



THE VIEW PAST THE HANDLEBARS

The Day They Took My Motorcycles

(with respects to Gene Hill)

My Dear Nephew and Nieces,

Today is the day they come to take my motorcycles.

I thought I'd write something about the way I feel about it, because, being your uncle, I felt it important to let you know how some of us felt about our machines, and to give you all a chance to know how much so many of us cared about our motorcycles and how deeply they represented a precious part of our lives.

Of course, riding a motorcycle has long since disappeared. It wasn't too long after the so-called "safety experts" had seen to the end of riding as we wished, without being encumbered by pounds of safety gear, that motorcycles and the companies that made them started to vanish. The high-performance street machines were the first to go, as the safety experts convinced the general public that no sane person could want to ride one of those. Next came the dirt bikes, with their supposed lead paint threat and "damage" to public land. Soon all you were lucky to see were a few anemic street bikes so hampered with environmental controls that it was impossible to get them above 45 mph.

But it seemed that, once the safety experts had succeeded in making it illegal to ride the way you wanted to, riders themselves began to vanish. Would you believe that there were once more than a hundred motorcycle rights organizations across the country? Not all of them were big, but they all made a difference. And that doesn't even begin to count the hundreds of other motorcycle clubs. Some of the groups continued for a while, and a few of us stayed on to ride in a parade now and then, just as a novelty, but it just wasn't the same. You had to apply for a day permit to even bring your motorcycle out on the road, and you can't even imagine how difficult it now is to find 92-octane fuel for the old machines. (Ask your parents to explain what gasoline was, and how it vanished, too.) Crowds would come around and wave signs and carry on against us, saying how, if we couldn't see the common sense in the new laws, then we were better off dead anyway, used as organ donors for supposedly "more enlightened" citizens.

Looking back on it, I can see how it all happened – I think. It was hard for politicians to stand up against the federal government, especially when the states they represented were being blackmailed by having their highway monies cut off if they didn't comply with the new safety standards. Then came noise ordinances and emissions controls, along with the introduction of fuels that our bikes simply couldn't burn. And there just weren't enough concerned motorcyclists to fight against the trend. I know you'll read about it in school, but I wanted you to hear the other side of it at least one time. You might get some idea when you see the pictures of me and your aunt and our friends with our motorcycles, all having fun, all smiling.

We had some great times back then, especially at the rallies. Thousands of motorcyclists used to ride from all over the country to get together at places like Sturgis or Daytona. Heck, even here in Minnesota we used to have a really big rally, with more motorcycles than you can probably imagine. We all used to bring tents and camp for the weekend, listening to good music and sharing good stories from the road with our riding buddies. And we all had favorite machines back then. There were the Harley-Davidsons, of course, bikes like the Electra Glide, the Road

King and the Sportster. Indian was still around in a small way. (You ought to look up an Indian Chief to see what a beautiful bike it was.) Of course, lots of imports like Yamaha and Honda, as well as even a few from Europe and Britain such as BMW, Ducati and Triumph. Somewhere in my stuff is a book with all sorts of pictures of the old motorcycles – you ought to save it, as I suspect it will be a collector’s item one of these days.

I don’t suppose you can imagine an early spring day with the dawn storming out of the east, a bunch of us dressed in six layers of sweatshirts and riding leathers, all getting together for that first spring run. We’d all be freezing – it was often barely above freezing when we’d all meet – but it was a thing not to skip. For no matter how chilly the morning was, you knew that by the time the afternoon hit, you’d be warm and grinning from ear to ear as you took that first yearly ride with your friends around the early-greening Minnesota countryside.

What did I ride? Oh, I owned a bunch of bikes over the years. Mostly I had cruisers, beautiful machines that were just made for the open road. My old Softail I named “Serenity” – some of us loved our bikes so much that we actually named them – and my Sportster was named “Phooka.” (She’s the one in the pictures with the flames painted on the fuel tank.) But no matter what you owned, everyone loved their bikes. People used to spend hours washing and polishing their machines, just so they would gleam in the sunlight as we rode down the highways.

I guess there’s no great sense of going into all of that now since it doesn’t mean much – just an old man mandering about something that he once loved very much, and that a part of his life went along with them on the day they took them away. I guess, to be honest, that all the songs and stories I like to remember best have come from the times spent with my friends in someone’s garage or out on the road or at a rally. But even to me all that is beginning to seem so very long ago.

The police are the ones that are coming to get the motorcycles. I know they don’t enjoy the job much either, but since there are so many funny laws now I guess they just have to go ahead and do what they have to do. But I have to let you in on a secret unlawful thing I did. I took my Sportster back to the barn and built a false wall on the north side to hide her away. I just couldn’t stand the thought of having her melted down or cut up for scrap. It seems that you can get away with a lot of pretty bad crimes, but if they catch one honest person with a motorcycle hidden away, out of sentiment, you get labeled a societal deviant and trucked off to some hospital for treatment and counseling.

But they’re all gone now. The young fellow that came for them was a county patrolman, someone I used to see as a kid watching our parades and waving at us while we rode by. I think he noticed that Phooka wasn’t in the garage as he rolled my bikes into the collection trailer, but he didn’t say a word. He’s a nice young man, and as I say, just doing his duty. I suspect he saw the fresh sawdust on my jeans from the wall I built, and I suspect I saw a small tear or two when he loaded up Serenity. I’m not *sure* I did, but I hope so.

With all my wishes that things may someday change,
Your loving uncle,

Mike
(who was once known as, “the Ghost rider”)