

WILLY'S GARAGE

WITH PAUL WILLIAMSON



The Discovery Channel may have brought the world of custom motorcycles into the limelight but the reality is choppers have been around since Jesse James was in diapers.

Motorcycle customization dates all the way back to the 1940s but things really took off for choppers in the 1970s when the movie *Easy Rider* harvested a cult-like following.

As a kid growing up in Gimli, Craig Kozlowski was inexplicably drawn to these unusual machines.

In 1992, shortly after his 16th birthday, Craig took the plunge and purchased a heavily customized 1974 Honda 750-4 cylinder chopper. The bike was a bit on the rough side but all of the mandatory '70s chopper components were intact.

Once it was road ready, Craig commandeered his raked out Honda all the way to Sturgis, S.D., for the annual meeting of the hogs. There were loads of custom bikes but surprisingly few choppers at Sturgis in those days. There was even fewer Hondas, but the old bike was a crowd favourite. It seemed that every old school enthusiast had owned a Honda chopper in the '70s.

They were also impressed with the fact that the teenager had ridden such a radical bike all the way from Gimli.

Craig has since made many trips to Sturgis and over the years the popularity of choppers has increased to the point where they practically outnumber factory prepared bikes.

In 2000 he put his Honda chopper on blocks and purchased a brand spanking new Harley Davidson Softail, a Night Train edition with cool black accents and a low-slung outlaw look. Craig rode the bike in basically stock trim to the tune of 12,000 km before he embarked on the daunting task of creating a custom cruiser that was literally like no other.

The bike took two years to build and was unveiled just in time for the World of Wheels. It was built to serve as a rolling calling card for Craig's company, Nitro Choppers.

The bike was rebuilt from the ground up and features a stretched and lowered aluminum Fat Katz gas tank, a modified Corbin fiberglass chin spoiler (that looks interestingly close to a '30s Ford grill) and Sumax Street



A bike this tough looking had better have the juice to back it up ... this one does.

Nitro Train

Custom chopper gets your motor runnin'

sweeper fenders.

Kenny Lang applied perfect black paint with green and gold pearl then wet sanded and polished everything to a mirror like finish. Metal artist Dale Lawrence covered the tank and fenders with airbrushed demon crosses and a variety of menacing looking skulls. The hand tooled leather seat also features the skulls and crosses and is hand laced.

A bike this tough looking had better have the juice to back it up and under the custom tank lies a killer 1550 cc 110 horsepower engine loaded with Screamin Eagle goodies like high compression pistons, jugs and ported and polished cylinder heads.

The list of modifications done to this machine is extensive and many of the parts were handcrafted.

Craig doesn't claim to be a master builder or fabricator; he is the idea man, and is quick to point out that Winnipeg has a variety of extremely competent machine shops capable of transforming his design ideas into

beautiful and functional parts.

Symmons Custom Machine and Northern Machine looked after the machine work while DI Custom Coatings looked after the black wrinkle coating that covers the blacked out engine. The flame-shaped chrome billet horn cover took 120 hours to create and was hand carved. The capable crew at House Of Silver looked after all of the chrome on this project.

Craig had lots of help making his ideas come to life, including friend Greg Klassen and hot rod craftsman Billy Bourbonnais, who transferred his skills over to bike building and masterfully assisted Craig in the final assembly.

The contrast of black and chrome on this machine is perfect. From a few feet away the bike is somewhat understated but, when you take a closer look, it becomes apparent that this is a special bike with considerable attention to detail.

The cool parts that Nitro Choppers have been creating have not gone unnoticed. Indian Larry, an old school chopper icon who is a regular on Discovery Channel, was so impressed with Craig's resurrected Eagle Leg handle bar riser that he has ordered a pair in brass for his upcoming *Easyrider* magazine show bike.

Now that his Nitro Train is complete, Craig has turned his attention back to the old Honda chopper. These import rakes are making a comeback and Craig is hard at work creating a hardcore chopper with custom .44 calibre inspired parts and an eight-sided diamond shaped gas tank.

This promises to be one wild ride. The project has been aptly nicknamed The Marshall and, when completed, it may just be the bike that sends Jesse James running for cover.

E-mail willy@willysgarage.com or call him at 294-7769 if you have a question, comment, or would like to see your prized ride featured in Willy's Garage.



PAUL WILLIAMSON photos