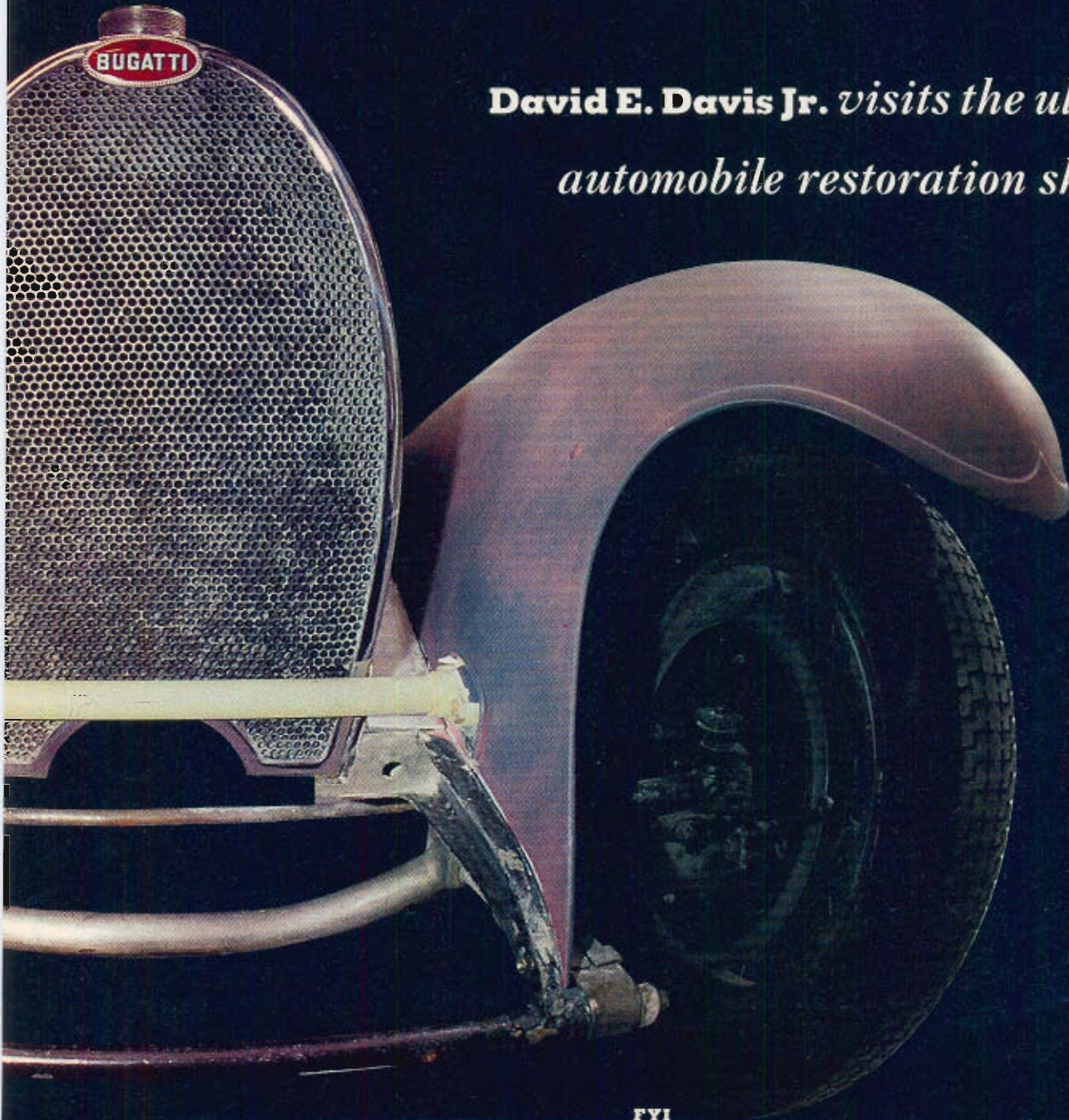


REBUILT *to* LAST

David E. Davis Jr. *visits the ultimate
automobile restoration shop.*



Paul Russell's Gullwing Service Co. is located in an anonymous industrial building just across the creek from Route 22 in Essex, Mass. It is a wondrous place that turns old cars into brand new cars. Inside, it feels like equal parts modern hospital, university library and automotive museum. What it does not feel like is a garage. Twelve or fourteen of the world's most desirable cars are being worked upon—from bare body shells and bare chassis to completed master-

Not even the restoration shop at the Mercedes-Benz museum in Stuttgart duplicates the quality of the work at Gullwing.

pieces returned for tweaking.

Paul Russell, 40, the proprietor, looks strong—but strong from working hard, not from working out. He's an excellent mechanic, but complains that his hands are too apt to be stained with ink these days; running the business keeps him away from the grease.

There are 24 employees between Paul Russell and the grease now, a far cry from June 1978, when he bought the business from his former boss. The firm originally specialized in mechanical work on Mercedes-Benz 300SLs—the legendary gullwing

coupes and roadsters built by Daimler-Benz between 1954 and 1963—but found themselves being asked more and more to do entire cars. Bodywork and upholstery were always farmed out in the old days, but as demand grew for a sort of exotic one-stop shopping, they expanded their list of services. Today they literally remanufacture whole cars, from the tires up.

In the years since 1978, Gullwing has restored 45 or 50 of the 300SL coupes and roadsters, probably the most painstaking restorations of those cars in the world. Not even the restoration shop at the Mercedes-Benz museum in Stuttgart duplicates the quality of their work. Remanufacturing an SL requires a minimum of 2,500 hours of shop time, probably something more like 2,900, and each hour will cost \$50, plus the cost of parts and any work that has to be subcontracted. One of the half-dozen SLs that was in the shop at the time of our visit, a beautiful roadster, had not been restored at all, merely “upgraded” to the tune of \$30,000.

As Gullwing's reputation has spread around the world, prospective clients have brought even more exotic projects. Currently Gullwing is completely restoring a 1937 Bugatti Type 57S convertible owned by a Dutch syndicate, a job that will take about two years. They recently spent two years, or 9,600 of those \$50 hours, restoring Ralph Lauren's 1938 Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic coupe, which won Best Of Show at last year's Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, and which may now be worth upwards of \$15 million. Sitting next to the Dutch Bugatti is a 1938 Mercedes-Benz 540K, and not far away is a delectable little 1933 Bugatti Type 55 roadster being done for a Boston University professor. No car enthusiast can browse through these work spaces without suffering some shortness of breath, without feeling a small electric current in the hair at the nape of his neck.

This expansion into prewar European “coachbuilt” cars has led to a new corporate entity called Paul Rus-



Author David E. Davis Jr. (left) chats with Gullwing Service Co. owner Paul Russell.

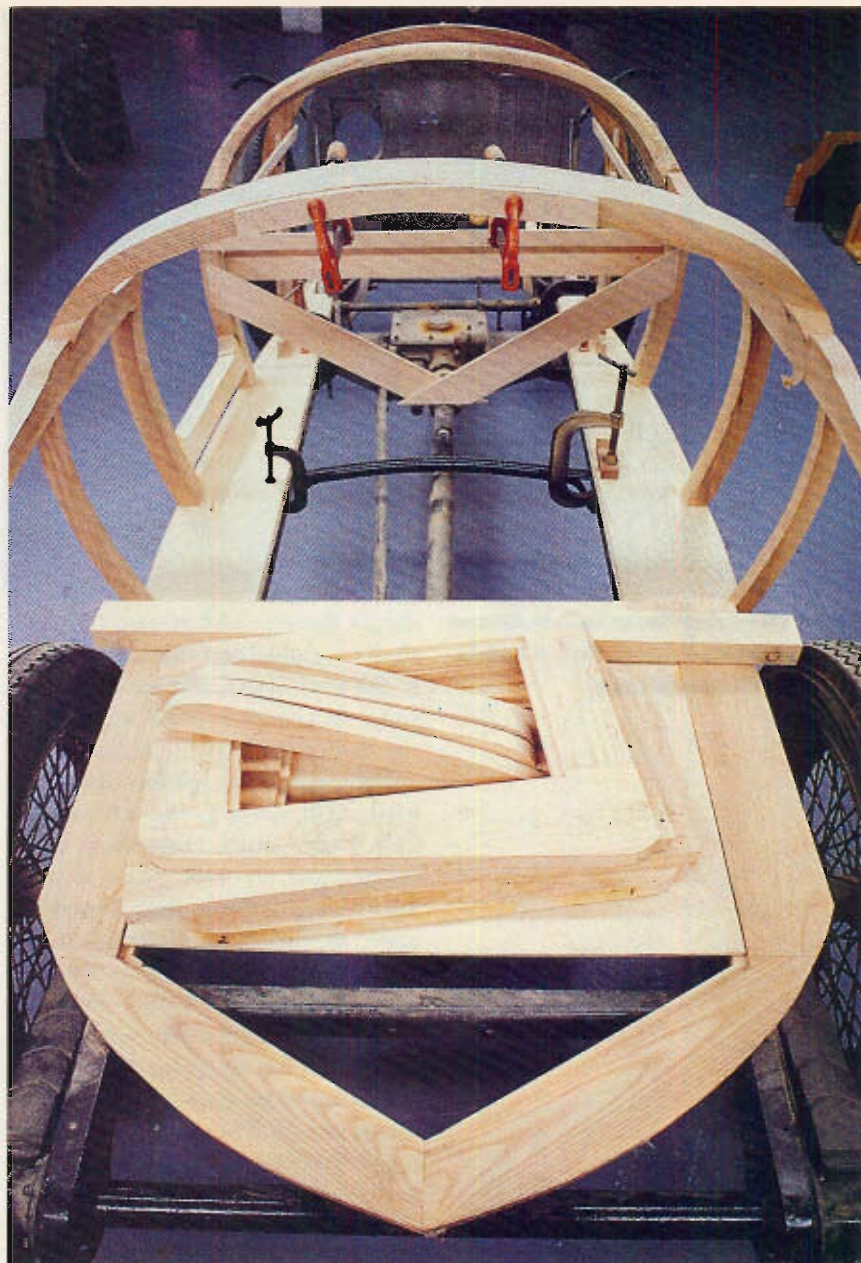
Photographs by Al Satterwhite

sell and Company. "Coachbuilt" implies that the cars' bodies were built over wooden body-framing, in the manner of horse-drawn carriages, and this requires a whole new layer of skills in the remanufacturing process. Gullwing will continue to do postwar cars, with special emphasis on Mercedes-Benz, while Paul Russell and Company will concentrate on the old creaks under the same roof.

Paul Russell says, "It's important to keep a focus. We don't want to learn at the customer's expense. That's why we stayed with the Mercedes-Benz and similar cars for so long, and that's why we've stayed close to our roots as we moved into the prewar cars. I doubt if we'll ever get into British or American cars, because that's not what we do, not what we know. A Rolls-Royce with James Young bodywork is as nice a car as money can buy, but we'd probably be more comfortable doing a Hispano-Suiza with James Young bodywork—it's continental, it's metric, and its technology will be more familiar to our people."

There is no snobbery in this judgment. Russell and his staff discourage prospective customers whose cars lack the intrinsic value to support the firm's remanufacturing efforts, yet they're also reluctant to work for people who are merely speculating in old cars. "We advise them to find a car, and to do a car that they really love," says Russell. "It may not be a fabulous return on investment, but it'll be a pleasure to own and drive. This is supposed to be fun."

The boom in vintage car values in the past few years has attracted a lot of speculators, and a lot of restoration shops catering to speculators. But "we don't want to be investment counselors in automotive commodities," Russell continues. "If you want to buy and sell cars, do that. But don't buy cars, restore them, and then sell them. If, on the other hand, you're thrilled by the prospect of restoring a great old car, but you lack the physical capability to do the work yourself, you go looking for someone who can do it for you. Then you're our kind of



customer. We can do that.

"There are jobs we turn down. There are guys who don't want to go through what we go through. We don't want to do what you might call 'temporary jobs,' simply putting new paint on over old paint. A lot of old cars have been fixed several times."

He points to a 300SL roadster shell sitting on sawhorses. "This is a perfect example of 'Gee, I wish you'd called us first.'" The bodywork is badly patched. Wrinkles and dents have been filled with plastic or covered with fiberglass. Sin is everywhere. Twenty-five thousand dollars will be required to undo another

(Above) A coachbuilt Bugatti Type 23 Brescia at a skeletal stage of restoration. (Below) The very first production Gullwing, vintage 1954, is re-readied for the road.





"My car's in the shop" has an entirely different set of meanings at Gullwing. Here, a 1938 Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic coupe.

shop's damage and restore the body shell to original condition. Fortunately for the owner, the car's ultimate value as automotive art will support the cost of the work to be done.

Each car is completely disassembled, right down to the last nut and bolt. Every single component is examined and set aside, to be re-used, refurbished or duplicated, depending upon its condition. Exhaustive mechanical detective work is done to determine original colors, materials used and construction techniques. This often means going through several layers of paint, or examining tiny fragments of fabric trapped in inaccessible crevices, to divine the maker's original intent. The research

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doesn't stop there. Automotive magazines of the period are checked for details and specifications. If the factory records are accessible, they may be researched. Making the point, a 1923 Bugatti Brescia sits off by itself. Derelict since 1938, it required a far-flung search for parts as fundamental as the appropriate engine.

Purists have complained that Paul Russell's cars are over-restored, better than the manufacturer ever built them. Russell disagrees, but does admit that he hates to think of a plain cast-iron hydraulic brake cylinder being attached to a perfectly restored backing plate. He'd much rather put a coat of paint on it to prevent it from rusting, whether the original builder was that considerate or not.

As the recession has taken hold, sales of vintage cars have slowed and prices received for them have fallen. Really good, very desirable cars have held their value reasonably well, but marginal cars have slipped noticeably. Paul Russell says that the recent economic downturn definitely gives him pause—his is not a business that builds up large cash reserves for economic rainy days—and he notes that people aren't exactly lined up outside clamoring for \$200,000 old car restorations, as they were in 1988 and '89. No matter how stunned one may be by the brilliant work done in that old building, and no matter how much one may wish to own all the cars therein, one must ruefully agree when he says that the service he provides is essentially non-essential.

Sitting in his small office at the end of the day, he says, "It all depends on how these cars will be perceived in the long run. Will they become historical objects, national treasures? Will people and institutions buy them as art? Will they stop being cars, and will that widen the market? If you watch the sales at Sotheby's and Christie's, you'll see somebody spend hundreds of thousands of dollars for a watch. Surely that Bugatti out there has more intrinsic value than a watch. Surely that will help cars like these outlast a soft economy."

If there's a bright side to the recession, it is that a lot of his fly-by-night competitors have disappeared. "The Johnny-come-latelies are dropping out," he says, with grim pleasure. "It's easier to run a video store." ❧

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