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Indian Motorcycle "Chief Fan" Prepares for Rods & Rails Classic Car Show

Bob Stark calls himself the chief fan of Indian motorcycles. Little wonder. The Perris Valley man grew up the son of an Indian motorcycle dealer in Akron, Ohio, and began his love affair with the brand as a kid. As a retired engineer, Stark boasts one of the largest collections of Indians in the country, maybe the world.

Inside his shop off Cajalco Road, Indian motorcycles built from 1938 to 2003 are lined up one after the other, all clean and gleaming, all 50 in working order. In addition, he's got thousands of parts waiting for buyers—everything from crankcases to clutch sprockets to transmission hand shifts to carburetors and gas lines.

His business has allowed him to rub elbows with the rich and famous, including actor Steve McQueen, with whom Stark developed a close friendship.

At 75, Stark still rides every week and still operates a parts catalog for his customers around the globe. His Starklite Cycle business even comes with its own motto: "A shop where old Indians never die."

Stark and his wife, May Lou, will be on hand June 13 for the annual 10th Annual Rods & Rails Classic Car Show at the Orange Empire Railway Museum, 2201 A Street. The event will feature dozens of classic cars, great food and entertainment.

"I love the freedom that come with riding motorcycles," Stark said. "It's a feeling of freedom."

Indian Motorcycles date to 1901 when two businessmen founded the company as a way of providing "a simple, practical, every-day motorcycle for the average man." The brand was the first America-built motorcycle. In its first year, 143 Indians rolled off the assembly line in the Springfield, Mass., plant. By 1913, the number had exploded to 35,000. In 1918, Stark's father became an Indian dealer. Today, Indian motorcycles are manufactured in Kings Mountain, North Carolina.

Stark bought his first Indian—for \$50—in 1950, when he was still in high school. A year later, he purchased the 1948 Indian Chief he still rides. It's his favorite motorcycle, one he's ridden more than 240,000 miles.

It's the motorcycle he almost never owned. Stark said he first laid eyes on the motorcycle at a dealership when it was for sale. He sold his model airplanes and worked extra at a fruit stand to earn the \$450 to purchase it. When he finally had the money, it was too late. It was sold.

A year went by until Stark noticed an advertisement in his home town newspaper featuring a 1948 Indian Chief for sale. When he went to see the motorcycle, it was the same one he was so intent on purchasing the previous year. The owner said the bike was too powerful for him and he was afraid to drive it. Stark paid \$325.

"I told myself if I ever got the chance to own that motorcycle, I would keep it for life," Stark said. "And I have. I'll never sell it."

Stark's collection includes police bikes and World War II-era motorcycles used by the military. He's also got several Ford Thunderbirds from the mid-1950s. Then there's his 1953 Indian Chief that took 37 years to build from parts collected from a myriad of sources and painstakingly crafted together.

The engine has never been started but Stark has no doubt it would crank if need be.

Stark and his wife moved to Gavilan Hills west of Perris in the 1980s, transferring their business from Fullerton. It was in Fullerton that the couple met actor Steve McQueen, a huge fan of motorcycles and motorcycle racing.

McQueen walked in one day and became enthralled with the Stark collection. He told Bob Stark that he arrived in California driving a 1942 Indian and when he saw one like it in Stark's shop, he had to have it. All afternoon, McQueen cajoled Stark to sell it, constantly raising his offer. By day's end, he'd written a check for \$4,200 for the bike. Stark still retains a copy.

McQueen became a regular at the shop.

"He was just a regular guy," Bob Stark said. "He'd drive up in a beat up 1952 pickup truck. We'd go out to lunch and he'd pull his hat over his head. He did not want people to recognize him."

McQueen once directed Stark to purchase 105 motorcycles from a dealer in Detroit and then sent him cross-country to bring them to California. Stark had to open a separate building to store them all.

He said he enjoys coming to venues like Rods & Rails for the chance to show off his toys and to explain to a whole new generation the history and legacy of Indian motorcycles.

Mayor Pro-Tem Mark Yarbrough calls Stark and his collection a treasure that attracts enthusiasts from all across America. Yarbrough, who owns a motorcycle, said the Starks allow people to sit on, ride and use the motorcycles in the collection.

"Bob and Mary Lou are true institutions within the motorcycle world," he said. "They love the freedom that comes from riding. They're great ambassadors for the Perris Valley. They are living legends."

See a short video and interview:



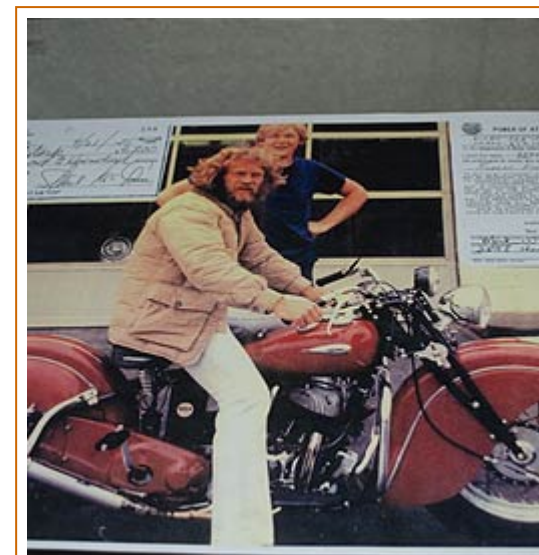
Stark holds a 1950s Cleveland Indians racing jacket.



Bob Stark with an advertisement featuring a 1940s conversion kit to motorize bicycle. It sold for \$109.75.



Some of the collection at Starklite Cycle west of Perris.



Actor Steve McQueen became a friend and customer of Stark's in the 1970s.