

Heroes and Helpers Part two

My Grampa was so very different from my dad. Grampa did the work thing just to support his hobbies. And he absolutely lived for his grandchildren! He never met a machine he could not fix or make better. Correct parts or not, it was going to work. End of story. No tractor, truck, jeep, chainsaw, go-cart, hay-baler, refrigerator, washing machine, radio, nothing stood a chance against Grampa's big fingers and his primitive tools! That was just the way God had wired him.

When the new block came in he asked if he could try it. Dad was too tired to protest so he gave in. Grampa had it running in no time. But he cautioned me that "All the tiny parts inside this new block needed time to get to know each other. So you gotta go real easy for the first hour or so, buddy." He was right. But simply running was not good enough for him. "Maybe if we bend this governor a little bit, and saw off a little bit of this great big muffler, or drill holes in this air filter cover..." His list went on and on. And for the most part, the things he tried worked. I was the envy of all my friends. The Rupp and I were fast.

My cousins started to get the itch too. Grampa bought them each mini-bikes too. He found a company called Powerdyne that made bikes that looked like mine but cost much less. He bought one of these for Jeff and another one for Scott. They were as fast as the Rupp, but not so "refined." They broke a lot. But this played right into his hands. If it broke, he had a reason to work on it. If he worked on it, he had a chance to experiment with things.

Most of his experiments worked too.

One time he was trying his hand at suspension. My cousin Scott liked to jump. He broke frames on a regular basis. Grampa would weld 'em back and paint 'em to match. But he figured that better springs might do the trick. But these just did not exist in 1970. I have no idea where the springs he brought home came from, but I am reasonably certain they were never intended for use on a mini-bike. He cut them to length and fitted them up carefully. It was ready for a test ride. Scott was in Grampa's house getting a popsicle so I volunteered. Grampa had done some bending of the discs on Scott's torque-converter that made it take off much faster than any other mini-bike around. So I never passed up a chance to ride it. "Take it easy until we see what it's gonna do, buddy," he cautioned me. But remember: I knew more than anybody else. I rode down the long driveway, with pastures on both sides, and turned around at the road. I looked back up the driveway. Way back at the garage I could see Grampa, Gramma, Scott and Jeff watching me. So, of course, I had to show off a bit. As I headed back up the driveway, I pulled a really cool wheelie. Just then I felt a jolt and noticed a wheel rolling into the yard. Uh-oh! Somebody's front wheel had just fallen off. I held the wheelie for as long as I could but that required speed. And speed was the one thing I needed the least.

The wheelie came to an abrupt halt as the fork tubes dug into the fresh asphalt. I went over the bars, across the asphalt and into the barbed wire fence. Between the asphalt and the barbed wire, I got cut up pretty bad. I lay there crying. Too tangled in barbed wire to get up. Everyone came running to help me. This was the only time I can ever remember hearing my Gramma curse. As she carefully pulled at the wire, I heard her mutter "damn motorcycles."

I healed up though. And we all rode so much that year. My Grampa always kept at least 20 gallons of gasoline in his garage. He tried to lock it up, but we'd always find a way around that. We found that if we all pulled up hard on the electric overhead door, it would open just enough to slide my 3 year-old cousin Liz underneath. Once inside, she had to feel her way through the darkness to locate the button for the door opener. This daunting task accomplished, she'd get a popsicle or a cookie, and we would have the fuel we craved! Grampa would know where the gas went, but seldom got mad about it. Oh, he'd always make a big deal about "Where in the heck could 20 gallons of my gas have gone to?" But mostly he'd just go get more and get on with it.

Grampa would build us trails and tracks all over his farm. He fixed everything we broke. He kept us fueled. And every Sunday he would invite us to church.

After about a year on the mini-bikes, a friend of his came by on a Kawasaki "Bushmaster" 90. This thing was a full-size motorcycle. It used a 2-cycle engine; it even had gears! This, we thought, must be the coolest bike around. Grampa bought one just like it. He taught each of us to operate it. We were so cool! We had it made in our little mini-bike heaven.

But our whole motorized world turned upside down in 1971. My friend Jimmy brought his new Honda SL70 over to the farm. We salivated over this little jewel. It was the perfect size. It had the perfect look. And the sound was to die for! Oh, if I just had one of those....