

## After The Isetta Restoration

by Carl Jensen in Austin, Texas

You may have read the series of articles I wrote in earlier issues of Minutia about restoring my Isetta. The series was called "Isetta Restoration for the Mechanically Challenged". I hope that some of the tips helped out, or at least didn't mess you up too badly. However, at the time of the articles I hadn't gotten a chance to put very many miles on the restoration, so I thought you might enjoy getting an additional perspective now that I have driven quite a few miles. Most of the repairs have held up pretty well, but there were a few surprises that I'll tell you about.

First a few words about the English Isetta club. I previously recommended using that club as a resource for new and used parts, despite the expense of buying an international money order and their club's inability to ship certain components due to liability concerns. Unfortunately, they have experienced some organizational difficulties and one offshoot is that we in the U.S. will not be able to buy any more parts from them.

I recently got a letter from the English club's new spares manager (that is the British way of saying new parts manager). She said that the minor difficulties are gradually being ironed out. They hope in the near future to be dealing with Krause Honda, and we may be able to get many of the parts we need from Ron Krause. I don't know Ron's phone number, but this sounds very promising if it comes through.

For those of you who are not members of both the American and the English clubs, I must say that the difference is quite startling between their struggling club and our dynamic and growing organization with its award-winning publication. I wish them the very best, but you may not realize how really lucky we are to have such a great club.

Now lets talk about the post-restoration. There are three interesting things I learned that really stand out. Lesson #1 -- my buddy in Abilene calls his Isetta "Puddles" for a good reason. No matter how careful or extensive you are with your restoration, your Isetta is going to leak oil. You may think (in your pathetically innocent naiveté) that you can stop all the leaks, but you forget one important thing. Your Isetta now has 40 years experience leaking oil, and it is much more adept in these matters than you are.

Lesson #2 -- your Isetta will have fewer problems if you drive it regularly. I know it doesn't seem to make sense that the more miles you put on your antique car the fewer overall problems it will have, but it's true. I guess that the constant use keeps all the seals moist, runs fresh gas through the carburetor, charges the battery, keeps flat spots from developing on components, etc.

Lesson #3 -- after you have put 500-1,000 miles on your restoration, go over everything on the car that you can to be sure that bolts are tightened, brake cylinders aren't leaking, etc. I know that human nature is such that you probably won't want to mess with much more after all the work you did on the restoration, but it may save you from having much bigger problems later on.

Now lets talk about some specifics. I believe the first big surprise you will have is when you try to torque the head down after the initial 300 miles on your rebuilt engine. My torque wrench has a low-profile head (meaning it doesn't need much clearance), but that doesn't help. I just couldn't seem to fit my wrench and its attached socket between the engine and the top of the engine compartment.

Maybe you are a better man (or woman) than I am, but there was no way I was going to remove the engine just to tighten the head bolts. I know that the purists will gag, but I finally got mad and cut a flap out of the parcel shelf directly over the engine, folded it back and voila! All the head bolts were accessible. After the bolts were tightened, I then folded the flap back down and sealed the edges with silicone caulk. I tried to smooth out the carpet-type material that goes over the flap, but the surgery still shows. Maybe some day I will put on a whole new piece of material over the entire parcel shelf, but that is more than I want to tackle at this point.

Before I painted my steering wheel during the restoration, I tried to repair the cracks where the three spokes go into the wheel itself. I enlarged the cracks with my Dremel tool, filled the widened cracks with J.B. Weld and then painted the wheel. I have now found that some tiny little cracks have reappeared. I guess that this area is always going to be subject to stresses and will flex some regardless. The cracks are much less noticeable than before, and I don't think it will do any good to fix them again. Maybe this is just one of those things that give an antique car its charm (how is that for a good rationalization?)

My Isetta has the old style of heater which has a big rubber tube running from the engine cooling shroud down to an opening in lower center of the firewall. This rubber tube was badly deteriorated due to the engine movement and due to the rubber's proximity to the exhaust pipe. Since the tube doesn't seem to be available as a replacement part, I tried to salvage the old one by using a two-part mixture that you mix like epoxy called Bondo Black Flexible Part and Bumper Repair. However, I guess that my rubber tube was just too far gone for the repair to work, and it didn't last. I ended plugging the hole in the firewall and will live without a heater, which here in Texas is no big deal. Unfortunately, living without air conditioning is a lot more serious, so I don't do as much driving during our hot summers.

I recently jacked up the rear of the car and put it on jack stands to see if I could slow a leak. I am glad I thought to take off the rear brake drum, since there was brake fluid all over the inside of the drum. Even though I had rebuilt the rear wheel cylinder during the restoration, I guess it had been honed out once too often and couldn't form a good seal.

One of the Isetta parts suppliers named John Wetzel had a complete cylinder in stock, and he got it out to me in less than a week. Now that is fast service.

This leaking brake cylinder problem was a very good lesson, since you never want any doubts whatsoever about your brakes, steering, and tires. Even though you have carefully rebuilt your wheel cylinders, be sure to go back later and slip the drums off to inspect the brakes. Any leaking fluid will quickly be evident.

A common problem seems to involve the canister that holds the air filter. Sometimes the vibration will make one or both of the canister's mountings come loose. I recently found that this had happened on one of my mountings, but I didn't want to go to the hassle of taking off the canister, having it welded, and then repainting and replacing it. Instead I bought a giant hose clamp at a local building supply store and strapped it around the middle of the canister and the solid bar that it mounts onto. This really worked, and will stabilize the canister until I do the repairs the right way by welding it, etc. That may not happen for a long time, since I am really enjoying driving my Isetta and am kind of burnt out right now on doing any more restoration work than I have to.

I tried hooking up a little Radio Shack buzzer to the turn signal light on the dashboard, since it is often hard to know if the turn signals are on during the daytime. It seemed simple enough to do, but somehow I ended up frying my blinker unit. The blinker unit makes a really cool buzzing-type sound as it is frying, and at first I thought it was my new buzzer unit making the noise. I finally decided to do without the buzzer, and if you want to install one you may want to talk to someone who knows what they are doing, unlike me.

Well, I guess that pretty much wraps things up. I would like to give a brief plug to John Jensen who is the author of the essential restoration book called "Isetta Restoration". I literally could not have completed my restoration without this book, and in my opinion he is truly the godfather of all restored Isettats. And many thanks to the dedicated Isetta parts suppliers and to the tireless people who run our club and publish Minutia. Happy bubbling!