

After a recent discussion about the new Indian moto(r)cycle and what the relationship might be between Indian & Harley riders, this popped outta my head.

Enjoy -

DD

“Indians and Those Damned Harleys”, a 6 Year-Old’s Tale

My Dad, Clarence M. "CM" Howe had a like-new used Indian in 1948-49, our small family's only transportation in Amarillo, Texas during that time. He finally bowed to wifely & motherly pressure to "go straight" and get a car after a cager T-boned him at a red light, banging-up the Indian and him pretty well.

What I recall of those days are a few personal memories and Indian Tales from CM through the years.

There were only two motorcycles shops in Amarillo then, Indian & Harley...this was a few years before Euro bikes appeared here, more years before the Japster invasion. And there were two groups, clubs or gangs, depending on one's perceptions, definitions & biases.

The two dealerships were small and of "standard" configuration for that time period...a small showroom with 1 or 2 new bikes and a few used ones, a parts department with counter & bins, a service department and behind that, Sacred Ground...the Race Shop. Newbs were grudgingly welcome in the showroom, so long as they didn't sit on the bikes or ask too many stupid questions. NO ONE was ever allowed in the Parts Depts. You could go in the Service Dept. if your bike was being worked on; or if you were are regular, you could attend the Friday & Sat beer nights there.

The Hallowed Race Shop was reserved for mechanics, racers and a few known, trusted regulars, welcomed as long as they didn't touch anything.

Being a semi-regular with my very-regular Dad I was always welcome, sort of a mascot I suppose. I remember gazing in awe at the big, red, shiny Indians and loving the roaring, frightening sounds of the straight pipes on the racers and many of the street "bobbers", although I don't think that term had been coined yet. Somehow my little pee-wee brain just knew this was all...special. I worshipped my Dad & his buds and I felt safe and at-home there. There was nowhere I'd rather have been.

One unforgettable Saturday night started in the showroom at closing time, and then migrated to the Race Shop to "supervise" the preparation of the flat-track race bikes by the mechanics and racers. Even then there was something very special about the small, light, purposeful, loud, angry & frightening race bikes, emotions I still experience in their presence, for which I am grateful.

In those days there was a ~3/8 mile rough dirt flat track outside of town, "Flying Saucer Downs". No banking, just an oval scraped out of the hard Panhandle dirt. It had a few old tires & hay bales scattered outside of the turns and an adjacent pit where bikes were prepared, and on-track races were settled after the race from time to time, if you know what I mean. There were no grandstands, just a hog-wire fence at a less than respectable distance from the track. The smooth hog-wire was a nice concession to

safety from the more common barbed-wire of this region! There was where CM showed me how cool the exit of Turn 4 of a flat track is. Mayhem, mud-balls, noise & terror...perfect!

It was rough, loud, dirty and totally mesmerizing to the little mascot. Especially since some of "my buddies" were always at or near the front, often ahead of "Those Damned Harley's"! I don't recall ever hearing "Harley Davidson" from my guys; it was always "Those Damned Harleys". I guess I thought that was their brand name. And we were always there for a race, not a parade or a party.

But back to that "unforgettable Saturday night"...In those days many of the flat track racers still had brakes as the bikes did double duty as the riders' daily transportation. The true fire-breathing, stripped down, pro-level trackers eschewed the use of brakes as they were "Out there to go, not stop!", and useless brakes only added detrimental weight.

After the race bikes were tuned & fettled the boys decided to go for a ride & a beer down NE 8th St. in Amarillo, aka "Beer Joint Row", now unfortunately named the more "Pleasing" "Amarillo Blvd". Yuk.

Indian racers, stockers & bobbers all in a group, roaring along the strip amongst the Saturday night revelers riding in cars and on "Those Damned Harleys". The goggle-eyed little mascot was perched on a flat tracker tank behind the headlight, holding on to the bars for dear life, cradled by the strong arms of one of Dad's racer buds as we raced through the light traffic. Bright headlights and car reflections, flashing neon lights and stop lights, wind blowing our hair and loud pipes blasting little teeth 'til they rattled...scared absolutely shitless and loving every second of it!

That's where my memory of that night fades, alas. I'd love to know more, but I imagine CM & I headed for home after we got to the bar. He was not one to ride under the influence (I think!) but I know he would not have carried me on a bike after drinking. Another thing I am sure of is that CM would have surely cautioned me against telling that tale to my mother or grandmother!

Post WWII bikers were mostly struggling financially and had no dough to support a club-house. The Indian & Damned Harley riders all hung out at their respective dealers. And their beer joints of choice, where they were tolerated if not totally welcomed.

There was an Indian bar and a Damned Harley bar, and never the twain were mixed. Except on rare occasions when one club or the other were feeling bored and/or particular feisty. Then they would ride to the other club's joint and charge in, looking for trouble! The "other side" would jump up and fists would fly. This would continue until they got tired, or bored, or everyone was whopped, or the cops showed up, whichever happened first. Then the interlopers would leave and all would be forgotten. Until maybe a few weeks later, when payback time came and the tables were reversed at the other side's bar.

(Un)Fortunately I was never included in one of those and I doubt my Dad was, he was a pretty tame individual (usually) but he did have his moments. The clubs rarely mixed it up outside their beer-joints and maybe in the pits at the track once in a while. And Dad said there were never any guns, knives, brass knuckles, chains, clubs, broken beer bottles, bricks or nun chucks involved. Never. I suspect that was typical of most clubs in those days and most of the bad stuff was invented in the movies. Then later adopted by the scumbag outlaw gangs we are familiar with.

Other Indian memories are scattered and vague, save two.

CM put a longer seat on the big Indian so the whole fam damily could ride. I remember riding with my mother Joy on the back, me in the middle, CM up front and bags of groceries everywhere, rollin' down the road!

Once at an Indian club picnic, CM decided Joy should learn to ride a motorcycle. After much discussion & arguing (and probably very little instruction), she caved and mounted up on Dad's big red Chief. She started off down a dirt farm road and all went well until she saw the large, brown bull crossing the road ahead. Naturally she seized up and forgot how to steer, much less brake. We all saw it well and figured she was going to T-bone (sorry!) the big beef. Luck was on her side though as the big bull paid her no mind and completed his casual saunter across the road just as she passed...missing him completely, except for his long tail dragging across the windshield but causing nary a bobble. She finally calmed down, stopped safely and fell over. And for a while was "Belle of the Ball"!

CM & Joy both loved telling that story. I'd love to hear them tell it again...

Dangerous Dave Howe

The little porch monkey is yours truly and that's my little ugly dog Weavy looking through the screen door.

Amarillo, TX. C. 1948-9



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