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## 1955 Harley-Davidson Panhead Buyer's Guide

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# 1955 Harley-Davidson Panhead — Factory-Correct Restoration Guide

IronHead single-year guide · Model year 1955 only · Covers all 1955 Panhead Big Twins — FL, FLF, FLE, and the first-year FLH Super Sport · The 1954 Panhead and all later years are out of scope except where differences are noted

Factory-correct restoration guides for classic motorcycles

## KEY FACTS AT A GLANCE

- **Model year covered:** 1955 only — FL, FLF (foot shift), FLE (Traffic Combination), and the FIRST-YEAR FLH Super Sport (FLH and FLHF).
- **Engine:** 74ci (73.66 cu in) 45-degree air-cooled OHV V-twin; 3-7/16 x 3-31/32 in bore x stroke; aluminum heads, hydraulic lifters, internal oil lines.
- **FL:** 7.25:1 compression; 55 hp @ 5,400 rpm; 62 lb-ft @ 3,200 rpm (compiled marque-reference figures; confirm against the factory service manual for the exact year).
- **FLH (new):** 8.0:1 compression; 60 hp; 65 lb-ft of torque (compiled marque-reference figures; the references conflict on rated rpm — 4,800 vs. 5,500 — so confirm against the factory service manual for the exact year). Stronger bottom end — larger bearings, larger oil pump, Timken main bearings; revised intake sealing; polished aluminum rocker covers; low-restriction muffler.
- **New for 1955:** oval taillight; "V" tank emblem; new speedometer; oil-tank decals (FLH); stronger clutch; revised fork internals.
- **Ignition:** 6-volt battery, breaker points; kick start only.
- **Transmission:** 4-speed constant-mesh; hand shift/foot clutch standard, foot shift/hand clutch optional.
- **Chassis:** Wishbone rigid frame (last rigid years: 1955–1957); Hydra-Glide telescopic fork; 8-inch front drum brake.
- **Wheels/tires:** Wire-spoked wheels; factory tire data lists 4.00 x 18, 4.50 x 18, and 5.00 x 16 fitments.

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- **Dimensions:** 60-inch wheelbase; 598 lbs (FLH, per the compiled year-page research).
- **1955 colors:** Black, Pepper Red, Atomic Blue, Aztec Brown, Anniversary Yellow, Police White, Police Silver; extra-cost Hollywood Green.
- **Identification:** No frame VIN — the engine serial (left case, between the cylinders, e.g. 55FL1234) is the ownership number. Belly numbers on both crankcase halves must match each other.
- **Production:** FL 953; FLF 2,013; FLE 853; FLEF 220; FLH 63; FLHF 1,040 — 5,142 across the listed models (compiled figures; Harley-Davidson published no official year totals).
- **1955 price new:** $1,015 (FL); $1,083 (FLH).
- **Key 1955-only details:** first year of the FLH — and only 63 hand-shift FLH models built, making a documented 1955 FLH the rarest first-year Super Sport; the "V" tank emblem; the oval taillight; the stronger FLH bottom end.

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# 1. Manufacturer history: Harley-Davidson

Harley-Davidson was founded in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1903 by William S. Harley and Arthur Davidson, with Walter and William A. Davidson joining the effort. The first factory went up in 1906; the first V-twin appeared in 1909. Through the 1910s and 1920s Harley built its name on V-twins and racing success; the 45-cubic-inch flathead models of the 1930s kept the company alive through the Depression, and the 1936 EL Knucklehead brought overhead valves to the Big Twin line.

By 1955 the Panhead was seven years old and Milwaukee knew exactly what it had: a magnificent touring engine that the performance market was beginning to outrun. The British twins were lighter and quicker; the American buyer who wanted speed had options. Harley's answer was not a new engine but a hotter Panhead — the FLH Super Sport, with 8:1 compression, a strengthened bottom end, and 60 horsepower. It was the factory hot rod, and it worked: the FLH became the performance flagship of the Big Twin line for the rest of the Panhead era.

The Panhead era that followed is the backbone of this brand: the 1958 Duo-Glide added rear suspension, and the 1965 Electra Glide added electric start and 12-volt electrics. The Panhead ran from 1948 through the 1965 model year, when the Shovelhead took over for 1966.

For the restorer, the authority is the factory literature: the Harley-Davidson Panhead service manual (1948–1957) and the year parts catalogs, backed by Bruce Palmer's *How to Restore Your Harley-Davidson*, Greg Field's *Original Harley-Davidson Panhead*, and the production research compiled by the Panhead & Flathead Site. This guide cites those sources throughout.

# 2. Model history: the Panhead Big Twin, 1948–1965

The 1948 Panhead kept the Knucklehead's proven crankcases, flywheels, and gear train and changed everything above the cylinders: finned aluminum heads with bronze valve seats and steel inserts, pushrod-operated hydraulic lifters, and redesigned rocker arms under pan-shaped covers. 1949 brought the Hydra-Glide telescopic fork, the 8-inch front drum, and the Brooks Stevens restyle; 1950 brought redesigned heads with enlarged ports; 1951 brought the two-piece cam, machined rocker sockets, and the Linkert M-74B; 1952 brought the foot-shift option, an all-high-compression lineup, and the end of the 61ci EL; 1953 relocated the hydraulic lifters below the pushrods and introduced the FLE Traffic Combination; 1954 was the Golden Anniversary year with its brass fender medallion and tapered pinion shaft.

1955 was the performance year. The FLH Super Sport arrived with 8:1 compression (against the FL's 7.25:1), a strengthened bottom end with larger bearings and Timken mains, a larger oil pump, revised intake sealing, polished aluminum rocker covers, and a low-restriction muffler — good for 60 hp at 5,500 rpm and 65 lb-ft at 3,200 rpm against the FL's 55 hp and 62 lb-ft. The whole line got the oval taillight, the "V" tank emblem, a new speedometer, and (on the FLH) oil-tank decals.

The model letters work like this. **FL** = 74ci high-compression (7.25:1 from 1955). **FLH** = Super Sport — 8.0:1 compression, strengthened bottom end, the performance model. **S** = sidecar gearing. **F** (not first letter) = foot shift. **E** as third letter = Traffic Combination motor with 61ci cam and M61 carburetor. **B** (1965) = electric start.

| Year | What changed |
|---|---|
| 1948 | First Panhead: aluminum heads, hydraulic lifters, internal oiling; wishbone frame; springer fork (one year only); chromed pan covers (one year only); E/EL and F/FL. |
| 1949 | Hydra-Glide telescopic fork replaces the springer; Brooks Stevens restyle; front brake grows 7.25 to 8 inches; Harley-Davidson makes its own breaker points. |



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| Year | What changed |
|---|---|
| 1950 | Redesigned heads with enlarged ports (about 10 percent more power); fixed-jet carburetor with revised jetting; remote oil filter; primary screws to 6/12 o'clock; die-cast fork sliders. |
| 1951 | Two-piece cam with ramps both sides; rocker arms machined with pushrod sockets; mid-year Linkert M-74B carburetor (stays through 1965); larger pinion shaft; script tank emblem. |
| 1952 | Foot-shift option (ELF/FLF); all Panheads high-compression; last year for the 61ci EL; rotating exhaust valves late-year; generator model 52. |
| 1953 | Lifters relocated below pushrods; FLE Traffic Combination introduced; 4-rib gearcase cover; 24-roller pinion shaft; revised generator; new muffler; 74-only lineup. |
| 1954 | Golden Anniversary brass medallion; tapered pinion shaft; Jubilee trumpet horn; first optional dual exhaust; winged fireball emblems; transitional frames. |
| **1955** | **FIRST FLH SUPER SPORT — 8:1 compression, 60 hp @ 5,500 rpm, strengthened bottom end with Timken mains, larger oil pump, polished aluminum rocker covers, low-restriction muffler; oval taillight; "V" tank emblem; new speedometer; FLH oil-tank decals.** |
| 1956 | "Victory" high-lift cam for the FLH and a flow-through air cleaner — about 12 percent more power; redesigned right crankcase oiling. |
| 1957 | Round Lucite tank emblem (first plastic emblem); polished aluminum rocker covers; steel-alloy valve guides from February 1; stronger valve springs from 57FLH4444. |
| 1958 | Duo-Glide: swingarm rear suspension and hydraulic rear drum brake; thicker cylinder-head fins; brush generator; step-down straight-leg frame. |
| 1959 | Arrow-Flite tank emblem; green neutral indicator on the foot-shift dash; chrome front fender tip; black footboards. |
| 1960 | Two-piece aluminum fork nacelle; Stellite-faced exhaust valves; rail-type oil-control rings; extra-heavy valve springs. |
| 1961 | Dual-point single-fire ignition with individual condensers; rear-cylinder timing mark added mid-year; four-point-star tank emblem. |
| 1962 | "Tombstone" speedometer; three round indicator lights; brushed-aluminum trim pieces. |
| 1963 | External oil lines to the cylinder heads; wider rear brake hub and shoes; round turn-signal housings; fiberglass saddlebags; new bar-and-shield tank emblem. |



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| Year | What changed |
|---|---|
| 1964 | Breather hole in the primary housing; oil-pressure switch; hollow hex timer adjuster; last year of the Duo-Glide. |
| 1965 | Electra Glide: electric start, 12-volt electrics, new frame, aluminum primary cover, automatic spark advance; last year of the Panhead. |

The company context matters when judging a bike. The postwar boom made the late 1940s Harley's biggest years yet; by the mid-1950s British imports were pressuring the sporting end of the market (answered by the 1952 K-model and the 1957 Sportster), while the Big Twin settled into its long career as America's touring motorcycle. The 1969 AMF takeover came after the Panhead era; no Panhead left Milwaukee under AMF ownership.

## 3. What is unique about the 1955 Panhead

The 1955 is the first FLH — the birth year of the factory hot rod. Only 63 hand-shift FLH models were built (against 1,040 foot-shift FLHFs), which makes a documented first-year FLH one of the rarest Panheads of the entire era. A correct 1955 restoration hinges on FL-versus-FLH differences that go all the way into the bottom end.

### 1955 details to get right:

- **FLH bottom end:** strengthened crankcases with Timken main bearings,

larger bearings, larger oil pump — not an FL bottom end with high-compression pistons. An "FLH" on a standard bottom end is a conversion.

- **8.0:1 compression (FLH) versus 7.25:1 (FL)** — pistons, and the

low-restriction FLH muffler.

- **Polished aluminum rocker covers (FLH)**; revised intake sealing.
- **"V" tank emblem** — first year; **oval taillight** — first year; **new

speedometer; FLH oil-tank decals**.

- **Stronger clutch** and revised fork internals across the line.

### What did NOT exist in 1955 (common mix-ups):

- No "Victory" cam (1956 FLH), no rear suspension (1958), no 12-volt system

or electric start (1965). The 1955 FLH is not a 1956 FLH — the cam and air cleaner changed.

### 1955 buyer cautions:

- **The FLH premium trap.** First-year FLHs command serious money, and FLs

get converted. Verify the bottom end (Timken mains), the serial (55FLH...), the belly numbers, and the FLH-only parts against each other — a single mismatch unravels the claim.

- **Hand-shift FLH (63 built).** The rarest 1955 variant by an order of

magnitude; any claimed example needs documentation to match the price.

- **FLE confusion.** The FLE Traffic Combination (61ci cam, M61 carb) is the

economy/police-flavored model — the opposite of the FLH. Do not mix them.

## 4. Technical restoration data — 1955 Harley-Davidson Panhead



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## 4.1 Frame and engine numbers (1955)

Pre-1970 Harleys carry no frame VIN — the engine number is the ownership number. It is stamped on the left crankcase between the cylinders, in the form year-digits + model letters + sequential number, for example:

```
55FL1234
55 = model year | FLH = model | 5265 = sequential number
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(The serial above is from a documented first-year 1955 FLH sold at Mecum.) Foot-shift (F) and sidecar (S) suffixes may not appear in the stamped ownership serial even when the bike is a factory foot-shift or sidecar model. The frame carries only manufacturing stampings and casting numbers.

**Belly numbers** are stamped on the bottom of each crankcase half. They were stamped by the machinist to identify a matched pair of cases through line boring and final machining — the two halves must carry the SAME belly number, and the belly number has no direct relationship to the engine serial.

## 4.2 Engine specifications (1955)

| Item | FL | FLH (Super Sport) |
|---|---|---|
| Configuration | 45° air-cooled OHV V-twin; hydraulic lifters; aluminum heads | Same, strengthened bottom end |
| Displacement | 73.66 cu in | 73.66 cu in |
| Bore x stroke | 3-7/16 x 3-31/32 in (87.3 x 100.8 mm) | Same |
| Compression ratio | 7.25:1 | 8.0:1 |
| Claimed output | 55 hp @ 5,400 rpm; 62 lb-ft @ 3,200 rpm | 60 hp; 65 lb-ft (rpm sources conflict: 4,800 vs. 5,500) |
| Carburetor | Linkert M-74B | Linkert M-74B |
| Ignition | 6-volt battery, breaker points | Same |
| Starting | Kick starter only | Same |
| Clutch | Dry multi-plate, strengthened for 1955 | Same |
| Lubrication | Dry sump; gear-driven oil pump | Dry sump; larger oil pump; Timken mains |

## 4.3 Carburetion and electrical

- Linkert M-74B across the line; FLE takes the M61 — rebuild with the

correct model's settings, not a generic kit

- 6-volt battery ignition with breaker points; verify charging under load
- Kick starter only

## 4.4 Transmission and final drive

- Four-speed constant-mesh gearbox, separate from the engine
- Hand shift/foot clutch standard; foot shift/hand clutch optional
- Chain primary and chain final drive; strengthened dry multi-plate clutch



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