

ANATOMY OF AN AUTHENTIC 60'S MOTORCYCLE GANG JACKET

by: Kenn Hartmann

I was Ebay's high bidder on an "authentic 60's motorcycle gang jacket." It's a cut-off Levi with an "APOSTLES" MC patch hand sewn on the back. Adorning the front breast is a metal Iron Cross with the number "13" inset into the center. Below the front pocket is a bright red Zig-Zag Man patch. Boldly hand lettered on the inside back of the jacket is "property of Hell's Angels, Frisco, the Buzzard" along with a crude death's head logo.

There are leather laces up each side of the jacket and across the shoulders. Oddly, the Levi brand label was cut from the back and re-sewn on the front, an indication of the owner's exuberance, back when Levi's still had cache. Although the seller touted that the jacket was kept in a smoke free environment since the 60's, there was a Marlboro cigarette butt filter and loose tobacco in the right pocket.

So what the hell does all this mean? Who created it and why? Who would willingly part with their colors? And how did it end up on an internet auction?

I started my search with the seller. For various reasons, the seller asked not to be identified, however answered all my questions forthright. The jacket belonged to a 19 year old street kid who ended up in San Bernardino, CA with the fantasy and hope of becoming a Hells Angel. Time and fading memory have erased his name except for the self-inscribed alias "the Buzzard."

The seller, who worked at a rehab for troubled youth, was given the jacket because Buzzard "was seeking to change the direction of his life. He would have been put in contact with his family and encouraged to return to a life that didn't focus on the hippie drug culture."

The jacket then became a prop in presentations given to various groups to raise awareness about drug abuse and run-aways. The local police department occasionally used the jacket as a teaching aid to identify biker gang symbols. By today's standard, the insignias seem rather quaint.

The seller was careful to not refer to the jacket as belonging to the Hells Angels, because obviously it was just wishful thinking on Buzzard's part. However, my efforts to verify the "Apostles" MC in the late 60's Southern California have not been fruitful. But does it really matter? I don't think Buzzard was a biker, but a wannabee.

Which isn't too bad because so was I in the 60's. Upon closer inspection, the jacket reveals a lot about the general rock and roll culture of burnouts, slackers and pot-head malingerers. It is a genuine piece of folk art, authentic to the period, even a little ahead of its time and amazingly it has survived.

My own ventures from that time period have long since deteriorated. One of the few things inherited from my old man (other than a bad temper and a receding hairline) was a black horsehide biker leather from the 40's that came apart at the seams during a 1973 rainstorm in Iowa that actually washed away the black and left the leather a putrid white. My own jean jacket colors lasted about 6 years of daily wear and eventually had as much substance as a worn out doily. So to discover a jacket in pristine condition from the 60's makes a fascinating study of how personalized colors come into existence.

Let's begin with the Hells Angels connection. Buzzard most likely was inspired by the cover of Hunter Thompson's book, crudely copying the cover photo using a permanent marker. Wisely, he chose the inside of his jacket to write "property of Hells Angels" so as not to arouse the ire of a real Angel.

Now to the external adornments. The weathered Iron Cross with inlaid "13" is attached to the jacket with an improvised clasp made out of electrical wire. There is sand imbedded in the medallion's crevasses. Could Buzzard have found this on a beach?

According to another bidder, Father Tim Pelc, a Roman Catholic priest and avid motorcyclist from Detroit, MI, said the Iron Cross "despite its more recent German and Nazi references is really derivative of the Maltese Cross of the Knights of St. John."

He speculated that "if there were motorcycles in the 11th century, the Knights of Malta would have been riding them. This band of brothers, like the MC clubs of today were composed of strong and independent individuals who were always up for a fight in the deference of a good cause."

Father Tim explained the 8 points of the Maltese Cross represent Truth, Faith, Repentance of Sins, Humility, Justice, Mercy, Sincerity and Persecution. He wasn't quite so sure about the number 13 being embedded into the cross. "Thirteen is considered lucky and unlucky by some Christians since that was the number seated at the Last Supper of Christ, hence a tie to the club name: APOSTLES."

Personally, I think 13 in biker parlance refers to the 13th letter of the alphabet "M" for marijuana which ties in with the Zig-Zag Man patch – for the rolling papers "Braunstein Freres France."

Now the leather lace up the sides is all show. It has a nice patina associated with age. Buzzard used granny knots to tie the ends. A square knot is a better choice especially when subjected to highway winds. Buzzard's jacket has not been slit up the sides. Traditionally, that's what the lacing is for: to accommodate an ever expanding beer belly or allow the vest to fit over your leather jacket.

The final accessory is the most authentic. It is the "APOSTLES" club name emblazoned across the back. The embroidered letters are hand sewn on a white oil-stained, weather-worn muslin arched background (the top rocker of traditional colors). It looks to have been removed from another source. All but two letters are professionally embroidered. The "P" and final "S" have been cut out of black felt to approximate the look of the other letters and both are embellished with a red pen to appear to be embroidered.

The auction attracted bids from all over the world including Canada and Australia. Marciniak from Germany bid on it as a vintage collector's piece "not to wear it, I know the trouble it can give." But as a connection to the old days "when there were lots of clubs in the Ruhrgebiet region, but young people today are more into the computer."

Father Tim concurs. "Most riders today wear designer clothes from those giant bike boutiques dealers that have replaced the original mom and pop shops."

So now I'm the temporary custodian of a genuine piece of folk art – an American original. Fascinating in its simple details. Rich in symbolism spanning centuries. Dreams were made and dreams lost. The owner disappeared over 30 years ago, whether he gave up his party-hearty ways we may never know. I do know that when I see somebody has modified their own motorcycle in some way, I feel that tinge of respect. The same is true of seeing someone create their own colors.

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