

Dr Sprocket's Column

TOM SIFTON: MASTER MOTOR BUILDER



I've been a pretty lucky guy. Since high school I've had the good fortune to be in the right place at the right time more than once and I've met a lot of my motorcycle heroes because of it.

In 1984, NorCal legend Dick 'Bugsy' Mann held an event at Sandhill Ranch just west of Brentwood called The Annual Vintage Dirt Bike Rally. It only lasted five or six more years but it was a great place to view neat

old race bikes and watch them do their thing in vintage motocross, flat track and hill climb.

All around the event grounds you could meet and talk to many of the riders and builders, along with old motorcycle shop and factory dealership owners from the greatest days of motorcycling. It's where I met Sam Arena, Joe Leonard, Larry Headrick and Kenny Eggers, all now sadly passed. All these guys were motorcycle racers and big winners who rode motors for – and built by – Tom Sifton, who I also met at Sandhill Ranch.

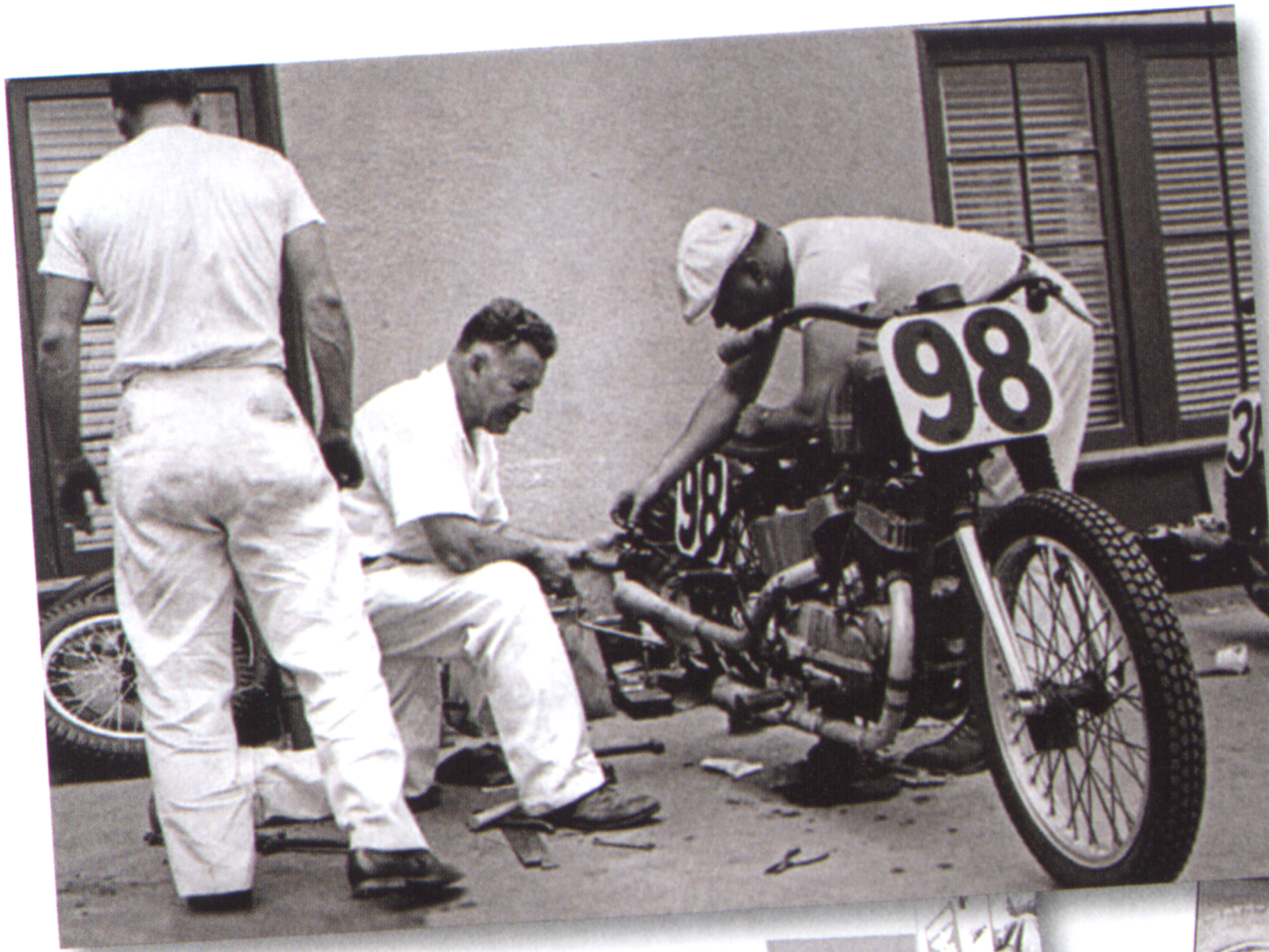
Tom passed in 1990 but started messing with motorcycles full time in 1929 when he was in his mid-twenties and started running a Harley sub-dealership in San Francisco for Dudley Perkins. In 1933 he took over a full dealership in San Jose, which he turned over to Sam Arena in 1953.

Tom dominated racing with the motors and bikes he built but never wanted any of the glory or fame that came with being the man behind his successful riders. He was famous for his quote "Keep me out of it". His attention to detail was extraordinary: he never liked radical motor work because more times than not it would

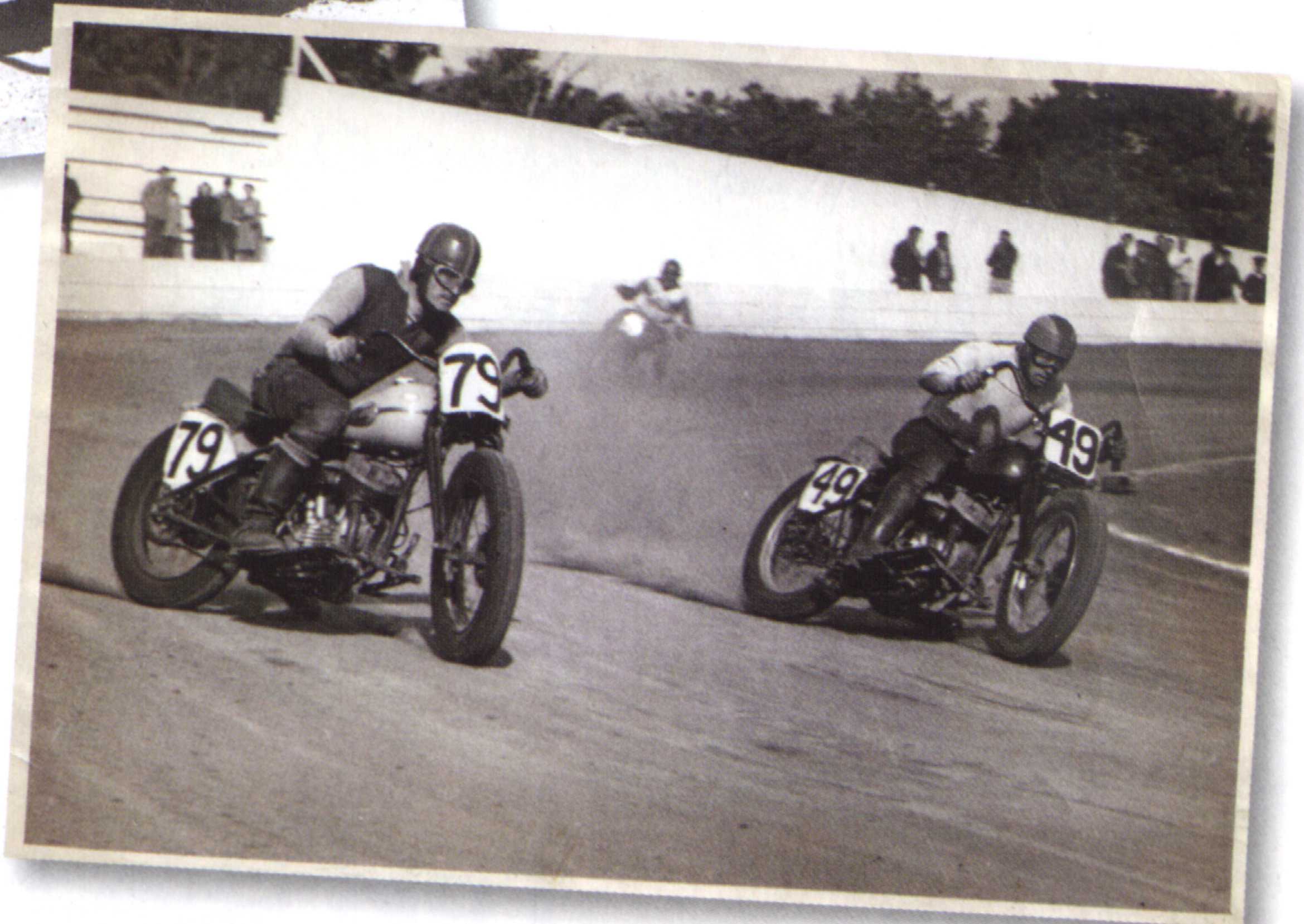
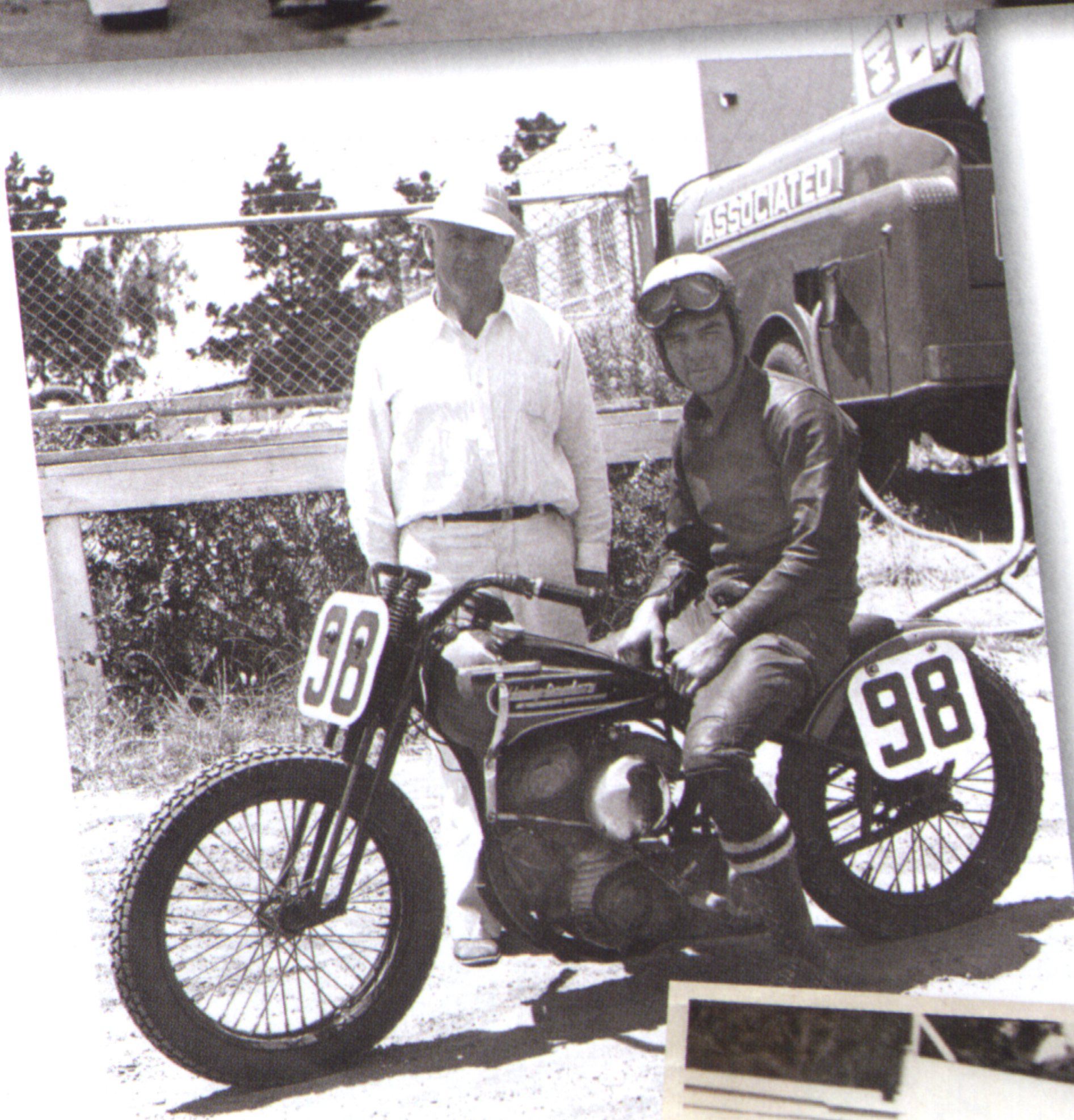
cause the motor to fail and let the rider down. His modifications were well thought out and his assembly was meticulous. The secret of his Harley WR motors' success was getting them to breathe so well. Getting it in, getting it out!

He built WRs for Sam Arena from 1938 until 1947 when Sam retired from flat track and Tom finally let the factory boys in on what he'd been up to. He had good reason to keep quiet about his methods and often said he wanted to keep his riders out front in clean air and not having to run back in the pack in the dirt and dust, scrambling to win. And out front is where they ran, again and again.

Tom was an ex-racer himself, and also a schooled and trained master machinist and tool and die maker, but it was winning races as a builder and tuner that got his name known ahead of many others. Later, after selling his dealerships, he began a new career manufacturing drivetrain components such as cams, pushrods and spring collars for Harleys, BSAs and Triumphs. Eventually this business was sold too to allow him to spend more time with his family



Left: Tom Sifton wrenches on Joe Leonard's KR race bike. **Below:** An early photo of Tom on a cool late '30s Knuck bob-job: check out the bars, straight pipe, plated tank and bobbed fenders.



Top: Above, Joe Leonard on his WR with Tom Sifton behind. Joe said of Tom: "He was more than just an engine builder. He was a coach, a scout of your competition and a fatherlike figure. He could read a track and tell you the best way to ride it and he was almost always right." **Right:** Sam Arena (#79) takes the outside...

and friends, who he visited at events all round the country, especially in northern California. Would you believe that Tedd's V-Twin now owns the Sifton product line.

Tom never took any credit for his success but always credited his riders; but it was he that recognised their talent and put them on the unbeatable motors that he'd built. Sam Arena (race number 79) was the first hot shoe to mount one of Tom's hot WRs and in 1938 he won the AMA Pacific Coast Championship. Same year, he won the Oakland 200 race – by 17 minutes.

Tom had set up Sam's motor to run 'wet', meaning he couldn't back off the throttle or it would foul the plugs with oil, so it was 200 miles with the throttle to the stop.

Tom maintained a machine for Sam that between 1945 and the end of

1947 didn't suffer a single loss. No flats, broken chains, mag failure or blown motors... for three solid years. When Sam retired from flat track in 1947, Tom retired his machine too. Sam then went on to win the AMA National Hillclimbing Championship from 1947 to 1950. One of the best racers to ever twist a throttle.

In 1950 Tom put Larry Headrick in the saddle and in his first year Larry won every mile race in the country and took home the 15, 20 and 25 mile National Championships. Unfortunately his career was cut short the following year when he was hit by a car on his motorcycle when riding to work.

Next up was Kenny Eggers (#59) in 1951 who won many races on a Sifton machine, including the first road race at Willow Springs in the SoCal desert. Next in line was 'big' Joe Leonard (#98). In 1954

Joe won eight Nationals on one of Tom's machines and became the first Grand National Champion; a title he won again in both 1956 and '57. He also won back-to-back Daytona 200s in 1957 and '58. He retired from motorcycle racing in 1961 to race cars and became the US AC Champion in 1971 and '72.

No wonder then, with his history of meticulously prepared machines and talented riders, that Tom's is always one of the first names mentioned whenever the best engine builder/tuners are discussed. As Sam Arena himself said of Tom in a Cycle Magazine article in 1950, "There just aren't any words. All I can say is, the man is great!".



One dealership, two great racing names. Sam Arena took over the San Jose H-D dealership from his friend and mentor Tom Sifton in 1953.