

## DIY

I became a motorcycle mechanic almost by accident. Impoverished by my \$320-a-month pay as a draftsman in the Army, my wife and I had both been forced to make our last entrepreneurial attempts if we were to have any hopes of making enough extra money to pay the rent on our \$80-a-month apartment, and still feed ourselves and our infant son until my next payday. Our combined savings as newlyweds were gone in less than four months after I was drafted, depleted by her several trips to visit me in basic training, and the cost of moving us all to my first posting in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Little fan's baby food purchases came first, but I can clearly remember that Sandy and I would have both starved for several days that first month in New Mexico if a lady from the "Welcome Wagon" hadn't come by with a carton of milk, a loaf of bread and a tub of cottage cheese. Sandy had often experimented with making her own clothes in high school and had taken her old sewing machine along when we moved. She began her career as a fashion designer making things out of remnants discovered by the local fabric stores, writing them into styles that were immediately so successful that she has continued to be an independent design/manufacturer to this day. Within months, the extra income allowed me to buy one of the first Yamaha DT1 250s (Enduro), providing a wonderful outlet to release the frustrations and restrictions of Army life by blasting through the hills and arroyos just minutes away from our home.

My own transformation could perhaps be traced to a cover article in *Red & Cream* at the same time, that proclaimed "30% More Power From Your VW For \$20." This appealed both to my need for more speed (my '63 VW was severely strangled by Albuquerque's high altitude) and to my willingness to learn more about engines. A \$20 metric socket set purchased from the bare PX (which I still proudly use) and a set of combination wrenches from Sears gave me the beginnings of a tool set and the means to pull the carburetor off my Bug. And I had support. My best Army buddy and fellow motorcyclist, Doug Brownman (who rode on the same bus to the induction center), owned a Karmann-Ghia that could benefit from the same work, so we determined to share the job and save money on carburetor jets. The magazine's trick was to file the carb's venturi larger by a couple of millimeters, two different main jets with a stopwatch in a controlled 30-50 mph sprint in third gear, and afterward carefully adjust the ignition timing to the best effect.



Of course, Murphy's Law entered the equation in the form of the carb's booster venturi, a strange obstruction in the center of the venturi that we were advised not to mess with. Being novices, we didn't understand that the booster's badly streamlined shape was meant to create a strong vacuum on its underside, to pull fuel from the float bowl and break it into combustible droplets.

My car was done first, and the work did indeed make a significant difference. I was impressed, the fuel, so strong now. But enthusiasm for wrenching is very fragile at first. Doug, on the other hand, after all his tedious venturi filing, attempted to improve upon the booster, filing it smaller, and wrecked the carburetor completely. His car would barely run at all until a junkyard yielded a replacement carb. Alas, his ancient mechanical frame had been modified out before it could burn more brightly, and I'm not aware that he has ever attempted wrenching again.

Before I was discharged, I traded the VW for a six-cylinder Chevy van, in order to carry all our belongings for the planned move to California. A set of genuine Chevy factory shop manuals, to enable tune-ups and such, were invaluable to my mechanical education. In those days, a factory manual explained not only how to do something, but the theory behind the design of the components, as well. It was invaluable, and something you rarely see any longer.

By the time we'd finally landed in Newport Beach, in Southern California, I had purchased more tools and was on to my third motorcycle, a '64 Gold Star BSA. I added Whitworth wrenches, purchased from the local swap-meet, to my toolset.

Not long after I'd become a civilian again, I found myself looking for work. Partly as a condition of my unemployment compensation, and partly out of curiosity, I applied for a job as a motorcycle mechanic at a shop I would regularly frequent anyway, not really giving much thought to the possibility of actually being hired. That was a Friday afternoon. Little did I know that it was tough to keep a mechanic even during those boom times for the industry, and I was hired the following Monday.

Anxious I entered with my little \$20 Sears toolset and took my place at one end of the two long workbenches on either side of the shop. There were no lifts, and no tire-changing machines. I was to receive half the flat rate of \$20/hour, and so long as the work was consistent (it never was) and I didn't get bogged down waiting for parts (inevitably), I could make a living (it ranged from low of \$60 to an average of maybe \$200/week). But living was cheap then, the waiting allowed time to make friends, and I understood that this situation only had to last until my slot in UCLA's graduate school opened up the following Fall.

Luckily, I dove into the proverbial deep end of the pool and tirelessly climbed or swam, I mean, continued to fix one problem after the other and eventually becoming (after many pinched inventories) very proficient at changing tires with nothing more than tire irons and a 25-gallon drum as a support stand (the PNO's baptism was to do all the tires until someone else got hired).

Plus, by being a friend to and mechanic, I was awarded their occasional help when I got stuck, the most deeply appreciated form of education I'd ever received. Before long, I gained confidence that had the knack for fixing things, and that my mind exceeded the practices that three-dimensional problems presented. And after the pretensions of grad school, I again graduated to motorcycle shops, over the years holding a variety of positions in the industry as well as owning my own shop.

But as our MCN Mechanics' Survey indicated a couple of months ago, it still isn't an easy way to make a living, and like myself, most are driven to the calling by a passion for bikes, rather than money. Many took up the vocation during motorcycling's boom years and fewer and fewer have taken up the tools since. That's just not right.

*Dave Seably*

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Editor-In-Chief