



FROM THE PRESIDENT AND CEO MINIS...WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

BY ROB DINGMAN

Readings about Honda's Z50 and its significance to motorcycling in this issue got me thinking about my own early experiences with motorcycles. Although the memories are clouded by 50 years, I believe I was about 7 when I was first exposed to motorcycles.

Three families on our street had minibikes. One older kid had what I think was a Honda CT70, though model specifics were pretty much lost on me at the time; another kid closer to my age had what I think was a Sears tube-framer with a 4- or 5-horse Briggs & Stratton engine; and then there was the family that had what I believe to be a Harley-Davidson Z90. There were five kids in that family, and they all shared the one bike.

It was on that Harley that I got my first ride as a passenger. I remember learning how to fasten the helmet's D-ring strap and my head swimming in a helmet obviously sized for adults. That first ride was just one lap around the yard, but from then on, every time I saw that bike come out of the garage, I was across the street hoping to get another ride.

Riding as a passenger was fun, but what I really wanted was to ride by myself. That wasn't going to happen on that Harley, but I was able to talk the kid with the Sears minibike into letting me do some laps around his yard. And oh, boy, was that exhilarating! Way more fun than I'd ever imagined, and of course I was instantly hooked despite the fact that that ride ended when the oil cap fell off and sprayed oil all over my shirt...which taught me to be prepared for anything when you ride motorcycles.

I was first exposed to street motorcycles in that neighborhood when my



MECUM AUCTIONS

One of my very first two-wheeled experiences was a very short ride on the back of a Harley-Davidson Z90 two-stroke like this one back in the 1970s. Fifty years later, that Aermacchi-designed mini still looks pretty good, don't ya think?

family had a fireplace and chimney built...and a few of the construction guys owned real-deal, raked-out 1970s choppers. I'd never seen anything like them and was fascinated.

I also developed a fascination with Evel Knievel at the time, and not only had the action figure and stunt cycle, but built a ramp to jump aboard my Rollfast bicycle. I learned the hard way that chip seal is not a very forgiving surface on which to crash.

We moved from that neighborhood, and it wasn't until I was 14 or 15 that I had another opportunity to experience motorcycles firsthand. I convinced my father's colleague to give me a ride on his Suzuki GS750 (or was it a 1000?), which was the first experience I had being on the road on a motorcycle. Riding minibikes was pure joy, but riding at highway speeds, even as a passenger, was a whole other level.

It wasn't until I got out of college that I had the opportunity to ride on the street by myself. My friend John, who I grew up with (and who is also an AMA member), had ridden his Honda CM400 Custom from Buffalo, N.Y., to where I lived at the time in downtown Albany, N.Y., and let me take his bike out for a ride despite the fact that I had

zero experience riding on the street. A bit sketchy, I know, but at least the bike was smooth and pretty easy to ride, and I had no problem navigating Albany's city streets. It was maybe the perfect first experience riding on the street, and I returned safely with a renewed desire to get a bike of my own.

That happened about a year later after I relocated to the Washington, D.C., area and began working for the Motorcycle Industry Council. I acquired a 1989 Yamaha XT350, which was a great first bike. I could commute on it, ride it to the beach, and even ride the trails in the George Washington National Forest in northern Virginia.

A few years later I added a 1984 Honda Nighthawk S to my stable, and from there grew the obsession that continues to this day. Since then I've had more than a dozen motorcycles, and currently have five in my garage today.

And like many of you, all of this can be traced back to those neighborhood minibikes. Who knew?

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