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The opening pages of

1979 Harley-Davidson Sportster Buyer's Guide

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IRONHEAD

1979 Harley-Davidson Sportster

Factory-Correct Restoration Guide

IronHead single-year guide · Model year 1979 only

KEY FACTS AT A GLANCE

- **Model year covered:** 1979 only (XLH, XLCH, XLS, and XLCR). The new-frame, rear-disc, electronic-ignition year; the last XLCH.
- **Engine:** 997.5 cc (60.9 cu in) air-cooled 45-degree OHV V-twin; 3.188 x 3.8125 in bore x stroke; 9.0:1 compression.
- **Frame:** New lighter, stiffer frame derived from the XLCR (new for 1979).
- **Brakes:** Rear disc brake (new for 1979); dual front discs.
- **Ignition:** Electronic ignition standard (no points).
- **XLS Roadster:** New for 1979 — extended forks, 16-inch rear wheel, small sissy bar with backrest, 2.2-gallon tank.
- **XLCH:** Last year — fewer than 150 built (Haynes); one source reports 141.
- **XLCR:** Final 9 built in 1979.
- **Carburetor:** Keihin butterfly-type.
- **Transmission:** 4-speed; left-foot shift; chain final drive; wet multi-disc clutch.
- **1979 colors:** Not documented in the sources checked — verify against the 1979 parts catalog and survivor bikes.
- **Identification:** 9-character VIN on the steering head and engine (H9 suffix for 1979).
- **Production:** XLCH fewer than 150 (Haynes; one source reports 141) — the rarest regular-production Ironhead variant year.
- **Key 1979-only features:** the XLCR-derived frame; rear disc; standard electronic ignition; XLS debut; final XLCH and XLCR.

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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, and the 45-cubic-inch flathead models of the 1930s kept the company alive through the Depression.

The 1936 EL Knucklehead introduced overhead valves to the Big Twin line, and the 1948 Panhead refined the formula. For the sporting rider, the key ancestor is the 1952 K-series: a unit-construction 45-cubic-inch side-valve twin with foot shift and swingarm rear suspension, built to answer the British imports. The K was the direct basis for the 1957 XL Sportster — essentially the K bottom end with larger displacement, overhead valves, and higher compression.

The 1960s brought the Duo-Glide (1958) and Electra Glide (1965) to the touring line while the Sportster carried the sporting brief almost alone. In January 1969 the American Machine and Foundry Company (AMF) bought Harley-Davidson, bankrolling expansion — including Sportster assembly at York, Pennsylvania, from 1973 — through a decade of variable quality control. In June 1981 a group of Harley executives bought the company back from AMF. The Ironhead Sportster ran through the 1985 model year; for 1986 the Evolution engine replaced the cast-iron-top-end motor the "Ironhead" name describes.

For the restorer, the authority is the factory literature: the Harley-Davidson service manuals (1957-1969, 1970-1978, and 1979-1985 XL/XR) and the year parts catalogs. Sportsterpedia's marque research is the strongest secondary source for year-to-year differences; this guide cites it throughout.

2. Model history: the Ironhead Sportster

The 1957 XL was Harley-Davidson's answer to the British 650 twins that were eating its lunch: take the K-model's unit-construction bottom end, bore it to 883 cc, fit overhead valves with hemispherical cast-iron heads, and raise compression. The result made a claimed 42 bhp — nearly half as much again as the side-valve K it replaced — and the Sportster has been in the Harley range continuously ever since.

The designations work like this. **XL** was the 1957 base model (and the name reappears on a basic model in some later literature). **XLH** (1958 on) is the high-compression touring version — bigger tank, lower bars, the volume seller. **XLCH** (1958-1979, "Competition Hot") is the sportier, stripped version: high pipes, small peanut tank, and for most of its life kick-start only. **XLRTT** was a limited-production race model of the mid-1960s. **XLS** (1979 on) is the Roadster. **XLT** (1977-1978) was a short-lived touring variant with hard bags and a windshield. **XLCR** (1977-1979) is Willie G. Davidson's cafe racer. **XLX-61** (1983-1984) was the stripped budget Sportster. **XR1000** (1983-1984) was the street-going XR with race-type heads and twin Dell'Orto carburetors. The **XR-750** (1970 on) is the pure dirt-track racer — not a street model and not covered by this guide except as context.

Engineering constants across the whole Ironhead run: a 45-degree air-cooled V-twin with four gear-driven camshafts, cast-iron cylinder heads (the source of the "Ironhead" nickname), unit-construction four-speed gearbox, and chain final drive. Displacement was 883 cc (advertised as 900) through 1971 and 997.5 cc (advertised as 1000) from 1972 on.

Year	What changed
1957	First XL: 883 cc OHV V-twin (3.000 x 3.8125 in, 7.5:1), 42 bhp, Linkert DC carburetor, 6-volt electrics, kick start, drum brakes.

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Year	What changed
1958	XLH (high-compression touring) and XLCH (Competition Hot) replace the single XL; higher compression, domed pistons, larger ports and valves; XLCH gets high pipes, magneto ignition, peanut tank.
1959	High-lift camshafts; period reports of 115 mph and sub-14-second quarter-miles.
1960	Detail refinements on the established 1958 formula.
1961	Hi-Fi color combinations introduced.
1962	Staggered shorty exhausts; the even/odd serial-number rule begins.
1963	Alloy fork brackets and motor mounts offered.
1964	Alloy front hubs fitted.
1965	12-volt electrical system replaces 6-volt.
1966	Tillotson diaphragm carburetor; hotter camshafts.
1967	Electric starting on the XLH (kick starter retained for 1967); new stronger crankcases and a stretched frame and swingarm for the XLH; the XLCH stays short-frame and kick-only.
1968	XLH becomes electric-start only (kicker optional); new front forks with more travel; about 58 bhp.
1969	Larger intake valves and revised cast-iron heads; AMF buys Harley-Davidson in January.
1970	Ownership VIN moves to the steering head (9-character format); XLCH gains electric start and battery-and-coil ignition; fiberglass boat-tail tail section; XR-750 racer debuts; about 8,650 Sportsters outsell the Electra Glide.
1971	New crankcases: the ignition timer moves into the cam-cover nose cone with automatic spark advance; wet multi-disc clutch; last year for the boat-tail option.
1972	Engine enlarged to 997.5 cc (3.188 x 3.8125 in, 9:1), 61 bhp; Bendix/Zenith carburetor; revised timer cam (dwell 90 to 140 degrees).
1973	Front disc brake; 35 mm Kayaba-type fork; turn signals standard; speedometer drive moves to the front axle; York, PA assembly begins.
1974	Cast wheels available; sales top 20,000.
1975	Left-side shift with right-side rear brake (DOT mandate), worked through linkage behind the engine; sales slump below 6,000.
1976	Bicentennial special edition; otherwise a steady year.

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Year	What changed
1977	New crankcases with gerotor oil pump (frame tube notched for access); Keihin carburetor; XLCR cafe racer and XLT touring model introduced; limited Confederate Edition.
1978	Siamese 2-into-1-into-2 exhaust across the line; solid-state charging electronics; dual front discs; 75th-anniversary editions; electronic ignition phased in late in the year.
1979	**New lighter, stiffer frame; rear disc brake; electronic ignition standard; XLS Roadster introduced; last year for the XLCH.**
1980	Timing marks revised (advance = single dot, TDC = lazy eight); 9-character VIN with J0 suffix.
1981	17-digit federal VIN; AMF sells Harley-Davidson to the investor group in June.
1982	25th-anniversary XLH and XLS editions; Hitachi generator in the charging system.
1983	XLX-61 budget Sportster; XR1000 street model (twin 36 mm Dell'Ortos, XR750-type heads, about 70 bhp).
1984	XR1000 final year; late-year charging-system running change (the factory manual treats Late 1984-1985 as its own variant).
1985	Final year of the Ironhead Sportster; the Evolution engine follows for 1986.

The company context matters when judging a bike. The 1969 AMF takeover funded the York plant and the 1970s expansion, but the AMF years are also the era of the most variable factory quality control — which is why matching numbers, correct fasteners, and year-correct trim matter more, not less, on a 1970s Ironhead. The 1981 buyback steadied the company; the 1986 Evolution engine kept the Sportster alive by fixing the Ironhead's oil-leak and overheating reputation at its root.

3. What is unique about the 1979 Sportster

1979 is the chassis-and-electrics year: the new lighter, stiffer frame derived from the XLCR, the rear disc brake, and standard electronic ignition all arrive together, with the siamese exhaust now universal. It is also an endings year — the last for the kick-only XLCH (fewer than 150 built) and the last for the XLCR (9 built) — and a beginnings year with the XLS Roadster.

1979-specific details:

- **New frame** — lighter and stiffer, XLCR-derived; the frame is the year's structural identity and does not interchange with 1978-earlier.
- **Rear disc brake** — new for 1979 on standard models; caliper, master cylinder, and mounts are year-specific.
- **Electronic ignition standard** — no points, no condenser; the module is increasingly hard to find, so test it before committing to paint.
- **XLS Roadster (new):** extended forks, 16-inch rear wheel, small sissy

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bar with backrest, 2.2-gallon tank — the factory custom-touring Sportster.

- **Last XLCH:** fewer than 150 built (Haynes); one source reports 141. Any 1979 XLCH claim deserves serial verification — it is the rarest regular-production Ironhead variant year.
- **Last XLCR:** 9 built — effectively unobtainable; verify any claim with extreme skepticism.
- **Timing marks:** advance = vertical line, TDC = single dot (through 1979; revised for 1980).

What did NOT exist in 1979 (common mix-ups):

- No 1980-style timing marks; no 17-digit VIN (1981); no Hitachi generator (1982).

1979 buyer cautions:

- **Module first.** Test the electronic ignition module on any non-runner before spending — NLA modules have ended restorations.
- **XLCH/XLCR claims.** Both endings make 1979 the most faked year for rare variants; verify VIN model coding and variant-specific hardware as a set.
- **Frame check.** The new frame's steering-head and swingarm areas deserve the standard crack inspection — new design, same hard use.

4. Technical restoration data — 1979 Harley-Davidson Sportster

4.1 Frame and engine numbers (1979)

1970 is the first year of the ownership VIN on the frame. The 9-character VIN is stamped on the engine and on the frame, with a label on the steering head showing the VIN and date of manufacture. Format:

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3A13675H0
3A = model code (3A = XLH, 4A = XLCH) | 13675 = five-digit serial
H = fixed character before the year digit | 0 = model year (1970)
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A 1971 example reads 4A13675H1 (4A = XLCH, H1 = 1971). Note a one-year quirk: on 1970 engines (and some early 1971 engines built with carryover 1970 cases) the VIN pad sits between the front two lifters; from 1971 on it is on the right side of the crankcase between the cylinders. The 1980 VIN uses a J0 suffix (example: 3A26782J0). Cam-cover castings: 25202-71 (1971-1976), 76-25202F (1977-1978), 79-25202 (1979-1980). Crankcase castings: 24534-72 / 24558-72 (1972); 24534-72 / 24558-73A (1973-1976); 24534-75 / 24558-75 (1977-1980).

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4.2 Engine specifications (1979)

Item	Specification
Configuration	45-degree air-cooled OHV V-twin; four gear-driven camshafts; cast-iron heads
Displacement	997.5 cc (60.9 cu in) — advertised as 1000
Bore x stroke	3.188 x 3.8125 in
Compression ratio	9.0:1
Carburetor	Keihin butterfly-type (XR1000: twin 36 mm Dell'Orto)
Ignition	Electronic ignition (breakerless); no points to gap
Starting	Electric
Clutch	Wet multi-disc
Lubrication	Dry sump; gerotor oil pump

4.3 Carburetion and electrical

- Keihin butterfly-type carburetor
- Electronic ignition standard (new for 1979) — no points, no condenser; no point gap to set
- 12-volt generator with solid-state charging electronics
- Electric start (all models); XLCH kick-only ends in 1979
- Spark-plug gap 0.025-0.030 in
- Timing marks: advance = vertical line, TDC = single dot (through 1979)

4.4 Transmission and final drive

- Four-speed constant-mesh gearbox in unit with the engine
- Left-foot shift, right-foot rear brake (1975 on, DOT mandate) — worked through a crossover linkage behind the engine
- Chain final drive; wet multi-disc clutch

4.5 Chassis, suspension, and brakes (1979)

- New lighter, stiffer XLCR-derived frame (new for 1979); 35 mm telescopic front fork; dual rear shock absorbers
- Dual front disc brakes; rear disc brake (new for 1979)
- Siamese 2-into-1-into-2 exhaust standard
- Wire-spoked or cast wheels; XLS: extended forks, 16-inch rear wheel
- XLS Roadster (new): small sissy bar with backrest, 2.2-gallon tank

4.6 Paint and finish (1979)

- Factory color options for this year are not documented in the sources checked. Verify paint against the year parts catalog and survivor bikes rather than trusting internet color charts — guessing at colors is how restorations get the most visible detail wrong.

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