

A member of Minuteman Section, Paul has over the past 38 years built a reputation as one of the world's finest Mercedes-Benz restorers. His projects have won awards at all the major concours d'elegance, and besides that, he's a real gentleman. Paul and Vintage Editor Rich Taylor talked at Paul Russell and Company in Essex, Massachusetts, a seacoast town about 20 miles north of Boston.

I grew up outside Andover, Massachusetts in a family with four kids. My father was an engineer; he had machine tools in his little workshop in the basement. He knew how to fix things. His philosophy was, "If you take on a job, do it right." There was nothing he hated more than sloppy workmanship.

Down in the village of Andover was one of those big New England woolen mills. The executives lived in beautiful big brick houses, and in the garage of one of them was a Cord Beverly sedan. As a little kid, I used to press my nose against the window and look at this thing. It had outside exhaust pipes, and the dashboard...well, I didn't know much about airplanes, but to me it looked like an airplane in there!

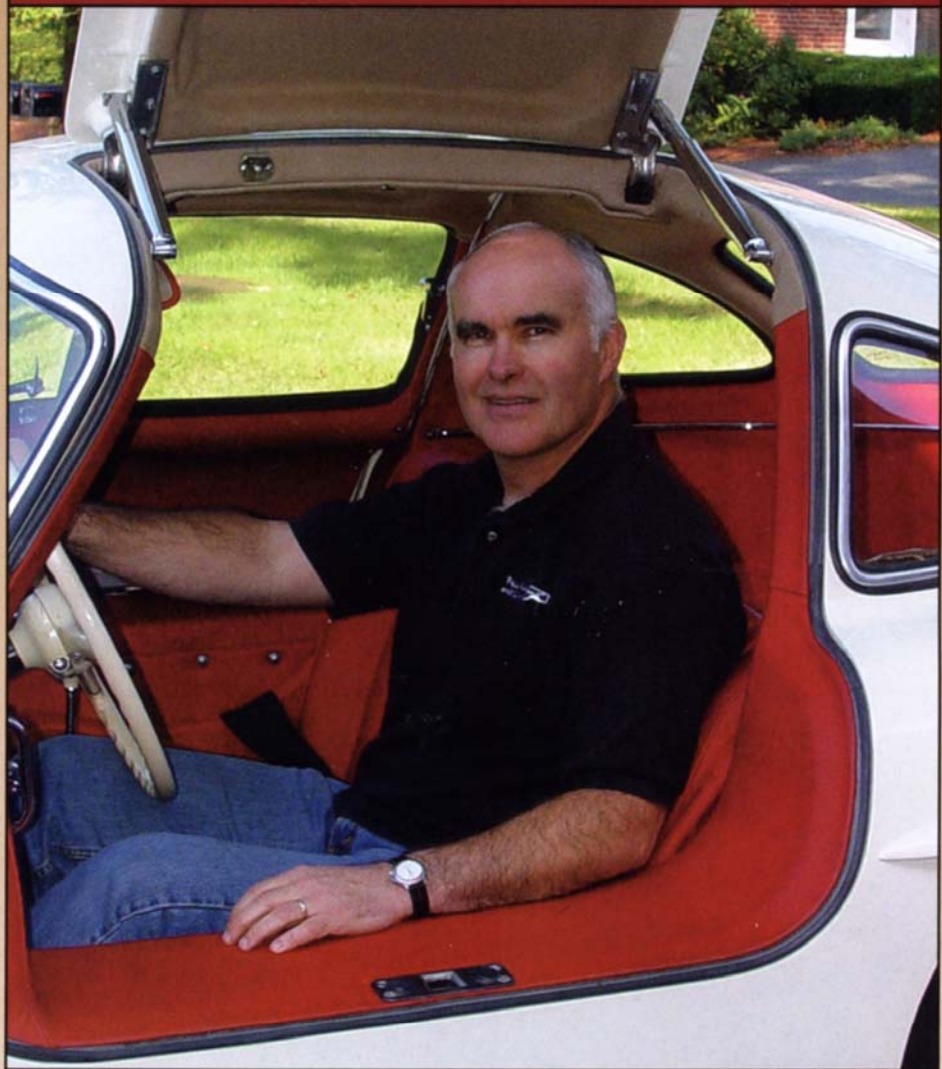
My father drove "family transportation units," but the father of my best friend in high school bought an Austin-Healey Sprite. What a revelation! You sat just inches off the ground, and there was such a sensation of speed. And entertainment. That was it; I was smitten.

I was a good student; I went to the Coast Guard Academy in New London for two years then switched to a college in Lowell. But I had this obsession with cars that I needed to get out of my system. Much to my parent's chagrin, I quit college after my junior year and took a job in a little two-bay repair shop in Derry, New Hampshire.

Apprenticeship

I was working for a guy named Willie Kendall. He had started out as an American serviceman stationed at a U.S. Air Force base in Germany. In his spare time he repaired foreign cars owned by his fellow servicemen, especially English sports cars. In the early 1950s, German mechanics hated to work on English cars!

Paul Russell: In His Own Words



Jean Constantine

At the end of his tour of duty, Kendall got himself discharged from the Air Force in Germany and was accepted for the five-year Mercedes-Benz factory technician training course. After his training, Mercedes-Benz sent him back to this country, where he worked for Daimler-Benz North America and various Mercedes-Benz dealers. Willie was a great Mercedes-Benz technician, a pretty good teacher, and a lousy businessman. After I'd worked with him for two years, I came into work one morning, and there was a big lock on the door.

Very soon after, I saw an employment ad that Alex Dearborn had placed in the classic car classifieds of the *Boston Globe*. I came down to Marblehead, Massachusetts from Derry, where I was still living, and started working for Alex.

The business was exclusively 1950s Mercedes-Benz cars; 300Ss, 220Ss, 300SLs. Alex Finigan showed up about 18 months later. After five years, Alex Dearborn concluded that for himself, there were more opportunities in the sales and brokerage end of the business. I was already thinking about owning my own restoration shop, and I'd started taking night courses with the Small Business Administration.

Gullwing Services

Alex Finigan, David Twitchell, and I were there when Alex Dearborn offered us his restoration business. I was the only one willing to get a second mortgage on my house to make it happen. That was in June 1978.

My deal with Alex was that he would find a



bigger building, with a showroom for himself, and I would rent the space next door and continue the restoration business. Obviously, for me, it meant a steady flow of potential customers from the showroom next door. We agreed to do this for five years and moved to the building in Topsfield, where Alex still has his showroom.

I continued to specialize in Mercedes-Benz cars from the 1950s. Not only did it seem sensible, I truly enjoy working on them. I like the way the people thought who originally built the cars. It seems to be the same way that I think.

Restoring Mercedes-Benz cars is satisfying work. The marque has a great deal of respect in the world, so people are willing to spend money to restore a Mercedes-Benz, knowing the car will be valuable in the future. Owners feel that restoring a Mercedes-Benz is satisfying both on a financial basis and a long-term, owner-satisfaction basis.

In Marblehead and Topsfield, we were essentially doing mechanical work, but many customers wanted to just drop off a car and have it completely restored. They didn't want to deal with the body shop and the paint shop and the trim shop and the chrome shop.

We started acting as a general contractor, farming out all the non-mechanical work. But that wasn't working. We had five different body shops doing work for us, two upholsterers, and more. But those shops had their own customers and their own priorities. I ended up being responsible for all of this outside work but not in control of the quality or the schedule.

Contraction and Expansion

At the time, a restoration could take three and a half years. To shorten that time, it needed to be a much more coordinated process. I decided to move to a larger facility and bring in-house everything we used to subcontract. In fact, a couple of craftsmen who'd been our outside suppliers came to work for me. For them, if they could do the same high-quality work but not have to deal with all the annoying aspects of running a small business, that was a great attraction.

So in 1983 I bought this old factory in Essex. It was just a cavernous space, 10,000 sq ft. We spent a long time adapting the inside for our use. Five years later we built an 11,500 sq ft addition to expand our metal shop and have room for an EPA-compliant spray booth.

Today, in addition to our mechanical restoration areas and our paint shop, we have our own metal fabrication shop, where we can build a whole new body if need be. We have a body shop, an upholstery shop, and a specialized machine shop. I have my own tool and die maker. We're up to 30,000 sq ft of space.

At the moment, we have 20 people working in all aspects of the company, including Alex Finigan, who handles sales and brokerage. There are 12 guys on the shop floor. The essential ingredient in this type of work is a real passion for the cars. To have an opportunity to work on a 540K or an SSK is very special. We've been lucky to get these commissions from our customers, and that keeps the

guys here because they are totally emotionally invested in the process.

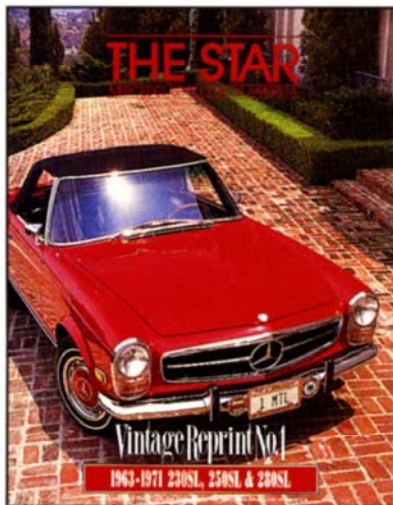
We also sell a lot of Mercedes-Benz parts. We've had carpet yarn dyed for us and woven into carpets; we've had fabric woven for us, like the original plaid for Mercedes-Benz racing cars. Now we're buying leather "crusts" that are unfinished and having them processed to our specifications. We're not just a retail parts house; we use the parts ourselves, so we know what works and what doesn't.

We find ourselves having to make more and more parts from scratch or having to extensively machine used parts. In days gone by, when you could still buy a new part, you'd put the used part on the shelf and think, "Someday we won't be able to buy new parts, and we'll need this." That someday is now. All those years we asked ourselves, "Why are we saving this junk?" Now we're going into the back room and digging it out.

Diversification

In the early days, calling the company Gullwing Service and trying to make a name for ourselves in that micro-niche served us extremely well. That changed in 1988. Our customer Mr. Ralph Lauren bought three cars from collector Tom Perkins on the west coast, three cars that we ultimately restored for him. These were an Alfa Romeo 8C-2900 short chassis Touring-bodied Mille Miglia Spyder, a Bugatti Atlantic Coupe, and the Count Trossi Mercedes-Benz SSK.

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Mr. Lauren had been having cars restored in England. Some had been there seven years, and he didn't feel that he was getting very good service. We had already restored a steel-bodied 300SL, an alloy-bodied 300SL, a 280SE 3.5 Convertible, and a 220S Cabriolet for him, so we had a pretty good track record. He asked me if we'd be interested in tackling the Bugatti Atlantic.

I told Mr. Lauren that I didn't know much about Bugattis in general or the Atlantic coupe in particular, but anything I didn't know I'd research and learn. Despite our specialization in Mercedes-Benz, most of the restoration skills and materials are transferable to any marque.

The general approach is the same, whether you're restoring a 3.5 Convertible or a Bugatti. What's different is that you must have much more understanding of the era in which the Bugatti was built, more understanding of the technology of how cars were built in that era, more understanding of how a one-off car was built, where each piece is unique. The whole process is much more comprehensive. The guys in my shop say, "We need to know how the Old Boys did it!"

On a one-off car, there's a lot more trial fitting. You make something, try it, take it off, modify it, and try it again. You end up pre-assembling the entire car at least once, and large portions of it many times. Then you must take it all apart and finish each part before final assembly.

Mr. Lauren's Bugatti was an opportunity to spread our wings, to go back in time to coach-built cars with wooden body framing. We can restore any post-war Mercedes-Benz in about a year. A pre-war car is a challenge to get done in less than 20 months. Typically, it takes two years or a little more. The wooden body structure of a pre-war coachbuilt car is a whole different animal. Fortunately for us, there was a shoe-making industry around Essex, so there are skilled patternmakers used to working in wood.

Authenticity

One of the things I've learned how to do is research the cars before we start work on them. I take great pleasure in working on historically significant cars, and we're willing to go the extra mile to get things exactly right. Our strict adherence to authenticity hasn't filtered into every restoration shop, particularly those in Europe. The cars we see that have been restored in Europe run well, but when I look under the hood and find a CD ignition or ABS brakes on a 300SL or power steering on a 540K, I just don't get that. That's heresy! There isn't the great



respect we have for the history of the car.

The motivation is different for every customer, but a lot of it has to do with nostalgia and romanticism. I certainly wouldn't pretend to speak for him, but for somebody like Miles Collier, I think it has a lot to do with art history as well as the aesthetics of the cars. Mr. Collier truly understands authenticity. To him, a car should be restored as good as it was new, but not any better than it was new. It's a treat to work with a client like that.

Business Relationships

This is a cyclical business, and I have to assume that the cycles will continue. But I think the peaks and troughs are going to be less extreme. During the last three or four years, people of means have been buying great cars and paying top dollar for them. But I don't get the feeling that this is speculative.

Companies that are willing to loan money to purchase classic cars are constantly approaching me. But my customers don't need car loans. They pay cash. They're not borrowing money to buy cars to flip for a profit; they're buying these cars because they want to own them and keep them.

We restore cars, but this business is about relationships. The relationship between owner and restorer has parallels to a patron commissioning a work of art or a client having an architect design a house. We try to deal with people in a manner that emphasizes the long-term relationship.

Old car restoration is not for everyone, not even for every car enthusiast. Some people should just find a car they like and write a check. Other people enjoy the restoration process. Either way, our business is about making people happy, satisfied, and proud of the cars they own.