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CLASSIC MOTOR CARRIAGES CLOSES EVICTED FIRM VOWS TO REOPEN

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Classic Motor Carriages -- the Dade company that built do-it-yourself vintage car kits and a bad reputation among some customers -- is closed, at least for now.

As part of an ongoing foreclosure dispute, the firm recently was evicted from its headquarters, a mammoth warehouse crowned with two spiraling cars, just off the Palmetto Expressway.

The property, 16650 NW 27th Ave., is for sale. A toll-free number is disconnected; a local number is accepting messages. And although **Classic** lawyers insist the company will reopen, about \$1.5 million of its inventory is being auctioned off at a sale beginning Dec. 7.

The closing of **Classic**, even if temporary, leaves plenty at stake: hundreds of undelivered car kits, parts and requested refunds.

"We can't afford to not let our customers have their cars," **Classic** Attorney Andrew Hall said Monday. "We will either buy back the goods at the auction or go out and buy more. We will do whatever it takes to get this factory back up and running. Until then, nobody will be satisfied."

In the past few years, **Classic** -- the nation's largest manufacturer of replica car kits -- has been dogged by consumer complaints of high-pressure sales tactics, slow delivery of kits, missing or defective parts, failure to issue refunds and poor customer service.

The Office of the Attorney General sued **Classic** in July 1994, charging the company with deceptive trade practices. Among the state's allegations are: Customers paid \$5,000 to \$15,000 for car kits that were defective or incomplete -- if they were delivered at all.

At least 1,800 complaints have been filed at the attorney general's office, with more trickling in regularly.

According to state officials, customers allege they are missing more than \$6 million in "back-ordered parts" needed to complete the cars. At least \$662,000 is being requested in deposit refunds. Some 700 complaints involve paid-for kits -- totaling at least \$3.5 million -- that have yet to be delivered.

"They may be closed, but we are proceeding with our suit," said Assistant Attorney General Robert Julian. "Our biggest concern is they are continuing to take kit orders and do not have the ability to provide the kits. And, if they are making a good faith effort to fill back orders (of old customers) at the expense of a new class of victims."

The company has acknowledged its problems and said it was trying to resolve the complaints. It says the closure came at a particularly bad time, when **Classic** was in the process of filling back orders and starting new orders. Now production is at least two months behind. Officials say they will reopen at another Dade location, but didn't say where or when.

Despite the assurances, some customers are panicked.

"Hopefully, we will resolve the dispute so we can take care of our customers. Right now we are not accepting new orders," said Ira Hatch, another attorney representing **Classic**.

He said **Classic** is part of a foreclosure suit involving Berkeley Federal Trust, which had the firm evicted shortly after Berkeley became the mortgage holder. It sued for nonpayment of about \$3.4 million in principal, interest and late

charges.

Classic attorneys are not discussing the specifics of the case, including the nonpayment allegations.

Earlier this year, the company's assets were sold to Advanced Plastics International Corporation (APEC), a Delaware corporation, under the stipulation that the new firm would assume **Classic**'s liabilities and resolve the mounting complaints. The new name is **Classic** Auto Replicars Inc. (CARS) -- operating from the same warehouse and using the same toll-free phone number.

In August, the state added APEC and CARS to the lawsuit, along with new but similar allegations.

Now, with the doors closed, customers are worried. They simply want the cars they ordered, or their money back.

Ron Benvie, a **Classic** customer from Livermore Falls, Maine, paid \$9,345 for a replica of a 1934 Ford in May. The car has not arrived.

"I have gotten every excuse in the excuse book. I have been calling them every week since August when it was supposed to be delivered," Benvie said. "Now I am thinking something is very wrong. I am a ten-dollar-an-hour guy. I can't afford to lose this money. If they have good intentions, then why haven't they bothered to call us customers?"

CUTLINES

JON KRAL / Herald Staff

Herald File

TROUBLED FIRM: Classic Motor Carriages sells kits of vintage car replicas. The company was booted out of its facility just off the Palmetto Expressway. **Classic** says it will reopen at an undisclosed Dade location.

Illustration:photo: Classic Motor Carriages (2 - a)

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