

## The Great Wealth Transfer Includes \$570 Billion in Classic Cars

For Gen Xers and millennials, inheriting a loved one's car often means weighing nostalgia against practicality.

By Hannah Elliott | May 15, 2026 at 3:15 AM MDT



There's a reason Alex Roy still has the humble 1973 Citroën SM his brother, Max, left behind when he died of cancer in 2024. They had planned to drive the teardrop-shaped coupé cross-country, honoring the brand that spirited their father and his German Jewish family out of Brussels during World War II.

In 1940 their dad had found a Citroën at an abandoned dealership after a neighbor's promise to drive the family to France never materialized. "All of the cars were gone except one, an early Citroën no one had stolen, because it was the oldest," Roy says. "My dad turned the crank, his brother got it started, and they escaped to Paris."

Today the blue SM needs repairs. The windows and AC don't work, so driving in summer is "hell on Earth." But the Arizona resident won't give it up. "My girlfriend's like, 'You should sell the car,' and she's right, because it never works," he says. But he regrets selling his father's Cadillac and his mother's Porsche when they died in 2000 and 2025, respectively, and doesn't want to make that mistake again.

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This tension between nostalgia and practicality is familiar to swaths of Gen Xers and millennials who find themselves inheriting cars from loved ones. Hagerty Inc., a media firm and automotive insurance provider, estimates that 12 million enthusiast vehicles will transfer to a new generation in the US over the next 15 years in estate plans or inheritances. That's roughly \$570 billion in cars, according to data provided to Bloomberg.

Alex Roy with his 1973 Citroën SM at Wormsbacher Motor Werks in Apache Junction, Arizona. Photographer: Jesse Rieser for Bloomberg Businessweek

Aidan de Cadenet was shocked by the response to his short film on the 1964 Alfa Romeo TZ his father, Alain, raced in the 2000s. The Alfa tells the story of the car and how they began restoring it together before Alain died in 2022. The 2025 documentary has received hundreds of comments from viewers who related to its message of love, loss and letting go.

The Los Angeles resident now often drives the red racer on Mulholland Drive at sunset, connecting with the memory of his dad. "These very particular objects define who we are," he says.

Notorious for their predilection to stockpile, baby boomers didn't stop at hoarding tea sets and baseball cards. The appetite to collect, inspired by Depression-era parents who saved everything, and amplified during the "Money for Nothing" consumerism of the '80s, extended to all things automotive.

The market for collectible cars — vehicles desirable for their heritage, performance and design — has mushroomed over the past two decades, according to Hagerty. It encompasses more than 43 million vehicles in the US, representing an estimated \$1 trillion in total insurable value.

As older owners pass away, their beloved cars become part of the legacy they pass down. It's a vehicular spin on the \$90 trillion Great Wealth Transfer, a massive shift in assets from the Silent Generation and baby boomers to their offspring, which is primed to change the global economy over the next few decades, according to the research firm Cerulli Associates.

Read more: Boomers Are Passing Down Fortunes — And Way, Way Too Much Stuff

"When you walk into a boomer garage, you're gonna see 50 neon signs, 18 gas pumps and all the cars and the parts and everything else," says Kenneth Ahn, the president of collector-car marketplace Broad Arrow Group. "Generally the younger generation has a lot less of that hoarding mentality."

Cars mean freedom and achievement; they reflect status and personal style, success and identity. A vehicle from any era, whether it's a '60s Porsche race car or an '80s Ford sedan, can accumulate family lore. They are tokens as deeply personal as they are communal.

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In Manila in 2018, Miguel Cervantes emailed his wife's grandfather about buying his 1984 Mercedes 300TD wagon, only to receive a one-word reply: "No." Fast-forward to 2024, after the grandfather died, and another family member who knew that Cervantes admired the car offered it to him. "At first I couldn't believe it," Cervantes says, "but now it is with us, undergoing a full restoration."

In Cambridgeshire, England, Benjamin Charles inherited a 1962 Jaguar E-Type his dad bought in 1972 for £700 (equivalent to about £8,400 today, or \$11,300). He describes the sleek silver blue coupé as a family member and remembers seeing his dad race it around the fields during harvest time.

"It's such a beautiful car and dad's pride and joy," says Charles, who received the car in 2018. Last year it needed £4,500 worth of engine work, including rebuilding the carburetors. Soon it's going in for a new clutch and gearbox. That hasn't limited his love for the Jag. "I can never part with it," he says. "It always gets good vibes on the road."

Passing a car from one generation to another has deep implications. Many of the more than two dozen people I spoke with for this story — women and men in America, Europe, Asia and Australia, ranging from their 20s to their 60s — described their inherited cars as totems. The prized automobiles mark not just important people in their life but also how they are remembered.

"Cars represent to the world who we are or who we want people to think we are," says Amanda de Cadenet, a British photographer, author and television host (and sister of Aidan, the documentarian).

Much like a teddy bear or blanket can help a child transition to a new life stage, a car can help those grieving feel regulated and connected to the person they've lost, says Amanda, who became a grief counselor after her father's death. "The smell reminds me of my childhood, especially the leather when the sun has been on it, and the smell of petrol," she says of her father's many vintage cars.

Auto-Motivated Sellers

Total hammer price of classic cars sold at auction

Source: Hagerty

As with anything passed down, decisions about a car can signify deeper questions, like whose grief counts most and what it means to let go. The answers can bring a family together or tear it apart.

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Disputes over wills and inheritances can be minefields, according to Mitchell Port, a Los Angeles attorney focusing on probate, trust administration, estate planning and tax law. That's especially relevant to autos, because the value of a vintage car can change significantly from the time a will is drafted to when the person dies.

Klaus Gottlieb, an estate-planning attorney in California, has seen disputes among siblings over cars turn ugly. "The parent had planned but wasn't specific enough, which left room for interpretation, and there was a lot of value at stake," he says.

Tensions can extend beyond the value of vehicles. "For one sibling, it might feel like a sacred connection to the person who died," says Claire Bidwell Smith, a therapist and author who specializes in grief. "For another, it might represent responsibility, burden or even resentment tied to the relationship."

Steven Beckmeyer co-owns Speed House, an auto restoration shop in Durham, North Carolina, that specializes in inheritance cases. Often, he says, he ends up "playing therapist" among relatives who may not agree about what to do with the car.

Aidan de Cadenet and the Alfa in Los Angeles. Photographer: Joyce Lee for Bloomberg Businessweek

Fabergé eggs, these are not: Cars require storage space, routine maintenance and regular driving to stay running. Not everyone is able or willing to manage what they've received.

One man I spoke with asked to remain anonymous to avoid further family strife around the 1965 Studebaker he inherited in 2005. He had long resisted selling it, spending about \$40,000, a multiple of its market value, on storage, rebuilding the engine and other expenses. But he finally sold it earlier this year.

"The amount of money it cost to just get it running was ridiculous. I would have rather put the money into cars I liked," he says.

Younger people tend to gravitate toward cars from the '90s and later, says McKeel Hagerty, chief executive officer and chairman of Hagerty Inc. Credit the 30-year rule: The model you had on the poster on your bedroom wall as a teenager becomes attainable about three decades later. This is why millennials don't necessarily appreciate the flashy fins or bulbous fenders coveted by prior generations.

Even though the family has kept some of her father's cars, Amanda de Cadenet did sell one she didn't connect with, using the money for something she loved, a 1983 Porsche 911.

"It was doing something sentimental and honoring with the money," she says, noting that she learned to drive on a 911 from the same era.

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When uncontested, an ownership transfer is straightforward. Requirements vary by car value and location, but typically, when someone dies, a new bill of sale is needed as a record of the update. In the US, state departments of motor vehicles can require an affidavit of inheritance and a copy of a death certificate; some charge a processing fee.

There is no US federal inheritance tax, and the federal estate tax (paid by the estate, not the heir) applies only to fortunes exceeding \$15 million per individual. So the vast majority of inherited vehicles are unaffected, says Gottlieb, the estate attorney. Those who inherit a car owe tax only on the profit they make if they sell it — and then only if the sale price exceeds the car's value at the time of the owner's death. Most often, it won't.

But it is helpful when a car owner plans what will become of their machines. That could mean selling them, donating them, putting them in a trust or identifying who will receive them, Gottlieb says.

"It takes the burden off of the heirs to have to make those tough decisions that they may not know anything about," says Ahn of Broad Arrow.

Even better is when an aficionado bequeaths their beloved vehicle while they're still alive. In Sydney, Joel Clinton's father-in-law recently gave him a 1992 Subaru Brumby he could no longer drive.

Now the entire family has fun with the miniature truck-like coupé, including Grandpa. Clinton's wife drove the car (then in mint condition) when they dated after high school. "It is now a cherished member of our garage, and our kids are learning to drive in it," he says.

In Los Angeles, Ant de Padovane and a friend (right) prep a Nash-Healey to be painted. "Working on this car has been a lifelong dream of ours," de Padovane says of his dad's classic roadster. Source: Ant de Padovane

Ant de Padovane spent hours as a child in Los Angeles working on a 1953 Nash-Healey with his dad, who is 72. But after decades of sitting, the car needs a total restoration. So the fashion designer works freelance jobs to raise extra cash as they resurrect it together. It's his way of making up for lost time before it's too late.

"I was always kind of selfish with my time and took it for granted," de Padovane says. "Now I'm trying to amend that."

Are cars as important to us as they once were? High gas prices, disruptive tariffs, electric and autonomous vehicles and environmental concerns have certainly shifted our relationship to the machines we use for our daily commute. But our bond with special cars — the ones we buy for pure pleasure, that make us feel a sense of occasion whenever we slip behind the steering wheel — has never been stronger.

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The collectible-car market has boomed with the rise of social media, which has enticed younger people to the pursuit, bucking the downward multiyear trend of other luxury assets like diamonds and art. It's expected to reach \$25 billion by 2032, up from \$12.6 billion in 2024, according to market analyst Credence Research Inc.

Autos also offer a unique way to bridge the gap between generations. Our parents bought cars on a whim, or after months or years of searching. They bought cars to commemorate an anniversary or business deal. They bought them to impress neighbors and friends, to gain access to exclusive social spheres and to represent their own identities. They bought cars to live out childhood dreams.

In Los Angeles, Tim Martin worked to persuade an aunt not to sell his grandfather's 1920s Ford Model A. The car had been a gift from his grandfather to his four daughters, who all drove it in high school in the '60s. His aunt hadn't loved the archaic model, but for Martin, owning the car was essential to honoring the past. "My grandfather was the one who got me into cars," he says. "It's one of those cars that can't leave the family."