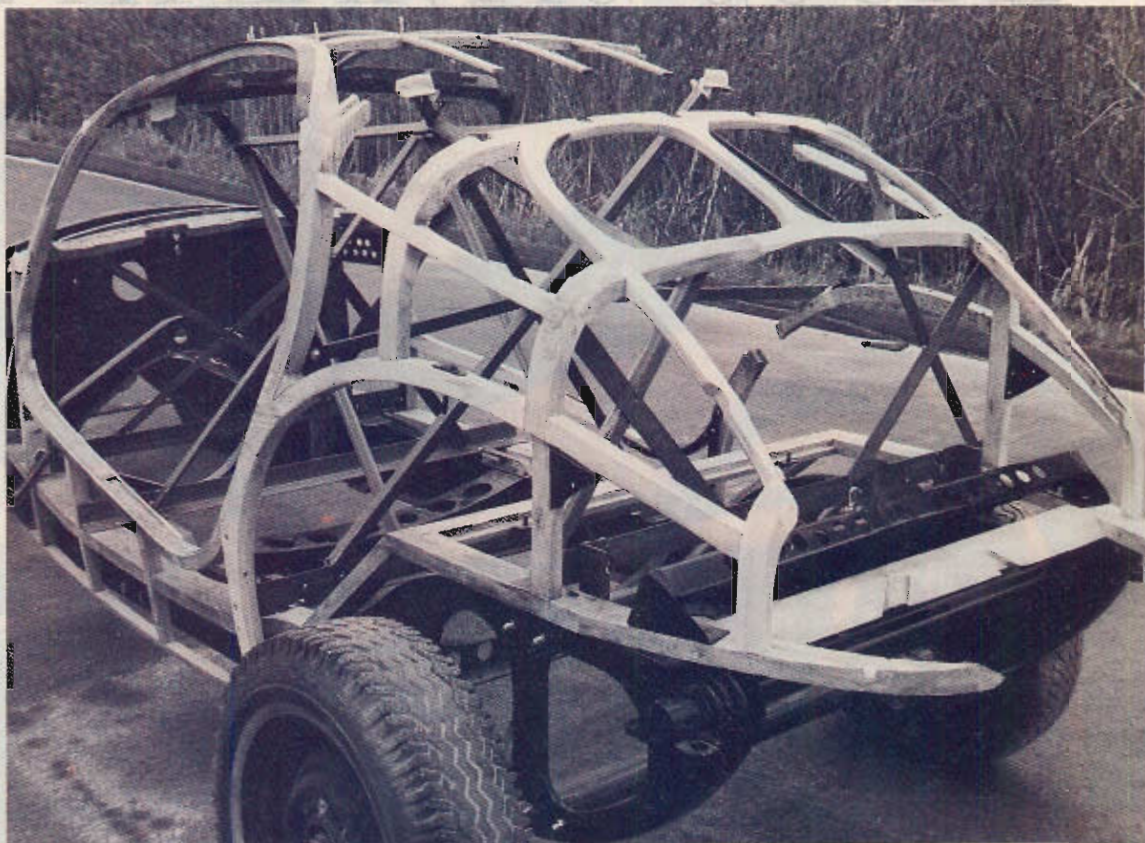


RESTORING THE ATLANTIC COUPE

When Ralph Lauren wanted his Bugatti 57SC Atlantic redone the right way, he took it to the Gullwing Service Company. There, a dedicated restoration team left no rivet unturned.



The man in charge tells the story.

Essex, Massachusetts—

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at the Gullwing Service Company have a simple philosophy: A car has to work well, not just be pretty to look at. We are most satisfied when we are able to restore a classic car to the highest level of performance as well as beauty. Fortunately, designer Ralph Lauren agrees. When he brought in Bugatti Atlantic T57SC number 57591 on July 11, 1988, he did not intend just to pay for a restoration. He allowed—and demanded—that the work be done to very high standards. A client

like that is indeed a pleasure to work for. We had previously restored his Mercedes-Benz 300SL Gullwing, but the Atlantic coupe was one of the most valuable and challenging assignments we had yet faced.

We're very sensitive to the history and authenticity of a car, and we do not want it to suffer from any "restoration

damage" by erasing history. So we scrutinized similar cars and examined a wide range of Bugattis from the same era. We also did a great deal of research, aided by the Bugatti Trust, among others. The detective work continued during the entire two years and 9600 worker-hours it eventually took to complete the restoration.

When we first evaluated the Atlantic, we were pleased that it appeared to be substantially original, with only respraying and retrimming work done over the years. Mechanically, it appeared fair, although there was a general loose feel-

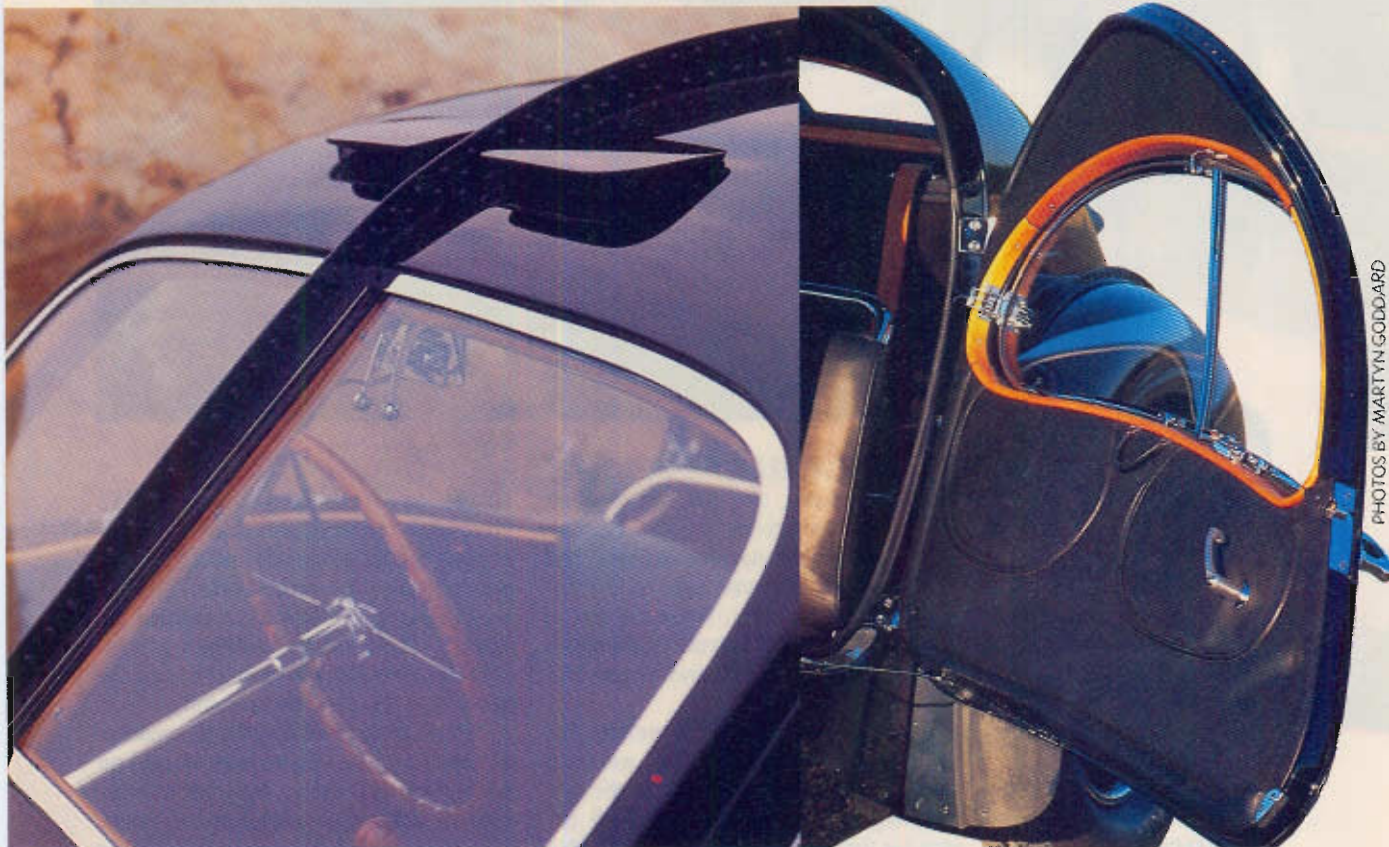
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BY PAUL RUSSELL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
THE GULLWING SERVICE COMPANY

Thus we started our restoration with the wood structure of the Atlantic, which is made of solid ash and is very light and delicate. First, we chemically removed all paint and took the body off the chassis to make the entire wood framework visible. Our aim was to save as much of the original wood as possible. Since the joints had become loose

the body and also, more surprisingly, between the sheetmetal and the wooden structure.

Next, we moved on to the sheetmetal. We were able to retain most of the aluminum body, which was in fair to good condition, and only repaired a few areas where moisture in the wood had corroded the aluminum. With long-term



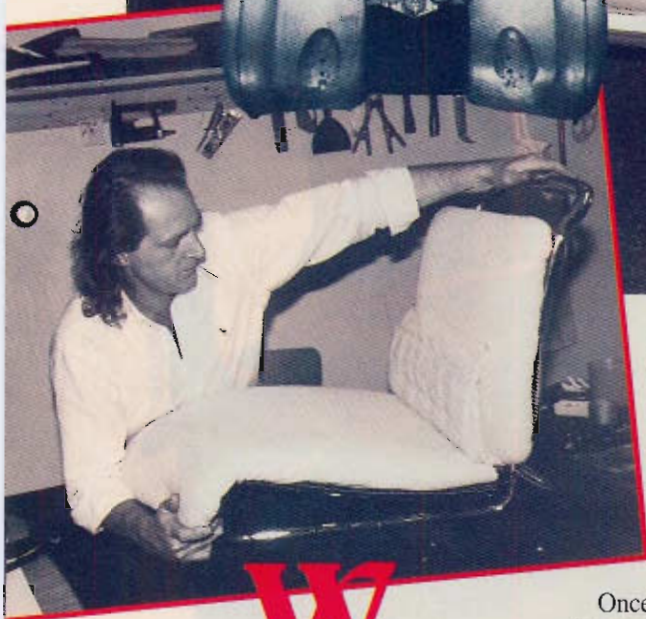
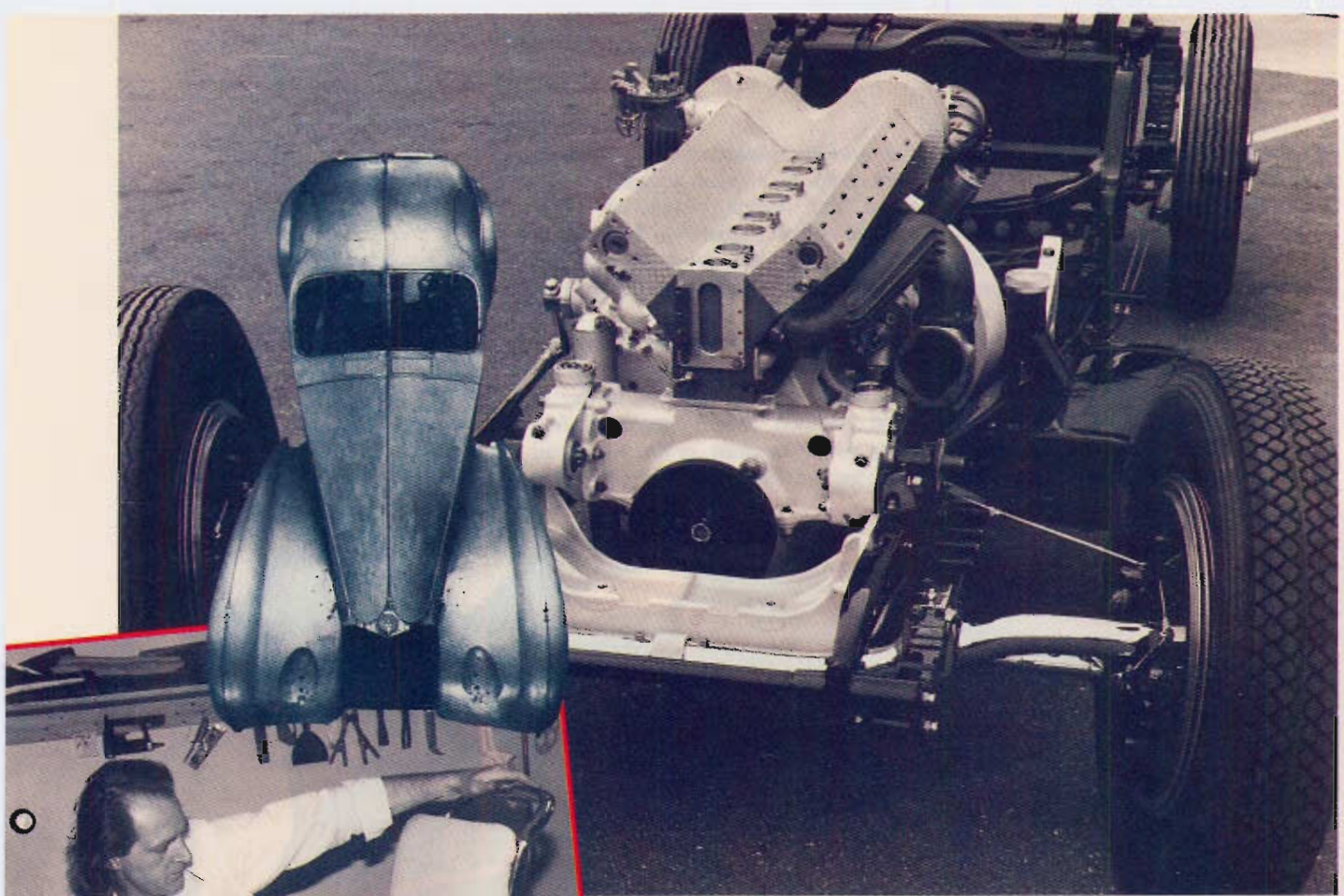
PHOTOS BY MARTYN GODDARD

with age, we next removed and inspected all the wood, regluing all original wood that passed our inspection and replacing the rest. We noted with interest two original peculiarities in the wood framework design: Straps along the roof parallel to the centerline of the car were originally installed the full length of the roof, but then had sections cut out to accommodate roof vents. Also, the entire tail section had been put together before cutting out the spare wheel and tire well, leaving several small pieces of wood only two inches from a joint. We chose to ignore the benefit of fifty years' hindsight and left all of the wood joints exactly as they were originally.

An interesting discovery at this stage

with preservation in mind, we took out every rivet—and there were many. Flush-mounted rivets are found on the Atlantic's hood hinges, roof, cowl vent, hood side grille, and ribs. We spent long hours cleaning every rivet flange, treating each one with special aluminum primer, and reattaching it with an identical new rivet.

Our next sheetmetal job was to create a new radiator shutter that would be a precise copy of the original, which we did—right down to the exact weld style and vane configuration. We continued in the same manner when we replaced the bellypan, which ran from the fire wall rearward past the rear axle. It had been heavily sandblasted, split in sever-



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al places, and patched together with pop rivets. This was a challenge, because the bellypan had many louvers and hand-hammered reliefs. We made dies to stamp the louvers in the exact configuration and shape Bugatti used.

Once we had satisfied ourselves that the body was in good shape, we went over every mechanical aspect of the car. The engine was completely rebuilt except for the pistons, which we were able to re-ring and save. We ground the crankshaft and poured new bearings, rebuilt connecting rods, and disassembled and cleaned the supercharger. Donald Koleman's Competition Motors Bugatti shop performed a valve job and renewed the cam-bearing bores. Donald and his able machinists also helped us with other specialized Bugatti machine work and authenticity research.

Our work continued as we rebuilt the starter, the fuel pump, and all other equipment on the engine. We fitted all new bearings to the transmission and needed to make only one new gear. Next, we rebuilt the rear end and fitted all new brake cables and relined brake shoes. We also rebuilt the front axle assembly and reconstructed the de Ram

shocks—a substantial job in itself. We completely restored the dashboard, including the Ki-gas pump and all switches, controls, and instruments. Finally, we dechromed, respoked, and trued the wheels. These we painted black and fitted with new Dunlop racing tires of the same type the car had originally.

We went to great lengths to preserve any markings that previously existed on parts, such as those on the front axle assembly and other nickel-plated parts. This made the job extremely difficult for our plater, who had to make sure the underlying copper plating did not fill in minor detail punch marks and numerals.

When we began work on the instrument panel, we examined photos of the car taken in the mid-Sixties, which showed us that the gauge faces had been changed. After studying the photos with a magnifying glass and looking at the panels of other Bugattis, we were able to restore the faces to the original style.

The oil pan, crankcase, and supercharger had been sanded and polished. We returned those parts to their natural "as cast" texture by manually stippling the surface. It took hours and hours.

The decorative scraping on the cam gear housings and cam boxes was a matter of great study and comparison.

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Different Bugatti models, we learned, had different scraping styles; some were irregular and others were geometric. Factory photographs of engines prepared for the automotive shows of the day showed scrapings that were more precise and regular than those on most customer cars. Since Mr. Lauren's was one of only three Atlantic coupes made, the scrapings had been of show-car quality. Although subsequent polishing of the cambones had concealed the scraping substantially, we could detect how perfect they once had been and proceeded accordingly.

The interior restoration was especially interesting. The inner structure of the seats—horsehair bags wrapped in muslin, with lumbar-support bags on the seatbacks—was intact. We removed the existing upholstery and searched for tufts of the original fabric and leather. Tiny pieces were found stuck to original upholstery tacks. The original material, we learned, was tan goatskin with a tan broadcloth headliner. We were able to determine the separation lines between the carpet and the headliner in the rear by finding the tack holes in the original wood. Luckily, certain pieces of interior hardware unique to the Atlantic were still in place, such as square key locks that allow access through the rear vertical panel.

Restoring the interior wood trim was a major task. The door windows are oval and in three planes, so fitting the wood trim to them was difficult. We were certain the dashboard was not original, so we made a new one, taking great care to fit it precisely.

The original interior has many extraordinary features. The door panels have scalloped and leather-trimmed door pockets such as those found in many T57s. The doors have no weather-strip gaskets; they rely on a windlace to make a seal and to help the drain channelwork that is incorporated into the door skin. A drain tube, covered in leather, comes down the center of the windshield post from the roof vent drain. All in all, the Atlantic has so much design detail that it is impossible to take it all in with a quick look.

The idea of taking the Atlantic to the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance first came up in May 1990, but Mr. Lauren did not make the final decision to enter the car until June. Our crew put in several seventy-five-hour weeks during the hottest part of the summer to complete

the restoration; on the final weekend before the concours, we were at work on the Bugatti around the clock.

I was honored to be present at Pebble Beach with Mr. Lauren when the Atlantic was awarded Best in Show. It is particularly satisfying to know the desired result was achieved, for this historically important automobile as well as for its proud owner.

Paul Russell is founder and president of the Gullwing Service Company of Essex, Massachusetts, a specialist in the restoration of Fifties Mercedes-Benzes. Russell was trained in engineering and spent several years as a mechanic in Mercedes and BMW repair shops. He

founded the Gullwing Service Company in 1978 with the desire to provide a place where high-quality restoration services would be top priority. A full range of preventive maintenance and repair services is also offered.

In September 1990, Paul Russell and Company was founded. Under this name, Russell and his associates restore prewar and custom coachbuilt cars. Both companies follow a single creed: "Quality is never an accident. It is always the result of intelligent effort. There must be the will to produce a superior thing."

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PHOTOS BY AL SATTERWHITE

