THE HUB OF NEW ENGLAND'S CAR COMMUNITY

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SPRING 2019

AMELIA ISLAND
CONCOURS D'ELEGANCE

OPEN HOUSE:
AUTOMOTIVE RESTORATIONS INC.

NEW YORK
INTERNATIONAL AUTO SHOW

OUR BENCH TEAM

Renowned restorer Paul Russell knows the value of a college degree. That's why he's a fan of McPherson College in Kansas, the only school in the country where you can earn a bachelor's degree in auto restoration technology and get right into the game.

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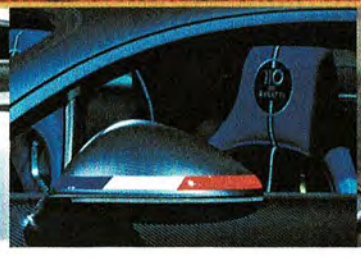

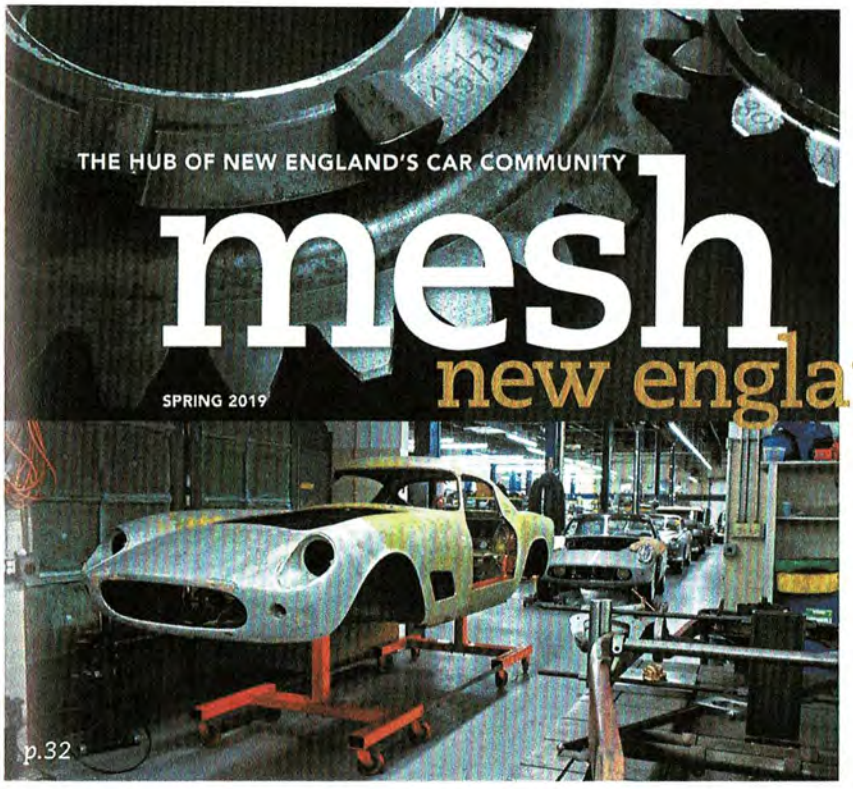

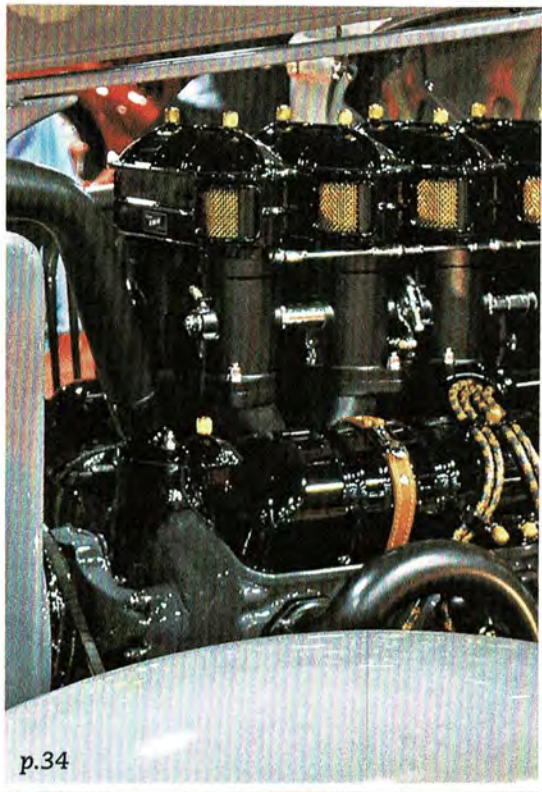

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OUR BENCH TEAM

Renowned restorer Paul Russell knows the value of a college degree. That's why he's a fan of McPherson College in Kansas, the only school in the country where you can earn a bachelor's degree in auto restoration technology and get right into the game.

words and photos by Russ Rocknak

In the automotive industry as well as the aircraft industry, I frequently hear, a restoration-technologies graduate is becoming an in-demand commodity. Hands-on talent is becoming hard to find, and right now only two secondary schools offer this program. One is McPherson College in McPherson, Kansas. It offers a four-year BA program in auto restoration technology. The other is Pennsylvania College of Technology, which in conjunction with Penn State, offers a two-year associate's degree program.

In terms of sustenance and longevity, education is where our future lies. Taking care of our collections will not be possible without a bench team warming up. We start this two-part series by focusing on acclaimed restorer Paul Russell and McPherson College. I met with Russell to discuss his involvement with the school and how it affects his business and our hobby.

This year's Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance Best in Show trophy went to a1938 Mercedes-Benz 540K Autobahn-Kurier that Paul Russell and Company restored.

PHOTO BY JOSH SWEENEY/SED

Russell started in the restoration business in 1978, working for a restoration shop in Marblehead, Massachusetts, owned by Alex Dearborn. It was a small shop with Russell, Dearborn and two other mechanics. Russell had worked at the shop for five years, when Dearborn decided to go in a slightly different direction, moving from restoring cars to selling them. He sold the restoration portion of his business to Russell, who was, in his words, audacious enough to think he was ready to run a business at the time.

"[Dearborn] really did make the transition easy for me to start out," explained Russell. "Part of our mutual agreement was that for five years I would maintain a relationship with him, being his tenant. He would buy a bigger building, and we could have a showroom and a restoration shop. The restoration shop only did mechanical work, so we would have to find outside sources like body shops, upholsterers and metal workers to do all the projects. After that five years, it became clear to me that most of my customers really wanted one-stop shopping. The liability at that time of managing the other shops and trying to get the entire package together as a deliverable and completed car was challenging and took way too long to get done. I aspired to move to a facility where we could bring all of those outside facilities under one roof.

"We moved to Essex in 1983," Russell continued. "Initially, we just occupied what is now the mechanical shop. After five years we built an addition where we could have a more environmentally compliant spray booth and ventilation system, a dedicated metal shop instead of just the corner of the body shop, and a centrally located parts room right in the middle. Gradually, as the business grew and the staff grew, we expanded again into the older part of this building. Now we have a full machine shop, showroom and a storage facility. We started out here with myself, Alex Finigan and Dave Twitchel. Now we have 26 employees.

"I got involved with McPherson around 2003 or '04, when I got a call from Brian Gunning, who was a member of the Mercedes-Benz Club and was on a committee involved with education and the club's support of educational programs, particularly McPherson College. He recommended that I learn more about the school and come out to Kansas for a visit. Part of the attraction was they had a restoration program, and the other was the educational component itself. I really believe in following your passion. At the school, you can learn because you are following your passion, not just picking from a list of majors, or saying, 'Oh, I think I'll be a dentist. They make good money.'

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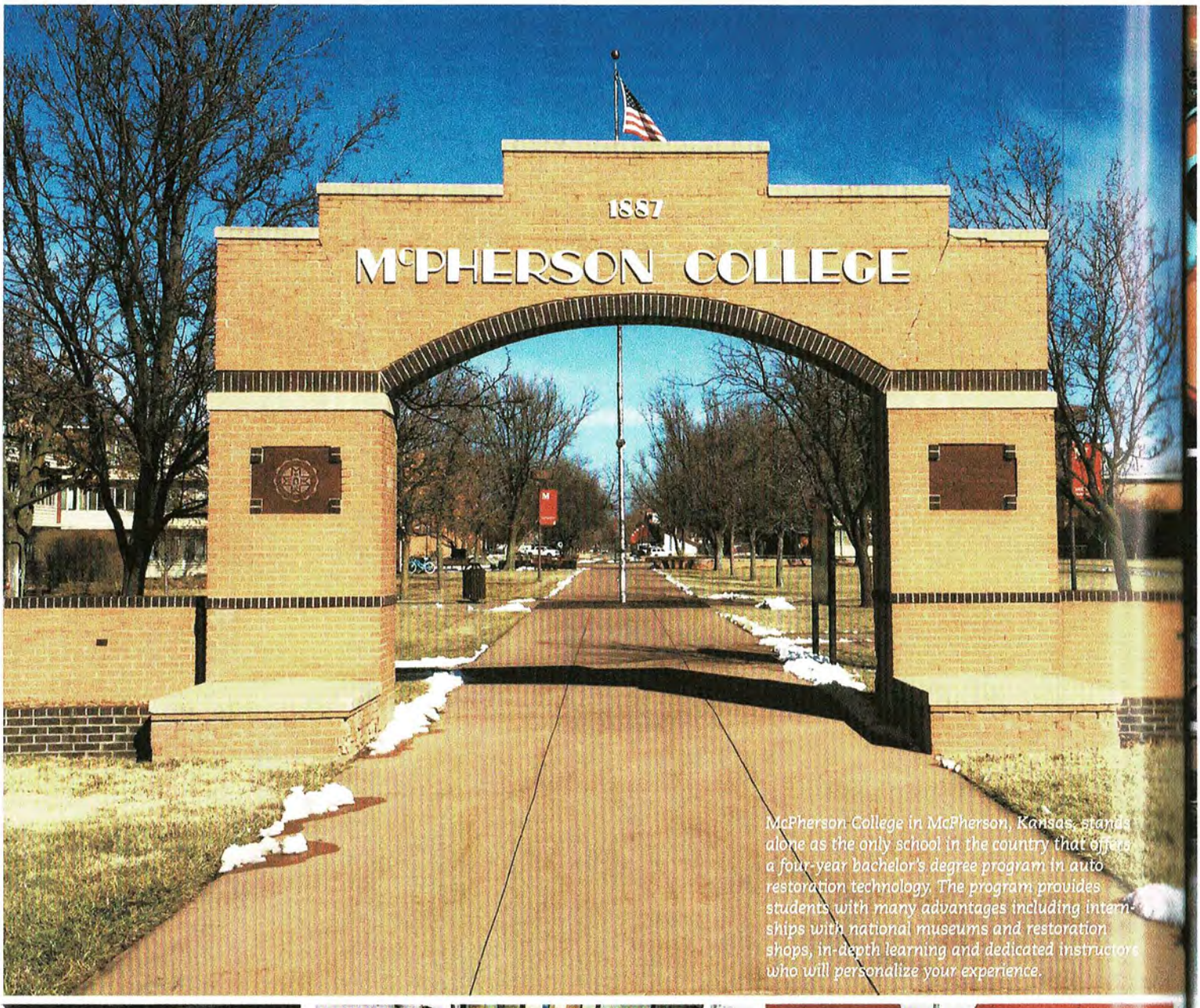
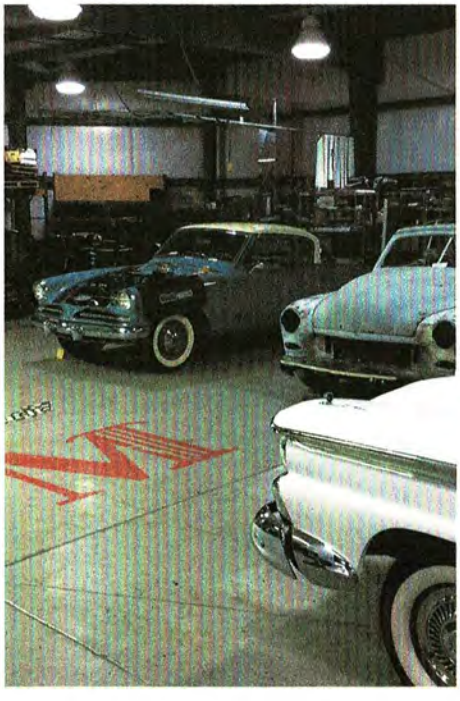
"When I got involved with the school, I was intrigued because it was a liberal arts school and it offered an automotive restoration program—an endeavor that is primarily technical. The mantra was, 'We teach liberal arts that you can make a living with.' That appealed to me.

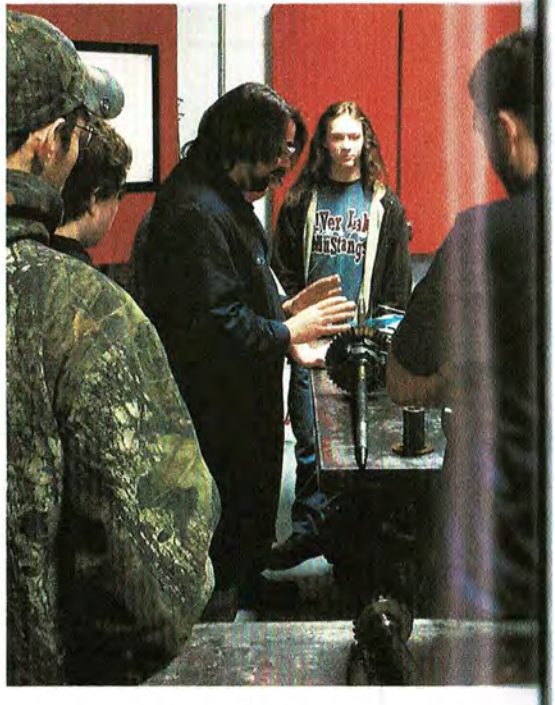
"At that time it was just a two-year program. There was a conversation going on about elevating the program to a four-year bachelor's degree program. For a while they offered both, and then they dropped the two-year program. I was invited to become

Paul Russell (above) finds that well-rounded individuals who are passionate about what they do are the best candidates for his bench team. Located in Essex, Massachusetts, Paul Russell and Company is rarely seen through a lens whose shutter actually opens and shuts. This is the environment that utilizes the best in automotive restoration technologies.



McPherson College in McPherson, Kansas, stands alone as the only school in the country that offers a four-year bachelor's degree program in auto restoration technology. The program provides students with many advantages including internships with national museums and restoration shops, in-depth learning and dedicated instructors who will personalize your experience.





part of the advisory board. I was an advocate of making this a four-year program, because in my own business we not only need craftsmen and technicians, we need people who have a well-rounded view of the world and people who are good at dealing with my clients. Having somebody who had the experience of spending another two years in school and experiencing life and maturing a little more and becoming more well-rounded and worldlier—that held great appeal to me."

The job placement of McPherson's restoration-program graduates is the envy of any school of any type in the country: It is about 95 percent. Students often have a job before they graduate.

"These graduates are in high demand, and Phil Reinhardt is a good example of that," said Russell. "Before I offered Phil a job, he came here as intern, a winter intern.

Phil Reinhardt

A recent McPherson College graduate and a new Paul Russell and Company employee, Phil Reinhardt is ready to transition from school to work, aligning his vocation with his avocation. On the school's campus in Kansas, I caught up with Reinhardt, a 22-year-old native of Tenants Harbor, Maine, and asked him about his trajectory to where he is now. He explained his path rather simply. "My dad has been in construction basically for his whole life. He had a shop where they would fix all the construction vehicles, and I gravitated toward the mechanics," Reinhardt said. "Watching him and his colleagues work was very inspirational. It lit the initial fire. So, my childhood went from playing with Legos to lawnmowers and then to tractors. When I was 9 years old, my father knew a former director of the Owls Head Transportation Museum [in Owls Head, Maine]. My father would bring me there to visit, and I was blown away by the old cars and planes. The museum had a volunteer program, and they agreed to let me volunteer there, even though I was pretty young. That really lit the fire for old cars. I always thought they were kind of cool, but by hanging out with them and all the old volunteers who tinkered on them, I really learned an appreciation for that era of automobile history.

"I got my first Model T when I was 14 years old—actually my first running car was a 1972 MGB. Time came to look for school or college, and I wasn't too thrilled about going, but I found McPherson College online. My parents weren't really into it, though my dad was a little more into to it than my mother was. She thought I was crazy. My parents came out and visited the school and saw what a world-class program this was and how, upon completing it, you could have some opportunities to make a living in auto restoration. Then my mom started to come around."

Growing up on the mid-coast of Maine, it's hard not to become involved in the maritime industry. (Reinhardt's mother's family are all fishermen, in the scallop or lobster business.) "When I was a freshman in high school, I picked up a job as a deckhand for the Monhegan Boat Line [which runs a pair of tour boats/ferries between Port Clyde, Maine, and Monhegan Island]," said Reinhardt. "After two years, one of the older tour guides retired. I had public speaking skills from volunteering at the museum, so I worked both jobs, deckhand and tour guide. After six seasons of that, there was a need for captains, so my boss asked if I was interested in applying. He offered to pay the fees to take the course and earn the 100-ton merchant mariner credentials. I completed the course, and this will be my second season as a captain for Monhegan."

Paul Russell is the chairman of the advisory board for the automotive restoration program at McPherson College; the board also includes Tom Cotter, the Revs Institute Director Scott George, and Casey Maxem, who runs the Historical Vehicle Association. Russell and the members set the curriculum for the program based on what they want in a future employee. Russell visits the campus a few times a year. "When [Russell] was on campus, I would introduce myself and explain that I was a local boy from Maine," said Reinhardt. "I kept in touch with him over the years, and in the fall of my junior year I did a winter internship with him at his shop in Essex, Massachusetts. He offered me a job soon after. I am really excited to start full-time there this September." —R.R.

It wasn't a full internship; it was only about a month. I really liked what I saw and was impressed with him as a young man. This was in the middle of his junior year. I thought that I better make my interest in him well known, because when it comes time for him to graduate, he might not be around. So I offered him a job, and he accepted. He didn't even have to start for a year.

"Enrollment in this program is growing gradually and is not over-stressing the system, the school and the faculty. It is growing, and it has given me an interesting insight into the business side of higher education, like seats in classrooms and retention. You don't think of it this way frequently, but it is a business. They need people to pay tuition and stay in school to make the whole thing work. You don't just open the doors and say, 'Here we are.' You go out and recruit. You promote the program, because they want more applicants.

"They have been very, very successful in recruiting for the restoration program. It's becoming more and more known by not only shops, but private collectors who have significant 80- to 100-car collections and need a person on the payroll to take care of these cars, take them to events, and make sure they are all kept up so the owner can enjoy them.

"The program has many aspects to it," Russell pointed out. "If somebody wants to become an automotive journalist, the student can take the automotive-restoration course and major in communications. They can take automotive courses as well as the other curriculum to complete the requirements for an accredited bachelor's degree.

"You can take automotive history, too. It's not all turning wrenches and spraying paint. There are a lot of avenues one can take at the school. There are also a lot more women getting involved now, and the school is placing those young women not only in positions that would traditionally be considered for women, like historical and archive work and public relations work, but also in the trades like body shops. I really applaud that.

"The business equation for the school now is that it has more applicants than it can accept. It has transitioned from hoping it would have enough applicants to now where it can be selective. The applicant has to have a portfolio and a certain grade point average to get in. The grade point average for the restoration program is about 3.2.

"Being on the board, I go down there at least once a year for the board meeting in May, when the school is starting to wind up toward the end of year celebrations and there is a lot of excitement in the air. Board members attend the convocation, and it is great to see students win awards for drama, band and track and field, just to name a few. Then there are all of these restoration-program students marching up to get their awards for doing other things in school life.

"The year before last, the president of the student body was an automotive-restoration program student," said Russell. "There was a time in the higher education environment—pre-Jay Leno and his call to action to get the younger generation involved—when I am sure some of the other faculty would look around and say, 'What are all of these guys doing here?' The automotive restoration faculty even used to call themselves the Auto Rats. Now these Auto Rats are serving as an example to the rest of the school. They have shown a way forward that all of the other departments are starting to pay attention to."

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Paul Russell and Company offers restoration, preservation, maintenance and sales and brokerage services on Mercedes-Benz, Ferrari, Porsche, Bugatti, Alfa Romeo and other fine European collectibles from the prewar era through the 1960s. Clients throughout the world recognize that Russell and his team are the very best at bringing very special automobiles back to their former glory.

The 2012 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance Best of Show winner, the 1928 Mercedes-Benz 680S Saoutchik Torpedo Roadster is another Paul Russell and Company restoration. The restoration team was comprised of several McPherson College graduates.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PAUL RUSSELL AND COMPANY