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BY TARA BAUKUS MELLO

LABOR OF LOVE

Bryan Wheeler was just 21 years old when he opened Wheeler's Speed Shop in Huntington Beach, California. It marked the beginning of a new chapter in his automotive career—one in which he was out from under the wing of bosses and partners and entirely on his own. At age 24 Bryan has decided owning his own shop and having the ability to choose the projects that interest him is exactly where he wants to be.

Bryan's first job in the industry was when he was just 15 and he thought that being a "cleanup kid" at a Porsche repair shop was the best job in the world. Like many young teens, Bryan's initial interest in cars was in the sports car genre, so the Porsche shop suited him perfectly. By the time his high school graduation came around, Bryan knew he wanted to continue working around cars. Through a friend he got a job at another shop, graduating to repair work on older cars. When the owner of the shop developed some health problems, Bryan took on more responsibility and as a result became part owner. A few years ago, the partnership was dissolved and he rechristened the business Wheeler's Speed Shop.

Over the years, Bryan realized that his true passion for cars was in building street rods. Slowly, he has focused his efforts on adding more equipment and developing a group of employees with the right mix of skills. Finding the right employees is the hardest part of being a shop owner, according to Bryan, but after five years, he feels like he's got the right group. True to the way he got his start, one of the small group at Wheeler's is 17-year-old Nathan Menkes, who keeps the shop clean and provides an extra set of hands on certain projects.

Currently, Wheeler's has five complete street rod builds in progress, in addition to the 70 or so repairs and conversions they handle annually. With four employees in addition to Bryan, it makes for long hours at the shop—often longer than one might expect because Bryan places a huge importance on making sure each job that leaves his shop is top notch. Recognizing that he's still a new rod builder on the scene, he knows that developing a reputation as a first-quality builder will ensure a long successful career.

Despite a passion for building turnkey rods, Bryan also notes that taking on repair work and half-completed rods provides some extra knowledge that would be hard to gain elsewhere.

"You see how other shops install certain parts, how the cars are built and how they are holding up. . . we take that information and, in turn, apply it to what Wheeler's produces," he explained.

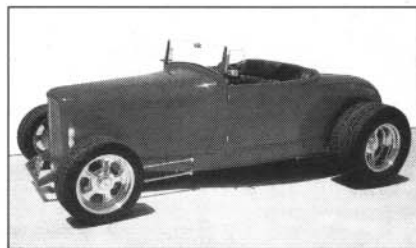
The long hours working on other people's cars, however, have taken their toll on Bryan's own personal rod. He purchased a '29 Ford roadster already in progress three years ago and wishes he had more free time to work on it. The '29 has a Brookfield Roadster body that sits on a pinched '32 frame from the Deuce Factory. The previous owner ordered the body in pieces so he could fit each panel to the frame,

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Wheeler's employee, Andrew McClelland, works on a '34 Tudor sedan, one of five hot-top-up project vehicles currently in the shop.



Wheeler's built this red highboy owned by Gary Herman of Newport Beach, CA. It was selected as one of the cars for the American Racing calendar.

later building a subframe for the body. Next on Bryan's list is a hood and floorboards. Suspension is a tube drop axle with a four-bar in front and a triangle four-bar with a Franklin quick-change rearend. A stock '96 Corvette LT1 engine with a six-speed manual tranny give the '29 its power, while Halibrand wheels gloved with BFGoodrich tires provide sticking power for the road.

While still young himself, Bryan has enough experience to be able to offer advice to other young rodders who dream of owning their own shop. "If this is what you want to do, then get ready for long hours, a lot of busted knuckles, cut fingers, and headaches upon headaches...it is a true labor of love." **SR**

Are you under 30 and in overdrive? If you're a street rodder who is under 30 and involved in rodding, either as a professional or for fun, we want to hear from you. Send us a photo of you and your pre-'49 rod with a letter detailing your experiences with street rodding. Be sure to include your name, age, address, and phone number. Send submissions to: SRM, Under 30 & In Overdrive, 774 S. Placentia Ave., Placentia, CA 92870.

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Bryan Wheeler, owner of Wheeler's Speed Shop in Huntington Beach, CA, and his personal street rod—a '29 Ford roadster.

