nothin' here's for sale.' He did want to look at my truck though.

"After I showed him the truck, he did allow me to look around the garage. Sure enough, he didn't have much of that 'stuff,' and when I was through crawling around in the corners, I was almost as dirty as he was. I did find a film strip and projector sent to Ford dealers to promote the new 1935 Fords and trucks. I spent two hours cleaning a bug nest out of it. I plugged it in and it worked! The phonograph record that went with it was missing, but we looked at the film together, and as I was about to leave he mentioned he had another business, the bulk oil distributor for that part of the county, and it had been started by his father! Well shucks, do you have time to go out there and show me around, which I knew he did, since he was just standing in the sun when I drove up.

"The bulk plant was about half an hour away, and when we got there I couldn't believe it. The place was spotless! The office was spotless, the warehouse in back was spotless, everything

was clean as a whistle. Looked like it had been moved into yesterday. I was kind of discouraged, but I had seen his other business, and knew (hoped) there would be something hidden away in a

corner somewhere. I looked and looked, and finally got up on a chair and looked on the top shelf of a closet full of files and saw a half dozen small porcelain signs, still separated by paper, advertising the brand of gas they carried back in the Thirties. The owner didn't know they were there



Layne's cleverly modified Diamond T flatbed truck helps him get his foot in the door when hunting overlooked automobilia.

and said 'Where did that come from?' Encouraged, I went back to the warehouse for another look, and this time got up on top of the oil drums and looked down inside the stud spaces around the wall with a flashlight, since the building was only sided on the outside. Way down in the bottom of one of the bays I saw something. I laid down on the top of the drums to get my arm down inside, which was OK since the drum was cleaner than I was and pulled up an old glass globe. It was black with grease and dirt on the outside, but looking through the inside I could see the emerald green slash that was part of the logo of Green Streak Gasoline, a rare brand from that area that disappeared during the

Depression!"

"Trying hard to contain my enthusiasm, I took it to the owner who turned it over, said 'What would you want that for,' and made a motion like he was going to throw it away! My heart stopped. I don't know if he was just trying to get my goat, or if he really thought it was just junk, but I convinced him to sell it to me, along with the signs. Before I left he called a friend of his who ran the bulk oil plant in the next county, and I spent the next day cleaning that place out."

Two weeks on the road, and then the Diamond T with its flat bed trailer returns to Layne's mountain-top log home, laden with old signs, pumps, and other rare treasures. Worth thousands at one of the conventions devoted to preserving America's past and its romance with wheels, it is the stuff of dreams for an army of determined collectors.

Is it really ethical to pay a struggling owner \$10 for an old porcelain sign that may be worth \$10,000? "People ask me what things are worth when we talk price," confided Layne. "I usually ask them to set the price, but if they won't, I tell them honestly what I would be willing to pay for it. If they won't sell, then I go somewhere else. I have spent years finding customers for

memorabilia, and I invest a lot of money looking for it. I can't afford to buy for what I would sell it for later. I'd starve to death!"

The hobby of collecting petromobilia started many years ago and has become almost a mainstream hobby; people of very average means who started years ago now have collections worth substantial amounts. Very few of them want to sell, however. "Pickers" scour the rural areas of the country, looking for the few remaining pieces not already in someone's collection. Summer time is full of conventions and swap meets. At last count, six newspapers served the rapidly growing interest in things our fathers or grandfathers worked with, then



threw out in the barn as each was replaced by a more modern device. "Collections worth over a million dollars are not uncommon nowadays, and an individual sign or gas pump worth \$5,000 is not unheard of," says Layne. "Many of those signs may have been picked up for free in a dump somewhere or were bought for a few dollars not long ago. Deals like that are harder to come by today, of course, so I've made a business of restoring old porcelain signs for collectors. I still search for the hard to come by pieces in the summers, though."

"Most of the low end stuff is not going anywhere, in my opinion" says Layne. "An everyday tin Texaco sign is selling for the same price today as it was 3 years ago. My income from sign dealing has dropped to where I can hardly afford to do it anymore. Besides, everything is pretty well picked over. Four or five years ago I could load my truck completely full in three days, and have \$4,000 worth of stuff to sell. You can't just drive down the road to the first barn and buy something worth having. The stuff is still out there, but it's stashed away in attics and other places where you have to spend a lot of time scouring to find it. The high end stuff (\$800 plus) is still strong, though, and appreciating," he said.

According to Layne, everyone who wants a pump now has one. The only market for pumps is in the rare or unusual ones. He'll still buy a pump if it's complete and costs \$50 or less, and he can sell it for at least \$300. One old gas pump Lane had his eye on for years, but he never could find the owner home when he was in the area. Finally one day he was driving by and saw the pump was no longer there. Turning in the gate, the owner came out to greet him. When Layne asked where the old pump was, the farmer pointed to a distant plume of smoke, where he had just taken the pump, along with "a bunch of other junk" to a ravine and burned it!

Layne thinks antique advertising—all types of signs, not just automobilia—is where the new action is, especially in the high end \$2,000-plus items. Mainstream antique dealers are just now catching on to the trend, so you may find signs in their inventory, and they may not know what they are worth. Plus, you don't have to get

dirty to buy them!

Layne is one of only two or three guys in the country that restore porcelain and painted metal signs. When I asked him why more people don't do it, he told me, "It takes a knowledge of pigments, especially in porcelain; a good deal of artistic ability with a



MOBILIA caught up with Layne at this Spring's Portland Swap Meet, where he displayed an array of distressed and reconditioned porcelain signs.

brush and a silk screen; plus a lot of metal-working skill and equipment to restore a sign that has been shot, bent double, and then run over. To make the colors match, the metal flat, or curved if it was curved originally, and smooth as the day it left the sign shop is not something that can be learned overnight. Besides, just finding materials that will stick to porcelain is a major task."

All is not milk and honey for Layne in the restoration business. He now encourages his customers to leave one side of a damaged sign—especially the two-sided signs—unrestored so it will be obvious that the sign is old, and not a reproduction. It costs the customer less, and discourages fraud in the more valuable signs. A restored sign in perfect condition is, in his estimation, worth 15-to-20% less than a mint original. After a sign has passed through several hands, the fact that it was once restored may not be told to the latest buyer.

An out-of-the-way garage recently yielded Layne a large old sign, bent in half with the porcelain ravaged by years of service as the base of a scrap metal pile. "I spent at least an hour

digging it out from under angle iron, old auto parts, and grease," said Layne. "When I got it out, the guy who owned the garage figured if I wanted it that bad, it must be worth a fortune. It wasn't worth a lot, a thousand maybe in perfect condition, but I'm one of the few guys in the country that

can do the metal work and the porcelain restoration to make it worth that. I offered him a hundred bucks. He decided, correctly, that if I wanted it badly enough to put in all that effort, it must be worth more than that. I ended up paying more than I wanted to, but it is now a really nice sign.

"I found an unusual Standard Oil sign up in Oregon several years ago that I had never seen before. It wasn't really attractive, and I figured it was a sign made by a local distributor and wasn't worth much.

It has what is known as a 'cloud' in the middle with Standard written in it, so I talked to a friend of mine who does neon restorations about cutting the Standard cloud out and putting neon around it. It would be kind of nice for my den. When I was about to start the metal work I mentioned it in a phone conversation to another friend, and after a long pause he asked me if I knew what that sign was. He told me that when the gas and oil business first started, about the turn of the century, oil companies used to deliver heating oil to homes using horse drawn wagons, with a porcelain sign on the back of the wagon to identify their brand of oil. That was the sign I had in my hand.

"I know a collector in Southern California who has a collection worth over half-a-million dollars and specializes in Standard memorabilia," said Layne. "When I called him he said he hasn't been able to find that size 'cloud' Standard sign! Of course I didn't cut it up. Oh, and by the way, did I mention it's for sale?"

Layne Christensen is, of course, interested in inquiries to restore porcelain signs; he may be contacted at P.O. Box 404 Eden, UT 84310; TEL 801-745-1808.