

Bill's Garage

Column by **Bill Dragoo**
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WRENCHING PAINS

Where Have All The Gearheads Gone... "....long time passin'." Okay. Some of you missed that, but that's alright.

I became a young man during twilight of the Age of Aquarius, turning 14 in 1969, the year we put the first man on the moon. The year of Woodstock. We used the word "peace" a lot and the little icons of the word were everywhere, although nobody had any idea what an "icon" was. We drew circles on our notebooks (the cardboard and paper kind that didn't plug in), and made upside down Y's in the circle with a line dissecting the V part. That symbol identified us as flower children, which fails to explain why I got into more fights than all three of my sons combined. We even cut peace signs in parking lots with our motorcycles by spinning the requisite doughnut and skillfully peeling out within the lines to polish off the details. Perfecting this art first on dirt and gravel, we soon graduated to concrete and asphalt. We were hard on equipment and, occasionally, we broke things.

Kids are smarter now. They mature sooner and know things before their teens that most of us relics from the industrial revolution may never learn. But this rapid rise in brain loading has a price. When it comes to mechanical skills, 14 is the new 10 for many of our children. Hand the average teenager a wrench and he will look

at you like you just handed him a dead fish. Unless, perchance, he is lucky enough to own his own motorcycle.

It takes a lot of time and energy to be the average youngster today. Just keeping up with all the latest versions of X Box and Guitar Hero can consume every waking minute. Admittedly, the skills learned doing so help prepare them for much of life in the 21st century...I suppose. But if you're going to ride a real motorcycle in the real out of doors, a little balance is helpful.

Call me a rusty old fogey, but I believe there is value in wrenching on your own bike. And it can be fun. In *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974) Robert Pirsig said,

"Not everyone understands what a completely rational process this is, this maintenance of a motorcycle. They think it's some kind of a 'knack' or some kind of 'affinity for machines' in operation...a motorcycle functions entirely in accordance with the laws of reason, and a study of the art of motorcycle maintenance is really a miniature study of the art of rationality itself." Well put, Bob. We need more rational thinkers.

I might suggest that, at times, this knowledge we seek has also been known to cause a bit of stress once we get older. For example, with the slightest noise, we imagine all those rapidly articulating parts competing against one another to hatch from their aluminum shell. This feeling always occurs somewhere far from home and on the coldest of nights. But there is also a peace of mind that comes when, at least, we have a clue to the sound's origin and what to do about it.

While still 14, my Honda CL 70 became the second victim of my attempts to pull off a "hysterectomy." In motorcycle terms, a hysterectomy is the act of removing vital parts and trying to reinstall them successfully...without killing the patient. In this case, the subject was fourth gear in the little CL's transmission.

My first patient was a Tecumseh lawn mower motor which, like the Honda, also didn't work when I put it back together. At least not un-



til someone enlightened my nine-year-old self about the timing marks on the camshaft and their relationship to valves, pistons and the peace and harmony of moving parts in close quarters. "Timing," I learned, is everything. Of course, letting kids do their own wrenching can be a messy business. My mother, bless her, is a patient woman. Fortunately, we didn't entertain much. Our living room was my garage. Later, when I got the shed out back, the writing was on the wall. The gloves came off and I tore into anything with a motor. With increasing frequency, I even managed to get most of my victims back to working order. Eventually, my failures were replaced by enough successes to keep me rolling into adulthood. Now, in these later years things have changed. My garage has become more of a living room.

So, how does the current generation acquire that special "feel" for torquing a 6mm bolt in aluminum without pulling the threads or busting the casting? Same as back then, trial and error tainted with a tad of supervision. I remember wanting to ride so badly that I would have waltzed across Texas barefoot for a chance to move on two wheels without pedaling. There is something about the whole motorcycle experience that separates today's youngsters from most of their peers. Even with X Box, they are more enlightened when they actually ride. Motorcycles, because of their relative simplicity and nearly audible demand for maintenance, provide unparalleled opportunities to handle the business end of a ratchet. Unless we deny them the lesson by doing it all for them, we can enjoy hours of unequalled quality time with our children busting knuckles and spinning yarns about the old days, when the only motorcycle with antifreeze was called a water buffalo. Perhaps sometimes, we might let our little "us'es" change their own oil and clean the air filter. If the pain of busted knuckles isn't too intense, the coffee table just might get transformed into a workbench. And that is not all bad.

