A Family Affair

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The sun was shining and the ocean breeze warm and inviting on that March day as I walked on the green at the posh Ritz-Carlton. The gleam coming off all of the paint and chrome of the assembled automotive finery was enough to make anyone reach for their sunglasses. I was on assignment at the tenth annual Amelia Island Concours d'Elegance in 2005, and as I scanned through row upon row of what were among the finest cars in the world, my eyes came to rest on one particular Mercedes-Benz; this putty-colored 300 SL roadster, wearing an unusual black hardtop, wasn't screaming for attention with red paint or chromed Rudge knockoffs—it was subtle, competent and inviting me over for a closer look. And it was there that I met Tom Kurtz and Paul Russell, and learned the SL's story.

According to Daimler-Benz historical records, the White Grey 300 SL roadster was delivered in 1960 with both soft and hard tops, "Lichtenheit" European-specification headlamps, and most unusually, factory-installed extra-tall padding on the driver's seat bottom. The SL has been a member of the Kurtz family since 1988, when Tom and his brother Bob purchased the car with their father, Robert, as a family restoration project.

"Our family's interest in unusual automobiles extends back decades," Bob recalls. "While in college, Dad dreamed of owning a Duesenberg he often saw parked in an alley near the dorm. In the early 1950s, he bought a 1948 Lincoln Continental cabriolet, which he restored while we largely watched. This was the first car he let us drive... or, more accurately, steer while we each sat on his lap." Although their dad soon became involved in his career and his passion for cars began to wane, the seeds had been sown; it was natural that their father's enthusiasm would begin to grow in the boys. Bob became intrigued with Mercedes-Benz "Gullwings" when he was in high school, and started responding to newspaper and magazine ads in hopes of finding an example his father would be willing to buy. That dream came true, following the senior Kurtz's retirement, when he bought a "virtual basket case" 1955 coupe in 1984. As they began the long process of restoring it, their admiration for the 300 SL grew, and within a few years, the three men were searching for a roadster.

"We found the roadster in West Virginia in 1988, and it was in very rough condition," Bob continues. "It is thought that this car was once owned by Sonny Bono and Cher. This 300 SL appeared in the 1976 movie *The Gumball Rally*, and it had been owned until 1981 by the actor who starred in that film, Michael Sarrazin. It spent many years in storage after Sarrazin's ownership, and the three of us, with some support from specialists, brought it back to running condition over the next several years. Following

The aluminum floor pans, transmission tunnel and bulkhead were removed to expose the chassis

The owners didn't know the SL's engine block was cracked

our Dad's passing, in 2001, we initiated an extensive body-off, frame-up professional restoration to return the car to its original specifications and colors."

Because the car ultimately would be a tribute to their father, Bob and Tom wanted to give it the very best restoration treatment. To them, this meant bringing the SL from its home in Ridgefield, Connecticut, up to Essex, Massachusetts, to the internationally renowned restoration firm of Paul Russell and Company. Paul, who was at Amelia with the car, made the trip to the Concours to support the Kurtz brothers' showing. "That car is obviously a family heirloom," he explains. "When the 300 SL initially came to us, we were to pick up the restoration where the Kurtzes left off—but after much evaluation, we decided that it would be best if we started over. We had been helping them with their restoration, offering both over-the-counter parts sales and

Bob's and Tom's dad, Robert, behind the wheel

Luxurious leather covers the dashboard, seats, door panels and sills. The steering wheel, cracked in an earlier accident, was repaired

After the body was chemically stripped and sprayed with a protective coat of epoxy primer, corrosion areas were addressed

This hardtop, not original to this car, had to be repaired and painted before it could be test-fitted to the SL's body

The complex tubular chassis was silica-blasted and painted with gloss black urethane; the wiring harness was then installed

When they were perfect, the distinctive fender "eyebrows" were bolted back on, and lead was used to fill the seams

To improve ventilation, the hardtop has an air vent under the lip above the window

nuts and bolts advice—we always enjoyed it when Mr. Kurtz would come in to see Jack Styles in our parts department with a crumpled list of parts they needed—and I admire them for trying to do the restoration themselves; it was great to support them.

"I went to Amelia to assist them in showing the car—I could talk with the judges and answer the technical questions that arose," Paul continues. "These 300 SLs are production cars, but they aren't identical—details evolved and changed from year to year, and when you're competing with the car, it's important to get those esoteric details right."

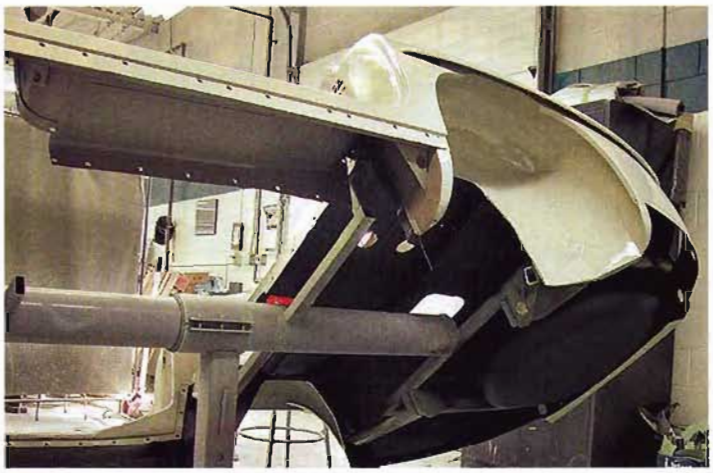
The Kurtz 300 SL is one of 249 built in 1960 and one of 1,858 in total; it traces its lineage back to the 1954 300 SL "Gullwing" coupe, but is more conventional than that race-derived exotic. The roadster debuted at the Geneva motor show in March 1957, and was in production three months later. Reengineered to accommodate conventionally opening doors and the lack of a structural roof, the additional supports in the roadster's complex tube frame added nearly 200 pounds to the weight of the previous SL, but compensated by making the Gullwing's optional competition camshaft standard on the roadster, bringing the mechanically fuel-injected, 2,996cc, overhead-cam straight-six to 240hp and 228-lbs.ft. of torque. The engine remained canted 45 degrees to the left to clear the low hood.

The roadster also differed with its redesigned rear suspension; the swing axles in coupes that frightened untrained drivers at the limits were modified with low pivot point and central compensating spring, which greatly enhanced the car's neutral handling balance, and the spare tire and gas tank that once filled the coupe's trunk were relocated and downsized to make room for luggage in the roadster. Although it filled the role of Grand Tourer, the open SL was no less a powerful sports car, running to 60 mph in roughly seven seconds and topping out at 133 mph with the standard 3.89:1 rear axle ratio. And at $11,573 new, including its $474 hardtop, the roadster was anything but inexpensive transportation.

When the Kurtzes purchased the companion roadster for their 300 SL coupe, the car was painted silver; it was missing its Bosch fuel injectors and assorted injector hardware, a number of trim pieces, the

Before it was painted, the SL's body received four coats of epoxy primer and urethane surface primer, and it was block-sanded

The rivets holding the sport wheels' steel centers to the aluminum rims were drilled out before the wheels were restored



Specialized 300 SL roadster body rotisserie is just one of the unique tools Paul Russell and Company use in 300 SL restorations

A sleeve brought one damaged cylinder bore to the same size as the other five; cam bearing brackets were marked as original

jack and tools, and the hardtop. Although it functioned well as a "driver" after they got it up and running, the SL had far greater potential. Tom and Bob brought it to Paul Russell's shop, where three crew chiefs were assigned to the car; these supervisors and their crews formed a team that was responsible for the roadster's restoration, from start to finish.

As is their standard practice, they first inspected the car from top to bottom for unusual wear and tear, evident or hidden damage and aspects that deviated from original. Frank Price, the body, metal and paint chief, found that the steel-bodied SL needed rust repair in the doorjambs, in the metal below the fender "eyebrows," and on the insides of the front fenders, in the area behind the headlamps. He discovered previous repairs from a hard front-end collision, also evidenced by damage to the dashboard from knee impacts and a cracked steering wheel. Frank also found unusual holes drilled in the sides of the front fenders and the area behind the seats, which most likely had been for camera mounts. The aluminum hood, door skins and trunk lid were in good shape. The crew chiefs prepared a list of the preliminary parts and materials that would be required, and Paul evaluated this and created an estimate of the time and money that would be required of the restoration.

The car was then completely disassembled; like every other car in the restoration shop, the 300 SL had its own parts storage area, and parts were clearly marked and arranged on shelves. Each crew chief dealt with his area of expertise in disassembly: Frank was responsible for repairing any dented or scuffed trim pieces before having them rechromed or anodized; Derrick Dunbar, in charge of upholstery, removed the black full leather interior, while Dave Berghoefer and Chris Hammond removed the engine and drivetrain mechanicals.

Using the specially crafted ceiling hoist designed to accommodate 300 SLs, the roadster's body was lifted off its tube chassis. The lightweight chassis was blasted with 80-grit fine silica sand to bare metal before Frank sprayed it, using a rotary screw compressor and Sata spray gun, with one coat of Glasurit epoxy primer and two coats of gloss black urethane paint. The body was mounted to a special SL rotisserie, chemically stripped and coated with Glasurit epoxy primer, so that its

Dash trim, like this textured metal and the knob surrounds, was hard to find

The SL's folding cloth top stays on the car and rests below the hardtop glass

The completed tubular chassis was fully driveable after being fitted with the engine, brakes, suspension and wiring

Using a padded ceiling hoist, five technicians maneuver and carefully lower the painted body onto the rolling chassis

With the aluminum floor pans installed, the dashboard wiring can be installed, as well as the carpeting and seat tracks

Polished aluminum folding roof frame is test-fit to ensure a perfect seal against the windshield header and side windows

flaws could be addressed.

All four of the distinctive fender "eyebrows" were unbolted from the body so that corrosion in the sills and around the passenger rear wheel arch could be tackled; Frank TIG-welded new 19-gauge steel in the outer panels; inner panels such as the metal behind the headlamps and the inner body panels below the aluminum trunk floor also required replacement, and patches were formed from 22-gauge steel. The roadster's reinforced aluminum two-layer vented firewall and seat trays were removed, cleaned and primed, while the steel hardtop got the same treatment. The fender eyebrows were cleaned and reattached to the body, sealed by leading.

While the body damage was being repaired, Dave, Chris, and the rest of the team were tackling the car's mechanicals. Unbeknownst to the Kurtzes, the front of the engine block was cracked—it was presumed to have happened in a collision where the cast-aluminum fan spindle was pushed in; Dave heated the metal, pushed it out, welded it and milled the surface flat to return it to factory specifications.

He also discovered that the engine had been bored .040-over at some point. One piston bore was scored, and to bring it to the next repair size, Dave created a sleeve to make that bore the same size as the others. The mechanics installed Mahle aluminum pistons, all at second repair size, into the block before topping it with the aluminum head. The camshaft bearing brackets were carefully marked with colored paint dots, as was done by the factory, and the head was fitted with original sodium-filled exhaust valves; a concession to modern engine technology was an easily reversible switch from the screen-type oil filter to a Paul Russell-devised bolt-on oil drain plate with a modern screw-on filter setup. The Bosch mechanical fuel injection was completely overhauled, all its lines replaced and the four-speed manual gearbox, with its internal oil pump, was rebuilt with factory parts and mated to a new Fitchel & Sachs clutch.

Before they were reattached to the chassis, each suspension component was blasted with glass beads and painted with one coat of epoxy primer and two coats of Glasurit 22 Line single-stage acrylic urethane paint. The four-wheel aluminum Al-Fin drum brakes were cleaned, repainted and reassembled with new wheel cylinders and components. Bob and Tom chose to have their SL fitted with optional Mercedes-Benz sport wheels; the rivets holding the aluminum rims to the steel centers were drilled out so that the rims could be polished and the centers chromed and painted before being reassembled. The wiring harness was attached to the chassis before the engine, transmission and driveshaft were installed; with the steering wheel reinstalled, they had a rolling, driveable chassis.

The metal-finished roadster's body was rolled on its rotisserie into the Paul Russell and Company's paint booth. Frank sprayed the engine bay and interior metal, including the removable aluminum footwell/firewall and seat tray panels, with semi-gloss black Glasurit urethane; the grille and headlamp openings were then masked, as was the trunk opening. With the doors, hood and trunk lid off the car, the body was sprayed with four coats of Glasurit epoxy primer and urethane surface primer before being block-sanded to ensure a flawless surface finish; three coats of 22 Line paint, mixed to exactly color-match the patch of original White Grey enamel Frank found inside the

glove box, were applied without wet sanding between coats. Although a clear coat was not factory-applied to any 300 SL, Paul believed that a clear coat makes scratch repair easier, protects the light color from losing its luster and adds depth to the shine. Three coats of Glasurit clear urethane were then laid over the color, and they were wet sanded with sandpaper grades ranging from 1000 to 2500 grit, resulting in a deep and luminous finish.

It took five team members to lower the roadster's painted and prepared body down over its rolling chassis; clearances for the suspension and mechanicals were checked and re-checked before the final mating was complete. The transmission tunnel and floor panels were fitted before the car received the new, correct black leather upholstery that had been prepared by Derrick and his team; these leathers covered the reupholstered seats, including the unusually padded driver's seat, the dashboard's upper and lower surfaces and broad sills, kick panels and door panels. They also installed original-style competition lap belts. Bob recalls that the anodized trim strips for the instrument panel, as well as the correct windshield wiper arms and the aluminum tonneau cover's latch lever were the hardest parts on the car to locate.

The polished aluminum frame for the folding top was covered with a carefully stitched black cloth soft top and test-fitted, and it rests in a well below the rare hardtop. This roof, with its glass rear window and perforated vinyl headliner, has been on the car since Bob and Tom took delivery in early 2005, four years and roughly 3,000 man-hours of labor after they brought the 300 SL to Paul Russell's shop.

And it drives as nicely as it looks, Tom explains. "This car starts promptly, requiring the normal SL startup routine...turn on the auxiliary fuel pump and let it run for a bit, choke at start and then run it for a minute at fast idle—otherwise, you'll get lots of popping and spitting. The driving position is good, and the racing seat belts are comfortable once you get used to them. The car takes off easily, the transmission shifting smoothly and firmly. And the noise is a delight, from the throaty exhaust to the mechanical sounds of the engine and transmission. The vehicle is extremely docile around town and in traffic, it's a blast to accelerate rapidly through the gears, and it handles quite well at all (legal) speeds," he laughs.

The brothers reflected, "For years, we went to numerous events with Dad to see what others had done to restore and maintain their SLs, and to take photos of the various assemblies we were working on or pieces we needed to locate. He appreciated the work done by the original builders and by the owners and restorers of these fine vehicles. We know he would be very pleased with how well the roadster turned out. Dad's grin would be from ear to ear as he cruised down the road, now with his two grandsons."

1960 300SL Owner's Story

As expected with such a rare and handsome car that has been restored to this caliber, the Kurtzes showed the 300 SL at important Concours d'Elegance like Amelia Island and Greenwich, where it took honors for "Best Mercedes-Benz." But this roadster, which shares garage space with their aforementioned 1955 SL, is no trailer queen, as the brothers put about 1,000 miles on it in its first driving season. "We love the thoroughness of the Mercedes-Benz engineering, the fit and finish as well as the quality of Paul's team's restoration. We also admire the timelessness of the design," Bob admits with a smile. He offers some thoughts on a project of this scope: "We've all heard it before, but buy the best car you can afford, because restorations build momentum and gain scope as you pull apart that puzzle. They will always cost more and take longer than you planned!"

Hidden spare and smaller gas tank leave room for luggage in the carpeted trunk