

# Do They Still Make Sidecars?

by David Hough

There are some parts of motorcycling that we're not quite sure what to do with. When you see a sidecar rig or a trike, do you look away, or look at them more closely? It's pretty hard not to scrutinize a classic old Harley-Davidson sidecar rig. But how would you feel about driving one on your next motorcycle ride? If your vehicular experience so far has been limited to two wheels or four, three wheelers don't fit the pattern, and it's easy to just ignore them.

And who cares about sidecars anyway, right? How many sidecars are there, anyway? If there are a few weirdo biker brothers out there who have this thing about three wheels, let 'em go off in private and do whatever they gotta do. Got a sidecar? Thinking about a trike? Hey, don't talk to me about that weird three-wheeler stuff!

But hold on a second! Before we dismiss three wheeled motorcycles as an unnecessary minority, consider how you feel about the bureaucrat or insurance industry spokesman who suggests that **all** motorcyclists are a minority with a death wish. "How many *motorcycles* are there, anyway? Maybe there are a few thousand weirdo bikers out there who have this thing about riding motorcycles, but who cares? Let's get 'em off the roads." The point is, it's easy to abandon minorities, and as motorcyclists we should watch out for our motorcycling minorities.

Is a sidecar rig really a "motorcycle"?

On the other hand, is a motorcycle with a sidecar still a "real motorcycle"? Some magazine editors have stated flat out that sidecar outfits and trikes aren't real motorcycles. How can anything that doesn't lean around corners be a motorcycle? The truth is, most of today's moto-journalists don't say much about sidecars because they don't know much about them. That shouldn't be a surprise when you consider that journalists get their bikes and most of their information from the motorcycle industry.

The bottom line is not what magazine editors

write, or what you or I think, but what's carved in stone tablets down at your state capitol. What does your state law say? Think back to the early 80s, when the federal Department Of Transportation was trying to figure out the bike boom, and how to save us from ourselves. A bureaucrat named Joan Claybrook felt the answer to the "motorcycle problem" was for the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) to force-feed helmet laws down the throats of states. One hang-up was what to do with those oddball three wheelers, including those Cushman trikes used by meter maids in big cities.

The DOT solution was to include sidecar outfits and trikes as "motorcycles" but somehow exclude the meter-maid trikes, so the ticket-writers wouldn't have to wear helmets. The DOT handed every state a suggested definition of "motorcycle," with language something like "...a vehicle designed to operate with not more than three wheels in contact with mother earth, upon which the operator sits astride the engine, and steers by means of a handlebar or tiller." Most states, with their highway dollars being held at ransom, quickly adopted the DOT definition, and forgot about it. But the bottom line is that legally motorcycle/sidecar outfits and motorcycle based trikes are "motorcycles" in almost every state.

"OK, big deal," you may be thinking. "Why should I care about any of this?" Well, the big deal is that three-wheelers are under a lot of fire at the moment. If you're interested in biker's rights, you should be interested in what's happening to three wheelers in this country.

Now, if the cards are all in your favor at the moment, (you are strong, healthy, wealthy, single, have a good running two-wheeler, and vacation time coming), none of this may matter to you. But if your motorcycling is facing major limitations because of young children in the family, or a dog who wants to go along, or more than one passenger, a sidecar is the only practical way to keep on motorcycling. And if you've got serious physical

limitations such as missing leg or lower body paralysis, a three-wheeler is really your only access to motorcycling.

### The Plot Thickens

Remember that there was a nationwide increase in motorcycle fatalities in the 1970s, and the DOT wasn't clever enough to figure out that the increase in fatalities just about matched the tremendous growth in motorcycle sales. The feds just looked at the total fatality numbers soaring, and decided that something needed to be done to reduce the motorcycle carnage. They threatened the motorcycle industry that either the industry had better clean up its own act, or the feds would do it for them.

The motorcycle industry got the message. The "big four" Japanese manufacturers got together and formed the Motorcycle Safety Foundation, with close ties to the Motorcycle Industry Council. Now, remember that none of the Japanese manufacturers designed or marketed sidecars. They had two-wheeled motorcycles on their collective minds. So, the marching orders to the MSF to develop rider training programs really meant "develop training programs focused on **two-wheeled** motorcycles." Today, almost all states have rider education ("motorcycle safety") programs using materials developed by the Motorcycle Safety Foundation, and hire only MSF-certified instructors. That's good, right?

Well, the MSF has been very good for two-wheeled riders, and very good for the motorcycle industry, but a disaster for those motorcyclists who prefer or need three-wheelers. The reason? MSF materials are very exclusive to two-wheeled operation. Even the licensing tests designed by the MSF were written for two-wheelers. And when the MSF provided all of its stuff to the states, no one stopped to think that everything had a distinctly two-wheeler focus. Many state motorcycle safety administrators are just beginning to understand that their materials are exclusive to two-wheelers, and that they haven't done anything for sidecar drivers, even though they have been collecting license surcharges from them.

What state administrators are just learning is that driving a three-wheeler requires very differ-

ent skills and tactics than riding a two-wheeler. Sure, you can go out and teach yourself to drive a rig or a trike, but even if you survive the self-training, your state may make it difficult to get an endorsement. How do you get a license to ride a motorcycle, if you are paralyzed from the waist down? OK, in California a car license is adequate for driving a sidecar rig, but that's just a way to cut through the red tape. What's really needed is a sidecar equivalent of the (two-wheeler) MRC/RSS beginner course.

### MSF vs. SSP

The principal sidecar enthusiast organization in North America is the United Side Car Association (USCA). A separate but related non-profit corporation, the Sidecar Safety Program (SSP) has taken on the task of doing for three-wheelers what the MSF has done for two-wheelers. The SSP was originally created to offer sidecar courses to experienced sidecarists in the Midwest. Over the past five years, the SSP developed a complete novice sidecar course, which is the three-wheeler equivalent of the MSF course. The SSP now offers support to state rider training programs, and has published a training manual, *Driving A Sidecar Outfit* (available from Whitehorse Press). The SSP has provided both curriculum and instructor training to the Motorcycle Safety League of Virginia, which enabled them to include sidecar courses statewide.

Is the Japanese motorcycle industry happy to hear that a group of volunteers has managed to create a nationwide sidecar training program with no industry support? We'd bet they are furious. But then, it's the American way, right? We're not going to allow a bunch of Japanese manufacturers to dictate what sort of motorcycles we choose to ride.

The Sidecar Safety Program can be contacted at 93 Thunder Road, Port Angeles, WA 98362 or by e mail at [pmdave@tenforward.com](mailto:pmdave@tenforward.com). The Motorcycle Safety League of Virginia is at (888) 826-7584.

# Introduction to Sidecars

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*The following information is a compilation of recent press releases and other data about sidecars, trikes, and three-wheeled motorcycles, as of September, 1999.*

Maybe you've just discovered sidecars. Or maybe you've been aware of sidecars ever since that World War II movie you saw as a kid, but you've just realized that sidecars are a real part of motorcycling, and not just museum displays or movie props. Maybe you're just wondering why any intelligent motorcyclist would screw up a perfectly good two-wheeler by attaching a sidecar. Let's see if I can explain.

I remember very specifically how I got bit by the "sidecar bug." It was back in the 60s. I saw a photo of Steve McQueen driving his outfit with a nervous Keenan Wynne in the car. Steve had the sidecar wheel a foot off the ground, and the biggest grin on his face I'd ever seen. Keenan looked a little apprehensive.

At that moment, I decided I'd get a sidecar someday and learn how to "fly" it, too. Here we are 30 years later, and I'm still riding and testing all sorts of motorcycles and writing about them. But I'll tell you a little secret: I still get a silly grin on my face when I "fly the hack."

Sidecars have been around almost as long as motorcycles. It isn't clear who first attached a third wheel to a motorcycle, but the purpose was very likely to carry a lady friend in a more civilized manner than astride the bike. The term "chair" derived from early sidecars being made of wicker, in the same style as wicker chairs of the day. You'll also hear a number of other names for sidecars, including "hack" (from use as a motorcycle taxi), "rig" (from a fancy horse carriage), "outfit," and "combination" (of motorcycle and sidecar).

Whatever the name you give them, sidecar outfits seem to have a universal appeal, especially to those who have a taste for things unique. Even a dyed-in-the-wool motorcycle-hater who would never consider a ride on a two-wheeled motorcycle will take a spin in a sidecar and step out

with a giant grin. And for those who must balance family needs against motorcycling thrills, one of the big advantages of a sidecar is being able to take the family along on a motorcycle ride. When children arrive, there's the immediate crisis of parenthood vs. motorcycling. A sidecar provides a means to do both at the same time. It's much less risky to carry smaller children inside a sidecar, and even older passengers enjoy the ride more when their view isn't obstructed by someone else.

One big advantage of a motorcycle/sidecar combination is three-wheeled stability. The threat of dropping your speedy two-wheeler on treacherous surfaces such as oily wet pavement, loose gravel, or streetcar tracks is a very real concern. A sidecar rig won't "fall down" on slippery roads.

And, for those who have difficulty keeping a big machine balanced while stopping, or for those with special physical challenges, sidecars are an excellent way to keep on enjoying motorcycling. Regardless of age or physical limitations, if you (or your family) are concerned about the risks of motorcycling, sidecars provide a way to keep on riding without the constant fear of injury.

Lots of motorcyclists get a sidecar rig just for the challenge of learning to handle a motor vehicle that's like no other. A combination certainly doesn't lean into turns like a two-wheeler, nor does it drive like an automobile. Each sidecar outfit is a different vehicle, with different dynamic characteristics.

Yes, you've got to learn some new skills, but many of us think that's just another challenging part of motorcycling. Sure, driving a sidecar is different from riding a two-wheeler, but some of us think a rig is more fun with less risk.

The majority of sidecars in the USA are produced as a separate product to be attached to the owner's motorcycle either by the sidecar manufacturer or by a local installer. The only motor-

cycle manufacturers who currently offer both motorcycles and sidecars for sale in North America are Harley-Davidson (USA), and Ural (Russia). Ural outfits and solo machines are imported and distributed by Ural America, Inc.

Most sidecar rigs are assembled by attaching a commercially built sidecar to a two-wheeled motorcycle of your choice. Yes, it takes a little ingenuity to mount a sidecar on some machines, but sidecars are being successfully attached to all brands and types of motorcycles. There are firms who also provide mounting kits and special hardware.

Sidecars are available from sources in many different countries, in a wide variety of styles, and with a broad spread in price and quality. Prices for a new sidecar vary from \$1,000 to \$7,000, and for a complete motorcycle/sidecar combination, from \$7,000 to \$40,000.

You pretty much get what you pay for with sidecars and complete rigs. Exotic high-speed outfits from Germany and Switzerland are high quality and performance oriented, but quite expensive by USA standards. Machines from Russia or the Ukraine are typically based on World War II designs, and manufactured with less attention to quality control, but are very affordable. English sidecars have always been common-sense, and priced somewhere between European and USA products. American-made sidecars tend to be reasonably priced, but are typically more focused on style than performance.

Attaching a sidecar demands attention to details such as strong connections, correct suspension set-up, and adjustments to steering geometry. If you want to enjoy three-wheeled motorcycling, it's important to build a good-handling rig.

Remember, getting an outfit doesn't mean you have to give up your two-wheeled motorcycles, if you're able-bodied. You can choose which machine to ride today, based on the weather, your passengers, how much gear you need to carry, or your mood. I find that I choose the sidecar rig about half the time. After riding on the back of different motorcycles for many years, my wife will *only* ride in the sidecar these days.

If you are just in the process of gathering information about sidecars, you are advised to at-

tend a sidecar rally, where you will often find sympathetic experienced sidecarists to show you the ropes. You should also join the USCA, which includes the bi-monthly publication *The Sidecarist*. Membership in the USCA provides contacts with other sidecar enthusiasts who are often willing to provide information and advice.

### The United Side Car Association

The United Side Car Association Inc. (USCA) is an independent association of motorcycle/sidecar enthusiasts in North America, formed to provide information about sidecars, promote the safe use of sidecars, and maintain communication between sidecarists.

The USCA publishes a bi-monthly magazine, *The Sidecarist*, which is included as one of the benefits of USCA membership. The USCA also maintains an emergency contact list, which can be of assistance to traveling sidecarists who experience problems on the road.

The USCA usually holds an annual national rally, where sidecarists from all over North America can gather to trade stories, participate in field events and safety seminars, and socialize. The national rally dates and locations are announced in *The Sidecarist*.

Membership in the USCA is open to any sidecar enthusiast. New membership dues are \$25 for either US or Canadian members, and \$35 for other countries, which includes a membership card, decal, patch, and subscription to *The Sidecarist*. Membership renewals are \$22 and \$32 per year.

Membership applications are printed on the inside cover of *The Sidecarist*, or can be obtained from Al Roach, 130 S. Michigan, Villa Park, IL 60181 USA. Telephone (630) 833-6732. USCA books are listed on the back cover of each copy of *The Sidecarist*.

Current USCA President is James D. Cain Jr. 3616 Beaver Ford Rd., Woodbridge, VA 22192 (703) 590-1355. E-mail: <jcain2@csc.com>.

### The Sidecar Safety Program

The Sidecar Safety Program (SSP) is an independent, non-profit corporation focused on sidecarist training and information in North America. The SSP trains and certifies sidecar in-

structors, develops and produces curricula and classroom training materials, publishes "safety" manuals for general distribution, maintains instructor and student records, and provides a central information source for sidecarist training.

SSP Chief Instructors conduct one or more instructor preparation courses each year, to train and certify sidecar instructors. Instructors who successfully complete an instructor course are certified by the SSP for an initial period of 5 years, renewable based on training activity and teaching performance.

Please note that SSP instructor training and certification is totally independent of the Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF). It is not necessary for sidecar instructors to also be MSF certified. The SSP provides a national liability insurance policy which can be accessed by certified instructors.

All of the SSP officers and personnel are volunteers. The SSP has its own directors and officers, separate from the USCA.

Current SSP President is David L. Hough, 93 Thunder Road, Port Angeles, WA 98362 <pmdave@tenforward.com>.

### Driving A Sidecar Outfit Textbook

The SSP has developed a textbook, *Driving A Sidecar Outfit*. This book is the basis for both novice and advanced sidecar courses, but it can also be used as a do-it-yourself training guide for new sidecarists who can't find a nearby sidecar class, or are in remote areas where no sidecar training is available.

*Driving A Sidecar Outfit* is written in an easy-to-read style, and includes both practice exercises to build skill, and common-sense lessons about topics such as driving in traffic, driving off pavement, and handling off-camber or decreasing-radius corners. The "advanced" section of the book gets into more detail about sidecar dynamics and control skills for an empty sidecar.

While *Driving A Sidecar Outfit* includes a chapter on sidecar mounting and alignment, the focus of the book is on driving skills and accident-avoidance strategies, not assembly of a motorcycle/sidecar combination.

*Driving A Sidecar Outfit* is available from

USCA SSP Treasurer Tim Colburn, 453 Tamarack St., Park Forest, IL 60466. Individual copies are \$19.95 plus \$3 Shipping and handling within the continental USA (\$22.95 total). Make checks or money orders payable to *USCA SSP Books*. Sorry, no credit cards.

For shipping to addresses outside the USA and for shipping costs of quantity orders, contact Tim Colburn at (708) 747-0480. SSP-certified sidecar instructors, training sites, SIC members, and book distributors can purchase quantities at a substantial discount, and by purchase order if requested.

*Driving A Sidecar Outfit* is also available from:

Classic Motorbooks. (800) 826-6600. Internet: <www.mbibks@win.bright.net>.

Whitehorse Press. (800) 531-1133, fax: (603) e-mail: <WhitehorsePress@compuserve.com>.

### *Hack'd Magazine*

*Hack'd* is a magazine focused entirely on sidecars and other three-wheeled motorcycles, produced independently by Jim and Chris Dodson, in West Virginia. Quarterly issues are huge, with a comprehensive collection of different sidecar stories, reports, ads, cartoons, and reader letters

Available by subscription from *HACK'd*, PO Box 813, Buckhannon, WV 26201-0813. (304) 472-6146. Subscriptions: \$29/yr. US delivery; \$39/yr. foreign delivery.

### Canadian Sidecar Clubs

Inquiries about the Canadian Sidecar Owners' Club and membership should be directed to Gail Clarke, 40 Manitou Avenue, Embrun, Ontario K0A 1W0, Canada (613) 443-9027, <gailsoc@magi.com>.

Information about the Bigfoot Sidecar Club in British Columbia can be obtained via Jerry Kotanko (604) 534-6473, or Peter Smith, Side Effects (250) 573-2364.

### The Sidecar Industry Council

A core group of commercial sidecar firms have their own national organization, the Sidecar Industry Council. Membership in the SIC is open to those involved commercially in the side-

car industry. Full membership is \$300 per year. A "Retail" membership at \$50 per year is available to small motorcycle shops and sidecar installers

The SIC generally holds two annual general meetings, one in the Spring and one in the Fall. For specific information about the SIC, meeting venues, membership applications, or a current list of SIC members and sidecar products, contact Sidecar Industry Council, PO Box 8119, Van Nuys, CA 91406 telephone (818) 780-5542 fax (818) 780-1587

There is a list of sidecar manufacturers on the SIC page of the Internet site <[www.sidecar.com](http://www.sidecar.com)>. If you are involved in sidecars commercially, it would be in your best interests to be a member of the SIC.

### Road Racing

Sidecar road racing is exciting for both the competitors and the spectators. For information about sidecar racing events, contact:

Sidecar Racers Assn. West, 3937 Ward Ave., North Highlands, CA 95660 (916) 339-1778 <[www.sidecarworld.com.au](http://www.sidecarworld.com.au)>

Sidecar Racers Assn. East, 12 Cedar Cresc., Borden, Ontario, Canada L0M 1C0 (705) 424-3679 <[rggreen@bconnex.net](mailto:rggreen@bconnex.net)>.

### Motocross and Offroad Racing

Leading Links M/C President: Mike Burns, 2834 Delevan Dr., Eagle Rock, CA 90065 (323) 254-0688. <[burns111@ix.netcom.com](mailto:burns111@ix.netcom.com)> <[www.sidecarmacross.com/llmc/](http://www.sidecarmacross.com/llmc/)>

### Dual Sport Sidecars

Mike Braverman, Dual Sport Sidecars, 13691 Gavina Ave. #643, Sylmar, CA 91342 (818) 364-5867; <[sidecarmike@earthlink.net](mailto:sidecarmike@earthlink.net)>.

### Assembling A Sidecar Rig

The Sidecar Safety Program receives numerous requests for information about assembling a sidecar outfit. While the SSP is focused on sidecar driving skills, we have put together some information to help answer the questions we receive.

While it is possible for a mechanically-inclined motorcyclist to install a sidecar in the home

garage, the task can be daunting for the novice sidecarist with no previous installation or sidecar driving experience.

It's important to understand that attaching a sidecar is not just adding an accessory, but building a new, three-wheeled motorcycle with very different operating characteristics.

Additional information to help get you started on the task of building a sidecar outfit is contained in a companion information packet, *Assembling A Sidecar Outfit*. You are also advised to contact a reputable sidecar manufacturer or sidecar installation specialist. For references, contact the Sidecar Industry Council.

### Conversions for Handicapped

Individuals with physical limitations often require specially designed three-wheelers, or special controls. While most sidecar installers will assist in locating a suitable outfit and adapting controls, engineering a sidecar outfit for someone with lower leg paralysis or for carrying an electric wheelchair is a very specialized field.

If you have special physical limitations which require a special outfit, you are advised to contact a sidecar installer who specializes in "handicapped" outfits.

Tomco Motorcycle Conversions specializes in recreational vehicles for people with physical limitations. Contact: Ina Marie Miller, Tomco Conversions Inc. PO Box 30, Midmont Road, Wilcox, PA 15870. (814) 929-5164; <[www.ncentral.com/oliver/tomco.htm](http://www.ncentral.com/oliver/tomco.htm)>; e-mail <[oliver@ncentral.com](mailto:oliver@ncentral.com)>.

### Other Sidecar Information

The SSP has separate information packages available. This is the *Sidecar Information* package. Others include:

Assembling A Sidecar Rig

Sidecar Events Calendar (seasonal)

SSP Staff Contacts

SSP information packets are updated periodically. To obtain a current package, send an e-mail request to [pmdave@tenforward.com](mailto:pmdave@tenforward.com), a mail a note with address label and three first class stamps to SSP Information, 93 Thunder Road, Port Angeles, WA 98362.

SSP Information packages are free, but if you need it by mail, we appreciate you paying the postage. You may duplicate SSP information in your club newsletter or reprint it verbatim for distribution at motorcycle events.

<[www.sidecar.com](http://www.sidecar.com)> Internet site

The USCA, SSP, and SIC maintain an Internet site at [www.sidecar.com](http://www.sidecar.com), which includes a forum where you can post questions and reference other information. The SIC page lists sidecar businesses including mounting and installation specialists. The SSP page focuses on training information, and contains hidden files which may be downloaded by instructors via a special access code.

If you have suggestions for additional information you would find helpful about sidecars, feel free to contact us. We prefer mail or e-mail. USCA President Jim Cain Jr; or SSP President David L. Hough.