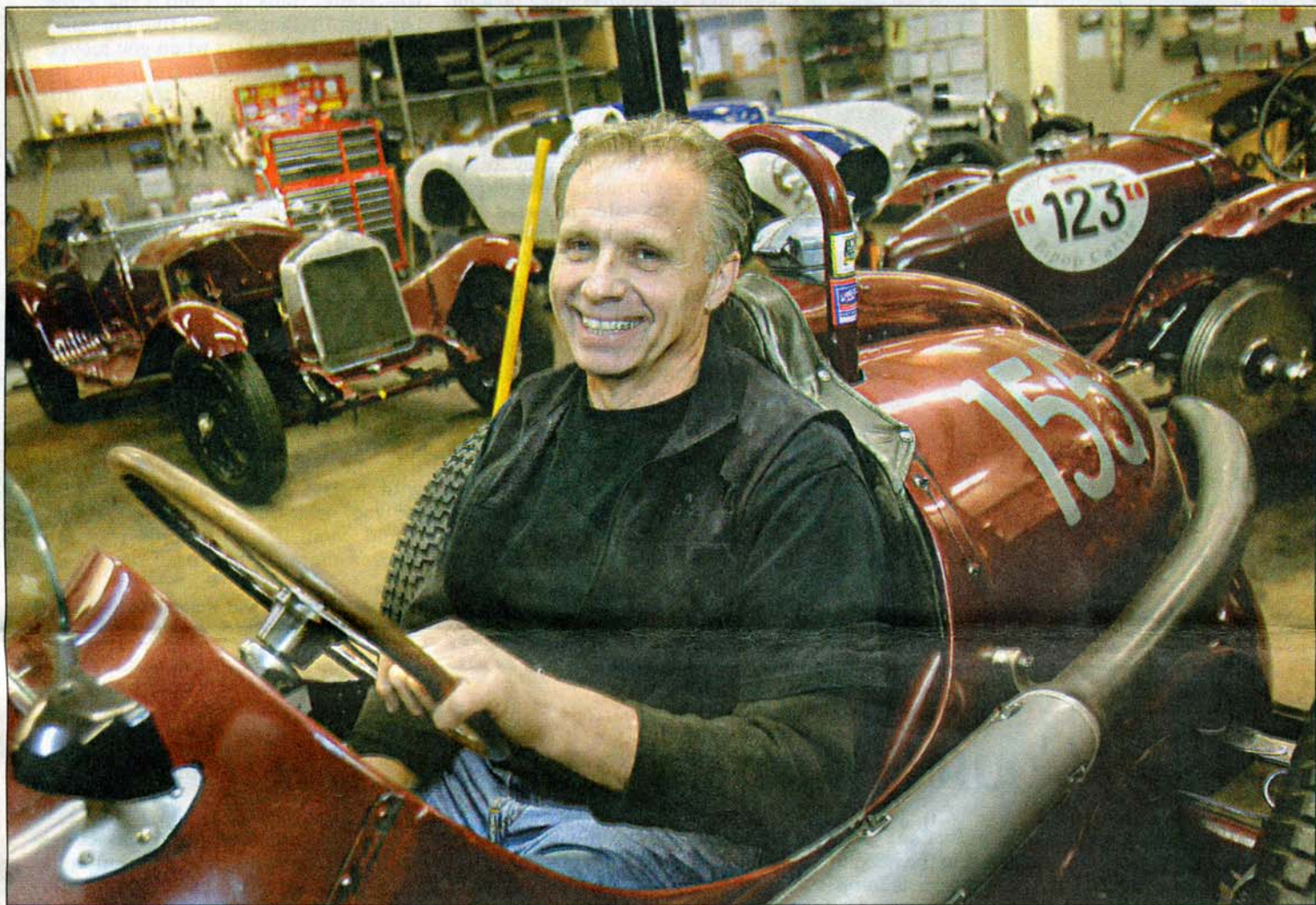


Art restored to its full power



The crystal Laliq hood ornament on a 1961 Bentley S2 Continental Park Ward Drophead convertible, in for a tuneup and a cosmetic touchup.



David George at his Chester County shop, where he restores some of the world's most expensive cars, in an Alfa Romeo Volpe Monoposto. CHARLES FOX / Inquirer Staff Photographer

By Art Carey
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Quartered in a former mushroom house on a winding rural road in Chester County is an art museum of sorts.

Its name is D.L. George Coachworks, and inside is a dazzling array of beautiful objects and rolling sculpture — Alfa Romeos, Bugattis, Maseratis, Jaguars, Ferraris, Bentleys, Mercedes-Benzes and Rolls-Royces.

Everywhere you look, in various stages of assembly and disassembly, are exquisite motor vehicles and vintage race cars, mostly built before World War II. It's a cross between a surgical suite and the back room at Christie's. It's a hospital and rehab center for diamonds of the macadam.

That car over there? It's the Cunningham C4R that won Sebring in 1953. The red racer the guys are frantically prepping for delivery? A 1934 Alfa Romeo Monza. "The best Alfa in the world," says David George,

A mecca for vintage cars needing care is a Louvre of levers and lug nuts.

the owner of this exclusive spa for high-bred motorcars. "This car is nothing but engine."

There's a 1938 Jaguar SS100, in for what George terms "bulletproofing" or a thorough mechanical vetting. Nearby is a 1932 Maserati 8c3000. Only four exist; George has refurbished two. "It's a diabolical car to drive," he says. "It killed two pilots."

For those who prefer motoring in a more

stately fashion, there's a navy blue 1934 Bentley 4¼ all-weather phaeton. Also in residence: a 1961 Bentley S2 Continental Park Ward convertible, in for a tuneup and cosmetic rejuvenation. Its crystal Laliq hood ornament alone is worth more than a modern-day Range Rover.

George and his crew of automotive artisans repair and restore these priceless relics to their original splendor. Then George not only drives many of them but also accompanies the cars and their wealthy owners to races, rallies and shows.

"I love to get up every morning and go to work. I love what I do," he says. "I go all over the world. I buy cars for clients. I go to events and campaign cars for clients. It doesn't get a whole lot better than that."

George, 57, is a tall, fit-looking man who runs and lifts weights. His handshake is firm, his personality pleasing, his manner polished. Equally at ease with grease and champagne, he can troubleshoot a cranky

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CHARLES FOX / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Josh Baldwin of David George's shop prepares a 1934 Alfa Romeo Monza for delivery. It's "the best Alfa in the world," says George. "This car is nothing but engine." Prewar Alfa Romeos are George's specialty.

A man equally at home with axle grease or caviar

CARS from B1

engine and hobnob with tycoons at a swanky concours reception. When he begins recounting the pedigree of one of the classics entrusted to his care, out gushes an encyclopedia of history and lore. He is incapable of concealing his enthusiasm. His belt buckle is an Alfa Romeo emblem.

"There was," he says, "a sense of soul in cars made back then."

"The products of his shop are right up at the top," says John Schieffelin, president of the Vintage Sports Car Club of America. "He does a beautiful job on extremely rare and valuable vintage cars. He's a terrific enthusiast, and he backs it up with the goods."

"One of the reasons he's such a successful businessman is that he not only makes a product that goes, but he also has a vibrant personality that attracts people," says Chris Leydon, whose specialty shop in Bucks County rebuilds engines for George.

When George moved to his present Cochranville location in 1991, it seemed spacious. Now business is so brisk and room so dear he's about to build another addition. The separate shops that make up the coachworks are tidy and organized, more like studios than garages. Each area is dedicated to a phase of restoration — mechanical refurbishing, body and metal fabrication, upholstery and trim, paint and finish.

Typically, the cars are prewar or older racing and eventing cars worth millions. Their bodies are aluminum, with shapely aerodynamic contours. Their frames are riveted rather than welded so they flex and won't break. All nuts are fastened with wire so they won't vibrate loose. The engines are magnesium and run on alcohol and benzene. Like racehorses, these cars are designed to be "flogged," George says, to be "run hard and put away wet."

They appear at the most prestigious, by-invitation-only venues. They are shown at Pebble Beach, raced at Lime Rock, and rallied in the Mille Miglia in Italy. Mostly, they are used, driven and enjoyed.

"These cars are primarily drivers," George says. "They're not over-restored. They're made to go. And our job is to make them reliable so when the owner goes to Monaco, he isn't embarrassed because his car is broken down on the side of the road."

"What sets him apart," says Jonathan Stein, an automotive writer, historian, and former editor of *Automobile Quarterly*, "is that he builds cars that not only win shows, but if he sends five cars to the Mille Miglia, five cars will finish. His cars look gorgeous, but they are also machines you can use really hard."

George doesn't advertise. His cars do that for him. Customers are referred by word of mouth. Demand is so high he can afford to be choosy. He and his eight employees tend to the needs of a half-dozen "serious collectors" and another half-dozen "fringe" clients.

Each year, the shop completes about

two or three major restorations and a dozen minor projects.

"You open a Pandora's box every time you restore a car," George says. "Some cars spend an eternity here because of things we run into" — engineering problems, parts that have to be fabricated from scratch.

"Our clients are experienced and astute. They don't expect to get a car done in six months."

They also need plump wallets. Rebuilding an exotic engine alone can cost \$120,000. Major restorations can run between \$300,000 and \$500,000. "Over time, clients become friends," George says. "Some become incredibly great friends, for life. This isn't just about money. It's truly a passion."

One such client: Philadelphia neurosurgeon Fred Simeone, for whom George has restored a dozen cars, including three Alfas, two Bentleys, a Maserati, a Cunningham and a Stutz Black Hawk.

"I consider him a world expert on prewar Alfa Romeos," Simeone says. "It's the iconic race car of that era, the collector's choice, and David is the restorer of choice for that type of car."

Another loyal patron is Dick Vermeil, who is relying on George and his "coaching staff" for help restoring "Old No. 7," the sprint car that his father, Louis, cherished and raced. ("He loved that car more than me," Vermeil says.) Louis Vermeil owned a garage in the Napa Valley where the former Eagles football coach learned to turn a wrench.

"I've had a lot of fun stripping it down to the bare frame," says Vermeil, who lives within convenient driving range of the shop. "It's a toy compared to what they usually work on, but there's no place in America that could better help reassemble it."

George's passion for cars was aroused early. By the time he was 15, he was poring over *Road & Track* magazine and anything else he could read about auto racing. By then, his family had moved from upstate Pennsylvania, where his father was a coal miner, to West Chester. Before he was old enough to drive, George begged his father to lend him \$400 so he could buy a

disassembled Porsche 356. When his father said no, George used \$150 he had saved from working at a gas station and mowing lawns to purchase a 1961 Austin-Healey Sprite.

At age 19, George bought the first of about a dozen Jaguar XKE roadsters, a car he had a crush on and still drives and admires. His father disapproved. "Son, this car will cost more in insurance than you paid for it," he admonished. Dad was right. George kept the car for about 2½ months, then flipped it. The practice became habitual and helped pay his way through West Chester State College.

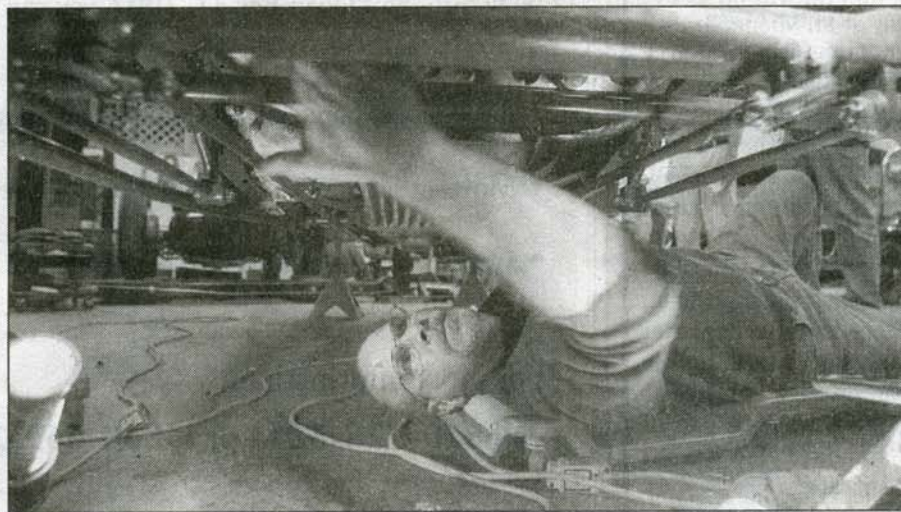
After graduating, George worked as a chemical engineer for a King of Prussia company that made equipment for coating catalytic converters. On the side, he restored cars in a barn in West Chester. Needing more space, he answered an ad for a building in Downingtown. The owner, an industrialist, was a vintage-car enthusiast. Charmed by George's knowledge and enthusiasm, he hired him to build a private car collection.

For six years, George traveled to England, Ireland, France and Italy, finding and buying cars, helping his patron assemble a collection that eventually exceeded 40 vehicles. In 1982, his confidence bolstered by that experience, George launched his restoration business.

Over the years, George has amassed his own collection of precious cars, including a 1938 Alfa Romeo Volpi Monoposto once owned and piloted by Juan Manuel Fangio, the Argentinian race driver known as "El Maestro."

"They are as beautiful as any work of art ever created," George says. "They just happen to roll. Unlike a painting or piece of sculpture, you don't just hang it on the wall or put it on the mantel. You can get in it and drive it. You can sit in the same seat and hold the same steering wheel that Tazio Nuvolari did when he won the 1932 Italian Grand Prix."

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The suspension of an Alfa gets close attention from mechanic Ronald Keenen. George calls the cars "as beautiful as any work of art ever created."