

April 2014

# streetscene

STREET RODDING'S ORIGINAL NEWS MONTHLY



A Publication of the  
National Street Rod Association®  
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## Bob & Patt Rutledge, Rutter's Rod Shop

by Tara Baukus Mello

**W**hen Bob "Rutter" Rutledge started rod building, it was for himself and friends who wanted his help because they knew he could do the work they wanted correctly. Later, as the owner of his own rod shop, he built his reputation on giving his customers assurance that he could "make it right," no matter the size of the job or its complexity.

"I call him 'Make It Right Rutter,'" says Bob's wife Patt, who also runs the office at Rutter's Rod Shop. "It's sort of a joke because people come to see us with all sorts of challenges—from creating parts on the English Wheel that don't exist to fixing a botched job they hired some inexperienced rod shop to do—and I tell



work on their cars after watching him build his own for many years. At the time, he worked for Upjohn in logistics and they had a program where they would pay most of the cost of any of the college classes their employees wanted

## Making it Right for Rodders Everywhere

them, 'Go talk to Make It Right Rutter, he'll do it' and he always does."

Bob started his rod business in Kalamazoo, Michigan, as a side business in the early '90s, initially because friends kept asking him to

**RUTTER'S**  **ROD SHOP**  
Professional Hot Rod Builder  
and Parts' Supplier



to take. "I decided I would take one welding class so I could undo all the bad habits I'd learned from teaching myself, but I ended up taking every class they offered," remembers Bob.

The business remained informal for several years, though Patt did make up fliers offering Bob's welding services to hand out to friends of friends at rod shows. As word spread, Bob found that their oversized two-car garage was not a big enough work space. "We moved to a new house in mid-1998 that had a separate barn where I could work and that's when Rutter's Rod Shop was officially born," he says.

Bob continued to work full-time at Upjohn until 2000, when he decided that he was ready to take the leap of faith to being a full-time rod builder. Within two weeks, Patt, who

had been employed full-time at International Paper, decided that she wanted to be Bob's full-time partner. "The more we talked about it, the more we realized that it would be too hard to run the entire business alone," she explains. "There was just too much to do between the paperwork, the billing and the actual work on cars. Plus, we felt like it was really important for us to be in this together."

And literally, Bob and Patt have been "in it together" ever since. One of the key things the Rutlidges did to enhance their business was to take an annual trip to visit the top rod shops in Southern California. "We wanted to see how they did business; to learn from them," says Patt. As a result, a lot of friendships were formed and the advice from their new mentors was taken to heart. "I think the biggest thing we heard was to be careful about getting too big," says Bob.

Bob intended early on to only build chassis, but then he realized that his customers really wanted a full-service



**There is a stopwatch and a clipboard for every project, so all work is itemized on the spot.**





Patt handles the administrative end of the business, including stocking the showroom. Come check it out during their open house on April 26.

Bob and Patt make work-life balance a priority, so he actually has time to work on his own project, this '30 Model A.





**The newest Rutter's location in Hickory, NC, has a state-of-the-art paint booth. Here Bob discusses the filtration system with PPG supplier Bob Smith.**

shop, so he decided he would do everything except paint, primarily because he didn't have a good facility to handle paint. Initially Bob worked alone, eventually expanding the shop behind their home to about 2,000 square feet.

Being at a shop behind their home, however, had its drawbacks. It was hard for Bob and Patt to maintain work/life balance in terms of both limiting work to business hours themselves, as well as keeping customers from stopping by at all hours. "Another challenge was that we were in a residential area, and therefore we couldn't have signage or much traffic," says Patt. "It limited us and made us seem less professional than we really were."

In early 2004, Rutter's Rod Shop moved to a commercial building that had been renovated expressly for their needs. "It was really a step up—5,000 square feet with a 40x40 showroom for us to display chassis and parts," says Patt. The Rutlidges hired two people to help Bob in the shop, and business grew quickly to five employees





**Bob hands off the '31 Chevy Rutter's completed for Tom Wollenberg (L). Look for it in this year's Builder's Showcase in Louisville.**

when they decided to leave Kalamazoo for Hickory, North Carolina, in January 2008 after they had grown tired of the long winters.

With the move they decided to downsize the business. "I remembered the California rodders warning us about getting big and realized with five employees, I just wasn't doing as much hands on as I wanted," says Bob. The first

North Carolina location was 4,500 square feet. It was just Bob and Patt alone again and they downsized their parts business to only stock parts for typical weekend projects, dropshipping the rest.

Over the next couple of years, they decided that getting Bob some help in the shop was necessary. "We realized that two employees are ideal," Bob says. "It is enough to give me the help we need, while still giving me enough hands-on time that I can ensure our quality remains top-notch." One thing the new North Carolina location did have space for was painting, so they decided to add that to their services in 2012.

Last December Rutter's Rod Shop moved again, this time to a 7,000-square-foot shop and, perhaps most importantly, with room for a state-of-the-art paint booth and a full-time employee who specializes in painting. These days, Rutter's work ranges from ground-up builds to "makeovers" of existing cars to fixing less-than-perfect jobs. Bob says, "I've found being well-rounded has its advantages. We don't just slap parts together in a build, we can provide top quality metalwork for people who

**This '37 Ford panel is the official shop truck of Rutter's. Bob and Patt have logged 80,000 miles in it traveling the country.**





need something custom or for parts that just don't exist...and I really enjoy that. I like the challenge."

Throughout their business career the Rutlidges have focused on doing business the way they would like to be treated as customers. All work and parts get itemized and all labor is literally timed with a stopwatch. Invoices are processed weekly and sent via e-mail so customers aren't asked for a large advance upfront. For customers that can't make it



**Rutter's Shop Tech Eddie Howard (R) works with Dan Whisnant (L) from WSC Racing Engines on a '73 Cuda.**

into the shop, including those that are long distance, Patt sends out detailed photos of their project's progress weekly as well.

"Over the years, we've found that the two most important qualities of running a successful business are communication and education," says Bob. "If you communicate with your customers well, and you educate them about what you are doing and why, business usually goes very smoothly." 🚗