FREE SAMPLE

The opening pages of

1961 Harley-Davidson Panhead Buyer's Guide

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IRONHEAD

1961 Harley-Davidson Panhead — Factory-Correct Restoration Guide

IronHead single-year guide · Model year 1961 only · Covers all 1961 Panhead Big Twins — the Duo-Glide: FL, FLF, FLH, FLHF · The 1960 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:** 1961 only — the Duo-Glide: FL, FLF (foot shift), FLH, FLHF Super Sport.
- **Engine:** 74ci (73.66 cu in) 45-degree air-cooled OHV V-twin; 3-7/16 x 3-31/32 in bore x stroke; 7.25:1 compression (FL), 8.0:1 (FLH). Aluminum heads, hydraulic lifters, internal oil lines.
- **New for 1961:** dual-point, single-fire ignition with individual condensers for each cylinder (replacing the single-point system); rear-cylinder timing mark added mid-year; revised pushrods; four-point-star tank badge; revised taillight.
- **Electrical:** 6-volt battery; kick start only.
- **Transmission:** 4-speed constant-mesh; hand shift/foot clutch standard, foot shift/hand clutch optional.
- **Chassis:** Duo-Glide swingarm frame; Hydra-Glide telescopic fork; 8-inch front drum (mechanically operated); hydraulically actuated rear drum.
- **Wheels/tires:** Wire-spoked wheels; 5.00 x 16 fitment (standard Big Twin fitment; confirm against the factory service manual for the exact year).
- **Dimensions:** 61-inch wheelbase.
- **1961 colors:** Black, Pepper Red, Police Silver, Police Birch White (the stated colors shown with Birch White tank panels); extra-cost Hi-Fi Red, Hi-Fi Green, Hi-Fi Blue.
- **Identification:** No frame VIN — the engine serial (left case, between the cylinders, e.g. 61FL1234) is the ownership number. Belly numbers on both crankcase halves must match each other.

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- **Production:** the compiled source lists 4,927 beside the FL Sport for 1961 without breaking out all suffix variants — treat as the source's listed figure, not a proven total (Harley-Davidson published no official year totals).
- **1961 price new:** $1,335 (FL); $1,400 (FLH).
- **Key 1961-only details:** the first dual-point ignition — the timer, the two condensers, and the mid-year rear-cylinder timing mark are the year's mechanical signature; the four-point-star tank badge.

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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 1961 the Big Twin's ignition had been essentially unchanged since the 1940s — a single set of points firing both cylinders. The dual-point, single-fire timer was Milwaukee's answer: each cylinder got its own points and condenser, timed individually. It was the most significant electrical change the Panhead ever received, and it stayed through the end of the engine line.

The Panhead era that followed is the backbone of this brand: 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 manuals 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; 1955 introduced the FLH Super Sport; 1956 gave the FLH its "Victory" high-lift cam; 1957 was the last rigid year; 1958 introduced the Duo-Glide; 1959 refined it; 1960 brought the aluminum nacelle and the durability upgrades.

1961 was the ignition year: the dual-point, single-fire timer with individual condensers replaced the single-point system that had served since the Knucklehead era, a rear-cylinder timing mark was added mid-year, the pushrods were revised, and the tanks got the four-point-star badge.

The model letters work like this. **FL** = 74ci high-compression (7.25:1). **FLH** = Super Sport — 8.0:1 compression, strengthened bottom end, the performance model. **S** = sidecar gearing. **F** (not first letter) = foot shift. **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.
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.

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Year	What changed
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 rocker covers; oval taillight; "V" emblem.
1956	FLH "Victory" high-lift cam and flow-through air cleaner (about 12 percent more power); redesigned right crankcase with new check-valve oiling path; new speedometer.
1957	Last rigid year: round Lucite tank emblem (first plastic emblem); plastic fender tip; polished aluminum rocker covers; steel-alloy valve guides from February 1; stronger springs from 57FLH4444.
1958	First Duo-Glide: swingarm rear suspension; step-down straight-leg frame; horseshoe oil tank; hydraulically actuated rear drum; thicker head fins; brush generator; O-ring intake seals.
1959	Arrow-Flite tank emblem; green neutral indicator on foot-shift dash; chrome front fender tip; black footboards; optional center stand; revised taillight lens.
1960	Two-piece aluminum headlight nacelle; Stellite-faced exhaust valves; rail-type oil-control rings; extra-heavy valve springs; revised clutch; new taillight.
1961	**Dual-point, single-fire ignition with individual condensers; rear-cylinder timing mark added mid-year; revised pushrods; four-point-star tank badge; revised taillight.**
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.
1964	Breather hole in the primary housing; oil-pressure switch; hollow hex timer adjuster; last year of the Duo-Glide.

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Year	What changed
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 1961 Panhead

The 1961 is the ignition year — the first Panhead with the dual-point, single-fire timer, and the only year with the mid-year rear-cylinder timing mark introduction. The timer, its two condensers, and the revised pushrods are the mechanical signature; the four-point-star badge is the visual one. A correct 1961 restoration starts at the timer.

1961 details to get right:

- **Dual-point, single-fire timer** — two sets of points, individual

condensers for each cylinder, replacing the single-point system. A 1961 with a single-point timer has a pre-1961 ignition swapped in.

- **Rear-cylinder timing mark — added mid-year.** Early-build bikes time

both cylinders from the front mark; late-build bikes have the dedicated rear mark. Check the build date.

- **Revised pushrods.**
- **Four-point-star tank badge** — new for the year.
- **Revised taillight.**

What did NOT exist in 1961 (common mix-ups):

- No automatic advance (1965 — the 1961 timer is still manual-advance),

no tombstone speedometer (1962), no 12-volt system or electric start (1965).

1961 buyer cautions:

- **Timer originality.** The dual-point timer is the value in a 1961 —

verify the correct timer body, the two condensers, and the wiring; later electronic conversions are common and hurt originality.

- **Mid-year timing mark.** The build date decides which timing procedure

is correct — using the wrong mark mistimes the rear cylinder.

- **Condenser pairs.** The individual condensers are a 1961 detail —

check that both are present and correct, not a single retrofitted unit.

4. Technical restoration data — 1961 Harley-Davidson Panhead

4.1 Frame and engine numbers (1961)

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:

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61FLH1234
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SAMPLE EXCERPT — full guide available at the link on the cover sheet

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61 = model year | FLH = model | 1234 = sequential number
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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 (1961)

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
Carburetor	Linkert M-74B	Linkert M-74B
Ignition	6-volt battery; dual-point, single-fire timer with individual condensers; manual advance	Same
Starting	Kick starter only	Same
Clutch	Dry multi-plate	Same
Lubrication	Dry sump; gear-driven oil pump; horseshoe oil tank	Same; larger pump; Timken mains

Note: no factory output figure is documented for 1961 in the surviving factory literature consulted — the 1955–1958 figures are not carried forward here, and period advertising claims vary. Do not quote an output number for a 1961.

4.3 Carburetion and electrical

- Linkert M-74B with O-ring intake seals — rebuild with correct settings,

not a generic kit

- 6-volt battery ignition with the 1961 dual-point, single-fire timer and

individual condensers; verify charging under load

- Kick starter only; manual advance — the automatic advance does not arrive

until 1965

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; dry multi-plate clutch

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