

Heroes & Helpers

In 1968, my Uncle Ronnie brought home the strangest, most intriguing piece of machinery I had ever seen. It looked like a short, fat bicycle. It had a basic tube-steel frame wrapped around a lawnmower engine. It had two solid wheels and a big cushy looking seat. Ronnie had bought this for my cousin, Jeff. Jeff turned out to be too small to ride it yet, so they needed a larger volunteer. "I'll try it," I blurted. I tried to hide my enthusiasm as best I could.

None of us had ever ridden a motorcycle or seen a mini-bike like this before, but I was sure ready to give it a try! He went over the controls with me like the salesman had done with him. Right hand makes it go, left hand makes it stop. Easy enough, I reasoned. He pulled the rope and the 3 HP Tecumseh rattled to life beneath me. I gave the right side bubble grip a twist and away I went. No suspension made this a pretty bumpy affair. The brake was a curved steel shoe pressing against the rear wheel. And the exposed centrifugal clutch next to my left ankle chewed into my bell-bottom jeans pretty good. But none of this could detract from the experience. I was riding!

I begged my parents for one of these for the next 6 months, and much to my surprise, they got me a mini-bike for Christmas! It was a bright red, 1969, Rupp. This was serious stuff here. It had a 3.5 HP motor, spoke wheels, drum brakes, a torque converter drive, and lights! I rode the wheels off of that thing. The Rupp served me well, but I did not return the favor. I seldom bothered to check the oil level, and it would prove to be my downfall.

Late one spring afternoon I heard the sound every Tecumseh pilot dreads . . . the telltale tic-tic-tic that they make right before they let go. And sure enough, CLANK! It did. It took me a couple of hours to push the bike back home from the back of Grampa's farm, and by the time I got there, I was mad. Dad was just getting home, and he was greeted with my whining about how the "stupid thing" quit on me and I had to push it for hours. Dad looked it over and pointed out the piece of shiny metal sticking out through the front of the motor. (Funny, I hadn't noticed that?) I had not learned the gratitude thing yet, so all I did was gripe. He should've slugged me. But he didn't. Instead, he ordered a new block for it, and in a couple of days it arrived.

Now, my dad worked constantly to support us. He went in real early and came home late. He worked every Saturday, too. This made me mad. He never had any time to see what a great rider I was! I have a much better appreciation of my father today.

Anyway, he came home late one day, and even though he was worn out from work, I did not even let him get the car door open before I started pestering him. "Did you get it? Did my engine come in yet? Can we fix it tonight? I wanna ride later!"

He had it. He didn't even stop to eat supper. He just got the block out of the trunk of the Mercury and started in on it. Now, dad had a heart as big as Goldwing, but probably not a whole lot of engine experience. When we got the Rupp running again, it sounded rough. And it only made it about 300 yards before tic-tic-tic-CLANK again! Most likely due to my application of full throttle as soon as I was safely around the corner of the big hedge that lined our front yard. I had lots to learn.

I was mad again. Dad was dog-tired and confused about why it had blown again. He said we'd take it apart the next day. I was furious. Why not now? I wanted to ride NOW! Dad was bummed. He trudged into the house followed by the whining of a little kid that he felt he had just let down. My mom was waiting there asking where he had been. He had missed her good dinner. I was sure he was the meanest father in the world. Just walking away from a child with a broken mini-bike! How could he be so cruel?

I didn't understand that it was my fault both times. He was doing his best. How I wish I had those next few days back. Dad was going through a difficult time at work. Serious stuff too. And I did all I could to compound his misery. I needed a good whippin', but he never gave it to me.