

America's Chopper™

Orange County Choppers puts product before publicity



Paul Teutel Jr. on the job at Orange County Choppers.

OCC

In the fourth installment of CTE's Made in America series, Mike Principato visits the Teutuls of "American Chopper" fame and gets treated just like a son by Paul Teutel Sr. for one scary moment.

Located off a lonely country road dotted with a few gas stations and a toppers bar, housed in a drab, 1960s-era red brick industrial building, Orange County Choppers could be mistaken

for a thousand other small metalcutting shops. But this shop is a bit different than the rest, since it is the setting for a hit television show.

Which is precisely why hordes of fans of Discovery Channel's "American Chopper" make the pilgrimage from all over the U.S. to the little town of Montgomery, N.Y. They join a "manufacturing paparazzi" that assembles each day on the weedy vacant lot across the street from OCC headquarters, staking out the company's

loading dock in hopes of catching a glimpse of the stars of the popular reality show.

Today, their patience will be rewarded. Word has spread through the flock that their heroes are in town. Sure enough, one of them makes an appearance on the dock. The reaction from the crowd is instantaneous and electric. A friendly wave to the eager group of fans is all the encouragement they need to dash across the street, thrusting posters, T-shirts and every conceivable



M. Principato

Paul Teutel Sr. (center) working a new project on the OCC shop floor.

Real talk from reality TV stars

If you've watched any reality television, you may often be left with the nagging suspicion that there ain't much real about it. Real "Survivors" don't get deposited on deserted islands with smarmy TV hosts who intone silly phrases like, "The tribe has spoken." No woman who can operate a cell phone as skillfully as Paris Hilton can possibly be as stupid as she seems. And don't even get me started about how the AARP must have stuffed the digital ballot box to help Taylor Hicks beat Katharine McPhee.

So it was with a certain skepticism that I looked forward to interviewing the Teutuls, whose on-air bluster is rivaled only by their mechanical brilliance. Surely, much of their act had to be just that, thought I.

OCC's very pleasant and professional young publicist, Jennifer Weyant, did her best to convince me otherwise when I contacted her to schedule the interview with her bosses. Warning me that the father and son duo allotted little time for such things, because "it's Orange County Choppers first, 'American Chopper' second," Weyant made it clear that the interview would be short. The men had bikes to build, after all.

Hmmm. I've met a few actors, and if there's one thing they have in com-

mon, it's a crack-like addiction to publicity. Could it be that Paul Sr. and Paul Jr. were actually what they appeared to be on television: normal guys with a love of metalworking and an indifference to the camera, rather than the other way around?

Time to find out. Joining me in an unpretentious OCC conference room filled with mismatched chairs, Junior ambled in, offered a handshake and asked, "What's up?"



"I want to say to some kids, 'Make something! You're melting your mind.'"

—Paul Teutel Jr.

Seconds after he sat down, the conference door slammed open and the doorway darkened with the bulk of a tattooed tree trunk of a man, who boomed, "What the #\$@% is this about??? Let's get this @\$% interview going!!!" And with that melodramatic entrance, Paul Sr. laughed heartily, overfilled a chair at the conference table and, with his son, opined on a wide range of subjects. Here are some highlights of that freewheeling interview.

CTE: Are you guys TV stars, entrepreneurs or tradesmen?

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kind of OCC swag at him to autograph. Grinning, the good-natured young celebrity takes it all in stride, signing the memorabilia that bears the distinctive OCC flame logo while chatting up his fans.

Eventually, the fans disperse and the star turns his attention to what he came out to the dock for in the first place—helping unload a truck.

Paul Teutul Jr. (pronounced "Tuttle")—aka "Paulie" or simply "Junior" to his legions of fans—may be the Derek Jeter of the safety shoe set, but he still has bikes to build.

Rough-Hewn Mechanical Geniuses

Specifically, Junior has custom choppers to build, many of which are one-off creations that stretch wheelbases, imaginations and budgets: Customers line up to pay \$40,000 for an "off the rack" chopper to the-sky's-the-limit for one of OCC's famed "theme bikes."

These theme bikes have made celebrities out of Junior and his father, Paul Teutel Sr. Airings of "American Chopper" have documented, from concept to production, the creation of elaborate, rolling artwork such as last year's "Fire Bike." That bike is a tribute to New York City's firefighters and firmly established the father-son duo as rough-hewn creative and mechanical geniuses.

Custom choppers with evocative names like "Black Widow" and "POW Bike" immediately attracted an audience of manufacturing buffs (including yours truly). We could hardly believe our good fortune at stumbling across a TV series that cast our metalcutting brethren in such a favorable light.

But the show's appeal quickly zoomed way beyond metal-shop heads and bikers. My own, admittedly unscientific, household survey (my two teenagers love the show too), reinforced by the happy little human spectacle I witnessed at the OCC loading dock, prove it. While the bikes are awesome and the production methods are interesting, they don't explain why viewers who don't know a V-Twin from the Minnesota Twins or a Bridgeport from a USB port are captivated by

"American Chopper."

From Parts to Action Figures

The reason, of course, is the Teutuls and the proudly blue-collar merry band who populate the show. After spending a few hours in the real-life domain of the cast, I'm happy to report that Senior, Paulie, Mikey, Vinnie and the rest of the OCC gang are, in fact, the real deal. They may be television megastars, but unlike their counterparts on those other, mostly cheesy, reality shows, these guys actually know how to make a living—even after the cameras stop rolling.

And what a living they've earned. The company doesn't provide sales figures, but it's clear that the Teutuls and their employees have benefited immensely from the attention the show has brought to OCC. In the 3 years since the show's first episode aired, the company has grown from a handful of employees to more than 40.

Plans are underway for a new, 100,000-sq.-ft. headquarters that will consolidate and streamline motorcycle manufacturing and service departments, and integrate OCC's burgeoning retail operation. Over 70 licenses have been granted for everything from OCC-branded motorcycle components to action figures. It's a long way from Paul Sr.'s Orange County Ironworks, where the custom chopper business was birthed and father and son learned metalworking skills.

The company's use of technology has grown to meet the increased demand for its bikes, and while both men freely admit to being neophytes to CNC and CAD, they haven't hesitated to apply the most advanced manufacturing tools available to custom and near-custom manufacturers.

Lead Engineer Jim Quinn, who joined OCC this year after a 15-year stint at a large cutlery manufacturer, now oversees a half-dozen CNC machine tools, including 4-axis machining centers and a 5-axis waterjet machine—all of which have been integrated into the company's production processes over the last 3 years.

Adding manufacturing technology has certainly accelerated the pro-



The nondescript building that houses Orange County Choppers and serves as the set of the hit TV show, "American Chopper."

duction process of creating custom choppers. True to form as self-described pragmatic tradesmen, however, the Teutuls believe the expanded design possibilities that technology brings to their already unique products is just as important to the growth of the OCC brand. Read on for more of this dynamic duo's com-

mon-sense perspectives on custom manufacturing. Δ

About the Author

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'Mini-Chopper Build' promotes technical education

In his recent interview with CTE, Paul Teutel Jr. of "American Chopper" challenged kids to learn manufacturing skills and "make something." The folks at Fox Valley Technical College, Appleton, Wis., are already busy "making something" in Teutel's field. The school's "Mini-Chopper Build," modeled after the TV show, is part of an annual event designed to expose high school students to high-tech manufacturing techniques.

KUKA Robotics Corp., Clinton Township, Mich., is a program sponsor. "We believe that by sponsoring this program financially and by helping students develop design ideas that match KUKA design criteria, we are encouraging technical training beyond high school and ultimately supporting technical knowledge and training advancements in the U.S.," said Kevin Kozuszek, director of marketing for KUKA Robotics.



One of the mini-choppers made by teams of high school students for a program sponsored by Fox Valley Technical College.

The program challenges teams of junior and senior high school students to design and build mini-choppers using CAD, welding, grinding and painting. The project involves engineering and manufacturing disciplines including industrial engineering, mechanical design, machine tool technology and electronics. KUKA Robotics, one of nine corporate sponsors, sponsored one of the six participating high schools.

—CTE staff

Junior: Tradesmen, definitely. But I don't have any formal metalworking training; I learned it all on the job and from my father. Definitely not TV stars.

Senior: Yeah, he's a dummy (both laugh). Actually, I'm not even sure what "entrepreneur" means.

Junior: It's a big word for "business owner," Pop.

Senior: No, I'm a tradesman first. You gotta stay true to what you do.

CTE: So what is OCC, really? Contract fabrication shop, parts maker or custom manufacturer?

Junior: All of the above. We'll always be custom manufacturers of bikes, but we're moving into production more and more.

Senior: We're moving one step at a time, investing in the business as we grow. We know we have to keep our work in-house to control it, rather than outsource.

CTE: How big a role is technology playing in OCC's success?

Junior: Huge, and I'm still learning about it. I'm basically an ironworker.



M. Principato

OCC displays theme bikes made famous by the TV show at its retail store.

The CNC and computer-aided drawing stuff is all new to me, but we've added some people who are really good with it. And I'm getting better at migrating ideas for bikes that are in my head to the computer screen.

Senior: We also have a lot of companies that want us to use their equipment because it'll be seen on the show. We're probably the biggest marketing tool in the industry.

CTE: Which industry?

Senior: ANY industry!

CTE: Your publicist told me, "OCC

first, 'American Chopper' second." Why?

Junior: Because WE'RE the brand. Someday the show will go away, and when it does, we'll still be here making great bikes.

CTE: The bikes you make are amazing to look at. Do people actually ride them?

Senior: Yeah. But only for a couple hours at a time!

CTE: You guys are a new phenomenon in television: tradesmen as rock stars. How do you feel about being a role model and what it might mean to kids who are thinking about a career in manufacturing?

Junior: Proud. We had a local teacher who visited the shop who told us that he told his students, "If you get A's we'll go to OCC." I think it's great.

Senior: The world today is full of kids using computers and video games.

Junior: I want to say to some kids, "Make something! You're melting your mind!"