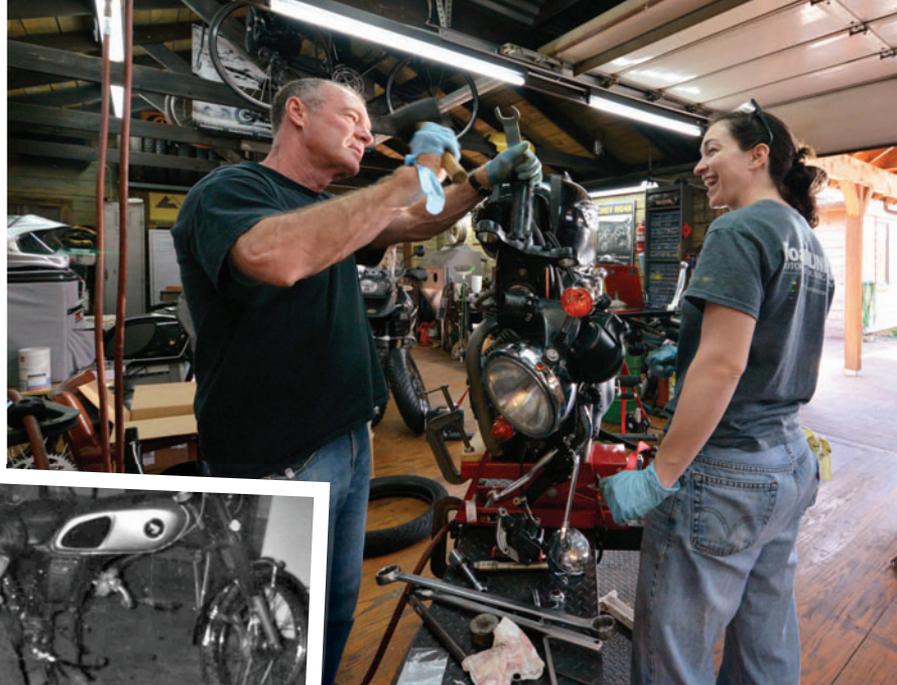


Sidetracked

STEALERSHIPS and the DIY Guy

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Fourteen-year-olds are sensitive creatures. Merle laughs when I ask how to adjust the clutch on my 1969 Yamaha AT1. Instead of offering technical advice he mocks me, saying, “You want to race and you can’t even work on your own bike.” His words cut me to the quick, but mostly, they made me want to learn. I never forgot what he said or how it made me feel.

Six months earlier my Honda CL70 had been laying in pieces on the garage floor with half the engine case screws drilled out or the heads chiseled off. My efforts to fix the busted fourth gear were more destructive than the stick that had jammed the chain and thrashed the transmission. A friendly dealership mechanic ultimately cleaned up my mess.

More recently, I cringed when a fellow Motorcycle Safety Foundation instructor bragged that he never took his bike to the dealership; only he called it “the stealership.” He explained to the group of impressionable students how dealers were just there to take their money. I thought back to my ham-fisted days of learning to use tools and wondered what my education would have cost in today’s dollars.

As an adventure riding instructor I advocate learning all you can about your machine. It’s like your horse. Take care of it and it will take care of you. There is no need for a flat tire or broken shifter to leave you stranded. Most places I go these days cell service is often sketchy and I’d rather not try to walk out in motorcycle boots. A few basic repair skills can come in handy. But where do we learn them?

Some motorcycle clubs have bike nights. Not the ones where everyone meets at the bar to throw back a few beers before hitting the streets, but informal seminars where riders can get together for a maintenance session. KLR jockeys love to replace their doohickies or perform the carb T-mod. BMW pilots might meet at Starbucks, but those who don’t, often come to my garage for a field tire repair session or to install a few new farkles. Although some of the “advice” tossed around could lead to trouble, most times the old salts who mentor new riders are pretty good wrenches. Hanging with them, especially the ones who make you do your own “wax on and wax off” (apologies to those who missed *The Karate Kid*), provides a chance to learn to use tools with minimum carnage.

These same clubs are often associated with a local dealer. Gone are the days when we could loiter in the shop, bugging the mechanics and getting work done for free, but there is value in developing a mutually beneficial relationship with the guy behind the counter. How do we cultivate such a relationship? It starts when we do business there, even purchasing a bike if possible.

Buy parts there or have a service performed now and then and don’t beat them up on price, even if you can save \$3.00 on

an oil filter online. Will that supply house tell you the viscosity and volume of oil in your final drive? Who will look up service bulletins on your Gold Wing or give you the valve adjustment specs for your hex-head GS? Nothing beats a face-to-face with someone you know you can trust.

Many dealers offer tires at a few dollars over cost because they know you can order them at a discount house. Give them a chance at your business and pay a couple bucks more if you have to. Trust is earned on both sides of the door, so be fair but not foolish. The ones who hold out for inflated prices or are stingy with information may not be best, but it’s worth a few bucks to have a friend at the dealership. It takes more resources to run a brick-and-mortar shop than a warehouse with order takers in an office somewhere off-site, so understand that you are helping them stay open *for you*. “Stealership” is hardly a fair term for the guy trying to make a living supporting our motorcycle habits.

I wound up working as a motorcycle mechanic during my budding racing career. I went on to become an aircraft mechanic and even did a stint working on Jeeps. The phone rang the other day and it was Merle. “Bill, I’m trying to get the brake drums off my car and they are stuck. It’s outside and it’s cold. Do you have any suggestions?”

“I’ll be right over, Merle.” As I drove the two miles to his house, his words echoed in my head. “...you can’t even work on your own bike.” I kept them to myself. **RR**