

These Inmates Have License To Tool Around With Vintage Cars

INDIAN SPRINGS, Nev.—Some people may question whether prison can truly be a place for rehabilitation. Michael Levi Fuller doesn't.

Inmate #46565 here at the Southern Desert Correctional Center, Mr. Fuller has watched some hard cases come into his institution for years, then leave practically reborn.

The cases in question are cars—very cool vintage cars. They come in rough and battered, and inmates restore them to their original glory. It may be the penal system's most unusual workshop.

Built With Conviction

See some before and after shots of cars the inmates have worked on.

[View Slideshow](#)

Silver State Industries

AFTER: A 1954 Chevy

"We've got a '56 Jaguar, a '48 Rolls Royce and a Studebaker pickup," says Mr. Fuller in a phone interview. The 51-year-old Mr. Fuller joins 32 fellow medium-security inmates at the prison's auto shop every weekday.

It's quite an operation and perhaps the most creative use of captive labor in a multibillion dollar business-behind-bars archipelago that stretches from New England to Hawaii.

The inmates restore vehicles for a unit of Silver State Industries, a wholly owned subsidiary of another "holding" institution, Nevada's Department of Corrections.

"We Have the Time to Do It Right," is one of the mantras on the unit's corporate website; "Built with Conviction" is another.

Although 40 of 50 states still produce license plates behind bars, prison businesses have diversified. Inmates at Arizona Correctional Industries at the Lewis prison complex in Buckeye fix diesel tractors. Nearly a thousand Tennessee and South Carolina convicts use draw knives and hand scrapers to "antique" floors for a company that markets interiors with a vintage look.

The Pendleton, Ore., penitentiary sells a line of Prison Blue work apparel. California has a product in development: its own denim collection, Folsom Prison Blues.

In the U.S., prison industries—correctional facilities with for-profit ventures that sell goods and services to the public—will have sales of over \$2.2 billion this year, according to the National Correctional Industries Association, a Baltimore-based trade group. Silver State's auto-restoration shop here in Indian Springs brought in \$130,000 of the facility's \$6 million in fiscal 2010 revenue.

Besides auto-restoration, Silver State Industries also has a shop that packages old playing cards into souvenirs for Nevada casinos, and others that print books and make clothing.

But the auto shop "is not like any old prison job," says Mr. Fuller, five years into a 12-year bit, who blames a drug problem for a crime career that has him in his third stretch behind bars.

As "inside" jobs go, this has qualities that are hard to find in prison—an intellectual challenge, prestige and a real sense of accomplishment in a job well done.

The auto shop's present inventory includes 32 cars in some stage of restoration. Among them: two 1960s-era Corvettes, two 1960s Mustangs, a 1959 Thunderbird, a 1965 Malibu, a 1935 Chevy pickup and two 1969 GTOs.

Michael Levi Fuller

.All kinds of customers bring their cars in. Barry Becker, a Las Vegas realtor, has had nearly a dozen cars restored by prisoners.

"I just keep buying stuff I don't need," he says. Among his prison-rescued treasures are a 1937 Dodge sedan convertible, a 1937 Dodge "Woody" wagon, a 1956 Nash Metropolitan and a 1941 Plymouth pickup truck

A Las Vegas couple recently agreed to pay the prison \$19,000 for a re-do of a 1973 Datsun 240Z, with a V8 engine installed. "Mom's going to go to the store really fast," says the shop's director, Carl Korsgaard.

Inmates, including a few murderers and lifers, have been trained to do everything from sanding steel bodies down to sewing upholstery. One upholsterer was born in Cuba, where Mr. Korsgaard believes he absorbed his countrymen's talent for keeping vintage U.S. vehicles on the road.

As with any jailhouse job, there are regulations. Silver State's chief executive, Brian Connett, a corrections-department official, insists each auto restorer have a high-school diploma or equivalent and be six months free of any disciplinary infraction. For inmates who have to pay them, 5% of their wages—which top out at \$5.15 an hour, according to Mr. Fuller—are garnisheed for deposit into Nevada's victims-compensation fund. It's the kind of give-back strict law-and-order voters insist on.

"Crime victims have an interest in good prison work programs," says Susan Howley, public policy director for the National Center for Victims of Crime. Aside from providing marketable skills, "they give offenders an opportunity to earn money to pay victim restitution," she says.

The prison declined to allow a reporter to visit, citing disruption of operations.

Mr. Fuller, who started in general repairs, works now in customer service. Mainly his job consists of hunting vintage parts, calling dealers who trade in engine components or pieces of car bodies, then negotiating a price.

Contact with the outside world is a penitentiary perk—as is befriending affluent civilians who someday may pen a favorable letter to a parole board.

"Just being involved in a program like this in prison, well it's amazing," says Mr. Fuller.

Bill Koning and his son, Ryan, sank almost \$30,000 into a 1948 Ford F-1 pickup they delivered to Silver State Industries in 2005. They discovered the truck on eBay, rotting in a Nebraska barnyard. The former Massachusetts electrical contractor, now retired in Nevada, trucked the heap to the prison, where the pickup began what turned into a four-year stretch behind bars.

"You realize right away you're not the priority," Mr. Koning says. "It's a prison. Those prisoners may get locked down and not see your car for weeks."

The Konings' F-1 gleams today in a southwest Las Vegas garage. From running boards trimmed in red oak to windshield visors to dashboard instruments, everything looks as if the truck just rolled off a Detroit assembly line. "We just love it," Mr. Koning says.

One problem: Some customers have been springing their cars early. Mr. Korsgaard says he's had three cars hauled away recently midrestoration by customers who couldn't raise the cash to finish, like the owner of a 1955 Bel Air who suspended work after sinking \$21,000 into the project.

While other parts of the local economy may be suffering, there's virtually no chance Silver State Industries will run out of steam, or job applicants. "I have hundreds" who want in, says Mr. Connett.

SmartMoney Glossary: Copyright 2012 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com