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Way, Way Old School

By Kenn Hartmann

So I slid on my ass through the slick intersection watching life pass before my eyes, past the lamp pole, fire hydrant and idling taxi. One hand waved ala wild buckaroo, the other clung to my trumpet's handle bar, the blanket of snow provided a soft landing for me but not my bike. Last winter sucked. To pass the time I decided to write a dissertation on the subtle nuance of mumbly-peg, an old-time children's game played with a sharp knife. As I settled down to the writing table, the phone rang. Our fearless editor Preacher suggested I instead write a story on experienced bikers versus newbies. I sheathed my Buck and sunk into a funk. Freaking editors, always filling your head with ideas.

I asked Preacher for details. He said 'like how bikers today stack up against bikers in the 50's, the old days.' However, anything in my lifetime is not to be considered old. To me old is anything before my time. My father's time is old. In the forties, right after a world war, my future dad fresh from a tour a duty that included Okinawa, returned to Chicago and glimpsed a buddy's sister astride a '37 Harley trike blasting down Lawrence Avenue through the farmlands west of Harlem. So my future dad commandeered a bike to hang out with this biker chick. My future mom. But let's go way back to the beginning.

According to the Motorcycle Hall of Fame Museum, the first two-wheeled conveyance that could qualify as a motorcycle came into existence sometime after the Civil War in the late 1860's. American inventor Sylvester Roper attached a twin-cylinder steam engine to a hickory-framed velocipede, those precarious contraptions pedaled with the big wheel up front. Roper's design featured the still essential twist throttle but also a firebox for coal, a boiler and a chimneystack behind the seat. He toured the east coast demonstrating his new-fangled monster at fairs and circuses. He eventually died astride his creation while doing laps at an indoor velodrome, a speed track for bicycles.

Roper's bike is the ultimate one-off chopper. Not only one of a kind, but one of any kind. There were no other engine-powered bikes in the world. However, right from the start, the original biker, Sylvester Roper fit the stereotype that had yet to materialize. On trips to town on the 'bone-crusher' chassis, neighbors complained about loud noise and acrid odors. He annoyed townsfolk and got hassled by cops, even arrested but released because he had broken no laws. Imagine the first and only biker on planet earth, spread-eagle against a hitching post with some constable's tale pinned to his ass.

The first glory years of the chopper may have been in the decade between 1885 when Germany's Gottlieb Daimler produced the first gas-powered engine attached to a bicycle and until mass production 'motorrads' came into existence around the turn of the century. For a brief span, ingenious amateur mechanics with an appetite for the new technology experimented with an array of fuels such 'kerosene, compressed air, naphtha, ether, acetylene, hot air and even carbonic acid' according to Mick Walker's History of Motorcycles. Mechanical inventors thrived. True, a muddy rut represented a road, but innovations sprang from backyard workshops and spawned an industry. The consumer age blossomed after 1901 with Indian and Matchless, followed by Triumph, Norton, Ariel, Harley-Davidson and countless others.

In 1910, Victor Appleton published 'Tom Swift and His Motor-Cycle; Fun and Adventures of the Road.' Teenage inventor Tom Swift trades his bicycle to a guy who can't handle the new technology. The book paints a picture of lousy, potentially dangerous roads, where a large stone can send the unwary biker careening into bushes, trees or pedestrians. Production bikes were flawed and needed endless tinkering and tuning. Appleton accurately described the distinct melody of these bikes as 'explosions.' Tom closely monitors weather conditions and a storm sends him seeking shelter. But when he's able to crank out thirty miles in one day, the thrill of being in the wind is as poignant then as today. The low point of the book is the overt racism spelled out in graphic stereotypes regarding the character nicknamed 'Eradicate.'

In 1910, Appleton entertained a certain disdain for a fellow with money but no mechanical aptitude or riding skills who could plop down a few bucks for a bike and quickly become a potential roadway menace. A century later, echoes of this sentiment still reverberate throughout biker nation. Sadly, practitioners of this philosophy base this delineation upon the date they purchased their first bike. If they bought their bike a year ago, things have changed in the last six months. That criterion makes it clear; everyone after Sylvester Roper is a Johnny-come-lately.

The industrial age made all things possible, including the mechanization of World War One. By the twenties, Brough-Superior rolled out of Nottingham, with Lawrence of Arabia a big fan. Moto Guzzi geared up in Italy, enticing race fans everywhere. The need for speed spurred visionary engineer Philip Vincent to build some of the most illustrious bikes ever built. The decade known as the roaring twenties witnessed bikes for the first time doing the 'ton' that magic speed of 100 mph. Most of the old photographs I've seen represent either sanctioned racing or very formal social riding clubs. But Bikerdom doesn't exist solely in the clubs and social strata. In fact, it is in the heart and soul of the lone rider that the whole bike world cult flourishes.

In fact all gatherings at some point celebrate the individual. The best bike, the

fastest race time, the highest hill climb, the rider who rode the farthest. Stories are swapped, parts traded. The mechanization monster reached an apex in World War Two. In the 50's, the Eisenhower administration constructed the national highway system, arbitrarily cutting a devastating swath through urban centers. Rampant affluence shone like the revolving beacon on the Palmolive building in Chicago, in the electric night as a young kid on Lake Shore Drive facing the dark Lake, dreaming all things possible.

Bikes were cheap and the road freshly paved. A lot of young guys were rebuilding bikes just to have something to ride. Japanese imports opened the floodgate and

motorcycles appeared everywhere. Today, if it can be imagined, it can be built, regardless of how impractical, fanciful or absurd. Some bikes truly defy convention – Billy Lane's helicopter rotor wheel appears to be impossibly unattached to the bike. Or Jesse Rook's art deco modern cool designs that look familiar yet new. Vintage bikes, repro vintage, kit vintage, breathe life into bikes from bygone eras. New bikes from manufacturers across the planet are available to anyone with means. Once again, the glory years are upon us and what else can be done except to thoroughly enjoy?

-Kenn Hartmann
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