



STAFF PHOTOS BY E.J. HARRIS

Above: Mechanic John Riddle, of Hermiston, works on installing a fuel line on a 1973 Plymouth Duster recently at Holton Secret Lab outside of Helix. **Top right:** A nearly finished 1956 Chevy Bel Air hotrod sits in the shop. **Bottom right:** Pat Murphy of Pendleton sands off body filler on a 1967 Chevy Nova SS while working in a paint booth.

SECRET LAB

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They do a lot of general maintenance work and often find themselves making repairs due to improper storage.

"People will have a custom car that's put away and not serviced right. Modern gas, ethanol, that really wrecks havoc. We get cars that sit for several years, and we have to pull the gas tanks, rebuild fuel lines, carburetors," Bill said.

A 1970 GTO the couple worked on had sat in an irrigated pasture for 20 years.

"The amount of rust on it — by the time we stripped it, there wasn't a lot of car left," Marcy recalled.

The team also completely rebuilds cars. "Somebody brings us something in pieces," said Marcy. "We had a 1930s black Tudor. When we picked it up, it wasn't even a car — it was on pallets. Now you look at it, and it's absolutely beautiful."

Many of the jobs they do are "Resto Mods," or restoring the body of a car to its original form, but replacing the engine and functions of the car with those of a newer, faster vehicle.

"We like driving old cars, but who wants to drive to the coast with a car that has no air conditioning?" Bill said. "We've got a '56 pickup that's basically a 2005 Corvette with a pickup body."

If they can't buy a part, Bill has the tools to make it.

There is a Louver press, which can make the vents that adorn Bill's 1928 Dodge Coupe; an English wheel, which can curve a piece of metal into a bow; a bead roller, which can emboss metal; and several types of welders and saws.

The work is not quick, nor is it cheap. "If we do a complete frame restoration, I tell them a year," said Bill. "And usually I can beat it."

A full-body restoration costs around \$100,000, much of which goes into materials. Paint is particularly expensive, costing hundreds of dollars a can.

Once the interior work of the car is finished, they'll get to work buffing and sanding, or "blocking," the body.

Holton employee Pat Murphy is working on a 1967 Chevy Nova SS, smoothing out a quarter panel on the passenger side of the car. The car will eventually be painted Malibu blue, and restored with its original engine.

"This one's a stock car," Bill said. "It's going to drive off looking like the day it came off the lot."



Above: Tools hang on a wall above a tool bench at Holton Secret Lab, outside of Helix

Left: Clay Huffman of Pendleton works on rehanging a door on a 1969 Chevy pickup recently inside the Holton Secret Lab.

Murphy estimated he puts about 50 hours of work into blocking each quarter panel on the Nova.

Before they paint any car, they will put the entire thing back together, and make sure everything is in the right place. Then, they'll take it apart again and paint.

Bill has a computer program that can tell him the formula to mix any paint color for a car from the 1930s to now.

"Black is the most difficult color to paint, because you can see all the imperfections," Marcy said.

She recalled a 1933 Roadster that they worked on, which was painted Candy Apple red. They used one gallon of paint, which cost \$4,000.

"We had to put about 25 coats on it to get it to the color we wanted," she said.

Bill has several different paint guns for

various levels of detailing, including one with some family history.

"This gun here, my dad bought it and used it in 1945 to start his body shop. I still use it today."



Bill Holton, owner of Holton Secret Labs, holds a paint gun head that was first used in a shop opened by his father in 1945.

The team usually has anywhere from 10 to 12 cars in various states of repair at the shop.

Though he tries to buy American, many car parts end up coming from far away.

"A lot of 'Made in Taiwan' stickers show up," Bill said. "That's just where the parts come from."

Many of his customers, too, are from outside the state of Oregon. He's currently working on cars from owners in Washington, California, New Mexico and Arizona.

The business' name, originally "Holton Restoration," has been a positive.

"As far as the 'secret,' you take your worst attribute and make it your best," Bill said. "When Marcy suggested we change it, I said, 'Are you crazy?' I've had to eat my words on that one a few times."

They're no secret anymore, but the couple feel their remote location, where they've been since they got married 42 years ago, adds to their appeal.

"I inherited the ranch from my parents," Marcy said. "We thought of moving to the big city. But we're kind of central to Portland, Boise, Seattle, Spokane. Convincing people that we're worth the drive — and people love the historical aspect. We stayed here because of history."

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