



# APEX

## CYCLE SHOP

ROUNDEL IN THE ROUGH



## BY ROGER WILES #32797

**N**estled in the rolling foothills and appealing curly roads of north Georgia is a BMW motorcycle mecca, an oasis of both fresh and old BMWs and other interesting Euro-bikes. This delightful and picturesque moto-retreat is operated by two young enthusiasts and BMW MOA members, Rachel and Wes Burden, who are proprietors of Apex Cycles, Ellijay, GA. Rachel and Wes have a fetching story, and a first-class vintage BMW establishment.

Rachel, a vivacious and ever-cheerful woman, grew up around motorcycles; her father, mother, grandparents and assorted uncles rode regularly, and it was only natural that Rachel began riding dirt bikes at an early age. Since her father ran a motorcycle shop, coming by a properly-sized starter bike was easy for Rachel. When Rachael began her studies at the University of Georgia, she obtained her motorcycle

endorsement and commuted to classes on her first street bike, a BMW F650. Later, her regular ride was a '92 BMW R100 with the seat replaced by a wooden, towel-wrapped board, an effective if not particularly comfortable way to reduce seat height. Her rides today are a work-in-progress 1954 R51/3, and a nice Ducati Monster.

In years past, Rachael became acquainted with Dennis Kanderis, a local BMW legend who has since passed away. Hanging around his Cumming, Georgia shop, Rachel found within herself a desire to become a mechanic, or as we say today, a technician. Dennis was most helpful, and not only mentored her as an apprentice technician in his shop but suggested she attend American Motorcycle Institute in Daytona (now WyoTech) and obtain a certification for one or more makes.

Wes' parents were firmly set against motorcycles; various family members had

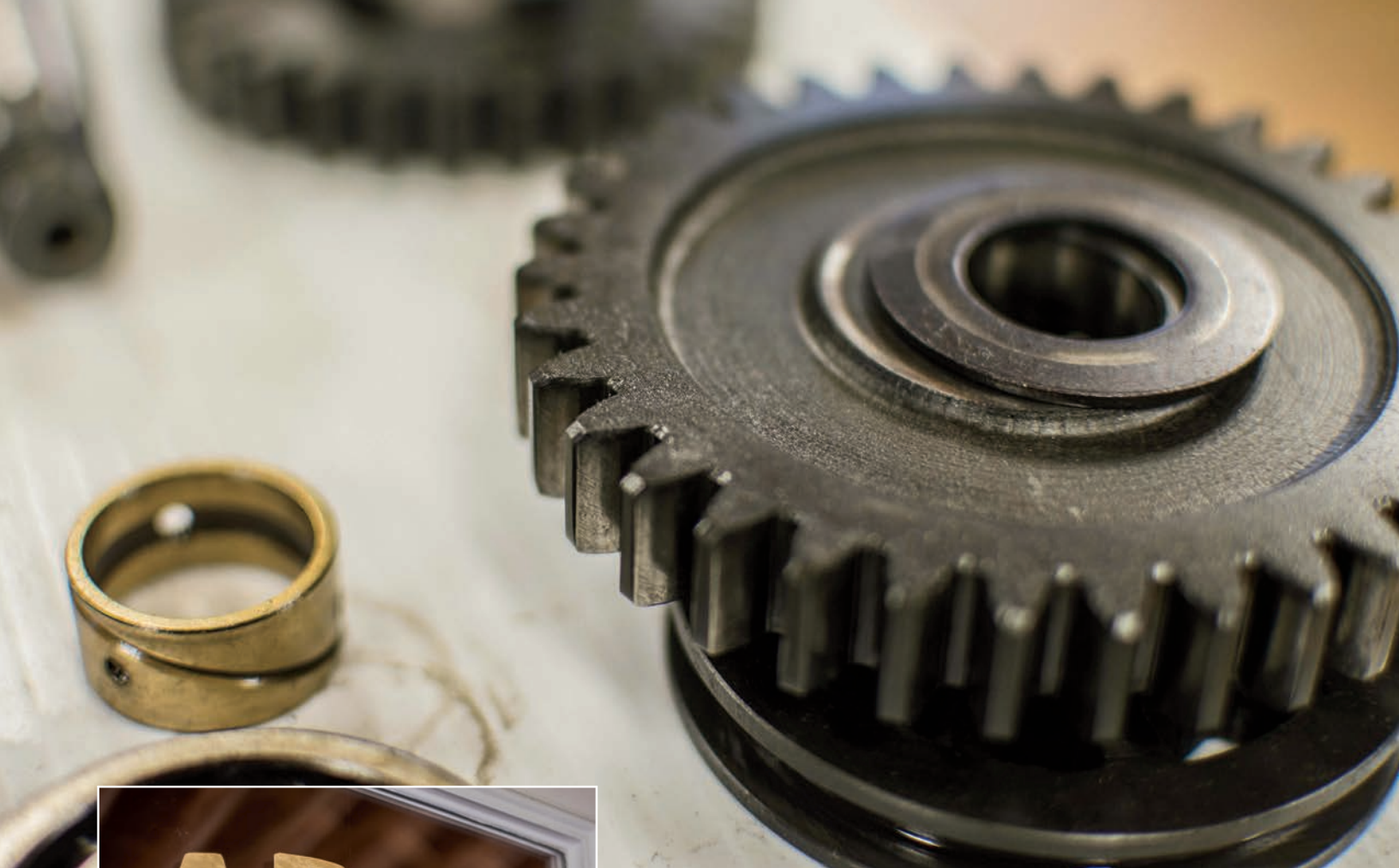
suffered motorcycle crashes in the past and, therefore, Wes was forbidden to own a motorcycle. So, of course, he secretly bought a Yamaha YZ80 and stored it at a cooperative neighbor's house. Wes would regularly sneak off from home and ride the YZ in the dirt, and return home dirty, battered and bruised. He would tell his parents he'd been riding his bicycle. An XR250 Honda replaced the Yamaha; later, his first BMW, a '77 R100, cemented Wes' relationship with the German marque.

As a younger man, Wes attended Auburn University, majoring in mechanical engineering. However, Wes left school before completing his degree. He moved to Atlanta and worked at various punk rock bars as 'security' – Wes is of a size, and I suspect he had little trouble keeping order at punk bars – as well as occasionally tending bar himself. Wes is an adventurous and universally competent fellow; he has taught rock



Rachel and Wes Burden with Scout.  
Photo by Bobby K. Russell





Top, transmission parts await reassembly. Photo by Bobby K. Russell. Above, the front door graphic welcoming visitors to Apex Cycle Shop. Photo by Adam Bennett.

climbing to inner-city youths and toured down to the south end of Mexico via motorcycle. In addition, he is a volunteer firefighter and paramedic. He traveled in the former Soviet Union as a teenager and has worked on concert festivals for the Harley-Davidson Motor Company.

During a stint at one particular such punk-rock nightclub, Wes met Rachel, who was keeping bar. Rachael and Wes discovered their mutual love of motorcycles and a relationship was born. Remembering Dennis Kanderis' advice, they enrolled at AMI together and finished with certifications in BMW and Ducati.

"It could have gone either way," both Rachel and Wes agreed, when asked why they decided to open an independent repair shop, instead of taking a steady job at a BMW retailer's service department. Most dealers are always looking for competent and trained technicians, and it would have likely been possible for both Rachel and Wes to hire on with a dealer that handles both BMW and Ducati.

"We really backed into the business; it grew organically, all by itself," Rachel commented, "We had no business plan and no real idea what we were going to be doing." But, using a two-bay garage donated by Rachel's father, Tim Hill, Apex Cycles came to life of necessity and customer demand.

"As soon as we opened, we were busy from the first job we took in, and it's never let up. We started in 2003, and 11 years later, we're still backlogged and booked well in advance." Several years later, they bought a beautifully sited home near Tim Hill's place, and built a three-story workshop a stone's throw from their new home. For over a decade, their business has kept both of them spinning wrenches, sometimes until the wee hours. Customers come to Apex Cycles strictly by word of mouth, and so far, it's kept the work-lifts full, with a motley moto-collection awaiting for a project to begin, or for repairs and





restorations, all languishing in the basement storage area. Since the house and business are adjacent, the business seems to demand attention nearly 24 hours a day; “We get customers and freight trucks at all hours of the day and often at night. The trucks bring projects from as far away as California and New York as well as all of the Southeast, and the trucks take someone’s new dream back to an excited owner.”

Apex Cycles inherited many special tools from Dennis Kanderis when he closed his shop, and has added a full range of tools needed for fabrication as well as normal BMW and Ducati repairs. Wes is an accomplished welder and is competent with all types of welding machines and the different metals. The shop sports an ultrasonic parts cleaner, useful for breaking up rock-hard varnish deposits in neglected, unloved carburetors, an old but precise lathe, a complex milling machine, a plasma cutter and much more. Wes has made a variety of special tools and jigs, can deal with any Airhead component, and can even rebuild final drive units up to and including the 1150cc Oilhead Boxers.

Wes says; “I love metal working, machining, anything creative that can be done in some kind of metal.” Wes used to do all his own head work. Recently, Wes established a relationship with a new mentor, NASCAR’s Bill Elliott’s legendary former intake specialist.







The shop area of Apex Cycle Shop. Photo by Bobby K. Russell.







This fellow, who wishes anonymity, now does all of the head work for Apex, and adds a higher level of expertise to the critical cylinder-head modifications for various engine builds, including complex five-angle valve-cutting, valve-seat and guide installations, and custom porting and polishing. In addition, repairs such as restored exhaust-spigot threads and new sparkplug threads can be accomplished. It's likely that no finer head work can be found in North America.

The basement storage area is also the machine shop, and room is being made for a roller-drum dynamometer. A fully ventilated and filtered professional paint booth is under construction; Apex also deals with a powder-coating specialist to match stock or

custom colors. Wes is building his pin striping skills, and may someday add that service to Apex' repertoire.

Asked which build was their proudest accomplishment, Wes spoke fondly of a recently completed 1979 R100RS, which was given the full resto treatment, including extensive head work, a fully balanced engine and much custom engine and frame work. Apex frequently gets barn leathers and basket cases, like a recent 1968 R60US that arrived in pieces, filthy, disorganized, water-soaked and generally disgusting. Motorcycles like this leave Apex as functional, pretty and desirable Airheads that have been given a second – or third, who knows – lease on life.

In addition to dealing with customers' commissions, Apex Cycles buys and sells Airheads, and as the business grows, they hope to do more of this. Wes has found that used BMW RT Airhead models are the least expensive used motorcycles on the marketplace, and he is able to obtain these at prices that allow Rachel and Wes to rebuild, customize or otherwise make a solid and reliable – and attractive – custom Airhead for some happy future customer. Another steady source of work and/or used bikes available at fire-sale prices comes from the archetypical rider-of-the-past, who found that mid-life has suddenly added children, mortgages, soccer tournaments and PTA meetings to life; the erstwhile rider parks the bike “for a short time” that often becomes five or 20 years. Then, kids gone and life less complicated, the fellow or gal either wants the bike restored so they once again begin riding, or are now willing to sell it. These are usually found in pretty good shape.

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IT'S WHO WE ARE  
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Readers perhaps now see that the focus of Apex Cycles is to continue to build a solid word-of-mouth clientele. “We find that people who come to us as referrals are a special breed of customer who often become dedicated enthusiasts of both motorcycling and Apex Cycles.” To earn this kind of support, Wes and Rachel cultivate contacts in Germany and elsewhere around the world that can provide new old stock parts (NOS), No longer available (NLA) parts, custom bits and technical support when needed. Airhead parts are becoming a little bit more difficult to obtain, although BMW still does an excellent job of providing parts support for their vintage machines. Sadly, prices for vintage and even modern-era (1970–95) Airhead parts have skyrocketed in recent years. Aftermarket sources in Germany and elsewhere are offering some relief with slightly



Wes and Rachel Burden discuss a repair. Photo by Adam Bennett.



more reasonable prices.

Any preferences? Rachel loves working on her R51/3, and anyone else's Slash 3, and Wes is happy working on just about any Airhead; he tries to avoid K-bike work. Rachel was adamant in her aversion for working on Dellorto carburetors.

Why BMWs? "We like the design and are both dedicated to the old stuff. We both prefer the Slash 3 and Slash 2 eras, as well as the modern-era Airheads," Wes explained.

What does the future hold for Apex Cycles, for Wes, Rachel and five-year-old son Race?

"We really want to finish our own custom projects!" both said spontaneously and simultaneously when the question was presented. "But the bikes keep coming and going, and we're still out here after dark often, trying to keep up. We'll get to them someday." Rachel's work in progress is her R51/3; Wes has visions of stuffing a big-pipe, big-valve 70HP 1978 R100S motor into an R80ST frame. The big motor in a light frame, with a lower final drive ratio, would make an interesting sleeper street-fighter!

Apex works mainly on BMW and Ducati machines, but will consider taking in nearly any European brand for repairs and custom work. If it can be said that Apex is a specialty boutique motorcycle works, then the hallmark would be custom retro-conversions – making newer stuff look old, and make everything run and work like it should. "We are about attention to detail, and doing it right the first time. We stand by our work and satisfaction is guaranteed." Wes added. "I love to get a commission that requires balancing and blueprinting an engine, doing custom frame work, bracing and removing unneeded frame parts; I like the bare-bones look of a BMW – an engine, wheels, a seat and handlebars – because less is more, and lines are all important.

Both Rachel and Wes spoke of the challenge of translating a customer's wants and needs, and the customer's vision of how they want the finished project to look and run – translating those words, emotions and visions into steel, aluminum and rubber. "It's very rewarding."

The Burdens' property is over 13 acres and adjoins the Cartecay River; they have turned several acres by the river into a campground, and plan to build an over-nighters' bunkhouse in the upper story of the workshop, along with a boutique shop



of apparel and other moto-bits that show the work of local artisans. The shop will also feature Wes' custom-made components, such as reverse-pivot brake and clutch levers, trick clip-on bar-and-lever sets, custom triple clamps that will work with the oversize fuel tanks like Hoske and others, and more. Rachel is working of getting a local artisan to build and modify seats.

If you're considering jumping into the vintage BMW world, if you are jonesing for the familiar valve clatter, torque effect and

the smooth forward progress that is the hallmark of these venerable and lovely machines, Rachel and Wes can help you get started, or can help you get the bike finished, finally.

"We live it; it's not just work, it's not just a job. It's who we are and what we do as a family. We hope all our customers come to trust Apex Cycles, and will pass the word on to others."

Apex Cycles is located at: 210 Fox Fire Trail, Ellijay GA 30536. Call 404-702.4394. [www.apexcycleshop.com](http://www.apexcycleshop.com) GPS: N34 38.283 W84 27.150 ☺