

Whatever Happened To ...The Distant Riders Motorcycle Club

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Weekend mornings the buzz of motorcycles can be heard radiating from a certain hilltop property in the southeast corner of Palmyra.

Time was when this sound indicated that 2,000 or more racing fans would soon gather to watch their favorite off-road motorcycle riders as they flew around the Hogback Hill Road location. They would bring their families and friends, campers, tents, and all sorts of gear for a weekend of camping and good times as the racers practiced and competed in one of the fastest growing sports of the day.

It all started around 1960, when a core group of racers had been practicing on property that at that time belonged to Carl Koester. They began talking about owning some land on which they would build a track to their liking where they could race and promote racing among their peers. From that beginning, the Distant Riders Motorcycle Club was formed that same year. Fred Ford and Bill Scheemaker were financially able to assist the club in buying the land initially. Ownership was transferred to the Distant Riders MC in January 1962.

The first membership roll listed Fred and Norm Ford, Bill Scheemaker, Glenn and Ed Bastian, Francis Smeatin (the club's first president), Grant Parker, and George Bailey. Some others who joined soon afterward were Bernie DeForest, the Robinson brothers, Dick Lovejoy, Roger Cramer, and Jan Verkey, to name a few.

Those early members and their families spent countless hours every weekend for what seemed to be an endless time clearing a suitable site for their track. Ray Halsey donated many hours of his time and machinery in the original excavating, and Dave Phillips has been the same since that time. That original work yielded a track designed for TT scrambles racing.

For those unfamiliar with dirt track motorcycle racing terms, scrambles are races over terrain and can be broken down into two types: TT scrambles are dirt track races with right and left turns and may include one or two jumps; hare scrambles are short races over open ground and through woods (also known as hare and hound.) Sources say that the only scrambles track left in New York State is in Medina. Another type of racing that is perhaps a little less exciting to watch is flat track, which is done on an oval closed dirt track with all turns in one direction. This type of racing is known affectionately to riders as "go fast, turn left" racing. Trials have also been run at Hogback, but this is actually a test of riding skill in crossing through tough terrain where speed is not a requirement.

Next is motocross, which has been the preferred style of racing at Hogback for about the last 15 years. These are races over a short track with varying hazards in which the heats or motos, are run on time rather than distance. Many motocross riders also participate in Enduros, which are actually endurance cross-country runs. They are scored on making as nearly as possible a set time between checkpoints. The average speed in most endures is 15 to 20 mph. One famous enduro is the Jackpine Run that offers its participants two days of rough riding over a distance of 500 miles. There are other types of motorcycle racing, but they do not pertain to the Hogback track.

The first Hogback riders used to look forward to the match races held in New England on Memorial Day weekend. Then, on Labor Day weekend, the same were held in New York. Among those early riders were Fred and Norm Ford, Harold Ward, Don Hodge, Dick Lovejoy, Don Dillman and Marion Pyron.

The development of dirt track racing in our town was not without its moments. There were times when the club struggled to make enough money to pay the taxes, and many times bills were paid out of the members' pockets. The Palmyra Racing Association was organized for insurance purposes after a lawsuit was brought against them. An accident had occurred when someone was standing on the fence—a dangerous practice regardless of how well one can see. The club settled and paid for the spectator's injuries.

One member remembers going to the track on Saturday morning to help prepare for the impending races on Sunday. He found that the concession stand had been burned to the ground the night before. Needless to say, there was a great deal of scurrying and building to prepare a new stand for the next day.

When the track was first built, there were no zoning laws in affect in the Town of Palmyra that affected its construction. There have been some problems with zoning regulations since, but a spokesman stated that the relationship with the town government has improved with age.

In the more recent past, a clubhouse, covered bleachers, equipment barn and stronger and more attractive fencing have been added. The track has been reworked and a pond and watering system added. These additions at the Hogback track have all been made through the financial and physical contributions made by members, riders, and their families over the years, and were directed at making it safer and more fun to participate and to watch the races.

Most of the riders, beginning with those first members back in the early 1960's, "started small." They were Sunday riders on second-hand cycles that were financed by jobs in grocery stores and garages, on farms and paper routes, and by their families. None of them won their first race, and some didn't win in their first 100. Many were injured, although not necessarily during competition. A few were hurt seriously enough to stop them from racing. However, they all had one thing in common, and that was determination and the will to win, hoping that fun and experience would be gained. Some had loftier goals, and became sponsored professional racers.

For more club information, racing schedules and current photos, contact the club's website—www.palmyramx.com.

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