

Tampa Bay Times

WINNER OF 10 PULITZER PRIZES

by the numbers

Rolls-Royce emerges from the shadows for more days in the sun (w/video)



Lane DeGregory, Times Staff Writer

Friday, February 6, 2015 4:58pm

ST. PETERSBURG

For decades, the two white houses had been dying.

Side-by-side they slumped, on an overgrown lot, at the edge of an old neighborhood where new owners were rebuilding. Paint was flaking off their rotten siding. Boards blanketed the wide windows. Around both, signs screamed, "No Trespassing."

The homes, two-story wooden duplexes, had been born in the '20s. An office had been beneath one. The other sagged over a two-car garage .

"These places have been empty for at least a dozen years, except for the squatters," said Pam Nickels, whose dad bought the homes as rentals in 1967. She wanted to sell, but no one wanted to buy.

Finally, last summer, Charles Cato called his Realtor. Those broken buildings at the corner of 30th Street and Third Avenue N were a quick bike ride from downtown. Cato had already rebuilt a couple of bungalows in that historic Kenwood neighborhood. The land beneath the two old houses would fit a whole row of new townhomes.

Cato's Realtor, Joe Moledo of Keller Williams, convinced Nickels: If she wanted to sell, the duplexes would have to be torn down. His client would take care of everything, he said, and pay to haul away whatever was inside.

Nickels didn't want to knock down those structures. But she was 52. Both of her hips had just been replaced. She knew she could no longer keep up the property. She Googled Cato, learned of his other projects. It looked like he had money.

So in October, she sold him both houses and the double lot for \$109,000. At closing, she told him, "There's an old car in the garage." Great, he thought. It'll cost me at least \$500 to have that junker hauled away.

Then she handed him the keys. And the title to a 1956 Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud.

"It's all yours," Nickels said as Cato hugged her in disbelief. She had only one request.

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Cars can be so much more than a way to get around. They give people personalities and panache. They preserve pieces of the past.

Nickels' dad, John, had been an optometrist, an amateur mechanic and a collector of classic cars. Lincolns and Studebakers, Model Ts. Over the years, at least 100 high-end antiques had inhabited his 10-car garage on Coffeepot Bayou. He didn't have a favorite, Nickels said. But she did.

She had been in elementary school in 1973 when her dad first drove home that two-tone blue Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud I. Three days a week, she would miss the bus on purpose so her dad would have to chauffeur her in what she called "my car."

He would play talk radio, loud. She would unlatch the mahogany table from the passenger seat in front of her to lean on her elbows and watch out the low windows. "It was British, a right-side drive. I always had to sit in the back seat so I could slide out on the sidewalk," she said.

"When my dad drove me around in that car, I thought I was so glamorous."

She was in high school the first time her dad told her to take the Rolls for a spin. She lumbered down the brick roads of the Old Northeast, struggling to turn the wide wheels without power steering, trying not to scrape the curbs. "It was too big for those streets, and for me," she said. It became the car her dad drove most days.

"He would take it to my mom's charity events, loan it out for weddings," she said. "Everyone in town knew that car."

Nickels graduated from Florida State University and worked as a paralegal, an accountant, a third-grade teacher. Every once in a while, her dad would come by and pick her up for dinner in the Rolls.

In 1997, her parents had to sell their huge home on Coffeepot Bayou and move into a condominium, where they could only keep one car. Nickels helped her dad sell the last dozen of his fancy fleet. The Silver Cloud, he saved for her.

"Once he got rid of those cars, he pretty much went to bed and died," she said. "He had nothing else to take care of."

She had nothing else of his.

To keep her Rolls off the street, she parked it in the garage beneath the old duplex. "That car was never kept outside, never had water on it. We always dusted it with a chamois," she told Cato. "Dad covered it with Oriental rugs."

No one had started the car in 17 years. "It was driving great when I pulled it in here," she said. "But I have no idea what condition it's in now, or if it will even start."

A few people had contacted her about buying the Silver Cloud, from California and Canada, Ohio and England. "I could have sold it long ago," she said. Except she wouldn't.

So why was she giving it away?

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They met last week between the dilapidated duplexes. Someone broke the lock off the garage. Slowly, as Cato pried open the door, sunlight striped the chrome grill.

"Oooh!" Cato called. "Look at her!"

Dust blanketed the domed trunk. All four tires were flat. The doors shimmered beneath a translucent patina of

termite wings.

"I grew up in Arkansas," said Cato, 61, beaming. "There probably wasn't a Rolls-Royce in the whole state."

In the months since he had acquired the car, Cato had done a little research. Only 2,238 of the Silver Cloud I had been built. Elvis and Frank Sinatra had both owned one. Restoring that model would probably cost at least \$25,000. In mint condition, it would be worth more than \$150,000. "Careful!" Cato called to a tow truck driver, who was hooking a thick chain beneath the front bumper. "Hey!" he yelled a few minutes later. "The wheels are turning!"

As her favorite car slowly rolled out of the dark garage, across the overgrown yard, onto the tow truck, Nickels watched, then stood tip-toe to peer through the dirty windows. She saw that the mahogany dashboard was still gleaming — with only 25,511 miles on the odometer. A cigarette was still in the driver's side ash tray. The gray leather seats looked pristine.

She put her palm on the Rolls' back bumper. "I could have gotten a lot of money from you," she said. "You could have gone halfway across the world."

But then she never would have seen that car again. "I wanted to keep her close," she told Cato. "You will keep her, won't you?"

Cato smiled. "We just got to get her to start, so we know she's worth saving."

Four hours later, after a mechanic installed new spark plugs, a coil and a battery — a \$300 investment — Cato put the old key into the ignition, and the Rolls roared to life. All the dashboard dials spun to attention. The headlights winked on. He phoned Nickels: "It's amazing!"

Nickels laughed, as if she'd known it all along. "When you get her back on the road," she said, "Would you give me a ride?"

She can't keep the Silver Cloud at her condo. She doesn't want to make any money from the car, or even drive it. She just wants someone to fix it up so she can sit in the back seat and watch out the windows, so she can remember the sound of her dad's talk radio, the smell of his cigarette. And maybe, for a few blocks, feel glamorous again.

Times researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this report.



BY THE NUMBERS

1956 Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud I

2,238 made in Crewe, England

18 feet long,
6 feet wide

4,647 pounds

41-foot turning circle

4 speed automatic transmission

0-60 mph in 13.5 seconds

103 mph top speed

12 mpg gas mileage

4.9L, 6 cylinder
engine

\$10,000 price new

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