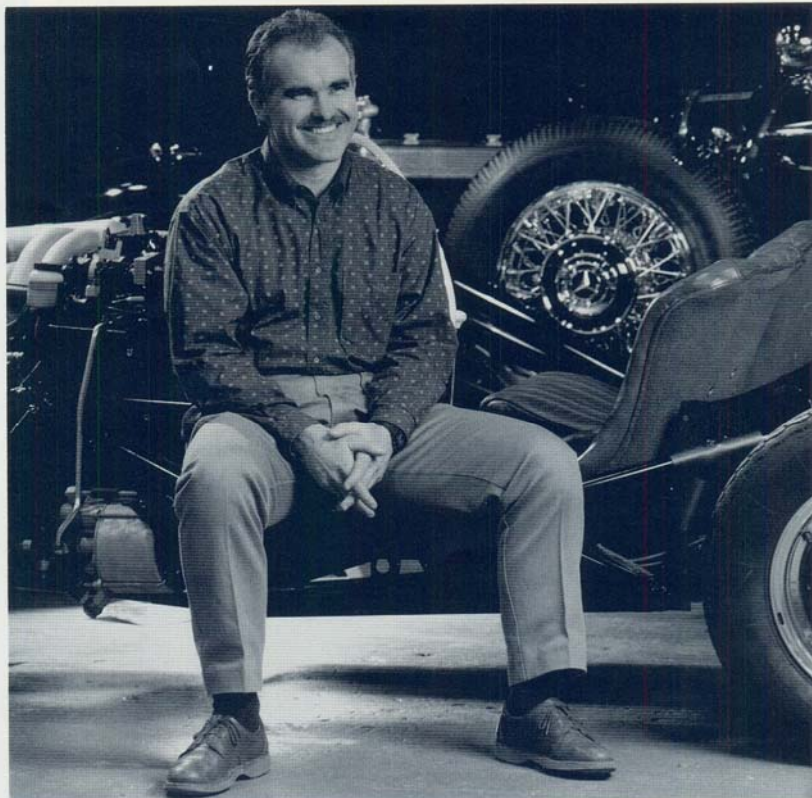


Interview: Paul Russell, restorer

Tucked away in the woods off Route 22 in Essex, Massachusetts is a restoration shop that works restoration magic on some of the rarest and most valuable cars in the world. Paul Russell, owner and manager of Paul Russell and Company (formerly Gullwing Services, Inc.) has come a long way in the last twenty-five years and traces his beginnings back to when he would restore \$200 Austin Healeys in his father's garage.

A quiet measured person by nature, Paul who runs marathons to relax, brings many of the strengths of a marathon runner to his work and applies an enviable determination and follow-through to the great cars he works on.

"When someone does call to talk with me about restoring a car I try to start at the end and find out what the individual's goal is before we discuss how to attain it," says Paul. "In the best possible scenario they haven't even acquired a car yet and I or my sales manager Alex Finigan can help steer them to one that meets their needs both from a quality and cost standpoint. There is very often a tremendous lack of knowledge of the restoration process among car owners, and you find after talking with an individual for a while that often what they are looking for is a nice car to drive and enjoy. In other cases a person has really high standards and wouldn't be interested



ABOVE: Paul Russell seated on 1960 Mercedes Benz 300SL roadster rolling-chassis with 1938 540K cabriolet "A" in background; both cars currently under restoration in his shop. BELOW LEFT & RIGHT: New panel fabrication for a 1930 Mercedes Benz

SSK Boat-tail roadster, designed by Count Trossi, coachbuilder Willy White.



Photographs by Neil Alexander.

in anything less than perfection. Then there are others who have little interest in the cars other than as a commodity and investment. So, if I can get to the root of what their motivation is, I can help them achieve it most reasonably."

"From a business standpoint it does me little good to have a guy in here and get started on a job if the product that we deliver is much more than he needs or wants, because ultimately I end up with an unhappy customer. He may like the car when it first comes out of the shop, but later finds he is uncomfortable driving it because it is too nice."

When we visited Paul in November, he had thirty-five cars in for work, including numerous 300SL Gullwings and Roadsters, a 1930 Mercedes Benz SSK Boatail Roadster, a 1938 Mercedes Benz 540K Cabriolet A, a 1923 Bugatti Brescia tourer convertible, a 1938 Bugatti Type 59 Grand Prix car, a 1937 Bugatti Type 57SC drophead coupe, a 1950 Jaguar XK120 Alloy Body roadster, several Ferraris, Porsches and assorted 600 series limousines. A special treat for us was Ralph Lauren's 1938 Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic coupe (in for annual maintenance).

The Atlantic was a turning point



1923 Bugatti Type 23 Brescia (original coachbuilder Profilée) under full reconstruction. Photographs by Neil Alexander.

for Paul when he began work on it in 1988 as it marked his departure from specialization in only Mercedes Benz's of the 50s. Two years in restoration this car went on to win Best of Show at Pebble Beach in 1990 and epitomizes what can be accomplished by his skilled craftsmen with time, money, and a committed client.

After speaking with Paul for several hours and touring and photographing every aspect of his shop, I began to understand this self described enthusiast and historian. Although his company will perform routine maintenance on your Gullwing or re-spray a favorite clients Ford Woody, his real passion is the "process" of complete and accurate restoration of the great cars.

"One of the things I found most disturbing about the recent market surge through the 1980s was the irreplaceable destruction of detail and features of some of the world's great cars through profit motivated budget restorations. Information on construction, materials, and detail frequently gets lost forever during these restorations," commented Paul.

When I asked him what his biggest weakness was he allowed that it was probably his attention to detail. From his office he gestured to a 540K on the shop floor and said, "The final restoration cost on that car will probably approach \$500,000 where it is possible to go elsewhere and have one done for \$250,000 - \$275,000."

He added, "They look pretty good, but they won't have the integrity and through and through consistent quality of one of our restorations. I want to work for people who agree with me philosophically and prefer to work on this type of restoration. If someone wants a pristine Gullwing it takes 12 months. If he wants a perfect 540K it may take two to two and a half years. In this age of instant gratification it takes a special client to make that type of commitment."

When I asked Paul about cost controls and the financial management of his restorations, he indicated that every car in his shop is done on a parts and labor basis, and that accurate time and parts invoices are generated for each car on a weekly basis. These invoices are collated at the end of the month and each client is sent an itemized bill detailing exactly what has been done to his car during the previous 30 days. They also encourage frequent visits by owners through-

out the restoration process.

Although Paul allowed that now may be a good time to acquire already restored cars he made the observation that many of the available ones are those that were poorly done and, "Most of our customers are not speculators, rather they have bought cars to keep, and there are very few restored to their standard that are available in the market place. Consequently, very few good restored examples are available in the market place at what many consider to be today's market price."

Paul Russell and Company is clearly not the best choice for a budget restoration, however, if you are a collector and enthusiast who has a thing for perfection they may well be the shop for you. Inquiries about their services should be directed to Paul Russell at the following address: Paul Russell and Company, 106 Western Avenue, P.O. Box 954, Essex, MA 01929. Tel:508-768-6919, Fax:508-768-3523.



ABOVE: Upholstery work for a 1955

Jaguar XK120 Alloy Body roadster.

BELOW: Checking tolerances on a 1930

Mercedes Benz SSK Boat-tail

roadster engine.



Photographs by Neil Alexander.