

So You Want to Buy a Vintage Bike?

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Am I not new to motorcycles but sure new to the Antique and Vintage world. A Newbie, Fresh Meat however you want to look at it, I have a lot to learn and with the help of some trusted 'old timers', I hope to learn how to go about evaluating an antique (before 1950) or vintage (1950 - 1969) motorcycle. It is a challenge that I am glad that I don't have to face on my own. First thing to consider, would we be getting a Title or a Bill of Sale may prove to be a problem depending on one's state laws. In Oklahoma, a notarized bill of sale that lists the serial number with the bike is required to be presented to the Tag Agency. They will verify that the numbers match and then they will file for a new title. The state will run checks to make sure that the bike is not stolen or has forged numbers. If they find everything ok, a title will be issued. Other state laws differ. Many concerns would be like those of buying a good used bike. There are many things to consider about the bike besides its appearance. Is it assembled? Does it run? Am I being presented with a basket case (the bike is apart and literally in a basket or boxes)? Is it a nice original bike that runs? Does it seem to need no more than cosmetics? Then it could become a 'Near Perfect Restoration'. A 'Basket Case' A basket case is not necessarily the worst crapshoot. At least the bike presents a lot of work and research. Are all the parts there? What is the overall condition of the parts? What's missing? Is the frame bent? Consider the cost of rebuilding the various parts such as the generator, crankshaft, transmission, rear end. A basket case presents an interesting challenge. It's like a picture puzzle with no guarantee that all the pieces are in the box. An 'old timer' advised me to remember that when buying a disassembled bike, that EVERYTHING needs to be restored, rebuilt or replaced. He said that in today's market, the cost to a 'do it yourselfer' would likely amount to between \$9,000.00 to \$15,000.00, plus the price of the disassembled bike. He said the cost would be close to the same for either a twin or a single. His encouragement came in the words, 'There are enough loose parts on the market today to make up for anything that is missing or beyond repair. Most replacement parts are being reproduced and offered by Bench Mark Works, Blue Moon and Bob's BMW here in the States, and several other outfits in Europe. In many cases, these parts are of the same high quality as the original BMW parts were when the bike was new. Sadly, other parts are marginally better than scrap metal. All come at high prices. It's part of the game. Eventually, most of this stuff will dry up. Pre-war bikes are a different case, because of the scarcity of parts and information. A 'Nice Original Bike' Unless it is a real original bike that runs, consider it as a 'Basket Case' still assembled. The advantages here include easier inventory of parts and the opportunity to study how the bike comes apart and of course goes back together. If the bike is really nice, consider the following: How were the maintenance records maintained? Was the engine ever rebuilt and if so, what did they do while they were in there? Bikes made before 1970 do not have a pressurized oil system, or an oil filter. They use a pump and oil slingers to distribute the oil throughout the engine. Is it almost plugged up? Without removing the crankshaft, there is no way of knowing the condition of the oil slingers. What is the condition of the valves and seats? Is compression optimum? Consider that the rubber in the seals hardens with age. Have they been replaced? If the bike runs and the tires are good, ride it. How does it handle? Do you have to fight to keep it in a straight line? The frame could be bent. By all means, check it over. One horror story I read talked about buying the bike, starting the restoration only to find over a pound of body putty had been used to repair a bent fuel tank. Something hard to find ahead of time. Look for crash evidence. A scuffed clutch control with a 'new' lever could mean the bike went down the highway while inverted. Look carefully at everything. A 'Near Perfect Restoration' Is it? All too often an owner turn a bike over to someone who can 'Restore' it. 'Money is no object,' they say. 'Make it beautiful.' I have no idea what actually goes into a restoration. Neither do I, but I am trying to learn. Things we should be alert for: Documentation of the work done and the parts that have been reconditioned or replaced. Where did the new parts come from? Were they NOS (new old stock) or salvaged from a parts bike? Did they come from a third world source where quality control is poor or nonexistent? An original air cleaner for some models could cost several hundred dollars. Does it have the original, or something from a later year? What is the condition of the tires and wheels. Were the wheel bearing replaced? If an Earles model, were the swing arm bearings and seals replaced? Look inside the oil dipstick port for signs that the inside of the engine was apart and cleaned. Is there any evidence the oil was changed recently? Any evidence of moisture in any of the fluids? (Look for cream coffee appearance) Was the steering head rebuilt, and were the axles replaced not just rechromed. NEVER RECHROME AXLES. (see footnote). Start the bike and allow it to warm up. Listen for unusual noises coming from the engine or the transmission. While still on the center stand, spin the rear wheel and listen for any roughness or noise from the rear drive. Ride it to determine how it feels on the road. Does it track straight on a flat road? If not the frame may be bent. Check it out. That old timer warned me to be on the lookout for very pretty so called restored bikes coming out of Turkey and Eastern Europe. He says they look 'over restored' and most of them were not assembled to run or be otherwise safe on the road. These bikes can still be candidates for restoration. Be advised, he said, the cost will be high. Proceed with caution, or proceed not at all. 'Honesty' How honest does the seller appear to be? Does he sidestep questions or give you direct answers? How does he know about his own bike? One should not piss the seller off by nit picking his bike to pieces. Keep notes private. If the seller is asking more than you are willing to pay, study your notes before you make him a counter offer. Make sure you are buying a safe bike and one that is of value to you. If it is one you plan to restore yourself, you can be sure that you will spend \$9K to \$15K for parts and outside labor. If you enjoy the challenge, go for it. The reward of 'Doing It Yourself' is one that is irreplaceable. It will always be your bike. The following checklist can be used

you evaluate the bike that you have looked hard and long to find. Read all the articles that you can come up with that cover potential problems. Ask questions of knowledgeable people. They are willing to help. So if your dream is a thumper or a super smooth twin, enjoy it. That is what it is all about. Don Meller

Footnote: Even though most of BMWs axles were originally chrome plated, (some pre-war axles were cadmium plated , not zinc) the factory used what some call "technical" chrome, or "industrial" plating. This chrome is electro plated onto the steel surface with no first layer of copper or nickel. The finished layer is often no more than .0003" thick. The mistake in replating axles is that they are more often than not taken to an automotive plater and given "show chrome" treatment. They look very pretty when finished and are otherwise useless, because the precision fit the axle had is now gone.

Note to our readers: Don contacted me inquiring about a checklist for buying an old BMW bike. Off the top of my head, I could not think of one, and suggested he write one up and submit it to the News, which he did. (See below).

Don claims that he has never gotten anything he has written published before, such as letters to the editor of his local newspaper.

This is a good example to illustrate that if you think something can or should be done, you have the ability to do it.

Nice job, Don!

Ed. ----- If you have any thoughts, suggestions, or additions, drop Richard a note at rishelaverne@hotmail.com.

Motorcycle Purchase Checklist

Make _____ Model _____ Year _____ Frame Serial
 Number _____ Engine Serial
 Number _____ Title _____
 Bill of Sale _____ All Keys _____
 Available _____ Owners Manual _____
 Maintenance Record _____
 Oil Type &
 weight _____ Clean _____ Valves
 Adjusted _____ Seats Repaired _____ Oil Slingers
 Cleaned _____ Engine
 Overhaul _____ Fuel Tank
 Leak _____ Carburetors Leak _____ Engine Oil
 Leak _____ Transmission
 Leak _____ Battery _____ Tires
 Condition _____ Age _____ Rust in Fuel
 Tank _____ Sheet Metal Rust (around
 rivets) _____ Sheet Metal Dents or Repairs (look on back
 side) _____ Rust on
 Frame _____ Cracks on
 Frame _____ Frame
 Straight _____ Paint
 Condition _____ Chrome
 Condition _____ Seat
 Condition _____ Front
 Shocks _____ Leaking _____ Rear
 Shocks _____ Leaking _____ Head
 Light _____ Works _____ Tail
 Light _____ Works _____ Handle
 Bars _____ Ends Scuffed _____ Speedometer
 Works? _____ Condition _____ Odometer
 Works? _____ Miles _____ Air Cleaner
 Condition _____ Brakes
 Work? _____ Condition? _____ Throttle
 Cable _____ Smooth _____ Brake
 Cable _____ Condition? _____ Engine Runs and Bike is
 rideable? _____ After Warm Up Is Engine Noisy or
 Smooth? _____ Transmission (shift smooth and
 quiet?) _____ Rear Drive (Spin rear tire with bike on stand. Is rear drive
 smooth?) _____ Does Bike Track straight? _____ How is bike
 presented by seller? _____ Was Previous work Documented?

 Condition and type of

Wheels _____ Spokes _____ Engine oil
 clean? _____ Condition of Steering head bearings?
 _____ Check to see if axles have been rechromed. This will give some
 idea of the type of work done on the bike. _____ With permission from owner,
 remove rear wheel and inspect brakes and splines.(look for worn splines) _____ Examine parts
 used and note whether NOS or high or low quality reproductions

_____ Â Check S/Ns
 closely for alterations. Have they been altered or forged? Use a magnifying glass. Â Age of tire can be determined by the
 DOT# on side of tire. Last four digits indicate week and year tire produced. Example: 5107 = 51st week of 2007. Tires
 made before 2000 only had three digits Example: 517 = 51st week 1997. If the ends of handle bars, edge of seat or other
 areas on bike are scuffed or show signs of road rash, the bike has at least been dropped if not wrecked. Â