



WILD WEST MOTOR COMPANY 2005 DRAGOON

Hand-built
HIGH TECH

Out of the skunk works and onto the street

by Terry Roorda

SAN DIEGO, CALIF.—A tour of the Wild West Motor Company plant begins in earnest at a computer terminal in a back office where company founder and CEO Paul Seiter shows off his software. There on the big flat screen is the image of the bottom panel of a gas tank. It's not a terribly sexy image on the face of it, but to Paul it's pure eroticism. He's a mechanical engineer by profession, and mechanical engineers are... well... different.



Paul nudges the mouse, rotating and flipping the image on screen, adding and removing grids and gradients, bringing up tables of data describing in arcane technical detail the properties of virtually every imaginary molecule of the imaginary steel stamping we're viewing, and it's a riveting performance, if you'll pardon the expression. This panel is one of three components that are deep drawn, laser cut and welded together to form the organically swept and bulbous tank of the company's chopper model, the Dragoon. A few more manipula-

tions of the mouse and we're looking at the Dragoon's chassis from every conceivable angle, with and without body parts, drivetrain and rubber, and then another couple of clicks bring up the exact steel plate jig—nuts, bolts and all—required to fabricate that elaborate design.

The software program Paul's showing off is Alias Studio, a \$25,000 program also used by the body designers at Porsche and Ferrari. With it, Wild West can create and test an entire motorcycle design using just electrons. This is mind-blowing stuff to someone like myself who struggles to open e-mail attachments, and if it all sounds to you like overkill for a company that currently manufactures no more than a dozen bikes in a month, go back and reread the part about mechanical engineers being... well... different.

Reluctantly exiting the design room flush with CAD/CAM wonder and fresh ideas on how to open my damn attachments, we stop next at the company's CNC milling machine which at this moment is chewing billets and spitting out license plate frame mounting brackets, just one of the roughly 150 Wild West components produced in-house. A short stroll from there leads to

the frame shop where the exact jig I just saw on the computer screen sits fully realized and clamping lengths of bent tubing in position to be welded into a frame. A CNC tube bender sits nearby beside a stack of steel tubes in various diameters. It's here

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that the company's signature drop-seat chassis are fabricated from scratch. It's also where their handlebars are produced, and their gas tanks welded together, and I'm beginning to get the feeling that Paul has a serious case of DIY syndrome.

At the motor assembly station, S&S Cycle motor kits in 111, 117, and 124 c.i. displacements are inspected, matched and balanced, and the cases polished—in-house, of course—before being hand-built by a single technician. Other subassembly stations turn out, among other things, the tire and wheel assemblies and wiring harnesses strung together from spools of aviation-grade wire. And then there's the paint shop where the company's staff artist is sweeping a spray gun over a taped tank, and Paul explains that they do their own paint jobs because supply and quality from outside sources had become issues, so what the hell, DIY.



Finally all of that manufacturing foreplay comes together on a group of bike lifts where the Wild West motorcycles are final assembled—again, each by a single technician. The parts and accessories brought in from the aftermarket to pull the whole Dragoon package together are a premium blend of Mean Streets inverted front forks, Baker Drivetrain RSD 6-speed transmission, Primo/Rivera belt drive, Performance Machine brakes, wheels and forward controls, High End leather seat, Ness billet handgrips, and a Hot Match pop-up gas cap.

So how much does all of this hands-on attention and top-shelf componentry cost you, the consumer? It ain't cheap, folks. The Dragoon as tested with a 117-inch motor and 280 series Metzeler runs \$39,800. You can buy a lot of software for that. Or maybe not.

Get down on it

It's a long descent into the saddle of the Dragoon, which sits a scant 21 inches off the pavement. Once ensconced and getting my bearings, the first thing I notice is the understated instrument panel incorporated into the handlebars. It positions a small analog/digital speedo and a set of idiot-LEDs right at eye level for easy reading. Looking down from there I notice the small fill plug and pair of oil lines coming off the



frame just aft of the steering head. That's where the oil gets put into the frame, the 2-inch diameter tube of the backbone serving as the tank. The next thing I notice is the open belt primary, and make a mental note to keep my foot and shoelaces and pant leg clear of it. It's guarded on the outside, but you can't be too careful. I've heard stories. And lastly I notice that I don't feel like I'm sitting on the bike so much as in it. The sensation is that of sitting in the cockpit of some kind of fantastic landship.

That sensation persists out on the road, but the relative agility of the chassis belies its size. Of the front end's 38 degrees of rake, 3 degrees are incorporated into the triple trees, effectively neutralizing the chopper flop factor and making for civilized slow-speed maneuvering. Beneath the seat (where the oil tank isn't) is a single vertical Progressive shock with adjustable rebound damping, and it does a good job of absorbing rough stuff and keeping the big 280 tracking predictably. The 4-piston PM calipers front and back do a confident job of bringing the big machine to heel, though stepping on the rear brake pedal requires some fancy footwork on my part owing to a long inseam and the protrusion of the air cleaner towards my knee.

Down in the powertrain department, the Baker RSD 6-speed transmission is everything we've come to expect from the unit—smooth, sure, and quiet—and the open 3-inch primary belt is fun to watch as it

takes its loping laps around the pulleys. Clutch pull at the lever is remarkably light, and throttle pull quick and even. The ballsy 117-inch motor barks with authority through the Wild West-designed 2-into-1 exhaust, and provides serious boost throughout its range. It does vibrate, however, and at highway speeds that vibration renders the single rearview mirror meaningless. Though the handlebars are rubber-isolated, the solid billet grips transmit the vibes into my hands more readily than I'd like, and a pair of well-padded gauntlets are a must for riding this brute with any semblance of manual comfort.

To market we go

Wild West Motor Company has been in the bike building business for 10 years now, and for 2005 they offer two other models besides the Dragoon: the Vigilante and the Gunfire. Both are pro-street styled machines, and are distinguishable most visibly by their tire sizes—fat and fatter—a 240 and a 300 (or 280) respectively. The company currently produces something on the order of 150 units per annum, but they expect that number to rise rapidly. The reason for that expectation is the impending CARB certification of their motors, which will allow the California-based company to enter the rich California market for the first time in its history. How's that for irony? ♦

