

# **A RESTORER'S GUIDE FOR IDENTIFICATION, RESEARCH AND REPLICATION OF AUTOMOBILE TOP MATERIALS**

## **Part III**

by Eric Haartz  
Haartz Fabrics

### **DOCUMENTATION AND AUTHENTICATION OF ORIGINAL MATERIALS**

Information sources vary by time period in the auto industry, and they are not consistent from one car maker to the next, but these guidelines should help. Prior to 1915 many sales catalogs and some advertisements specified the top material(s). These can help in making a choice between surface-coated (vinyl) or cloth types. From the twenties through the thirties, manufacturer's service parts lists or body specification publications may help, although some material descriptions are unclear from today's perspective. Likewise with any trade letters to dealers. Dealers' trim and upholstery books provide very useful reference sources, especially from the early fifties onward.

If there is a club that specializes in your make of car, the club's technical committee can often provide information. Museums and library collections could help, too, if they offer reasonable access to any detailed technical or sales documents for a given car marque. Sometimes the Pre-1946 car manufacturer's literature referred to top materials by trade name.

A very aged top on a car may be original, but the only sure way of determining this is by removing the top from the bows or tacking strips (assuming they are original). If you find more than one set of tack holes, then the top material is not original. If there is just one set of tack holes in all bows (being wary of bow or tacking strip replacements), you can then examine the material as a standard for reference. At this point you need to find the freshest, cleanest available portion of the topping. Original equipment side curtains for open-bodied cars often provide a better example, usually being of the same material as the top. On the top itself, look for areas concealed from weathering, wear and fading. Soiling and fading can alter a material's surface appearance, so those areas con-

cealed under flaps usually offer a better example of appearance. So do reinforcing straps and top pads, if made from the same material. Keep in mind, too, that top bows and reinforcing straps conceal and protect areas of the top material inner fabric. In some cases the interior side may have faded or discolored due to soiling. Save a piece of any original topping (and other trim materials) you find. The bigger the piece, the better. These can be valuable for reference later on.

Prior to 1935 makers of car care products offered various "top dressing" compounds, usually as a brush-on liquid. The older the top, the more likely it is to have received such a treatment. For this reason, very old cloth tops can seem to have a surface coating. A top dressing coat on a cloth top material will be very, very thin, and probably does not conceal the surface pattern of the underlying fabric.

### **CURRENT MATERIAL OPTIONS FOR VINTAGE CAR TOPS**

Whether you select a material based on personal preference or for best authenticity, begin by deciding on a basic type of material. Then determine the color options available within that category. Restorers and trim professionals generally suggest that it is better to select a top material color before finalizing paint and upholstery colors, especially when color harmony is important. It is easy to tweak a paint formulation to harmonize with a top material color, but rarely feasible to do the opposite. Beyond the basic blacks and tans of all eras, additional color options available now only approximate most original choices.

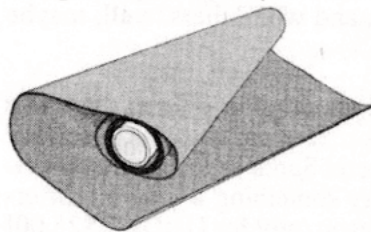
In general, a restorer is better off using a reputable brand of ready-made top when replacing the convertible or landau top of a post-1945 car. For pre-1940 cars, there is limited availability of ready-made tops back to about 1935. If you are restoring a pre-1935 car, figure on having the top made up from yard goods of top material and related components. Many professional restorers and a very few hobbyists can do a good job at this. The rest of us should enlist the help of a competent automotive trimmer/upholsterer. The old adage, "you get what you pay for" certainly applies to this field of work.



**CLOTH-** Although the color choices available today tend to be limited by the availability of suitable fabric, the current popularity of cloth topping for modern convertibles yields a greater color selection than had been available in the late 1900s. Very little three-ply cloth material with cotton outer fabric remains on the market, and its colorfastness is mediocre at best. Newer cloth top materials use a solution-dyed, acrylic face fabric. Few other fibers can outperform acrylic for colorfastness and general weatherability, hence its widespread use in modern cloth top materials. Generally a topping composed of a square weave facing and drill weave lining provides the best authenticity for most vintage American cars. However, you may choose a twill faced material either because that is appropriate on a particular car, or in order to use a special color not otherwise available.



**VINYLS-** Some of the vinyl coated fabrics presently on the market provide suitable material for replicating old tops of surface-coated materials. For rubber or pyroxylin materials from prior to 1940, vinyls with similar embossed grains are well accepted. Colonial (and the nearly identical Bison)



and Short Cobra grains are appropriate for open and convertible car tops. Long Cobra grain material is available for roof covering and top decking of closed

bodied cars from the mid-1920s into the 1930s. Early vinyl tops from the mid-1950s onward are readily replaced with newer vinyl, the classic Standard (a.k.a. diamond or pinpoint) grain still being produced. Fewer colors are available than the Original Equipment options, but the more popular colors can be matched or approximated.

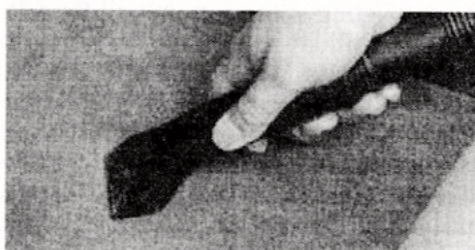
**OTHER MATERIALS** - Very early cars, and later custom-bodied cars using leather top material can be fitted with new leather tops, unless a vinyl topping is preferred for ease of maintenance. Khaki

cloth topping on very early cars can be replaced with tightly woven cotton duck (use a so-called number 8 or 10 duck cloth) in a suitable tan shade, but finding it in a suitable width for car restoration work is challenging. This option is not advisable for replacing Burbank material from the late twenties and the thirties unless you are sure that your classic car will not have to withstand a heavy rain! Uncoated canvas (usually a tightly woven cotton duck) for military and farm vehicles remains available. Enameling duck remains available for the do-it-yourself restorer seeking to trim and paint this. Oilcloth of the kind used on pre-1940 vehicles for fixed roofs and side curtains seems to have vanished from the commercial market. Some do-it-yourself historians have retrieved techniques for replicating this product in limited quantity, and that will likely be the way this can be replicated if one so chooses. Waxed cotton cloth from Australia is another approximation of period oilcloth.

## TAKING CARE OF TOP MATERIALS

Since vintage and collector cars usually undergo prolonged storage at times, the practice of raising the top for these instances lengthens the useful life of the topping. If the storage area is subject to airborne dust or dirt, it is a good practice to cover the top material, particularly if it is a lighter color or has a cloth exterior surface. Long or repeated exposures to moisture and ultraviolet light affect topping just like they do the car's paint and trim materials. Periodic cleaning and care, as recommended by the fabric or top maker, help to increase the useful life of the top.

For routine cleaning of dirt and pollen particles from cloth top materials, gentle vacuuming is a good technique. Avoid spot cleaning because it is hard to avoid residual rings around the cleaned area.



When fully cleaning a cloth top, vacuum it first, then give the whole top a gentle rinse.

With those preparations, you can then clean the top with a good grade of fabric roof cleaner. Heavy soiling might require a repetition of this step. Do



not use aggressive solvent based cleaners as these will damage the top material. After using the cleaner, rinse the top gently but liberally so as to flush out all soiling and residual cleaner. Allow the top to dry completely. For post-1945 cars, you may need to have the top slightly retracted to reach the back part of the top below the body belt-line. Once the top is thoroughly dried, apply one or more coats of convertible fabric protectant. This is most crucial on tan and other light shades. Be generous in the use of the protectant.



Vinyl tops demand less care. They can be cleaned with a mild cleaning agent (no solvent or distillate-based cleaners can be used, though) and then rinsed. Allow the top to completely dry before folding it down.

Since our collector cars usually enjoy covered or indoor parking most of the time, weather aging of top materials is not much of an issue. Severe cold inhibits the material's flexibility, while tropical-latitude sun and humidity tend to be the most limiting to a top material's service life. Service life of a convertible top can be measured in several years under harsh conditions, but it can endure for many decades with hospitable garaging and a bit of care.

S.K.

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