

## Metalwork and Metalworking Machines for Motorcyclists - Part 1

- Old-school skills vs. new-tech tools -

By John Gunnell

As classic bike values rise, professional restorers are bringing thousands of vintage motorcycles back to life. However, a growing number of amateurs are doing their own motorcycle rebuilding projects to save money and have fun. They buy books and videos and attend seminars to learn skills that they need to restore bikes. Metalworking is really an essential restoration technique.

Metalworking is the process of working with metals to shape or form parts, assemblies or structures. The term covers everything from jewelry making to bridge building. In rebuilding motorcycles, restorers deal with metals that were "worked" when the manufacturer made the parts. They are actually doing "metal reworking." The goal is to bring parts made long ago back to their original shape.

Knowledge of metalworking is in high demand right now. Metalworking techniques range from very medieval practices to modern, high-tech skills. An important metalworking tool is a simple sandbag, but pulsed wire-feed welders and heavy tubing cutters and benders are very nice items to have in the shop.

The reason you can work metal is because it is malleable and ductile. These properties allow you to shape it using tools and machines. In rebuilding bikes, restorers use sheet metal shaping techniques like hammering, bending, pressing and wheeling. To recreate the shape of parts, they use hammers, files, chisels, punches, sandbags, slapping hammers, body dollies, wood forms, picks and other tools, as well as machines that



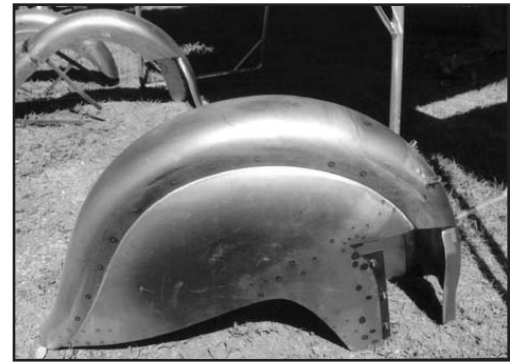
The Eastwood Company of Pottstown, Pa., sells this English wheel that's very well suited for the home restoration shop in terms of size and price.



Bill Politsch, of Mittler Bros. Machine & Tool, demos the use of a tubing bender during the Lefthander Chassis trade show. Lefthander sells the Mittler Bros. line of quality metal fabbing tools.



One of the top metal fabricators in the motorcycle restoration business is Iron Horse Corral, which makes concours-quality reproduction tanks, like this one for 1938 to 1946 Indian Chiefs.



Iron Horse Corral uses dies like the factory did to make this late-model Chief rear fender. However, product consistency is actually better because fewer people do the metalworking.

can do what tools can't.

One of the best-known metal fabricators in the motorcycle restoration business is Matt Blake, of Iron Horse Corral, whose Clovis, Calif. company makes fenders, tanks, tool boxes and sidecars for Indian motorcycles. Matt is the nephew of custom car builder Dean Jefferies, who created the Monkeemobile GTO. He started building motorcycle sheet metal with Sammy Pierce ("Mr. Indian") in 1980. Pierce had a commission to restore bikes for the Steve McQueen estate and Matt joined him in 1980, two weeks after the actor died.

Matt has original factory drawings for front and rear fenders of late-model Chiefs and patterns or drawings for Sport Scouts, Chiefs and Fours for all years from late-1934 until Indian went out of business in '53. "Through the years I have borrowed and measured fenders for every year and model," says Blake. "We have patterns for most and what we don't have in patterns, we have in original fenders, plus we have drawings of every fender we made over the years."

While Blake has an English wheel in his shop for custom work, the Indian fenders are stamped out with dies he owns. "We assemble them and weld them up in different configurations," Blake explained. "There are 27 different variations of fenders, using basically the same top crown portion, for late-'34 to '53 models." Blake has researched both original designs and original factory manufacturing methods to ensure that his fenders, tanks and other parts are concours perfect. Blake publicizes his products at [www.Indianfenders.com](http://www.Indianfenders.com) and has a printed catalog. He says he thought that interest in Indian sheet metal parts had peaked in 1997, but over a decade later things are still going strong and he just had his best sales year ever in 2007.

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Check out Part 2 in August issue

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