

This month's interview with Jim Wihlborg conveys some past history from our club, to both those that remember and to newer current members. Enjoy this month's interview.

Tell us about your first "motorcycle experience", and how did it lead to your first Harley.

My first introduction to motorcycles came from listening to my father [Pop] talking about *his* first bikes. The very first was a Harley that he purchased as a 14 year-old during the Depression for \$8.00! Of course, it didn't have an engine, but Pop and a buddy pushed it up the neighborhood hills so they could coast it back down. He and a friend later bought a 30.5 in³ *Indian* for **\$6.00**; it was in someone's basement, but it was easy to get out because it was in boxes. Each part was separated from all the others – Pop said that even ball bearings were in pieces, with the balls rolling around in the bottom of a box. Every part was there; by the time they'd "re-manufactured" it, they must have been pretty good mechanics. It was under-powered, but reliable.

At seventeen, Pop bought a '29 Harley 74 for \$15.00. It didn't have a working kick-starter, so Pop had to push it and pop the clutch to get it to turn over. The tank that held only gasoline leaked, so it was unusable. The other side held the engine oil and the reserve gas tank; it carried enough fuel to get Pop fifty miles without running out. "It was a wonderful motorcycle. I had lots of fun on it," he'd brag whenever that 74 came up in a conversation.

My first bike was a '62 Norton Atlas 750 that I bought in the fall of '65. I was going to a school in Connecticut with *lots* of rules – one of which was that no student could possess a vehicle until some point in the last semester of his senior year – and I was only a junior, so I had to be very discreet. The seller drove me from school to his home in Rhode Island, where I inspected [looked at and fondled] the bike, signed papers/passed money, then drove his car (following *him* on *my* bike) to a vacant grocery store parking lot (vacant because it was after closing hours, and . . . did I say *dark*?) It was during the following panic-stricken half-hour that I learned (*hah!*) to ride a motorcycle – first from watching the seller ride the Atlas and listening to his explanations of what was going on. When it was my turn to mount up, it was my first-ever time sitting on a 'cycle with a running engine; of course, it wasn't running until I pushed down *hard* on the kick-starter. When I'd managed a few [very slow] circuits around the parking lot, we shook hands, and off I went into the wilds. He must have figured I'd be okay, because I didn't: hit his car; dump the bike; or run into the store.

The ride back to school was not fun, but a good learning experience. Lots of 2-lane roads from village to village – each of which had at least one town square [sometimes square, sometimes round] *around which* all drivers had to maneuver (complete with other roads entering the square). Squares were laid out so there was easy access to the courthouse and at least one church bordering it [good planning for a horse-and-buggy environment]. Surviving each town was a surprise - especially since I had to rely on the magneto for my headlight; the battery was dead. At idle, my headlight wasn't far from dead, either, but at higher rpm, it lit up the street.

After I passed through the last village on my way back to school – uh oh! – onto I-95 and toll booths and no easy access to change in the bottom of a trouser pocket. Cars behind with horns honking, and toll booth workers, "Come on! Hurry up! You're holdin' up

traffic," as I'd have to get a glove off, hold it in my mouth, dig for money, give it to the attendant (and maybe get change which had to go back into the pocket), get the glove back on, and at least once, killed the engine while trying to start my getaway. More honks and bad language 'til the bike started again, and I could lose myself in [moving] traffic. When I finally got back onto campus, the bike had been parked in a rented garage (thank goodness the old lady who lived there didn't have a car), a 2-mile walk, and an over-the-wall and sneak through the dorm halls, to the sanctuary of my room. I beat the odds and the campus cops for the next 20 months (until graduation).

I did learn to ride my first Norton, and absolutely loved my freedom on it. My second bike was a Norton, too – a '64 750 Commando – that I bought used in San Francisco in '68. It, too, logged some miles - wonderful hills and twisty turns in the Bay area. She didn't ride with me much, but the bike must have impressed the woman I'd just met; she married me as I was being transferred to San Diego [she knew she'd seen the last of that wonderful bike unless *she* went, too]. Freeway traffic was *not* so great, but hey, this bike had a battery and better headlight. We had to sell it before moving to Alaska in '69.

The shifters on those bikes were on the right side [brake, of course, on the left], and worked the four-speed transmissions. First gear was *up* ↑, and down ↓ for 2nd, 3rd, and 4th. It all made sense, and became second nature.

My third bike was – you guessed it – another Norton. This was a '77 850 Commando (the only big bike I was ever able to buy new), the last year of Norton's production. It was another beautiful bike, but hard to ride for two reasons: (1) The shifter was now on the left side, with first gear *Down* ↓, and up ↑ for the others [and brake on the right side]. It was (and still is, sometimes) hard to remember that my left foot became the one for shifting gears; and (2) It can be hard to get from place to place on Alaska's road system when you need lots of gas stops. With gas stations few and far between [and closed at night], the rider's trips had to meet gas stations' hours or run out of gas – which could mean waiting 10 hours for a tankful of gas. Frustrating! I sold that bike after two seasons with less than 2,500 miles on it.

After living near Oak Harbor for almost five years, the bike bug had bitten me really bad. In May of '93, my '92 FXRS Convertible first made our acquaintance. A dream-come-true! It has received minor performance modifications as time has passed, and a major front-end re-build after a bad collision in '95 [I wasn't seen by the 77-year old automobile driver]. Trips that summer prior to the smash-up were super for me: Regional HOG rally in Reno; State HOG rally in Wenatchee, and *Sturgis!* Wonderful memories! Wonderful reasons to get bike [and self] mended. Seven months later, we were both back on the road☺

I've ridden regularly since. My bike adds a great deal to the quality of my life.

When did you join NCHOG and tell us what the club was like at that time?

I joined during the summer of '93. The first couple of meetings I attended were in the Skagit Harley-Davidson retail store (after closing hours). We all sat on the floor, between display racks of parts and pieces for sale. There weren't many of us then - maybe 6 or 8 would attend the meetings. Shortly after that, we began meeting in the restaurant (19th Hole) in the same small complex that held Skagit H-D. The meetings were fun, as were the few parties and annual pool shoots (also held at the 19th Hole). About the time that Skagit H-D moved from Anacortes to Burlington, membership grew as fast as grass grows in the

springtime. We ended up with standing room only at the 19th Hole, and then standing room only at the Mount Vernon Royal Fork. It sure was fun seeing all the members' bikes at Royal Fork; lined up, backed into the curb, from near the front door, around the back, and some stragglers even parked on the third side of the building! Good people, good rides, and good times.

As an outstanding member in NCHOG for so many years, how has the club changed, and does it still meet your needs?

I'm not sure some many people would say 'outstanding', as a description of me, but the biggest change has been caused by the size of our membership. Now, we have members whose names I don't know, or what they ride, or anything about their riding skills and common sense. But, because we have good, reliable officers (road captains, especially), group rides have generally abided by the standards of safe riding practices. We know to watch out for each other, and not to 'push' a rider beyond his/her comfort level.

In the past, I have served as NCHOG's secretary and editor, but please don't ask me to fill either position again. So many activities within our chapter would overwhelm my ability to keep things straight that Fred and the director would fire me after making my first report. And editor? Susie Heller succeeded me; I was embarrassed each time I read her newsletter because mine were so amateurish compared with hers. Kim and Mike and Kathy have continued to improve NCHOG's written history to the point that it would be hard to make it even more professional than it is! I believe that it is the newsletter that ties all of us NC HOG members together; certainly many members are absent from meetings, but we *all* get the word because of the newsletter. So . . . Thanks, editors. You do us proud.

As a past board member of the state Motorcycle Safety Education Board, what contributions that you made to that agency do you feel are the most important?

I was interested in working with the board to ensure that those of us with disabilities would have our say. I certainly didn't have the technical expertise or historical grasp that other members had. Listening to a presentation of a subject or (an objection from a riding school vendor), I could easily become confused with jargon or referral to 'this statute' or 'that regulation' and interrupt with a question. I have been told that my questions were valuable to many others present at the meetings, because *they* didn't know the answers, either, but never asked for clarifications. My worth to the board may have been only to slow the meetings down, but it may have also reminded those talking that they were speaking for a diverse group, with varying levels of sophistication and general knowledge, but who all ride motorcycles.

You and wife Barbara have ridden both two-up and as solo riders, explain how they were different yet both rewarding?

Barbara's only ridden as a passenger when her bike has been disabled. That's fine by me, since I was involved in that collision. I don't want the pressure of 'what if' were to happen if I crashed and was carrying a passenger. She did ride with me (only once) in Alaska, for the 210 mile trip to Fairbanks (and then back home). Envision traveling through moose (and occasional bison) country, with 6-8,000 foot peaks all around. Is your passenger looking for animals or how ravines look differently now than a month ago? Well, not mine! She spent the entire time between potty or gas breaks reading a paperback book. [And fellas, you

know she can't be reading a book and holdin' on to you at the same time.] Like I say, it was only the one trip.

We *did* enjoy rides when we were riding our own bikes, though.

Of all the many trips you've made, which stands out as the most amazing and why?

My second ride to Sturgis (2001) really was a trip. U.S. 2 to (and back from) Spokane, and regular rides on the Needles Hwy and other roads in the Black Hills were spectacular. The toughest part was three days in a row of 109 degree temperature - couldn't even get cool riding with short sleeved shirts and no leathers!

What was your worst motorcycle experience?

My collision in September, '95. The only things I know about it are from written reports, though. The experience traumatized my wife, who *was* aware of my injuries and what they meant. Recovery has changed my life, but it's still good and I still love riding!

What would you suggest to members to keep their motorcycle skills current and safe?

- 1) Read *Motorcycle consumer News*. Regular columns include medical issues of riders, a safety article with 'what if' scenarios, reports of mechanical problems for specific motorcycles, and readers' accounts of problems and resolutions;
- 2) Take a professionally presented rider refresher class; and
- 3) Talk with someone if you have questions about riding problems or ways to improve your riding abilities. It's the smart thing to do.

Any future rides planned for this coming summer?

Well, for every summer, it's Sturgis (but the last time I was there was in '05). Maybe this year!

What future goals do you and Barbara have?

Barbara: Improve her gardening expertise. Jim: Ride more and reduce the size of his honey-do list.

Well it's riding season so get out and ride and make some memories that you can remember

Until next month, the History Guy, paul