

“One in the Air and Two on the Ground - - - Wheels, that is!”

By Roger Gooding

Introduction

“Well Gooding, I’d say that you are one of those ‘semi-intelligent’ people who on the odd occasion demonstrates flashes of sheer brilliance in getting out of situations that no fully intelligent person would ever have got into in the first place! I think I could still use you though - - - - if I keep an eye on you!” These were the words spoken to me by a man named Terry Rowland back around thirty years ago at the end of an interview for an engineering position under him which I had applied for. They have come back to haunt me many times in my life since then and I have finally realized that they were highly prophetic.

Terry and I had known each other since I joined Ford Motor Co. in the UK as a body engineering apprentice back in 1959, where I had worked under him in their Final Paint, Trim and Assembly plant in Dagenham, Essex during a statutory period of apprenticeship training. Our paths merged once more during the nineteen seventies at the British Leyland ‘Pressed Steel Fisher’ car plant in Oxford. Terry had become an executive engineering icon at Ford, Chrysler and then British Leyland in those days. He had just successfully completed a ‘Green Field’ car build plant in Iran, for Chrysler’s International Overseas operations. (Ironically, that very same plant was later commandeered by the Ayatollah Khomeini regime and lost by Chrysler during the Iranian political uprising after Khomeini had overthrown the Shah of Persia and forced him into exile.) Another engineering icon named Frank Tilston and Terry Rowland had been enlisted by the British Leyland board of directors during the early nineteen seventies to help turn around production engineering facilities of the already ailing car giant and were looking to staff their newly established operations. In retrospect, it was a pleasure and a privilege to be selected by him and to this day, I have nothing but the most warmth and admiration for Terry and his down-to-earth knowledge and wisdom. He was a great friend and mentor and someone should write a book about him one day.

Now, dear reader, I don’t know that anything “brilliant” exists within the text of anything that is written here-on-in but, many of the situations reveal and support the, “No fully intelligent person would ever have got into in the first place” part of this opening statement. Although the title I’ve given to this collection of ‘tales’, was originally based on an article about the motorcycle three wheel and sidecar world, it emerges that this phrase pretty aptly describes the way my entire life has run and continues to unfold right up to this day. Maintaining a precarious ‘on-the –edge’ balance that threatens to shift at any given moment and throw everything off center and out of control. It seems that I have a really good knack for never fully having a firm grasp on situations that arise on many different fronts, but in reality, who amongst us really does?

It all started about four years back when I read what I thought was an excellently written article by a fellow expatriate Englishman and classic motorcycle enthusiast named Mike Jones. With Mike’s permission, this would be a good point in time to share with the reader Mike’s fine article and different kind of perspective. I must thank Mike for showing me two things. The first is for identifying the fact that a difference in perspective exists between the US and the UK roles that, what now are called ‘classic motorcycles’ played. The second is for permitting me to use your work to help set the theme of this collection of autobiographical articles of my own. By throwing down the gauntlet in your article Mike, you inspired me to write my first article on this subject. From that time on, many more have emerged so far and material is still being gathered to commence writing additional ones in the very near future. .

MTR Newsletter 2005 (Metro Triumph Riders Club - Detroit)

Life on Two Wheels

-- By Mike Jones

Ron Bruett, our president, has repeatedly reminded us at monthly club meetings that contributions to the Newsletter are always required ...on any subject related to the club and to motor cycles in general. Here is my contribution, which hopefully may even motivate other members to jot down similar thoughts.

I am always intrigued to hear how people originally got themselves into motor cycling and how they have maintained their interest in what outsiders often regard as a crazy and dangerous past-time. Whenever I meet a motor cyclist, I usually want to know how it all started, rather than ask about the machine he or she owns. This sometimes offends the individual, because part of the culture of motor cycling is showing off the machine rather than the rider.

I suspect I am something of an odd ball motor cyclist, and not really representative of the dedicated folks in the club. Possibly this is because my first motorized road machine was not a motor cycle, but a very old and unreliable car built in 1938. Possibly also because my job is in Engineering, so working on machinery is not really a novelty for me, and is certainly not fun. The fun for me is in the riding and seeing the scenery. Working on machinery for me is something to be done when a part fails, and doing so for cosmetic reasons is out of the question. My attitude to cosmetics may be due to my English origins where motor cycling is usually for the impoverished who need to have transport to and from work in all weathers – the riders rarely own cars as well, which seems to be the rule in the USA..

I suppose I first got interested in two wheels when I got into pedal cycling at the age of about 10 years old. Suddenly I had the freedom to go almost anywhere at a considerably faster speed than walking, opening up many possibilities. Freedom was the operative word, and of course at virtually no cost, which is not unimportant to a child. I was also fascinated in the business of balance on two wheels, and with my friends tried some of the tricks seen in circus acts, usually ending in many bruises. We also found that off road riding could be great fun, especially when airborne for a few precious seconds, again often ending in bruises. But we got better at it with practice, and that was half the fun. The repairs to the bike were merely a necessity.

My fascination with balance led me to become friends with some circus performers, who came to the local park with the Big Top once a year, and they taught me a few more bicycle tricks and to walk a tightrope. Just when I was about to learn to ride a unicycle, I had to leave the area, and did not sit on one again until a few years ago when I learnt to ride at a Unicycle Club in Redford Township. Most folks learn inside 3 months, and I just made it in time. The older you are, the longer it takes.

When I became old enough to be allowed to be in charge of a motorized machine, my father taught me to drive his car, but he sensibly would not let me drive it after I had passed the driving test, so he bought me a very low cost and old car. I soon found I could not afford to repair it, which was a regular requirement (Lucas Electrics come to mind!) and I found the cost of fuel too much for any long trips. I eventually found a buyer stupid enough to buy the car, and I immediately bought a used Francis Barnett 197cc motor bike, mainly to get me to and from college and work – at the time I was doing a sandwich course leading up to an engineering degree. I was apprenticed to a car company called Rootes, later to be taken over by Chrysler.

Initially the motor bike was just a means of transport, but I began to rather enjoy riding it, especially in the summer when England did actually have some sunny days. I even found that I could ride it over 100 miles, which had been virtually impossible in my car without some major breakdown. With the bike, all I had to do was to fill it up with oil and fuel (it had a dirty two stroke engine) and every 50 miles or so remove the sparking plug to get rid of the 'whisker', without even getting off the bike.

Until I got married a few years later when I had to settle down and become a boring family man, eventually with five children to feed, I had become a convert to motor cycling, and although my daily work was very much to do with cars and trucks, I did not even consider buying a car.

Inevitably I soon found that 197cc's of engine can only provide limited fun, so I moved up to a Douglas 250cc flat twin 4 stroke. I felt I was now in the big time, and started to go much too fast, but luckily didn't fall off, although I deserved to on a few occasions. I kept it for about a year, until I reached the ripe old age of 21. I was now a real man so I thought I ought to have a real man's bike, and I moved up to a used 1956 BSA 640cc Golden Flash. This thing by my standards really had performance, and I'm sure if it had been my first motor cycle, I would have killed myself in the first week of ownership. It took me to many parts of England, mostly on roads which are perfect for bikers, with lots of curves and hills, and I luckily only came off it on one occasion. I front wheel skidded on a low speed roundabout, (circle) in front of a line of people outside a movie theatre. A few nasty people applauded, and one guy even asked me to do it again because he hadn't seen the incident the first time. The bike suffered a bent peg, and I suffered only bent pride. I was very sorry when I eventually traded that bike for a boring car to become the boring family man. That was 1960

The next time I rode a motor cycle was 1976 in South Africa where I worked for Ford Engineering. Still a boring family man, but I was now looking for just a little excitement once in a while. (middle age crisis?) The bikes of that era were vastly different to BSA 650's, especially in steering and handling, but the performance was frankly frightening. The brakes were also pretty impressive to someone who had been reared on drum brakes. Where I lived, I met a crazy journalist who did motor cycle road tests for the local biker's magazine. He picked my limited brains on engineering matters, and in return he occasionally let me ride the bikes he had to play with, usually for about a week. That job to me was one of the best jobs on the world, but to him it was just routine. I suppose other people's jobs always appear more exciting, and inevitably he thought I had a far more interesting job in the car engineering.

I moved back to England in 1984. and there worked at Lotus Cars until 1991 as an Engineering manager. I suppose my lust for performance was satisfied by the frequent opportunities to drive some quite quick cars stabled at the Lotus factory, so I didn't once ride a motorcycle in all those years back in England. Hardly a dedicated biker.

In '91 I moved to the USA and eventually I began to think and dream of motorcycles again, especially during summer weekends. What tipped the balance was when I joined a small engineering company owned by two Englishmen. They had this odd idea that by displaying a 1971 Triumph Bonneville, belonging to one of their employees, in the lobby of their facility, it would somehow demonstrate the prowess of English engineers! I never really understood their logic. However I decided I wanted to have this bike, but the owner wouldn't initially sell it. It took me over a year of nagging, cajoling and the purchase of many doughnuts before we finally struck a deal – it coincided with his purchase of a Norton!

I still have the Bonneville, although to an MTR man, it is hardly recognizable as such, but I like it. Every year I decide to sell it, but every year I change my mind, especially when the sun shines!

I am however a trifle embarrassed at not being a really active MTR member and dedicated motor cyclist. My rather weak excuse is that I haven't retired yet, so my job keeps me busy, and I have other hobbies that take up much my spare time. For instance I'm fascinated with aircraft, but can't afford to fly a real one, so I play with radio controlled models, enjoying both the building part and the flying part. I have a glider, a Spitfire and a helicopter, which all fly in a very different way. I also ride a bicycle in the summer, mostly for charity events, when I have to pedal for about 100 miles, which is not as comfortable as motorcycling, but the feeling of having achieved something at the end of the ride can be quite rewarding..

Does the club really need part time amateur motor cyclists like me?! Probably not, but hopefully I'm not the only part timer in the club!

Let's hear why other members joined MTR, and why they got into motorcycling.

Mike Jones

January 2005

(1,626 words)

Like Soccer, Cricket and Boxing, Motorcycling is in the blood of many Englishmen of my age, whether they now live in England or Timbuktu. It was indeed a thrill to discover that the exact same sentiment can be found right here in Michigan where there is an abundance of these beautiful old machines and owners or restorers. As of this point of time, I am still actively involved in keeping alive classic old British motorcycles, my current project is a 1970 Triumph T100 C Trophy 500. Work is well under way since my wife Rose and my grandson Joe 'conspired' to have me buy up its remains late last year. As back in England, I have discovered a wealth of knowledgeable enthusiasts here in the US who share exactly the same passion and pleasure with building, repairing and riding of these wonderful, yet sometimes exasperatingly infuriating old machines with all of their flaws and little idiosyncrasies. I think we all share another thing in common, we are all mechanical masochists. An underworld of colorful characters and eccentrics abound yet still both sides of 'The Pond' and negotiating between the two countries for parts or machine history is all part of the charm of being an 'old bike' enthusiast. Amongst the younger generation there are notable exceptions like my grandson Joe Taminski, who undoubtedly will continue to 'run with the baton' long after those of us from the 'In the Day' folks have passed on, but this is rare. I am including some material from Joe to close out this collection. It is my hope that my articles might some day help ignite a little interest or spark a little enthusiasm for a few folks that always wanted to get back into it but for some reason or other, always put it off.

I have not delved too deeply into the technical aspects of various British bikes since they have been covered quite adequately by the established experts and can be found easily on the bookstalls and the websites that specialize in this field. I have attempted to address these reflections with a more personalized approach and tried to expand them to cover also some of the fascinating characters I ran into at that time along with a glimpse at some of the other associated events such as music of that day or social etiquette.

(Word count: 2,734 words total)