

Corbin's new
retail showroom
in Ormond
Beach, Florida



Mike Corbin Rides On

40 Years Sitting Tall In The Saddle

IT IS HIGHLY UNLIKELY THAT ANYONE READING *American Iron Retailer* would be unfamiliar with Mike Corbin, whose company has been an industry mainstay since 1968. From its humble beginnings in his Connecticut garage, Corbin's company has been the subject of admiration and controversy while it has persevered throughout the years as very few others have managed to do. Corbin's 40th anniversary in business is approaching, and its legendary founder sat down with us to discuss what's next for the company.

ML: Can you give us some background information on Corbin's size and number of employees?

MC: Corbin-Gentry (the original company) began in my Connecticut garage in 1968, and I sold it to my partner in 1979. Then I came to California and restarted as Corbin, and today we have over 220 employees between our facilities in Hollister, California, and Ormond Beach, Florida. This October we're celebrating our 40th anniversary.

ML: Congratulations! When you originally founded Corbin-Gentry, what was the purpose of the company, and how did it evolve from a manufacturing point of view?

MC: In the mid-1960s, I was working as an electrical contractor, riding a Norton that I had bobbed up with custom paint and a seat that I made myself. I went to a rally in New Hampshire, and a guy riding a Norton similar to mine saw my seat and offered me \$40 for it. I sold it to him and rode home — on my jacket

— to make myself another seat. I also made one for a fellow electrician who was riding an Ironhead Sportster. When he rode the Sporty out to the Harley shop in Hartford, Connecticut, they asked him where he got his seat and if they could get five of them before the weekend. So I went ahead and made them, which led to an order for 10 more, and before long, it snowballed.

At that time, there was a paradigm shift going on in the industry. In the mid-'60s, probably less than 50,000 bikes were sold. Then Easyriders came out, and, coupled with Honda's new CB750 and aggressive marketing — "You meet the nicest people on a Honda" — the industry exploded to 1.5 million bikes by the early 1970s. The dynamics were beyond your imagination! So, obviously I outgrew my garage, rented a small 400-sq.-ft. shop nearby, moved from there to a 1,000-sq.-ft. shop in Bolton, Connecticut, and then I relocated to a 7,000-sq.-ft. shop in Ellington, Connecticut. We just kept expanding, and by 1974, we had 125 people working just to keep up.

ML: As this happened, what was your role in the daily operations?

MC: I would go out and get ideas, and then I'd try to make the molds and models for the new products. I had a great partner in our sales manager, Al Simmons.

ML: Is that Mustang's Al Simmons?

MC: Exactly. My wife and I were partners, and Al turned the seats into a routine

Mike Corbin



dealer product. He traveled around visiting dealers, and he was marvelous at it. I was an introvert. I like to make things and fix things. I wasn't really much of a salesman.

ML: *Most manufacturing businesses run in one of two ways: Either they focus on a specific product and try to be first, best, or cheapest, or they diversify the product line and try a shotgun approach based on whatever design skills they have. Over the course of 40 years, in addition to core motorcycle accessories, you've manufactured exercise equipment, furniture, and even complete vehicles. How do you think that approach affected the way Corbin evolved over time?*

MC: It's all positive because you need to challenge yourself, your engineers, and your design team. It's good to test the waters to see if you've interpreted the market correctly in other areas besides the core products. For example, the muscle machines were effective, and we sold them to Arnold Schwarzenegger's Gym, Gold's Gym, the Miami Dolphins, and the Green Bay Packers, proving that we can do more than just motorcycle-based designs. We're focused on motorcycle seats, controlling about 92 percent of the worldwide industry, so there's something to be said for that. But at the same time, our saddlebags are our fastest-growing new line of products, and we are also doing well with fairings and other products. The most important concept in business is the idea, and we try not to limit ourselves.

ML: *What developments within the industry are most important to Corbin today?*

MC: Corbin is very prolific in new-product development, so when a new bike comes out, we're on it like flies. We start making something for just about every new large bike that's introduced, and there are many in the pipeline. There are new ideas coming out of Harley-Davidson, like buying Lehman. The trike business is going to get even bigger, and Bombardier's new Can-Am is an exciting example along that line. We're growing along with Victory and Triumph as they continue to gain share. Essentially, Corbin grows both by aligning ourselves with new models and by trying to service models that exist.



Mike Corbin with David in R&D, developing a new seat for a Victory

ML: *What do you think your biggest marketing challenges are today?*

MC: Everybody has to be attuned to change and figure out what they can do to participate in that change. Sometimes you can create change by inventing a new product that catches everybody's eye, while sometimes you identify a variation on an existing product that everyone's asking for. The industry is solid, but the only constant is change. Our challenge is to be ahead of that curve.

ML: *When you look out into the industry, who do you think is doing a good job, and why?*

MC: I have a lot of admiration for S&S' new line of engines. Brett Smith is a great young CEO, and I see him taking that company into the future very nicely. Kuryakyn is probably one of the best new-product developers in the industry. They come out with something practically every day!

ML: *Do you think there's anything unique about the way you handle your service to customers and dealers?*

MC: We're very good with dealers and offer them plenty of opportunity to make money. We have six reps that just talk to motorcycle dealers all day to get a sense of what's going on there. We also have techs that help customers with questions they may have.

ML: *Are you looking to expand your dealer network, or are you going to concentrate on improving the service for the dealers you already have in place?*

MC: We're already servicing the dealers very well, and we pick up new dealers almost daily. In fact, the biggest change I foresee is that we really don't want to go through distributors anymore. We want to go directly to dealers because our line evolves so quickly. We introduce approximately 150 new products on an annual basis, and the speed to market is imperative.

The distributor systems, which are generally catalog-regulated, can slow down our speed to market. Catalogs are fine for standardized parts like tires and tubes, but when you're in high design, you wind up with many color combinations and other multiple variables. It's better for us to go directly to the dealer to ensure we get the right part number, the right color code, and the right mix of options for each specific customer's needs.

ML: *Any insight on your plans for the future, new products, or new strategies?*

MC: We've thought about taking our Ormond Beach store model and putting another one in the New York City tristate area, which has a high population to service. The Florida store is a 5,000-sq.-ft. showroom, 4,000-sq.-ft. warehouse, and 2,000-sq.-ft. installation area. Other than that, we'll focus on new product development. Hey, it's been working for 40 years, and I've got a 10-year contract still left on this job. My goal is to see Corbin prosper to its 50th anniversary. **AIR**



A seamstress at work in the Hollister factory



David in R&D installing a new seat

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