

MOTOR CYCLE MANIA HIT BROKEN HILL

Ever since someone first bolted a motor between two wheels, man has striven to develop and tame the two wheeled outlaw, and the residents of Broken Hill and district have been no exception.

This was stated by a prominent member of the motor cycling fraternity in an article prepared to give readers a look at the history of motor cycling in the Broken Hill district.

The article, by a man writing under the name “Ariel”, continues:

Just when the first motor cycle came to Broken Hill is anyone’s guess, but one can safely assume it was some time prior to World War 1, and no doubt, its arrival caused a great deal more interest than the latest machine would today.

These early models, while appearing primitive in design by today’s standard were, in actual fact, most reliable.

Because they were so simple in design, most had no clutch at all, or a very simple one, were belt driven, light on petrol and cheap to buy.

They were, therefore, a minor revolution in light transport in remote areas.

All you needed was a belt – repair kit, a large puncture – repair kit, a pair of pliers and plenty of heart – and you were king of the almost non – existent road.

TWO LOCAL CLUBS IN 1920S.

World War 1, no doubt, retarded the development of motor cycling in the district, but it was not long before interest was again revived.

There is evidence of two motorcycle clubs in the city in the early 1920s, and the activities of the clubs were many and varied, with reliability trials being run to Menindee, Silverton, Stephens Creek and Umberumberka.

Speedway events were held at the Jubilee Oval and the Western Oval.

Locals will, no doubt, recall some of the names associated with this era..

At A meeting of one motor cycle club in August 1927, the chairman was G. Harton, and some of those in attendance were W. Blow, G. Scoble, W. Tonkin, S. Bates and B. Visser.

They were organising a reliability trial to Menindee with checkpoints at Red Hill and Box Tank.

The run to Menindee was to be made on a Saturday, with return on the Sunday.

While this might not appear to be a great feat today don't forget there were no roads, and the motor cycle of more than 50 years ago had practically no springing up front – and none at all at the rear!

In those times, there were few specialised machines on the market, and with the exception of the famed Dirt Track Douglas, the bikes most used in the speedway events at Western and Jubilee Ovals bore nostalgic names like Harley, Norton, Indian, Rudge, Triumph and big x Excelsior.

The names of some who competed were Pixie Lofts, Sparkes Slee, Vic Kolstad (the mad swede), Bert Stempel, Ern and Les Chaplain and George Scoble.

EVENTS ATTRACTED LARGE CROWDS

These events attracted large crowds, and, no doubt, were very spectacular as the machines were quite powerful.

Douglas and Harley bikes were lapping the famed Brooklands board tracks at over 90 mph in 1924.

The family and social side of events was also evident in the number of gymkhanas and picnics held in those times, with the wife or girlfriend in the then –popular sidecar (no doubt, handy to help mend a puncture or push through the sand) .

Enthusiasts used to make their way to one of the popular picnic Spots of the time to enjoy an afternoon of flag – races, musical chairs, etc.

On some occasions, the crowd was entertained by the antics of a local stuntman, Buick Turner, doing handstands, etc. on his immaculate Harley Davison.

It was the age of mad stunts and crazy races all over the world, and, no doubt there are hundreds of tales that could be told of this district.

One such famed local episode, attributed to both Alf(Sparks) Slee and Vic Kolstad (the mad swede) – and I'm not sure which - was an attemp on the unofficial speed record from Broken Hill to Menindee.

After leaving Broken Hill, the rider braved corrugations, sandhills, stones and pohoies, and reached Maiden's Hotel, Menindee , an hour and twenty minutes later – at which stage, the rear wheel collapsed.

WOMEN TURNED TO MACHINES.

The activities of women were not confined to cutting sandwiches for the menfolk.

Gidgee Stephen's late sister Edith was the first woman to obtain a motor cycle licence in the Broken Hill district, and rode a 125cc Panther two – stroke to and from her place of work in 1930.

A two – stroke motor cycle in the 1930s was a rare sight, as air cleaners were almost non – existent, and the power units in this district were almost invariably large four – strokes, which just seemed to go forever. The activities of local motor cyclists was interrupted again by World War 2, and it was not until the late 1940s that club activities got under way once more.

The club acquired the old aerodrome site on the Menindee Road, and began to build a speed track, and scrambles were organised at several of the gravel pit areas.

Of course, fun days were organised for the running of gymkhanas and picnics for various local charities.

While roads had not changed much in the district, the introduction of telescopic forks in 1946 – 47 softened the ride somewhat for local enthusiasts.

Through 1947 – 48, motor bikes supported the BH Cycling Club in meetings at the Western Oval, and, on one occasion, Gidgee Stephens staged a match race with visiting speedcar.

FAMOUS SPEED CIRCUIT SET UP

In November 1953, the Silver City Motor Cycle Club, in conjunction with the vintage Sports Car Club of Australia, conducted a meeting on a 1 1/2 – mile dirt track at Silverton in aid of the Flying Doctor Service.

There were 16 starters in all – powers scratch race, which was won by Bill Hepburn from M. Neidorfer and L. Cox.

In those days, there were no safety fences, and large track made it hard to control dust, so it was decided to build a half – mile speed- way at the old aerodrome circuit.

As there were by this time certain regulations being introduced for short - circuit racing, club members had to erect a safety fence.

This fence consisted of thousands of bluestone bags filled with sand, and made into a wall right around the 890 – yard circuit.

This circuit proved to be one of the most successful projects embarked on by the club.

Championship meetings were held, and riders and machine of world class came from all over Australia.

At the time, waste oil was plentiful, and many a Sunday morning was spent drenching the surface with it.

While this was one of the worse jobs I can remember undertaking in the name of motor cycling, it proved its worth.

PUT BROKEN HILL ON THE MAP

Firstly , it showed the dedication of the motor cyclist to his sport.

Secondly, it put Broken Hill on the map as having the best half – mile circuit in Australia at the time.

Thirdly, it was a proving ground for local riders.

Roy Thomas was the first local to compete in British speedway: Gidgee Stephens was the first local to race at the Sydney Royal; Spot Burke won more than 16 state and national championships in sidecar classes; and Tiger Bath was the first local to qualify for the South Australian A – grade motocross division (at the age of 39).

The new track was a success for a number of years, although the sandbag fence had to be replaced inside two years.

Competition slowly lost its fire over the next few years, and club activities died for a while until the Japanese started to make cheaper and lighter machines, and, in the early 1960s, trailriding revived in terest in motor cycling as a sport.

With a lot of guidance from some of the experienced members – like Gravel Denton, Doughy Visser and Tiger Bath – and lots of work from the younger generation, the local club soon got under way again.

A mini – bike club was set up to help juniors, and the speedway Association was formed.

Then, another local champion was on the way in David Adams, who was to become the sidecar champion of Australia Speedway.

Over the past century, the motor cycle has evolved from an overweight, underpowered, bone – shaking outlaw to a lightweight, powerful machine with 12 – inch travel front and rear – but still an outlaw.

But, if the springs are getting better, the bumps will be made bigger, and, at the end of the next 100 years, there will be a band of local enthusiasts looking back with nostalgic memories at their attempts to tame the two - wheeled outlaw.

One of Broken Hills legends in early racing days would be Ivan ‘ Gidgee’ Stephens mention anything about early motor bike days whether it be racing or rebuilding selling or trading Gidgee's name is sure to come up in the conversation.

His competition racing days started in 1948 and continued until 1989 in which time he won many a trophy riding at speeds up to 100mph.

Gidgee's first bike was a 1925 Harley which he paid seven quid for, he can

recall riding his Harley to Mildura via Menindee and Pooncarie all unsealed roads, he would start his bike up on Shellite and swing over to Kerosene as petrol was rationed at one Gallon a month.

Gidgee recalls standing and admiring a brand new War surplus Harley at Argent Motors selling for Seventy Pound and thinking of seventy reasons how he couldn't afford to buy one.

He did buy an army Harley which was all pulled apart for twenty quid and spent weeks assembling his highly prized WLA Harley.

Gidgee says over all his Biking Days he would have owned in excess of two hundred motorbikes.

Whilst on holidays in America in 1989 Gidgee suffered a Stroke and on his return to Australia he was determined not to let his disability stop him from doing his favourite thing riding with the boys, so after a lot of hard work at physiotherapy and the addition of a side car he was back riding with his mates after two months, and to this day, you can still see him on Sunday morning lined up with the Ulysses for their morning ride.

Gidgee says tribute must be paid to Bill Blows who ran a small Motor Bike sales and repairs in Lane Lane.

Bill was a gentleman and helped many early day bikers.

Live To Ride Gidgee Stephens, you are a Legend.