

Today's Auto Repair

with Chip Stewart

- "I can't get my car fixed!" -

This story is for those people who can never seem to get anyone to repair their car.

Some time ago, a lady, new to this area, came to my shop in a car with its engine spewing all sorts of who knows what and the first thing she said (shouted) to me was, "Aren't there any decent mechanics around here? I can't get my car fixed!! (I deleted all the colorful expletives.) Amazed, I said, "Excuse me?" "Well, I've taken my car to one place and they said one thing and then I took my car to another place and they said something else and now I'm here and I still haven't got my car fixed!!"

After calming the lady down a bit, I started asking some pertinent questions. "What did they say at the first shop?" "They said they couldn't get it in until tomorrow." "And the next shop?" "They said they could get it in but that they would have to do a diagnosis before they could actually fix it!" "So," I replied, "What's wrong with that?" She looked at me incredulously. "They were going to charge me money for that! And besides - my boyfriend back home has a friend who's cousin's father used to be a mechanic a while back and he said that it was probably just a heater hose. I went and bought the parts already - I got this hose - the parts guy said it was probably the right size - and some hose clamps - I just need someone to put it on. Now, can you fix my car or not?"

While *Ms. X* was discussing her problem I took the liberty of raising the car's hood and a quick inspection revealed that this ten year old vehicle had been seriously neglected. There were clues indicating what might actually be wrong with this car. It had a split heater hose. The radiator hoses were ballooned. There was a crack in the side of the radiator. And it looked as if the water pump had been leaking. I started the engine for a few seconds to "give a listen". It had a miss. A misfire along with a cooling system that has obviously been over-pressurized is a good indication of a blown heat gasket. But, until a proper diagnosis is performed to make sure, it's just a guess. The miss could be caused by moisture in the distributor cap caused by the cooling system leaks that were the result of a stuck thermostat.

I took a deep breath. "Yes, I can fix your car." She look relieved. "Finally! How much will it cost?" "I don't know," I said. "We'll have to go through a diagnostic procedure to find the actual problem, research the parts and labor involved and then we'll be able to give you a fairly accurate estimate, usually within ten percent, one way or the other. But," I added, "I can't do the diagnosis for free because it involves my time, my education, and a considerable investment in equipment and tools."

I explained how proper diagnosing and the fees associated therewith are necessary in order to repair cars correctly and acquire the education and equipment to do so. Unfortunately, this concept escapes many people, *Ms. X* included, and she was not impressed. You see, in this particular case, the price differential of those two repair possibilities is several hundred dollars. On one hand, the use *Ms. X* would get from the car would be worth the investment. On the other, the cost involved would be more than the value of the car and it would probably be wiser to invest in a better vehicle. *Ms. X* turned and walked away muttering something about rip-offs and lousy cars and no-good mechanics. She stopped, turned back and asked, "If I let you do that diagnosing stuff

and then I let you fix my car, do you need your money right away?" I mustered the best smile I could and said "Have a nice day!"