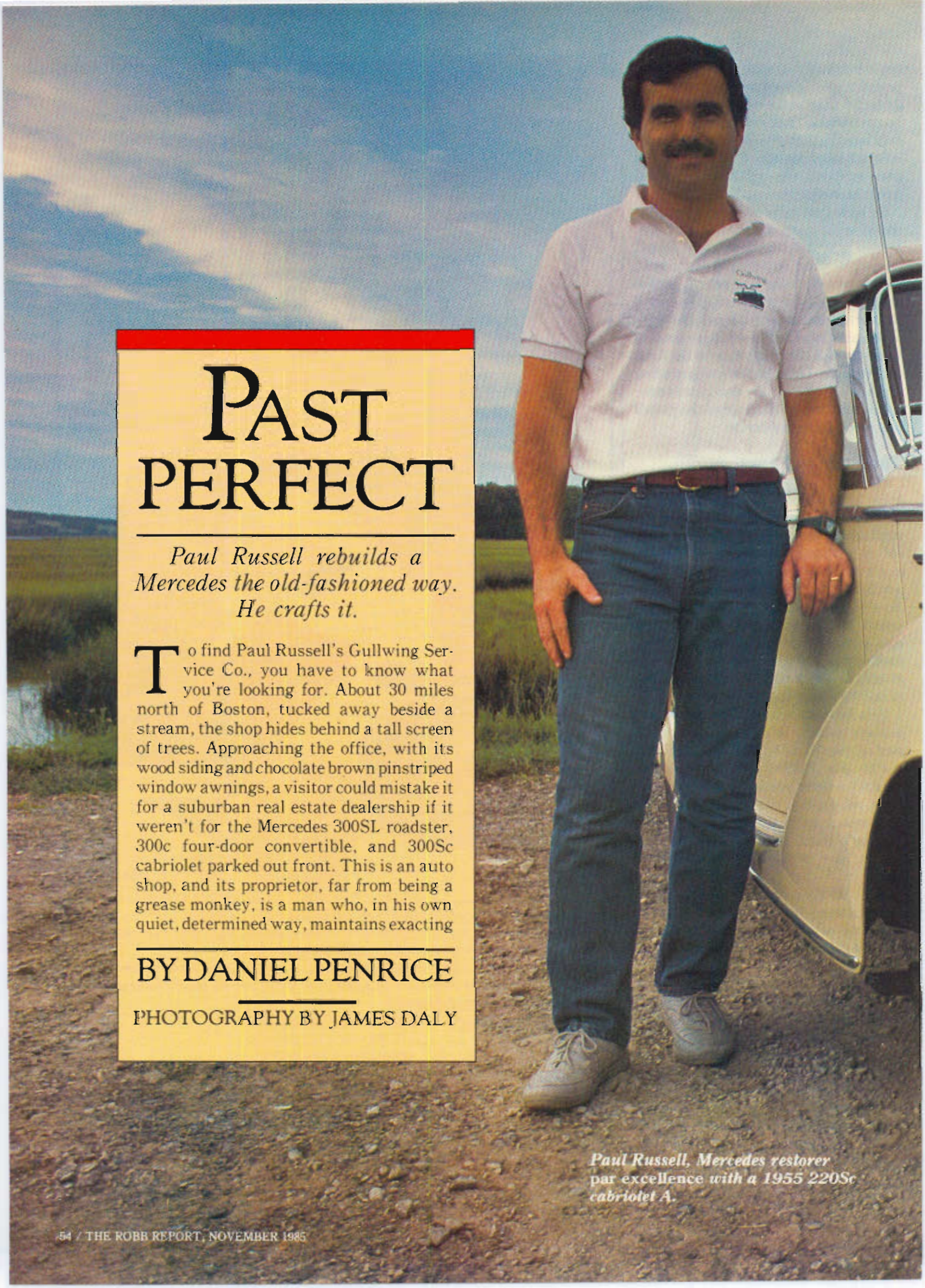


PAST PERFECT

Paul Russell rebuilds a Mercedes the old-fashioned way. He crafts it.

To find Paul Russell's Gullwing Service Co., you have to know what you're looking for. About 30 miles north of Boston, tucked away beside a stream, the shop hides behind a tall screen of trees. Approaching the office, with its wood siding and chocolate brown pinstriped window awnings, a visitor could mistake it for a suburban real estate dealership if it weren't for the Mercedes 300SL roadster, 300c four-door convertible, and 300Sc cabriolet parked out front. This is an auto shop, and its proprietor, far from being a grease monkey, is a man who, in his own quiet, determined way, maintains exacting

BY DANIEL PENRICE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES DALY

Paul Russell, Mercedes restorer par excellence with a 1955 220Sc cabriolet A.

standards and knows just what he wants.

Russell restores old cars — but not just ordinary old cars, and not by any ordinary restoration process. He and his 11 employees remanufacture classic Mercedes-Benzes from the 1950s and early 1960s. As Russell himself admits, he's found a rather narrow niche, one that allows him to indulge his own peculiar passion for excellence. In an age in which fine craftsmanship has all but vanished, Russell, 34, stands apart as one of the world's leading Mercedes restorers.

His standards are receiving worldwide recognition. At last summer's meeting in Hamburg, West Germany, of 150 members of Europe's 300SL owner's club, Russell, the personal guest of club president Robert Bayer, was introduced as "the foremost restorer in the United States."

Even one of Russell's major competitors is ready to praise the quality of Gullwing's work: "There are a lot of hacks out there," says Bob Platz, proprietor of Precision Auto Works in Camden, N.J., "and only a few of us who are recognized nationally for doing these cars. Paul Russell is a very discriminating person when it comes to rebuilding 300SLs mechanically, and overall he delivers a very fine product."

This tomato red 1955 300Sc Gullwing (above) happens to be Russell's in-shop favorite. The Gullwing staff gathered around it includes (left to right) Russell, Bruce Marston, John Arsenault, Dave Burnett, Dave Turtchell, Jay Herbster, Jack Shepherd, Carl Brown, and Alex Finigan. Meticulous sanding by Brown (left) returns panache to the Mercedes body. Hand assembly, like that performed on a 300SL Gullwing by Warren Gilks (below left), set the 1950s Mercedes apart from later models.

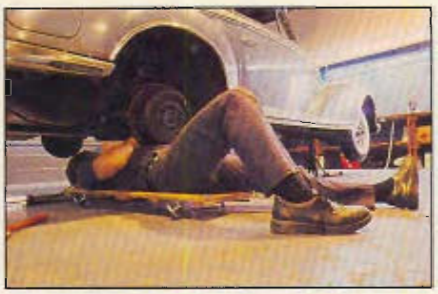
High praise for someone who specializes in such a narrow area. Why does he limit himself to only a few model years?

"The fifties was really a great era for Mercedes," Russell says, "and the cars of the fifties are a kind that are very difficult to duplicate — they're handassembled cars. It's incredible when we take apart a very nice, original but worn-out car and see how it was built to begin with." A connoisseur of the "little

touches" that identify the old Mercedes assembly process, Russell lists his favorites: "The trim wood will have little leather patches underneath where it attaches to the door frame so it won't squeak, and the woodwork that goes over the instruments will be lined with black felt, so that there's no rubbing or squeaking. The tops and interiors are put together in a real old-world fashion, with handtied springs in the seats and horsehair padding that's all wrapped and quilted in muslin baggies — it's really almost like Victorian furniture."

For a time during the sixties, limited-production Mercedes models such as the 600 and the five-passenger convertible continued to be handassembled. But gradually even these cars came to be manufactured by more modern methods that used cheaper materials. At Gullwing, Russell limits his work to cars that were produced the old-fashioned way. Yet his purism should not be confused with antiquarianism; Russell also is interested in restoring cars, not just as showpieces, but for use. That is why he won't handle cars made before 1950; his appreciation for the models he works on extends to the way they perform.

"The fifties cars, despite being built in the classic tradition, are very drivable cars, with a very modern feeling," he says. "They handle well, they get mileage in the 20s, they're very advanced engineering-wise, with fuel injection and overhead camshafts — things that didn't appear in other cars until much later."



Russell's reputation for meticulous service, restorations, and general maintenance brings recognition in Europe and clients from around the world to the Essex, Mass., shop. Most Gullwing customers love their cars as much as Russell seems to love his work.

"Regulars" — those who return for routine checkups, regardless of whether or not Russell has ever restored their cars — now number between 75 and 100, according to Russell's estimate. Many of these clients own Mercedes that have

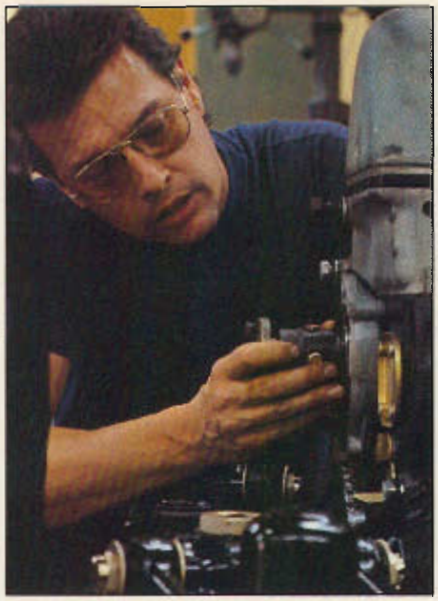
Restorers like Dave Burnett get fully involved in their work (top). The half-finished body of a 1954 300SL Gullwing (middle) takes on an eerie skeletal look. A restorer takes a classic position under a classic car of the fifties (left). One of Gullwing's residents, a 300Sc cabriolet (below), waits to be retrieved by its Brazilian owner; it has been at the shop three years.

been in their families since the original purchase, cars that have almost become family members themselves. The owner of a beautiful beige 220 Cabriolet A, for instance, claims to have been born in the car. And even though Russell has been quoted as saying: "We look after the best interests of the automobile over those of the owner," he really does care about the owner, too. An English racing car was garaged in the shop as a courtesy to a customer whose Gullwing was undergoing restoration. Just across the hall from Russell's office, a gleaming tobacco brown 300Sc cabriolet patiently awaits its workaholic Brazilian owner. It has been three years since Russell completed its restoration.

On a typical Gullwing day, a stately 300Sc, a 220 Cabriolet A, a pair of 300SL coupes, and a red Gullwing — its famous doors raised as if for flight — are lined up before the long workbench that extends along one wall of the shop. Only one — one of the 300SLs — is being totally restored. Of the approximately 100 cars that each year pass through the shop, only six are completely redone.

A full restoration, which takes about a year to complete, begins with a thorough game plan based both on the customer's dreams and on Russell's analysis of what needs to be done. Diagnostic tests are performed on the body, mechanical components, and trim features of the automobile. Prices for a total restoration range from $70,000 to more than $125,000, depending on the car's initial condition. Russell says he likes to counsel a prospective buyer of a classic Mercedes before he selects a car for restoration; Gullwing increasingly is helping potential customers locate cars.

Once Russell gets the customer's approval, his staff completely disassembles the car. "We take the drivetrain out of the car," Russell explains, "we take all the windows and electrics out, and the bumpers and chrome and everything else — we strip it to a bare shell. In



Alex Finigan's intricate engine work (top) gives a 1951 Mercedes with a 1936 body style new life. A 1966 300SE silver convertible engine (center) gets a thorough review by Bruce Marston (left) and Dave Turtchell. The Mercedes 300S of the post-war era has been called a super luxury car; the observation holds true for this striking example, a 1956 300Sc (below).

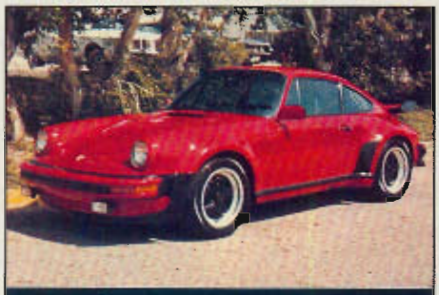
Mercedes' popularity is on the upswing; the 1960 300SL roadster (above) is worth around $50,000 today. The shop's extensive stock of original Mercedes parts (right) can bring back the gleam to the grillwork of the 1960 300SE convertible (center) and the Mercedes emblem (below).

the case of the cars that it can be done on, which is not all of the ones we work on, we take the body off the chassis." Following this last process, which is performed with the aid of special equipment built by the Gullwing staff to duplicate Mercedes' own, the car's shell moves to the body shop, and the mechanical shop starts "tearing down" (taking off) all the individual components. Assigned to each project, a crew chief first inspects the components, determines what new parts are required, and submits order forms to Gullwing's in-house parts department.

Because of the difficulty of obtaining certain mechanical and trim components that are often needed for these restorations, Russell's one-man parts department is continually looking for parts, even if they are not needed for jobs currently in progress. If Gullwing cannot locate "factory original" parts directly from Mercedes, or from Mercedes' own suppliers, it tries to find former owners with spares, people who have reproduced parts for their own Mercedes, or members of the broad network Russell refers to as "cottage industries" of the restoration business. "It's quite an administrative undertaking to restore a car," Russell says, "and it's one of the things that we're particularly good at."

As a last resort, both mechanical and trim components sometimes require remanufacturing, either in-house or with the help of an outside contractor. For one recent job — the restoration of one of only 20 aluminum-body Gullwings ever made — Russell's body shop planned to fabricate an entire body shell.

Upon finishing the internal work, Russell and his workmen carefully reassemble the car, putting it back together so that, in the end, it's as good as or better than it was when it first rolled out of the Stuttgart, W. Germany, factory. "In a way," Russell says, "you build the car twice." Once all major mechanical and body work has been finished, a coat of primer has been applied, and the job is nearly complete, "You're really only



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halfway there," Russell explains. "We then put all the gaskets and the locks in the car, we close the doors, and we check the gaps in the profile, making sure everything fits properly. Then we put all the glass in the car and make sure the window openings are all the right size. And then we take it apart again, make any adjustments necessary, and finally paint it."

Russell prefers modern paints, available from Mercedes in the authentic original colors, to the so-called "factory original" paints; they are more durable and weatherproof than the older ones, which is important to customers who put their cars to use. In addition, Russell finds German leather superior to American-made hides and handles the ordering of all "soft work" — upholstery — himself.

Russell sees his business this way: "We've defined the types of cars and the era of cars we like to work on, without limiting the nature or categories of the work we'll do. In other words, we'd be happy to remanufacture a Gullwing for a customer, or we'd be happy to change his oil, and everything in between. We want the owners of those cars to know we can provide any level of service they require."

Yet he still insists on the best. "If a customer wanted what we would call a 'quick and dirty' paint job on a car for a few hundred dollars, we wouldn't do that. We maintain the standards of the workmanship regardless of the quantity of work that's done on the car."

Success like Gullwing's comes only through enormous effort and dedication, but Russell is hardly a fanatic. Affable yet businesslike, articulate without wasting words, Russell has a relaxed, precise manner that permeates the shop's atmosphere. In Gullwing's spacious, uncluttered, impeccably swept main wing, which houses the mechanical and body shops, propeller-style fans silently turn overhead, and workmen softly play portable radios; they converse without shouting. The only distractions are the two dozen classic Mercedes in every conceivable stage of disassembly, repair, and remanufacture.

"All the guys in the shop work here," Russell says, "because they have a real interest in the cars" — just like Russell himself.

"I had always been interested in cars as a kid" he says. With his square jaw and clean-cut neatly mustachioed features, he's hard to distinguish from any American man who grew up listening to the Beach Boys and dreaming of his first Corvette.

Russell got his start tinkering with inexpensive English sports cars in his parents' backyard in nearby Andover. One summer, while working his way through engineering school, he took a job in southern New Hampshire in a small, independent repair shop that specialized in foreign cars. His boss, who trained in Mercedes' five-year factory apprentice program, grew fond of Russell, began to explain the beauties and intricacies of Mercedes' workmanship, and forbid him to work on any other car. Instead of returning to engineering school, Russell stayed at the shop for a total of 15 months and spent the next few years working at various Mercedes and BMW dealerships. Although he was primarily interested in receiving formal training, Russell says dealerships were reluctant to invest in factory training for their technicians. Finally, as he puts it, "I made a generalization about the new-car service industry: they weren't as committed to the quality of the work as I would like to see them."

So in 1973 Russell answered an ad placed by Alex Dearborn, owner of Dearborn Automobile Co. in Marblehead, Mass., a small shop that specialized in restoring old Mercedes. Russell worked for Dearborn until 1978, when his employer's interests turned increasingly to the buying and selling of antique and classic cars. After five years in the restoration business, Russell bought Dearborn's restoration department, and with two of his fellow employees set up his own independent organization — Gullwing Service Co. The company remained in Marblehead for a short time, and after a five-year stint in Topsfield, moved to Essex in 1983. Whereas the Topsfield shop had only 2,000 square feet and three bays — Russell had to contract out about 30 percent of the work on total restorations — the Essex building enables him to handle all but a few very specialized aspects of the Mercedes restoration process.

"It's kind of all-consuming," Russell says of his job. Although it doesn't leave him much time to work on the cars himself — instead he runs the operation — Russell seems content doing for a living what he otherwise would do out of love.

"We know that if we want the job done right," Russell quotes his customers as saying, "we should talk to you." For Russell, who has always known he wanted to do the job right, there can't be anything he would rather hear. ■