

# Service Dept.

A Rich Mixture

Page 102

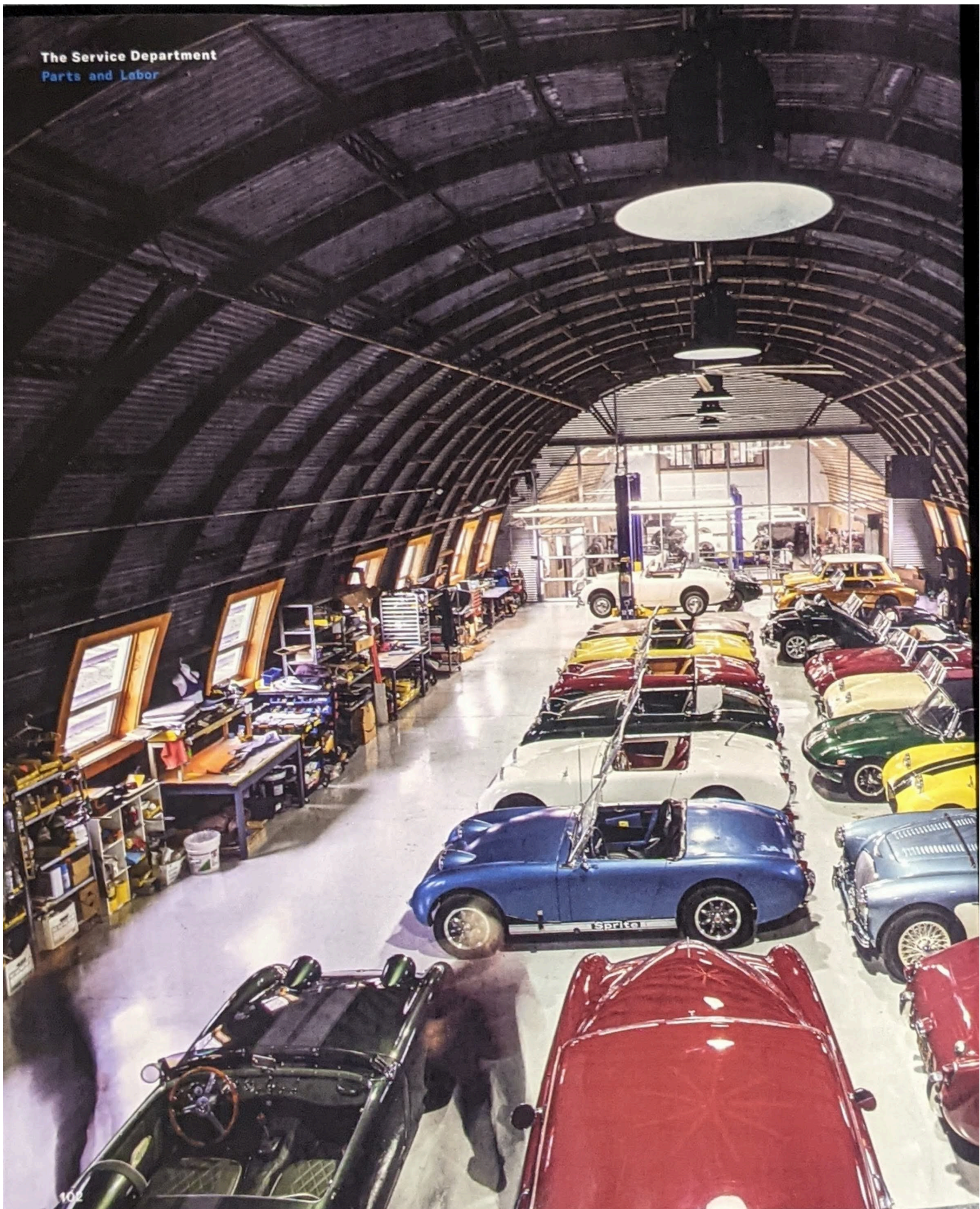
**Bitten by the Bug(eye).**



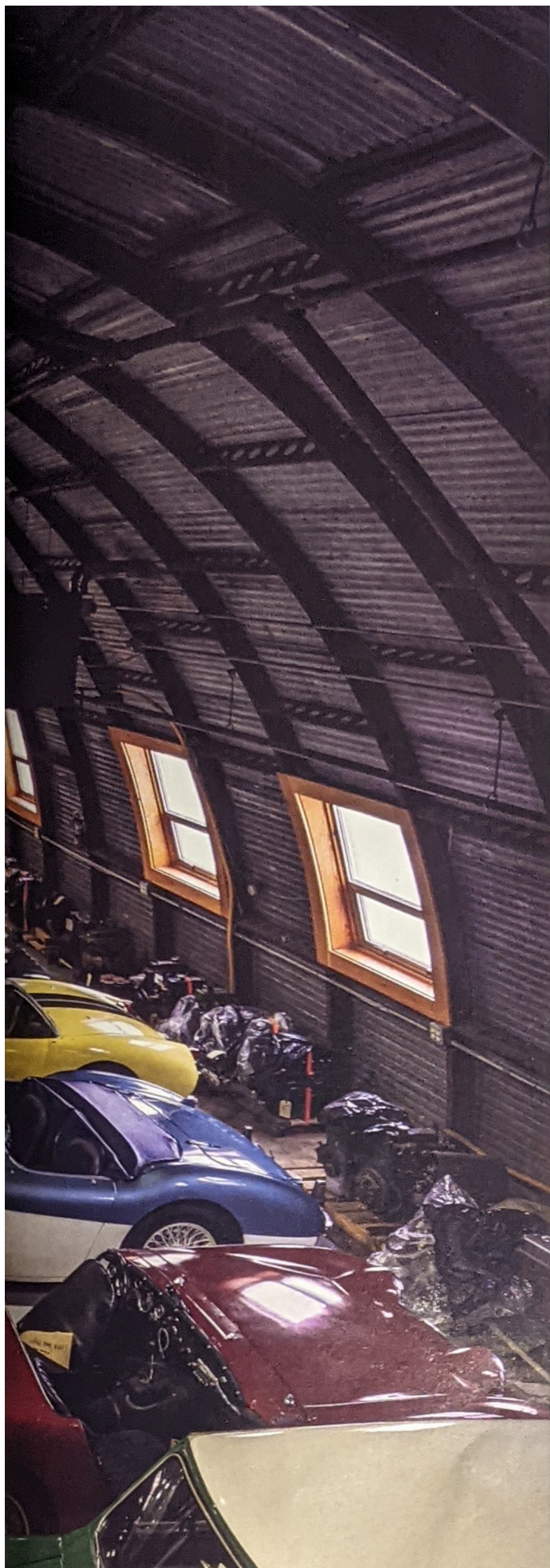
Photo by DW Burnett



The Service Department  
Parts and Labor







## The Eyes Have It

David Silberkleit's Bugeye shop has been churning out happy little restorations for more than a decade.

Words by Andrew Newton  
Photos by DW Burnett

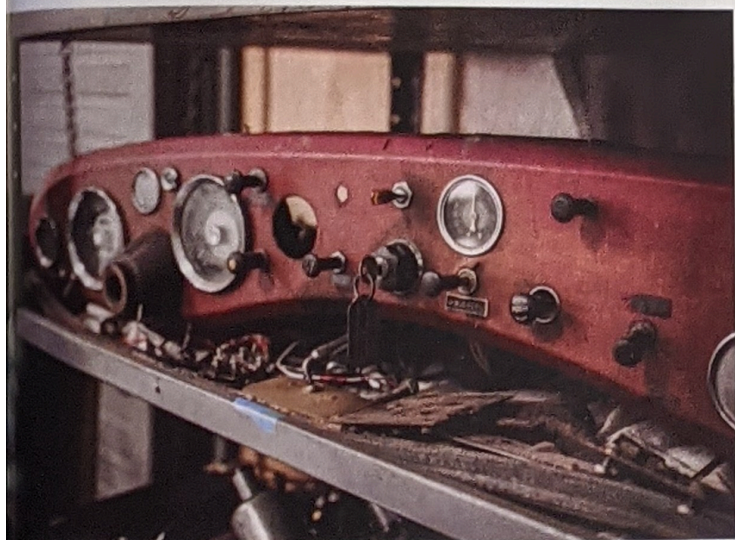






David Silberkleit bought his first Bugeye Sprite, a car he still owns, in 1978. He didn't become the "Bugeyeguy," however, until 2007, when he decided to make a career change and focus an entire business on the happy little cars.

Finding high-quality components remains a challenge, but the parts, service, and restoration sides of Bugeyeguy's business are all booming.



There is a lot of change in the collector car market these days. New buying and selling platforms are cropping up. Younger enthusiasts are entering the market and paying big money for cars and trucks built in recent decades. In all this excitement, it's easy to forget about old, slow English sports cars.

That'd be a mistake, says David Silberkleit, aka the "Bugeyeguy." "Last year was the best year in our history. Everything here has accelerated and expanded."

Silberkleit's main shop is a neatly restored 1950s Quonset hut in Branford, Connecticut, located a few miles east of New Haven on Long Island Sound. He's fluent in MG and Mini, but most of the cars coming in and out of the shop are Mk I Austin-Healey Sprites, commonly called "Bugeyes." He currently has 15 Sprites in the queue for restoration work and is booked out for several months on other jobs. The parts side of the business has grown dramatically over the past year, too, and earlier in 2021, Silberkleit sold his 300th Bugeye. "We hardly had time to celebrate," he says. "We sold the 301st a few days later."

Impressive stuff for a business whose focus is so narrow. Silberkleit himself remains infatuated with the humble roadster, however. "It is probably the greatest cult car with the greatest personality and the biggest smile," he says. "It's a car with absolutely no pretensions, so it's the opposite of something like a 911, and it has so much character. It elicits all kinds of responses from all kinds of people, from small kids to old racers. You just don't get that with most cars."

Silberkleit bought his first Bugeye for \$1100 in 1978, when he was in high school. Despite life's curveballs and other cars coming and going, he never got rid of it. "There were other phases in my life where I've had to pare down, ramp up, have a house, sell the house, etc., but my Bugeye survived it all." He didn't truly become the "Bugeyeguy," however, until 2007. In the mid-2000s, he was running an executive coaching practice, advising people to follow their passions in their entrepreneurial work. In part to provide an example for his clients and in part to indulge in his love for the smiley-faced two-seater, he ran a webpage and updated it regularly with articles, photos, and other material he had amassed as a Bugeye enthusiast.

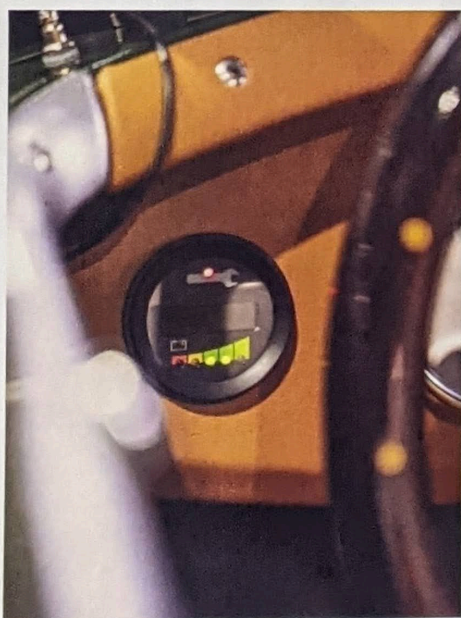
Then the messages started coming in—not from budding entrepreneurs, but from other Bugeye fans. "Because I had all this content—and especially back then, when the internet was in its earlier days—I had this number-one rating on Google. And then people just started contacting me about Bugeyes." Silberkleit decided to follow his own advice and pursue a passion-based career. "I was willing to take a flier and see if we could make a business dedicated to this one little car."

One little car that appeals to a broad range of buyers. "They can wear many different kinds of hats," says Silberkleit. The average buyer is a man in his late 60s who wants a sorted Bugeye that's as headache-free as





One of Bugeyeguy's first two EV conversions. Also known as "Frog-E," it gets about 100 miles of range.



Although Silberkleit sees a bright future for Bugeye EV conversions, he has just been too busy with the conventional, gas-powered business to develop the electrics as much as he'd like.





Silberkleit's first Sprite, nicknamed "Gumby," pictured in front of the renovated 1951 Quonset hut that serves as Bugzeguy HQ.

possible, but Silberkleit often sells cars to women and to younger car guys on a budget, as well. And the Bugeyes he sells include driver-quality cars, concours-quality show cars, high-dollar custom builds with superchargers and upgraded interiors—even cars with lengthened chassis for older clients to aid ingress and egress. The shop has also done two electric conversions to Bugeyes and is working on a third, with Tesla power.

Silberkleit credits much of his spike in the past year to his large internet presence. In addition to the website and usual social media channels, he has been posting YouTube videos for years that highlight cars for sale or the shop's restoration work. There are currently over 800 such videos on Bugzeguy's channel. And because of the website's high search ranking after so many years of posting content, "if someone is Googling and looking to find out more about Bugeyes, they will almost always come across us."

Despite custom builds that can run up to \$60,000 (nearly twice the current #1 "concours" value in the *Hagerty Price Guide*), Silberkleit maintains his perspective on the

Sprite's humble origins. "You wouldn't cut up a 246 Dino like this because it's too precious, and the value of a car like that is in its accuracy. But a Bugeye is just a Bugeye. You don't have to take it so seriously. A lot of these restomod-type cars and reimaginings like Singer Porsches are becoming really popular these days, and the Bugeye is very viable for that because it was never so literal." Silberkleit gives the Sprite's chassis, which was relatively advanced for the late 1950s, plenty of credit, too. "More than so many of these old body-on-frame British cars, the unibody structure of a Bugeye is an exceptional asset since they're so tight and nimble. Even a rusty one can drive really well if you work out the kinks."

Over nearly a decade and a half, the Bugzeguy shop has grown to seven employees, including two 25-year-old McPherson College grads, and the business is growing even more to meet pandemic-induced demand. "There were people who had a Bugeye on the bucket list, saying: 'You know what, I'm done waiting. I'm not going to be around forever.' I've had a lot of those types of phone calls."

Bugzeguy's biggest challenges these days are in finding quality parts and high-quality help. The custom builds are gaining in popularity, and although Silberkleit sees a bright future in the electric conversions, he's been too busy with the standard cars to develop them as much as he would like. That said, his next Bugeye EV is going to a client who has two other Bugeyes—one completely factory-correct car and another supercharged hot rod. "Does this guy really need three?" asks Silberkleit. "Well, if you think about it, they're three different cars for three different occasions. And I think he's a great summary of how versatile these cars are."

"Versatile," "charming," "personality," "fun." These are the ingredients of cars that stay at the top of enthusiasts' wish lists decades after they go out of production. It's why a smart business like Bugzeguy can thrive even as tastes change and the market shifts. People will be driving Bugeyes for years to come, and they (both car and driver) will have a big grin on their face the whole time. Many of those Bugeyes will come out of a Quonset hut in Connecticut. [anewton@hagerty.com](mailto:anewton@hagerty.com)