

CAVEAT EMPTOR: REPAIR RACKETS

TODAY THROUGHOUT America there has been a resurgence of gyp auto repair shops. Perhaps it is because of the fierce competition, the moral tone of the times, or because a great many motorists are limited in knowledge of their automobiles to the fact that a turn of the key starts the engine.

Years ago when television was in its infancy, consumers faced the problem of gyp repair men. In many areas of the country law enforcement officials found an effective way to detect and drive out of business these fraudulent TV repair men. What officials did was "plant" a perfectly good TV set in a home and loosen a tube. The gyp dealer who said the set had to be taken to the shop with a whopping big repair bill, or the gyp dealer who said several tubes and condensers needed changing, was promptly arrested and brought before a grand jury.

District attorneys are taking a note from TV-gyp days and are resorting to "baited" or "planted" automobiles.

Recently, Queens County, N.Y., District Attorney Frank D. O'Connor's office directed a member of the Rackets Bureau to take an automobile to a repair shop suspected of chicanery. The automobile previously had been checked by several reputable mechanics and found to be in perfect operating condition. A transmission button was removed and the automobile was taken to the suspected gyp shop. Normally the job to replace the missing button should be approximately \$5 for labor and parts.

What happened was that the detective played his part well, acting completely unknowledgeable about cars. His dramatic skill brought forth a bill for \$180 to repair the "defective" transmission.

The shop in question is part of a chain operating extensively throughout the Long Island area. (On the presumption of innocence until proven guilty, it is not named, as the case has not yet come to trial to the date of this writing.)

FOLLOWING THE arrest of the shop's manager, D.A. O'Connor revealed that evidence resulting from a year-long undercover investigation would be presented to a grand jury. He said, "We will make spot checks from time to time to see whether the industry will correct itself in the abuses. Because of the blind business involved, as far as the average motorist is concerned, abuses are frequently hard to detect."

In Tulsa, Okla., two owners of an

engine rebuilding exchange were sentenced to five years in prison for defrauding the public. Under the guise of exchanging engines in cars, they repainted the old engines, but did not change or repair them.

AWAR HAS been declared on the many gyps in the auto repair field who make their living defrauding the public by not repairing the car according to what needs to be done, by charging for work not done, or by making repairs not necessary for proper car operation.

Active in the battle to clean up the auto repair field is the Independent Garage Owners of America Inc., a national trade association with 5000 members in 36 states. The IGOA has been joined by several other trade associations in the automotive field to help protect the motoring public from dishonest auto repair shops.

Officials at the Chicago-based national association say that gyp repair shops continue to operate because the public helps to keep these fraudulent repair shops in business. The public thinks it gets a bargain on car repairs when low prices are advertised for specific jobs. This kind of shop can be eliminated if individuals complain to local Better Business Bureaus, police departments, or District Attorneys, when they believe they have been defrauded. The protest must originate with the filing of a complaint.

The first indication of a gyp repair shop is generally in its advertising. Such gyps are consistent advertisers of "bargains" and will tell the public it can exchange a presently inoperative automatic transmission for a rebuilt unit for \$39.75 or \$49.50. In reality it costs a minimum of \$100 to remove a transmission from the car and replace with a rebuilt unit. This is in addition to the cost of the unit. Engine exchange is another area of gyp operation. The gyp artist will advertise exchange engines for \$49.50. These shops generally are the ones where old engines are repainted without being removed or repaired.

Gyp shops often use inferior parts, "bootleg" parts, or used parts taken from automobile wrecks. Though the car may function for a short period of time, the owner soon will have his vehicle back in a shop.

Several suggestions have been advanced to assist the motoring public in choosing a reliable automotive repair shop. Before having a repair done on a car, a wise owner should ask for a diagnosis and estimate of the costs involved. Reliable shops are equipped to

test cars and find troubles within a short time. There are times, however, when it may take longer because of a series of trouble spots. In this case, the reliable shop may charge for the tests, with the charge being applied to the total cost of repairs.

There are other questions which can be asked of the repair shop: 1) Are the replaced parts retained for customer inspection and an explanation given why such parts had to be replaced? 2) Does the shop itemize the invoice, separating material and labor costs and showing what work was done? 3) Does the shop road-test the car before returning it to the customer? 4) Does the shop guarantee its work? 5) What happens if the car doesn't work right and has to be returned for adjustments? 6) Are employees fully trained and qualified to be repairing today's complex automobiles?

Other indications point to the honest shop. The legitimate shop is on a well traveled street, not in a back yard, down an alley or in a basement. Work is done during normal business hours by full-time mechanics, not part-timers. The honest shop owner belongs to the Chamber of Commerce or other local trade groups. The local office of the Better Business Bureau will know if the shop has had many complaints lodged against it. The shop's reputation, credit standing and membership in industry-wide trade associations point to legitimate operation.

Local shops deal locally, hence it shouldn't be difficult for anyone to find persons in the neighborhood who can tell their experiences in dealing with a particular shop. Fairness of prices, dependability of work done, keeping promises for delivery dates and length of time in the area or in the trade, are what make good reputations.

THIS SEEMS a great deal of trouble to go through just to have a car repaired. However, an automobile generally is the individual's second largest investment and taking a little time to check on the person about to repair the vehicle will save money and grief. In the long run, a reliable auto repair shop will guarantee its work and will be most anxious to turn out satisfactory work so that not only will the customer return, but that the shop will be recommended to the customer's friends and neighbors. On the other hand, the gyp operator will dodge the questions and often will try to induce a pigeon to sign a blank order form.

When it comes to auto repair it really is—*caveat emptor!* —Joseph Arkin