FREE SAMPLE

The opening pages of

1969 Harley-Davidson Shovelhead Buyer's Guide

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IRONHEAD

The 1969 Harley-Davidson Shovelhead Buyer & Restoration Guide

KEY FACTS AT A GLANCE

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Manufacturer History

The Shovelhead story starts in 1966. Harley-Davidson needed more power from its Big Twin to move the heavy Electra Glide dresser, and the answer was the Power Pac: new aluminum cylinder heads with larger valves and ports on the existing Panhead-style lower end, with the rocker boxes shaped like the business end of a coal shovel — the name every Harley fan knows today.

The first Shovelhead generation runs from 1966 through 1969: the generator (slabside) years. The generator hangs off the front of the engine cases, the ignition is breaker points, and ownership identification is the engine serial number. In 1970 the motor changed fundamentally — the alternator replaced the generator inside a redesigned cone-shaped timing case, the ignition points moved into the nose cone, and a nine-character VIN appeared. That cone motor is the second Shovelhead generation, and it runs all the way to 1984.

The model line grew with the motor. The 1971 FX Super Glide — Willie G. Davidson's factory custom combining the FL frame and 74-ci engine with a Sportster front end and the boat-tail rear — invented the cruiser category. The line expanded through the 1970s: electric-start FXE, the FXS Low Rider (mid-1977), the FXEF Fat Bob (1979), the belt-drive FXB Sturgis and FXWG Wide Glide and the all-new FLT Tour Glide (1980). Displacement grew from 74 cubic inches to an 80-ci option (mid-1978) and then the all-1340 line (1981). Carburetion moved from Linkert (1966) to Tillotson (1967–1970) to Bendix (1971–1975) to Keihin (1976 on). Breaker points gave way to Prestolite electronic ignition late in 1978. The 17-digit federal VIN arrived for 1981, and in June 1981 Harley's executives bought the company back from AMF. The FXR chassis (1982) brought rubber mounting and a 5-speed to the FX line, and in 1984 the Evolution engine arrived — ending the Shovelhead era that this guide covers.

Model History

This guide covers one model year only. The Shovelhead Big Twin line for the covered year is described in the key-facts section; model codes, carburetion, ignition, and chassis details are year-specific and must be verified against the year parts book. The through-line of the era is the cone motor introduced for 1970 (alternator, nose-cone points, nine-character VIN), refined year by year until the 1984 split between the final Shovelheads and the first Evolutions.

What Is Unique About 1969

AMF buys Harley-Davidson (January 1969) — the American Machine and Foundry takeover that funded the 1970s expansion through the decade’s variable quality control. (One valuation reference dates the takeover to 1970; factory histories and the IronHead Sportster research place it in January 1969 — see the corrections companion.)

Last generator year — 1969 is the final year of the generator lower end, the kidney timing cover, and the left-case points timer. A 1970 cone-motor part on a 1969 is always wrong.

“King of the Highway” package — the factory touring package with a fiberglass fairing mounted on the handlebars, hard saddlebags, and a top case. Note: this is the handlebar-mounted touring fairing, not the later fork-mounted “batwing” — the two are different parts from different eras.

Last Tillotson year — the Bendix replaces it for 1971 (1970 keeps the Tillotson).

What 1969 Did Not Have

- No alternator or nose-cone points (1970); no Bendix carburetor (1971); no front disc brake (1972).
- No “batwing” fairing — the 1969 fairing is the handlebar-mounted King of the Highway unit.
- No frame VIN — ownership identification is the engine serial alone.
- **Model year covered:** 1969 only (FL and FLH Electra Glide). The last generator year; the AMF year.

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- **Engine:** 1,207 cc (74 cu in) air-cooled 45-degree OHV V-twin; 3.4375 x 4.00 in bore x stroke; 8.0:1 compression; generator lower end.
- **Fuel system:** Tillotson diaphragm-type carburetor (last year).
- **Ignition:** 12-volt battery and coil; breaker points with the timer on the left crankcase.
- **Charging:** 12-volt generator (final year before the 1970 alternator).
- **Starting:** Electric starter with kick-starter backup.
- **Transmission:** 4-speed constant-mesh; right-foot shift; chain final drive; dry multi-plate clutch.
- **Chassis:** Telescopic fork; dual rear shocks; drum brakes front and rear; 16-inch wire-spoked wheels.
- **Touring package:** Factory “King of the Highway” package — fiberglass fairing on the handlebars, hard saddlebags, top case.
- **Identification:** Engine serial on the left crankcase is the ownership number; odd first serial digit for 1969.
- **Production:** About 7,300 Big Twins (1969 published figures via the 1971 CHP stolen-motorcycle identification handbook, quoted in AMCA marque research).

1969 Technical Specification

- **Models covered:** the FL and FLH Electra Glide
- **Engine:** 1,207 cc (74 cu in) air-cooled 45-degree OHV V-twin (Shovelhead)
- **Bore x stroke:** 3.4375 x 4.00 in (87.3 x 100.8 mm)
- **Compression ratio:** 8.0:1
- **Power:** FLH 60 bhp; FL 54 bhp
- **Carburetion:** Tillotson diaphragm-type
- **Ignition:** 12-volt battery and coil; breaker points with the timer on the left crankcase
- **Starting:** Electric starter with kick-starter backup
- **Transmission:** 4-speed constant-mesh; right-foot shift; chain final drive; dry multi-plate clutch
- **Brakes:** Drum brakes front and rear
- **Wheels:** 16-inch wire-spoked wheels front and rear

Identification: Engine Serial and VIN

For 1966 through 1969, ownership identification is the engine serial number stamped on the left engine case. From 1970 through 1980, Harley-Davidson used a nine-character VIN (model code + sequence + year). From 1981, the federal 17-digit VIN applies — the 10th character is the model-year code (1981 = B, 1982 = C, 1983 = D, 1984 = E). Verify the VIN structure itself: a claimed post-1980 bike on a nine-character number, or a claimed 1981+ bike whose 10th character does not match, is a red flag.

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Nine-character VIN model codes (1970-1980 era)

Code	Model	Years
1A	FL-1200	1966–1973 (74 ci dresser)
2A	FLH-1200	1966–1980 (74 ci Electra Glide)
2C	FX-1200	1971–1974 (74 ci Super Glide)
2D	FX-1200	1975–1976 (74 ci Super Glide)
2E	FX-1200	1977 (74 ci Super Glide)
9D	FXE-1200	1974–1977 (74 ci Super Glide, electric start)
2F	FXS-1200	1977–1978 (74 ci Low Rider)
4F	FXS-80	1979–1980 (80 ci Low Rider)
6F	FXEF	1979 (Fat Bob)
7F	FXEF-80	1979–1980 (80 ci Fat Bob)
5F	FXE-80	1979–1980 (80 ci Super Glide)
3G	FLH-80	1978–1984 (80 ci Electra Glide)
5G	FLT-80	1980–1983 (80 ci Tour Glide)
6G	FXE-80	1981 (80 ci Super Glide)
7G	FXWG-80	1980–1984 (80 ci Wide Glide)
8G	FXB-80	1980–1982 (80 ci Sturgis)

Nine-character year codes: 1970 = H0, 1971 = H1, 1972 = H2, 1973 = H3, 1974 = H4, 1975 = H5, 1976 = H6, 1977 = H7, 1978 = H8, 1979 = H9, 1980 = J0.

Federal 17-digit years: The 10th character of the 17-digit federal VIN is the model-year code: 1981 = B, 1982 = C, 1983 = D, 1984 = E.

What to Check Before You Buy

1969/1970 boundary. The cone-motor change for 1970 is the most consequential in Shovelhead history — verify the lower end, timing cover, and charging system are 1969-correct before paying a premium.

AMF-era quality. The AMF years are the era of the most variable factory quality control — matching numbers and correct fasteners matter more, not less.

Fairing correctness. Reproduction “batwing” fairings are routinely fitted to 1969s; the factory 1969 piece is the handlebar-mounted fiberglass fairing.

Paint and Finishes

- Verify the bike’s original color against the year parts book (Painted Parts section); repaint in a non-factory color is the single biggest value deduction on a restored bike.
- **Hidden original paint:** check under the seat, inside the side covers, and behind badges for the original finish before trusting any color claim.

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Production

1969 published figures put Big Twin production at about 7,300 machines (1971 California Highway Patrol stolen-motorcycle identification handbook, quoted in AMCA marque research). No model-by-model (FL vs. FLH) breakdown was found.

The Technical Restoration Content

Casting and date codes

Engine cases, cylinders, and heads carry casting numbers and date codes. A factory-correct restoration matches casting numbers to the model year and checks date codes against the build date — parts cast months after the bike's assembly date are replacements. Photograph every casting number before disassembly; the year parts book lists the correct numbers.

Torque specs

Do not use torque values from memory or from generic charts. Head bolts, case bolts, and critical fasteners are torque-to-yield or angle-sensitive on these engines, and published values vary between sources. Use the year-correct Harley-Davidson factory service manual for every torque value, and follow its sequence. If you cannot verify a number, follow the factory manual procedure — a wrong torque value breaks cases.

Gaskets and seals

Shovelheads mark their territory. A restoration that aims at correctness uses the right gasket materials for the year (cork, paper, or composition as the parts book specifies), and a restoration that aims at riding replaces every seal in the primary, the rocker boxes, and the pushrod tubes as a matter of course. Budget for it; there is no cheap way around it.

The top end

The Shovelhead's aluminum heads are its glory and its weakness. Check valve guides, seats, and the head gasket surface before committing to machine work. Overheating history shows in discolored fins and pulled head-bolt inserts — both are repairable, both cost money, and both should be found before paint.

The bottom end

The 1966–1969 generator lower end and the 1970-on cone lower end share the Shovelhead top end but differ in the timing chest, oiling, and charging system — parts do not freely interchange between the generations. Verify the case casting against the model year before buying a "rebuilt" engine.

Rust-prone areas

Check the frame at the steering head and swingarm pivot, the inside of the gas tanks, the fender mounting points, and the floorboard/forward-control brackets. Chrome that looks tired is usually telling the truth about the metal underneath — budget for re-chroming, not polishing.

Restoration sequence

1. Verify numbers (engine serial / VIN, title, model codes) before spending anything.
2. Assess the engine: compression, leak-down, oil pressure history.
3. Frame and sheet metal: straighten, repair, then paint — never paint before the mechanical assessment.
4. Rebuild the engine and transmission to the year-correct specification.
5. Re-chrome and re-plate to the year-correct finish.

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6. Reassemble with the year parts book open — fasteners, clamps, and finishes are year-specific.
7. Final verification: every number, every code, every finish against the book.

Shop the Supplies

The parts and tools for this restoration are covered in the IronHead parts-and-tools box at ironheadguides.com. Buy the year-correct factory service manual first — it is the single most valuable tool in a Shovelhead restoration.

Sources

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  `https://www.antiquemotorcycle.org`

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