

# The Go-Between

Alex Finigan brings cars and customers together for happy, long-term relationships



WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID LaCHANCE

**T**here's always time to talk when the subject is cars, old cars, the kind of cars that put a sparkle into the eyes of enthusiasts. So while the e-mails accumulated and the phone system took messages, Alex Finigan settled back behind the desk of his cluttered office, wearing a big, boyish grin as he told the story of how he ever got into this line of work, buying and selling the kind of collector cars most of us can only dream about.

"All my life, I've been unconsciously training myself to do what I'm doing right now," he said. "I just started reading *Hot Rod* and *Road & Track* and *Sports Car Illustrated*. How do you train a guy for this? I do this to feed my jones for old cars." The job that Alex unwittingly groomed himself for, that he seems to have been destined for, is sales manager at Paul Russell and Company in Essex, Massachusetts, one of

the country's most highly respected specialists in sporting European classics. As Alex notes, it's a job that draws on everything he's learned by doing the things he loves to do: reading about, restoring, repairing, collecting and enjoying classic cars.

So, where did it all get started? "I was living in North Arlington, New Jersey," Alex said. "It was these little post-war houses that seemed big at the time. I was 9 or 10, and a couple of the kids on my block were 17 or 18. They had hot rods. One night, the kid next door threw a stack of hot rod magazines away," he said, holding his hands about eight inches apart. As the adage says, one man's trash is another man's treasure, and it was never more true than in Alex's case. "I flipped out at it all," he said, and it's clear that the memory is as fresh as if it had happened yesterday in this rural Cape Ann town, rather than nearly a half-century

ago at the curb of a tract house in suburban New Jersey. You don't really need to ask if he still has those magazines.

The rest, apparently, was fated. Before he was old enough to hold a driver's license, he and two friends scrounged up a total of \$68 to buy themselves a decade-old 1953 Studebaker Commander coupe with an engine that was shot. They rebuilt the engine as any bunch of green teenagers might, without realizing that they really ought to have been checking clearances and the like. When the engine self-destructed, Alex sold his share in the car to his partners for a pair of ice skates. Chalk it up as the first of countless automotive deals, then.

In high school, "I was a classic nerd," he said. "I wasn't big into dating; I ran track." His athletic ability won him a scholarship from Fairleigh Dickinson University, the





Reference materials, mementos and collectibles fill Alex's office at Paul Russell; a photo of his first Deuce, sold when his son entered college, hangs on the wall



A collection of (mostly) Gullwing-related license plates brightens the office

largest private university in New Jersey, from which he emerged with a bachelor's degree in marketing. That got him in the door at Mazda and Fiat, where he began his short and unhappy corporate career. "My job was to take Fiat parts that came into the country priced in lira, and translate them into dollars, and send them out to dealers across the country." That would take him until 11 in the morning, after which his boss told him to look busy for the rest of the day. One Friday, he went out to lunch and never returned.

Alex dove head-first into a new career as a self-employed Volkswagen mechanic, his primary assets being a belief in his own abilities, a leased garage and a copy

of *How to Keep Your Volkswagen Alive: A Manual of Step by Step Procedures for the Compleat Idiot*, John Muir's classic 1969 manifesto on the care and feeding of the air-cooled VW. "I've always had self confidence, and I figured I could read this book as good as anybody," he explained. When the lease was up on the garage, he visited a friend in Marblehead, Massachusetts, where Alex Dearborn ran a business that specialized in the restoration and repair of Mercedes-Benz 300 SLs. Three Gullwings and a Mercedes SSK under the roof gave Alex the impression that this might be a pretty good place to work, and he talked his way into a job as a mechanic, joining Paul Russell and David Twitchell.

That was in 1975, and Alex has pretty much stayed in the same place since then, while the business has evolved around him. Dearborn decided to sell the restoration side of the business, which Paul Russell bought and renamed Gullwing Motor Service in 1978. Relocation to Essex followed in 1983. Alex stayed on as a mechanic, helping the company build its reputation as a leading Mercedes-Benz specialist. Gullwing's star shone brilliantly when the 1938 Bugatti Type 57SC Atlantic restored for Ralph Lauren captured a best-in-show award at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance in 1990; a second best-in-show followed in 1993, with Lauren's 1930 Mercedes-Benz SSK Count Trossi Sports Two-Seater. By that time, the company had become Paul Russell and Company.

Twenty years ago, Alex put down his wrenches, becoming the head of Paul Russell's sales department. He was well suited for the transition, with his strong interpersonal skills, his wide circle of friends in the hobby, and his broad knowledge of automotive history.

Although he never uses the word, it's clear that Alex's real job is like that of a *shadchan*, a matchmaker, trying to bring together car and owner for a long, happy relationship. Sometimes the prospective buyer will call, looking for a particular car; other times, an owner will call, offering to sell, or Alex will call a collector, offering a car that he thinks might belong in his collection.

"Our core customers are American busi-

Among the classics for sale is this restored 1968 Jaguar E-Type coupe





In a tech session with members of the Typ 356 Northeast club at Bentley Publishing's Boston shop, Alex delves into the fine points of evaluating a Porsche 356. He's active in a number of clubs, and also leads tours of Paul Russell's restoration facilities

nessmen, from 40 to 70 years old, typically a company owner who has sold the business or retired. They have a lot of money and a lot of time, and they love cars," Alex said. "We try to make it as fun and effortless as possible. That's what keeps the hobby fun for you." These days, it's cars, not buyers, that are in short supply. "It's a seller's market—it's hard to find an inventory of cars," he said. In his experience, the current crop of collectors are enthusiasts who look at their cars as long-term investments, and usually will not consider selling unless it's to buy something else. That's a great deal different from the outright speculation that led to a collapse of collector car prices in 1990 when the bubble burst.

Alex is cautious about what he buys, looking long and hard for just the right cars. He's careful to always identify himself as a dealer, and to explain that he intends to resell the car at profit—showing a degree of integrity that is not universal. "The only thing in this business that you really have is your reputation, and I've got a reputation for being fair and honest and knowledgeable. I could call almost any collector in the world, and they'd know who I was and what I did," he said, with a note of pride in his voice.

What are those collectors looking for? "What is popular right now is the best of anything. Anything with no stories in fabulous condition with a good history and paperwork. I don't care what it is, you can buy a good car and sell it. It's condition, condition, condition," he said. "It can become very frustrating. My to-buy list is this long," he added, his hands spread two feet apart. What's the hottest thing at the moment? Porsche Speedsters. "If someone

calls looking for one, I'll say, OK, I'll put you on the list, and you're not going to be at the top of the list."

What Alex will not offer to sell you is his own 1957 Speedster, the car he drove from coast-to-coast in 2004 for the gathering in Monterey, California, to celebrate the Speedster's golden anniversary. "I drove 3,900 miles in seven days, and never had a breakdown. I had everything with me to rebuild the engine, but I never needed it," he said. The Speedster is one of four 356s in his collection, along with two early 911s, two Deuce Coupe hot rods—one under construction—and a 1956 Volkswagen. Since college, he's never been without a 356, and estimates that he's owned 50 of them over the years. "I scare myself to think what I'd do if I had money. I like Simcas, I like Fiat Abarths, I like all this crazy stuff," he said. "It is a disease. It could have been crack. I think sometimes my wife, Krista, thinks, well, how bad could crack be?" he laughed.

Alex has some sound advice for his customers: Drive your car, as much as possible. "There's an inverse relation between how much you spent on it and how much you're going to use it," he said. "Make it perfect once, and then drive the wheels off it. When I drove my Speedster across the country, that thing was fresh. I had just done a three-year, nut-and-bolt restoration. I had one little chip the whole way across." Another transcontinental run, his seventh, is scheduled for next year, when his new Hemi-powered Deuce Coupe is ready to roll.

"I'm really very happy, I've got a great



Alex's 1957 Speedster performed flawlessly on a Boston-to-Monterey run in 2004

wife and family and cars and friends," said Alex, who celebrated his 60th birthday in February. The couple's 25-year-old son, Alex, works in New York, while their 22-year-old daughter, Samantha, works in Boston. "I've got an inordinate amount of really close friends. The hobby has done very well by me. I just love what I'm doing. I can never see myself retiring." 🌐