

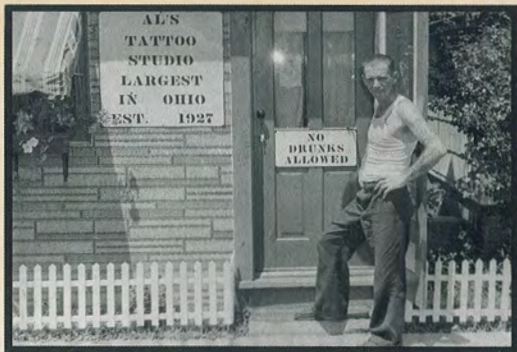
THE AL SCHIEFLEY LEGACY

A Rock of the American Tattoo Ages

By Rich T
Photos courtesy of the Temple Tattoo History Museum

Al Schiefley's name ought to be much better known than it is. Beginning in the 1920s, Schiefley was a main anchor in American tattooing, a contemporary and associate of American legends like Charlie Wagner, Paul Rogers, Milt Zeis, Cap Coleman, and Huck Spaulding. He was one of the few who carried it through the lean years.

Until now, Schiefley has been kind of a mystery figure. His name was well known, mainly because of a number of widely published photos of Schiefley taken during his visits to Les Skuse's Bristol Tattooing Club in England in the 50s. People talked about him as "the guy up in Sandusky," but it usually ended there. Recently Rich T, owner of the Temple Tattoo History Museum in Gallipolis, Ohio, took on the job of filling in the blanks around the life of Al Schiefley and his son Dale. Even though Sandusky and Gallipolis are at extreme opposite ends of Ohio, this was history right in Rich's backyard. In the course of his research, he acquired a large collection of Schiefley's original papers, many of which we've reproduced here. This is a big tile in the mosaic of tattoo history, an important blank being filled in.



Al Schiefley in front of his studio at 1513 Pearl St., Sandusky, 1950s.

Al Schiefley began tattooing in Sandusky, Ohio, near Cleveland, in 1927. His son Dale picked up the business in 1967 and carried on until 2000. Al's most colorful contribution was the Sandusky Tattoo Club, modeled after Les Skuse's famous Bristol Tattooing Club in England. Throughout their tattoo careers, both Al and Dale Schiefley kept full-time day jobs. The fact that they tattooed around day jobs should not lead anyone to think they were amateurs or half-assed in any way. Far from it. They took their work seriously, had a large and loyal clientele, and were highly respected by their peers and customers.

The Harley-Davidson motor company was in operation for a whopping eight years when Al Schiefley was born January 17, 1911 to father Frederick Schiefley, a laborer/city worker, and mother Valerie, a French immigrant. Al would become the eldest of nine siblings. The family resided at 1501 W. Market Street in Sandusky, Ohio.

According to his son Dale, Al Schiefley's interest in tattooing began with receiving a tattoo from a carnival artist at age 12 or 13 at the local summer fair. As with a lot of us, his parents weren't too happy. The tattoo artist's name at present is unknown and may be lost to time. According to Dale Schiefley, in the off season, the artist resided in Fremont, Ohio, approximately 30 miles from Sandusky.

This is also the person who gave Al Schiefley his start in tattooing. Al found out that this guy "was selling him equipment and ink that he wouldn't use himself, you know what I mean," Dale said. "He was dumping all the junk off on my dad." In 1927, at age 15, Al started tattooing professionally from his parents' residence using his bedroom as his studio. According to the US 1930 census, Al was working in the packinghouse of J.H. Ruth Pork Products. He was a fortunate young man to be working during the Depression. Going through Al's scrapbooks, photo albums, and letters shows that in the early '30s he started corresponding heavily with several suppliers. Among them were Prof. Charles Wagner, EJ Miller, and Percy Waters.

On November 24, 1934, he married Theda Lewis and moved to 1513 Pearl Street, Sandusky, where they rented from



Al Schiefley with Huck Spaulding at the 1956 Sandusky Tattoo Club Convention.



Les Skuse and Al Schiefley. No Drunks? 1956 Sandusky Tattoo Club Convention.

Al's mother. Later on they bought the home. His tattoo shop was a separate building in their backyard.

Al worked full time as a conductor for the Pennsylvania Railroad, taking the night shift to allow for his seven-days-a-week tattoo shop hours. Al's Tattoo Studio was open 5-9 on weekdays, 10-9 on Saturday, and 1-9 on Sunday. Al also bought and sold guns. The correspondence during these years appeared to be straight-ahead business. Correspondence with Charlie Wagner dated December 4, 1937, reads:

Dear Mr. Schiefley

The cost for the three machines you desire will be \$5 and 50 cents a jar for inks or 4oz. for \$1.

Yours very truly
Charlie Wagner
P.S. design sheets are 50 cents.

The next correspondence I found was from Cap Coleman dated August 2, 1943. Again, it's straightforward business, but it also shows the kinship that existed among tattoo artists of the day:

Glad to know you received bag OK. Brown is \$2 1/4 lb or \$3 1/2 lb. As I advised you—use storage batteries to run the machines. Machines run better and you can do better work. Transformer no good. You will put the machines on the bum with transformer. Machines are adjusted for batteries—with transformer you are using a/c current. The machines require d/c current. You get it from batteries. I use batteries myself.

All good tattoo work is done with batteries not transformer.

Coleman
P.S. Charge them plenty for your work

The 1950s would prove to be a very exciting decade for Al Schiefley. Dale remembers his father remodeling the shop in 1953. Nine years old at the time, Dale helped out by staining the frames that would display the commercial design sheets that Al Schiefley and Mac McCullen collaborated on. The design sheets were printed from negatives on photo paper. Where the originals are is anyone's guess.

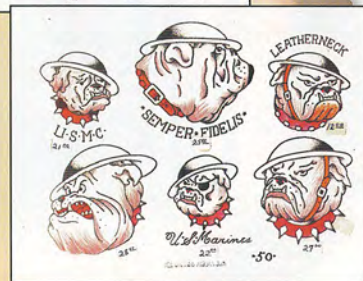
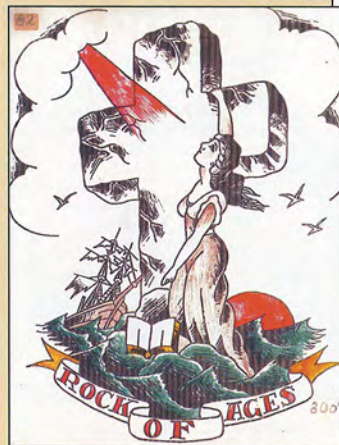
Sandusky has always been a vacation spot, so in the summer the Schiefley's sold lawn ornaments to supplement their income. Dale has fond recollections of traveling to Cleveland to buy these lawn ornaments from Cleveland businessman EB Newman. According to Dale, Newman had seen a bit in a newspaper about Les Skuse, a British tattoo artist and president of the Bristol Tatooing Club. Al started corresponding with Les in 1953. They became fast friends. Al knew a good idea when he saw one, and started the Sandusky Tattoo Club in November of 1954. In 1955, he traveled to England to be the guest of honor at the Bristol



Al Schiefley with his sister-in-law Jean Parker and Les Skuse, 1956.



Al Schiefley/Mac McCullen commercial flash, early 1950s

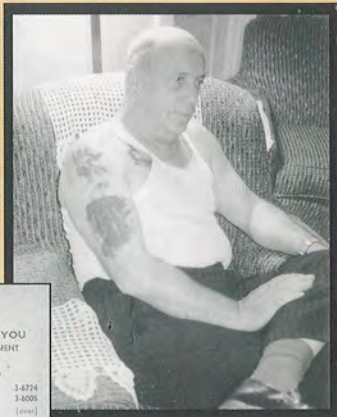


Tattooing Club's "Unique Party" at a pub called The Cornish Mount in Pennywell Road, Bristol. On the flight over Dale said Al read an article on race horses being stolen and the "new" practice of tattooing identifying marks inside their lips. Dale quoted his father as saying "If horses, why not people?"

In 1956, Al organized what I would describe as the first modern tattoo convention. The guest of honor was Les Skuse. Milt Zeis came, as did Paul Rogers, Huck Spaulding and members of the Sandusky Tattoo Club. Dale recalls Paul Rogers in 1956, describing him as very athletic. "I watched him walk the whole backyard on his hands," Dale said.

In 1957, Al Schiefley and Milt Zeis were the guests of honor at another Bristol Tattooing Club "Unique Party." Al's wife accompanied him. In an early Spaulding and Rogers promotional flyer, there are endorsements from Al and Les with photos of Les being presented with design sheets and machines at this party. In October, 1960, Al would again be one of the guests of honor at the eighth anniversary of the Bristol Tattooing Club. Joining him was Huck Spaulding as the second guest of honor. In a recent interview, Danny Skuse described Al Schiefley as "a gentleman's gentleman."

Al Nesbit AKA Captain Al. Al Schiefley taught Al Nesbit to tattoo in the early 50s. He served as a tugboat captain on Lake Erie and tattooed at 310 Meeker Avenue, Huron, OH.



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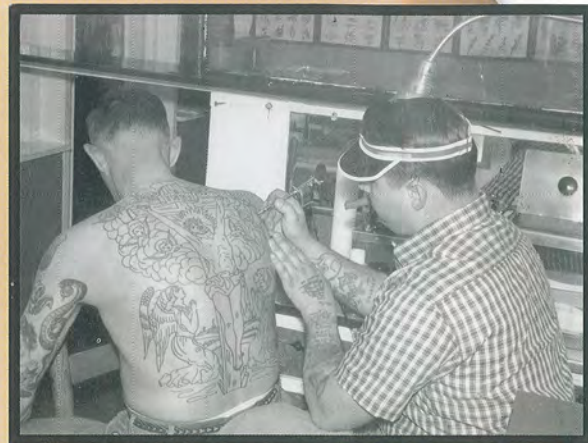
Al Schiefley with Paul Rogers and Huck Spaulding, Fayetteville, NC, 1950s.

During this same time period, Al stayed in close contact with Paul Rogers and Huck Spaulding and visited their Fayetteville, NC shop. On one of these visits in the mid 50s, Huck Spaulding tattooed Al Schiefley's back with an exquisite Coleman-style crucifixion. He did the job start to finish, Dale said, in "7 hours and 40 minutes." It was rock solid tattoo work by anyone's standards.

Al's phone book from the 50s and the 60s reads like a who's who of the tattoo world, with way too many names and addresses to list here. Among the American tattoo artists he stayed in touch with were Crazy Philadelphia Eddie Funk, Jack Dracula, Sailor Eddie, Phil Sparrow and Karl Bumpus. British tattoo artists he knew: Cash Cooper, Jack Zeke, Rich Mingins, Bob Maddison and, of course, Les Skuse. He also kept in touch with Doc Forbes in Canada and European artists like Denmark's Tattoo Ole and Holland's Tattoo Peter de Haan. There are neat little notes here and there in his phone book like "new yellow" with an arrow pointing to Stanley Moskowitz' address, "see Bill Skuse for this green" and other notes on different chemical companies that sold dry pigments.

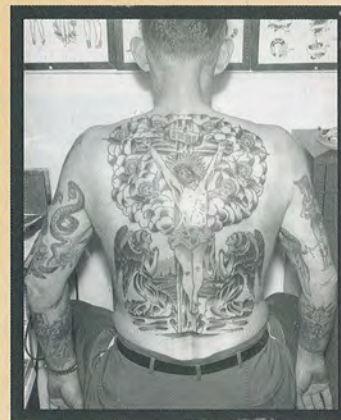
Al's son Dale received his first tattoo the day he graduated from high school June 6, 1963: his name "Dale" on the inside of his lower lip. "The thing about it was tough, see, my dad wouldn't tattoo me until the day I graduated from school," Dale said. "That's why I know exactly that the date was June 6, 1963, 'cause that was the day I graduated from school."

"So my dad said 'Okay, pick out whatever design you want and I'll tattoo it,'" Dale said. "I told him my name on my lip. That's what I wanted. And he couldn't believe it but that's what I wanted so he did it. The thing about it was when you do it—it always felt like you had snuff or something in and my dad always said, 'Don't put your tongue in there or you'll force ink out of it.' Well I did that, and the third time my dad redid it I went in the house and said 'Mom! Mom! can you see my name?' She said, 'No, pull down your lip.' and I said, 'Well if you can't see this way I'm okay then.'" Dale married his wife Carole in



Huck Spaulding at work on Al Schiefley's back piece, 1950s.

"Al Schiefley was one of the unsung heroes of tattooing. He was a credit to his profession in his time. He kept tattooing alive and well until other people could pick up the torch."
 —Lyle Tuttle



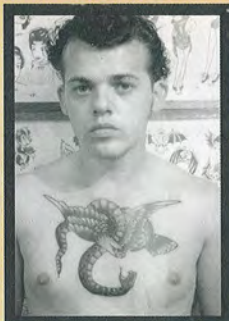
Al Schiefley's back piece. A very nice example of Huck Spaulding's tattoo work, completed in one sitting, 7 hours and 40 minutes.



Al Schiefley on his visit to the Bristol Tattooing Club, 1955—all sporting their new lip tattoos. "If horses, why not people?" Al said. Pictured left to right, front row: Les Skuse, Al Schiefley, Jeff Newton. Back row: Danny Skuse, Garland, Bill Skuse, and A. Bassett.

1963 and was hired by the Ford Motor Company in November of the same year.

In 1967, Al started teaching Dale to tattoo. "He wanted to teach me earlier," Dale said, "but I guess I just wasn't ready because he always said 'Well, when you start to settle down that's when we'll get serious.' I had other things on my mind, I guess." The same year Al suffered a stroke from which he would never fully recover. Al and Dale worked the shop together until 1971. "The tattooing with my father and myself was always a hobby more than a livelihood," Dale said, "because through the winter time there would be a lot of times that I would go maybe a month, a month and a half back in the early 70s that you wouldn't do no work whatsoever. So it was just something that you couldn't really rely upon, so my dad had a full-time job, and I had a full-time job, and I've always stated that the tattooing with me was always a hobby. It was never a job. I never considered it a job because I always figured a job is something that you want to go and get done and go and do something that you want to do. So that's why I always considered it a well-paying hobby." The same year they changed the name of the studio to Father & Son Tattooing. Due to Al's



Al Schiefley customers, 1950s.

deteriorating health he retired from tattooing in the middle of 1971. Dale continued to work the shop, modeling himself after his father by working a full-time job and using the money from tattooing to supplement his mom and dad's income. On May 25, 1973, Al passed away from a massive heart attack. In June, 1973 Dale moved the studio to 1508 Taylor St.

Talking to Dale, it seems like he kept to himself for the most part. He did, however, contact Marty Holcomb at least six times to make appointments to go down and get work from Marty in Columbus, Ohio. Dale speaks very highly of Marty Holcomb. In 1976, Dale attended the first National Convention in Houston. He said he didn't care much for the neighborhood around the hotel, but that he did enjoy himself. He has fond memories of talking with Lyle Tuttle and said, "He was always a hell of a nice guy." I asked Dale if he felt the shift in the late 70s and early 80s to fineline single-needle work. "My customers stayed pretty much the same," he said. "If someone wanted fineline I'd do it, but the majority of the people who I was still tattooing wanted the traditional stuff, you know. I didn't get into a lot of like the arm bands or the sleeves or stuff like that—it was just basically the single tattoo, you know."

Dale's business picked up in the 80s, and he continued to supplement his mother's income through his tattooing until her death in 1987. His best years money-wise were "right before I quit," he said, in the early to mid 90s.

*Paid Nov 9-57
Al. Received the frames
also your letter.
I have shipped the
frames and tubes
12 tubes - 600
10 frames - 300
Washers set. - 20
Postage 48
968
Will these iron
frames are quite some
work so do not spread
it around as I will not
care to bill them at that
price Regards Wm. Jones*

Bill Jones postcard sent to Al Schiefley, 1957. Jones made the famous Jonesy tattoo machines.

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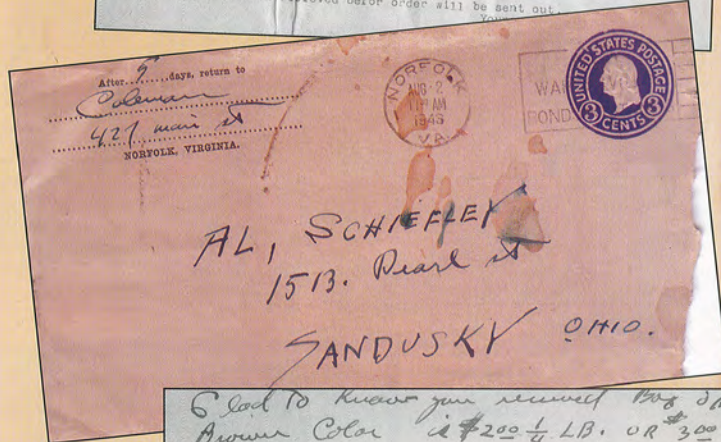
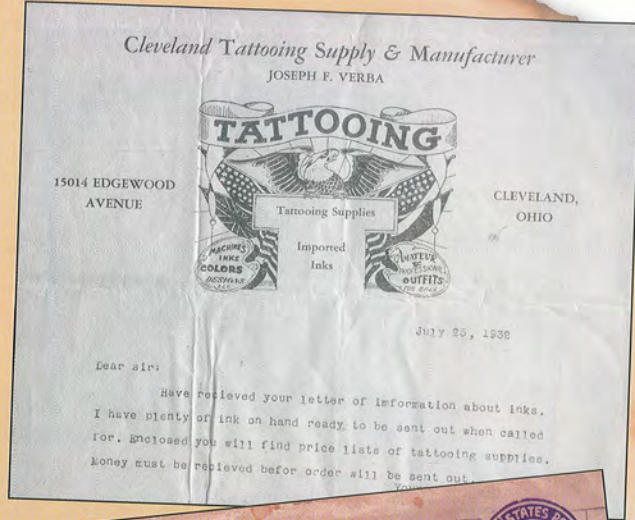
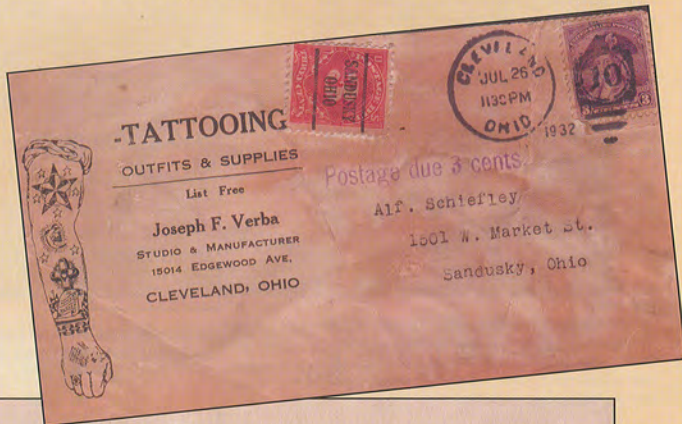
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"The year previous to the year that I decided I was going to retire, I had a hell of a good year," he said. "It was hard, in one sense, to give it up, you know, but then again I just got burned out." Dale worked the Taylor Street location until he retired from tattooing in 2000.

By the time this magazine hits the stands, Dale will have retired from 40-plus years at the Ford Motor Company and ended a 23-year career in tattooing. Dale and Carole are both in good health and their three children are grown. Dale and Carole are members of a car club and enjoy traveling to car shows with their '51 Mercury and '59 El Camino. Now they can hit the car shows without sweatn' about making it to work on Monday. "This is our time," Dale said.

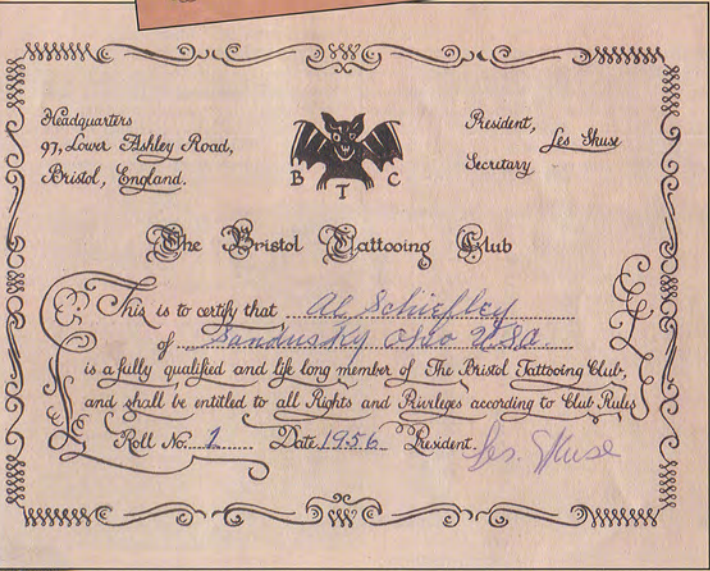
Toward the end of one of my interviews with Dale, I asked if tattooing had been good to him. "Yeah," he said with a warm chuckle, "oh yeah."

Cleveland tattoo supply envelope, 1932.

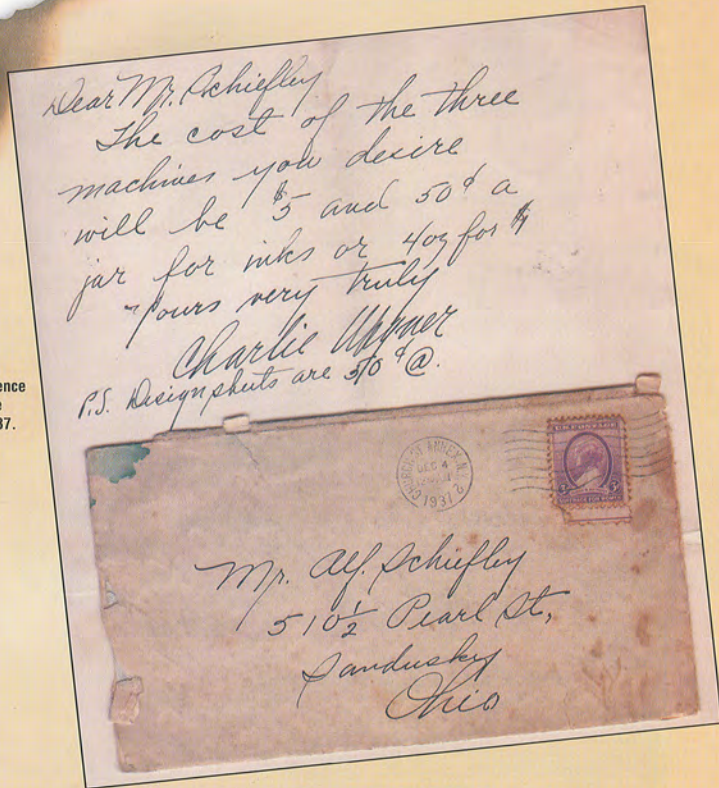


Correspondence from Cap Coleman, 1943.

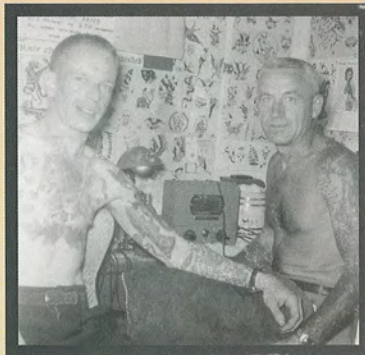
Good to know you received 100g ink. Prover Color is \$2.00 1/4 LB. OR \$3.00 1/2 LB. As I advised you - use storage batteries to power the machines. Machines run better and you can do better work. Transformer no good, you will put the machines on the burn with transformer - machines are adjusted for batteries - With transformer you are using A.C. current. The machines require D.C. current, you get it from batteries. I use batteries myself. All good tattoo work is done with batteries not transformer. - Coleman



Correspondence
from Charlie
Wagner, 1937.



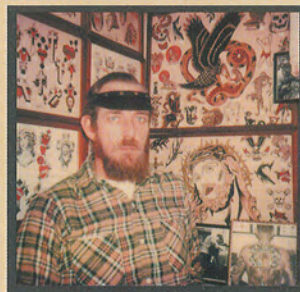
Mac McCullen
and Paul Rogers,
Sandusky Tattoo
Club Convention,
1956.



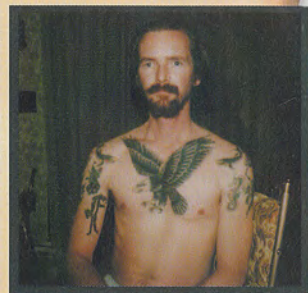
Dale Schiefley
with a bandaged
customer in the
shop, 1971. On
the bench to the
right you'll see
a converted
battery-charger
power pack.



Dale Schiefley at
the 1508 Taylor
St. shop, 1980s.



Dale Schiefley
eagle on Doug
Surhart, 1970s.
"I could usually
do a large chest
eagle in about 3
1/2 hours,"
Dale said.



Dale and Carole Schiefley today with their '51 Merc.