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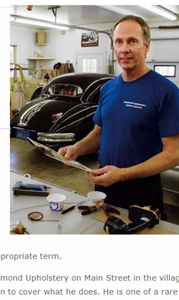
Restoration Service Station

Mike Lemire is proof that Vermont is still home to old-fashioned virtues of craftsmanship and precision

by Virginia Lindauer Simmon



Michael Lemire, the owner of Richmond Upholstery, brings his down-to-earth approach, his Vermont work ethic, and his father's training to restore the interiors of the world's most treasured cars. Behind him are his current projects: a 1929 Rolls Royce Phantom II and a 1955 Jaguar XK140.

"I do most of my work when I'm sleepin'," says Mike Lemire, referring to his creative side. "But that's the same with any craftsman," he adds. Craftsman he surely is; "artist" might be a more appropriate term.

Lemire is the owner of Richmond Upholstery on Main Street in the village, but upholstery doesn't begin to cover what he does. He is one of a rare breed of world-class coach-trimmers who restore the interiors of high-end vintage automobiles, often one-of-a-kind, often worth millions.

He's direct, plain-spoken, and practical — an unprepossessing guy who operates in a garage next to his home. It's a garage unlike most. Posters from vintage car shows decorate the walls; everything is well lit and spotless. The showroom where customers enter features photos of many of the cars Lemire has worked on and a selection of furniture upholstery fabrics to entice the wives of his mostly male customers. Asked what percentage of his business comes from furniture upholstery, he laughs. "About 1 percent, and I farm that out to my brother."

"His work is terrific!" exclaims Pierce Reid, the owner of Vintage Garage in Stowe, which specializes in restoring Rolls Royces and Bentleys. "He's very creative and innovative, but at the same time, he has managed to preserve what, in some cases, is the lost art of coach trimming."

Vermont, it turns out, is a hot bed of antique car restoration professionals. "It is a very close industry," says Reid. "Good shops generally know each other and tend to cooperate. We're a little like the old guild system in the Middle Ages: Everybody has his expertise. One guy can test the handle, one can solder it all together, and between you and your little village, you can make some pretty interesting stuff." Reid met Lemire in the late '90s through this network.

Scott Sargent, the owner of Sargent Metal Works in Fairlee, has known Lemire since 1991, when he learned of him through Avery Hall, a Burlington collector of classic automobiles.

"I run a complete restoration shop," says Sargent. "There are two things I shop out: One is the engine alone, and the other thing is the trim work — the upholstery. We do everything else."

Sargent began using Lemire's talents in 1993. "His customers fell in love with my work and my whole Vermont attitude," says Lemire, laughing.

So it was that, in April 2003, when Sargent was hired by a collector to restore a 1936 Bugatti Atlantique, one of only two in the world — Ralph Lauren owns the other one — he called Lemire. "I knew he wouldn't let us down — would get the job done and it would be pristine — and that's exactly what happened," says Sargent.

"He called me from Colorado and asked me if I would come down and do the interior of this Bugatti," says Lemire. "I said I would love to, but was just so busy. I was specializing in convertible tops, and it was the season for convertible tops. I was doing three a week. He convinced the man he was working for to pack up my shop and tools and me and ship me to Colorado."

Lemire says he was there about two months. They completed the project and, in August, Sargent trailered the car to Monterey, Calif., for the annual Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance. Lemire flew out from Vermont to join him.

"Us two little country boys from Vermont took First in Class," says Lemire, "and we also took the Best of Show. This is best in the world; this car was the best car ever made by Bugatti. It is worth millions today."

Since then, he visits Pebble Beach every year. "That's where I get most of my work," he says. Cars he and Scott have worked on have continued to win awards there, and they have become best friends in the process. Lemire has travels to other shows such as the annual Retromobile Show in Paris and the Concours d'Elegance in Amelia Island, Fla. He has had the privilege of working, with Reid, on a replica of a Rolls Royce 12-cylinder truck used during World War II to transport Merlin aircraft engines for the war effort in Great Britain.

Learning how Lemire operates, it soon becomes clear why his work is so appreciated. For one car, it takes, on average, three months of eight-hour days, 40 hours a week, he says.

Once he's hired for a job, he goes to the site to remove the car's interior. "I want to do that because we want to take pictures, step by step; take every nut and bolt off, label each part that comes off, send out everything that needs to be re-chromed — door handles, some visor brackets — and I want to be able to put everything in a box. A lot of these cars have wood dashes and arm rests, and I want to be able to bring it all back with me."

On the second floor of his 36-by-36-foot shop, he has little stalls for each car. "Everything is labeled, with pictures and notes on what needs to be done. Then two years down the road, after they get done with the car — because they're doing a total off-frame restoration — I get it back, freshly painted inside and out."

The car arrives by trailer, and Lemire raises it to waist height on a lift and looks it over. All the materials come out of the packages, and he starts the process of duplicating everything he took out that needs replacing.

"We don't put anything back that's old and smelly from the mice and whatnot," he says. "In the meantime, we do a lot of research on the particular vehicle: try to find out who the last owners are; has it been reupholstered before — I can usually tell — and make sure we match the exact colors and grains of the leather. That's very important," he adds, "because these cars are going to Pebble Beach and they're judged."

He selects, orders, cuts, and dyes leathers and fabrics; crafts and finishes custom reproduction interior parts when necessary; and sends metal pieces to be re-chromed or reproduced — in the case of Rolls Royces, in German silver. He usually works on only three cars at one time, alternating projects as he waits for parts to come in. "They're right here in the shop and I live right next door."

Although he has done upholstery since childhood, Lemire didn't start out with cars. "My dad was my guru," he says. "My dad was my college."

Upholstery can certainly be called the family business. Lemire's Dad, Paul, was an upholsterer in Williston for 30 years; his uncle, Bob Groleau, has an upholstery shop in Essex; and his brother Marc does upholstery in Williston.

Lemire's mother died when he was 6, and his father was raising Lemire and his siblings alone. The shop was in the basement of their home, and every day after school, there was work for Lemire to do.

"Working for your dad is never easy, of course, and he never forced it on me," he says. "We had our spats and our differences, so I said, 'You know, I'm going to go look for a job."

He pumped gas for a while, then cleaned stalls at a horse farm. "Both of those jobs got old very quickly: It wasn't a future, just a paycheck. I realized that having my own business, I could be a little more controlling, and working at home in my basement year-round was more appealing, so I stuck it out."

He rented a space in his father's basement where he began to build his own upholstery business. "I was getting quite a few customers, and my dad was getting burnt out, so he retired — said he was going to Florida and I had to get out."

Lemire was recently graduated from high school. "He helped me borrow some money to buy this place in Richmond back in '78. I paid him back every cent, and I've been here ever since," he says.

His dad, however, spent only 10 years in Florida. "He was missing his kids," says Lemire. He lived with Lemire for a while and occasionally helped out in both of his sons' shops. Wanting to be nearer his family doctor, he eventually moved to The Courtyard in Winooski, where he still lives.

After Lemire moved to Richmond, he began dabbling in automotive work, practicing on his own vehicle and those of his friends. "Then my friends' friends started coming over," he says. "They would tell their friends, and I started having customers in automotive as well as furniture."

Pretty soon he needed help and hired Tom Coggio, who was with him for 12 years. That was before he went to Colorado. Nowadays, he has only a part-time helper now and then, and his girlfriend, Olga Rullan, helps with paperwork, returns phone calls, runs errands, and does a lot of Lemire's photography.

Over the years, he has instituted environmental changes, such as the use of water-based paints instead of lacquer, which he says has produced a 30 percent savings. He's also installed a system that filters chemicals and dust.

In his spare time, he works on his own car, a BMW Z4 roadster. "I did the interior with alligator leather just to advertise," he says. "But hobbies? I come to the shop, even on weekends, and I design stuff. I don't ski; don't want to get hurt. I work out a little bit. If I have any time off, I have apartment buildings to take care of.

"I'm looking for help," he says. "It's very difficult to find help. The kids today are a little different than we used to be. I'm 50 years old now and I can remember being a kid, but I was always there for work."

He pauses a moment, then continues. "I've been hanging onto this little world that I live in, and it's kind of sad. It's a dying breed of craftsmanship." •