

Harley on the Bucket List

My Daddy loved the sound of a slow-revving engine, whether it was steam engine of the sort displayed at antique equipment shows, or a throbbing John Deere two-cylinder tractor from the 1940s or 1950s, or a rumbling V-twin Harley Davidson. Daddy was born in 1930. He died in 2018 so I can't ask him if he ever worked with a steam engine, but I know for sure that he had plenty of time on his John Deere Model B and M40 tractors. As far as I know, he never rode a Harley, but he'd roll down the truck window to savor the exhaust sounds when a Harley was next to us in traffic.

Daddy wasn't much of a risk-taker and that philosophy extended to riding motorcycles on the highway. Too dangerous! Too many motorcycle riders killed by drivers who never saw them. Having only two wheels in contact with pavement was not enough for Daddy. Off-road "dirt bikes" were OK. He bought a 1973 Hodaka Dirt Squirt that my brother David and I abused on our 3-acre property on Wilmington Hwy when we were teenagers. We'd cut through the woods and ride on the sandy lanes between the trees and shrubs of Butler Nursery, an adjacent expanse.



GR's first street bike: A Kawasaki 100 but mine had the engine in a cardboard box.

A kid in our neighborhood got a red Kawasaki 100 street bike when he got his driver's license in about 1976. Once the new wore off, he sold it to my buddy McCrae who rode it until he misjudged a shift and over-revved the engine. With unfounded optimism and no mechanical expertise, McCrae had taken the engine apart. There were dozens of oily aluminum pieces in a cardboard box. Everything else about that motorcycle was immaculate... the chrome, the red gas tank, the tires, and so on. A good mechanic should be able to resurrect that fine bike, I

reasoned, so I bought the box of engine parts and the bike for \$50 cash. I did this without first asking for Daddy's opinion, because I already knew what he would say. "Don't spend your money on somebody else's disaster."

When Daddy came home, I led him out to his workshop. Anticipating his cynicism, I had polished the chrome and red paint on that motorcycle. It gleamed. Impressive! But it was obviously missing an engine. That meant I had to show him the box of scrambled engine parts. He didn't get mad. He just shook his head in disapproval, and that was it. He could neither match nor fathom my optimism, but I didn't expect him to.

We took the bike and the box to a motorcycle shop on Bragg Boulevard where the mechanic had the same response as Daddy: a grunt, and sideways shaking of his head. We left it with him. After weeks and weeks of no progress, he offered to take that basket case in partial trade for a two-cylinder Honda CB 350 in terrible condition.



GR's second bike.

When I got it, someone had shot the gas tank with a BB gun, so there were multiple holes and dimples. The original mufflers had been replaced with slip-ons that were far too loud. This

model didn't have an electric starter, so kicking it was the only way to bring it to life. It started reluctantly and, when it ran, it ran reluctantly. Even so, this was a massive improvement over the lifeless Kawasaki. I paid maybe \$300 for this mess.

I think it was my buddy Billy Jackson who helped me patch the gas tank and spray paint it and the panels beneath the seat a shade of blue like a bruise several days old. In our haste, we did not prep the metal properly. If we had sought a rump

surface the texture of a lemon peel, we would have been entirely successful. A smooth shiny surface it was not.



I don't remember how I got my motorcycle license, but I did. And I called Miss Mildred Pigg at State Farm for insurance. Off I'd go, with a big grin on my face, blasting down to McRae's place for a game of basketball.

When I had this bike, I was working at Acme Fence Company after I had dropped out of college. One morning as I was turning into the big gate along the sandy side entrance to the Fence Company, I applied too much front brake. The bike skidded out from under me. It fell on top of me and pinned me to the ground. I had to endure the ridicule of co-workers who witnessed my misfortune and eventually lifted the bike off

me. That was the only time I've "dropped" a street bike. I have been very careful to use the front brakes sparingly ever since.

Daddy joked, "You know how to recognize a happy Honda rider?" "Bugs in his teeth!" Well, I don't recall riding with an open mouth. I do recall a huge juicy butterfly intercepting my route at 50 mph. It inserted itself into my helmet right next to my temple with a splat. After that, I preferred helmets with face shields.

Parts would fall off that bike while I was riding down the road. Those slip-on mufflers (which did very little muffling of sound) would slip right off and go bouncing along the pavement, sparks flying. The kick starter vibrated off once. Mirrors shook loose. The thing was decomposing while I was on it. I didn't keep this motorcycle for very long. I don't remember how I got rid of it. I can imagine why its former owner, frustrated with this cantankerous piece of junk, shot it!

I made sure to get an electric start on my next motorcycle, a 1972 Honda 450.



GR giving his mother a ride on his third motorcycle in the back yard of 3446 Wilmington Hwy.

This was actually a decent bike. The paint and chrome were good. I had it while in graduate school in Chapel Hill at the same time I had a 1970 GTO. The Goat, as Daddy called it, required one gallon of premium gas to go a mere 12 miles. We lived in Hillsborough NC about 12 miles away from the lab at UNC, so back when my yearly stipend was \$5000, I rode the motorcycle because it was fun and cheaper to operate than the GTO. I bought a bright yellow one-piece riding suit so I could ride it even in cold weather. One day it snowed while I was in the lab which meant I had to ride home on slushy roads in snow flurries. That was a slow and treacherous trip, slipping sideways in the ice and snow.

During weekly phone calls to Daddy, he'd mention whether it had rained in Fayetteville, always with the sarcastic comment, "Good motorcycle weather!" Even now, every time it rains, I think, "Good motorcycle weather."

One afternoon when I was running an errand in Durham, the bike stalled (OK, it was my fault) at a stoplight. The car behind me smacked right into me, breaking my taillight and bending the tag. I kept my balance, but I was very shaken, and nervously drove it home, thankful that the accident had not been worse. It wasn't long after that incident that I swapped that motorcycle for a dilapidated Carolina blue Dodge Dart that ran about as well as that first miserable Honda 350. This was about 1985.

For decades, I didn't have a motorcycle. Too dangerous. Not worth the risk, especially during the child-rearing years. But I sometimes fantasized that I'd rent a couple of Harleys, one for me and one for Daddy. I imagined us taking a slow cruise, pattering along on country roads at 45 miles per hour, enjoying gentle curves, and the masculine exhaust sound rumbling in our wake. Somewhere in his 60s or 70s, Daddy became too unsteady on his feet, and I was no longer confident that he could handle a massive Harley. It made me sad to realize that we'd never have that father-son motorcycle experience I dreamt of.

Decades passed. My children became adult children. Tia passed away unexpectedly in 2014. I met Mary Helen in September 2016. When we married on July 29, 2017, I instantly acquired two bonus children (Gentry and Jordan) and a father-in-law Henry Richbourg who had been an avid motorcyclist for decades. Even in his early 80s, Henry was still riding his Harley Heritage Classic but he had become too weak to manage this behemoth safely. He fondly reminisced of a six-week, fifteen state motorcycle trip with his cycling buddies to all the way to the west coast from his home in southern Georgia. He described a trip to Milwaukee for the 100th anniversary of Harley Davidson. He told of riding adventures in the mountains of north Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. Henry's was the first Harley I ever rode, and I must confess, it wasn't as exhilarating as I had imagined. I was disappointed that I couldn't hear the deep exhaust rumbling from where I sat in that massive seat. It was fun, but not as much fun as I had anticipated.

About that time, bonus son Jordan living in Chattanooga purchased a 2012 Honda CBR250 street bike unbeknownst to his parents and ultimately against their wishes. He took a motorcycle safety course and got his license. He quickly became dissatisfied with that first bike and traded it for a much more powerful but much less reliable track bike, a 2005 Honda CBR600RR. He wanted to exploit that bike's handling potential on challenging curvy roads. We loaded it on my trailer. Mary Helen and I unleashed him on the road that goes from Columbus, NC to the top of White Oak Mountain. Jordan complained that road was too steep and too twisty to enjoy so I had him follow us along Hwy 108 to Saluda, where I sent him down that awesome stretch of Hwy 176 toward Tryon. "Perfect!" he said, as he rode it several times before we called it a day. Totally hooked on crotch rockets, Jordan bought an even more powerful 2006 Suzuki GSXR-750.

This was my excuse to buy another motorcycle now that I had riding partners in Jordan and Henry. I went to a disreputable used motorcycle dealership in Spartanburg where I bought a red 2004 Honda Shadow Sabre VT1100 for \$3100 on June 13, 2018. This 14-year-old bike had only 3291 miles on it. I named it The Scooter. I walked around it while it was idling in the back yard, recording a video with the sound of the super-loud straight Vance & Hines pipes. I sent the video to Daddy over the cell phone. I didn't see his expression when he watched it, but I suspect that he shook his head and grunted, worried that I had just bought a ride to my premature demise. It was the same sentiment that my colleagues in the Biology Department expressed when they found out.

A nice motorcycle chock from Harbor Freight mounted in my trailer allowed me to tow The Scooter to Brevard where Mary Helen and I met Jordan who rode his Suzuki to the meeting spot. Mary Helen sipped at a craft brewery while Jordan and I rode Hwy 276 up to the Blue Ridge Parkway and descended to the north until the twisty road became straight and flat. On the downhill run, I was going too fast around one corner and came perilously close to the edge of the pavement. Had I been a couple of inches further, it would have been a nasty, embarrassing, and physically disastrous end. Those few seconds are etched in my mind and taught me that, on these roads, even one mistake is intolerable. Jordan was behind me, and he saw how close I came to a very big spill. From that moment forward, I have been careful not to take curves with too much velocity.

I was in the lead until Jordan startled me when he flew past on a straight section at a speed I dare not record here! Jordan and I really enjoyed those sharp curves that day, and I anticipated many more fun times on our bikes.

Weeks later, Jordan hit some gravel on a curvy mountain road when out riding with some buddies. The bike wasn't badly damaged in the fall. Jordan was wearing protective gear, but that mishap required surgery to stabilize his thumb with a metal rod.

Henry gave me a motorcycle touring map with routes named The Gauntlet, Hillbilly Heaven, The Wolf, Dracula's Driveway, Moonshiner 28, Cherohala Skyway, The Bushwacker, and The Rattler. Henry described riding the Tail of the Dragon, a famous motorcycle road with 318 curves in 11 miles at the North Carolina-Tennessee Border. It sounded like so much fun that I planned a trip. I rented a

cabin at Fontana Village. Son-in-law Brandon borrowed a Triumph 650 and we rode The Tail of the Dragon several times over the weekend. Mary Helen rode halfway through it with me. Her mother Ann Richbourg had ridden the Dragon with Henry once and Mary Helen wanted the experience. There are pictures of us gliding through the twisties. I left her at the restaurant at Deal's Gap while Brandon, Alicia, and I rode The Dragon repeatedly until we had a sufficiency.



Mary Helen and GR on the Tail of the Dragon.



GR and his Honda Shadow "Scooter" on the Tail of the Dragon.

Jordan then got his dream bike, a 2015 Yamaha R1S. Oh, what a machine! What a marvelous machine! All was well until a woman in a car turned left in front of him to get her kids some Wendy's. After a terrifying phone call from Jordan's girlfriend with partial information about an ambulance ride, Mary Helen met Jordan at the Emergency Room. He was fortunate to escape with only bruises and soreness after tumbling across the hood of her car. That immaculate bike was a total loss. Jordan sent us pictures of the wreckage from the salvage yard. Jordan had done absolutely nothing wrong. An inattentive driver could have killed him. That event ended Jordan's cycling days, much to his mother's relief.

After Jordan's accident, Mary Helen refused to ride a motorcycle and strongly preferred that I get rid of The Scooter. She will not go with me to the mountains if I take The Scooter. I understand her worry, but my attitude is typical of motorcyclists: Serious accidents are common, but I'm a careful rider. I don't believe that I'll be in a serious accident. So, I continue to ride fully aware that, like Jordan, an inattentive driver can cause me great harm even if I am not at fault.

Henry replaced his Harley with a 2017 Can Am Spyder, a three-wheeler that is much safer but much less fun than a two-wheeler. At age 88 in 2023, he doesn't drive the Spyder any longer, so I have no riding partners.

After I retired from Wofford College in May 2023, I made three solo trips during the summer and fall to the Blue Ridge Parkway near Brevard, each time riding 150-200 miles after unloading The Scooter from the trailer. I don't drive fast. I don't take risks. I noticed that leaning into the curves produced an unstable sensation. I discovered that the tires, while having plenty of tread, were as old as the bike (20 years!) A new pair of top-of-the-line Dunlops made it much more stable! New baffles have made it audibly less obnoxious. I figure that riding solo may be safer than riding in a group with other cyclists who may go too fast for me. After Jordan's first accident, I'm keenly aware that gravel, sand, leaves, and such on pavement can be catastrophic.

Henry recommended the Rattler, a section of NC Hwy 209 between Fines Creek and Hot Springs. It was good, but there are too many driveways and roadside abodes that sprinkle too much gravel on the road to make the drive as safe as I prefer. Other twisty roads that look enticing on maps have uneven or crumbling pavement that would make them treacherous. Motorcycling safely requires a

good even surface with few or no access points for other vehicles. I enjoy Hwy 276 north of Brevard, a route that I have traveled by car and van for years. I know the Blue Ridge Parkway well between Wagon Road Gap (mile markers 412) and Devil's Courthouse (MM 423.) Although the BRP is pleasant, it is too wide, too flat, and the curves not severe enough to provide the sideways leans that make motorcycling so much fun.

I discovered Hwy 215 from Rosman to the BRP (17 miles) and further north for another 4-6 miles is my ideal motorcycle route. This route is not labeled on the touring map, so I named it The 215 Supreme! Even more challenging is the four miles of twisties descending north from the Parkway on Hwy 151 to Upper Hominy. Hwy 178 between Rosman and Hwy 11 is another unnamed favorite. These routes are not as popular as the Tail of the Dragon, but in good weather, I meet many motorcyclists on these roads. We acknowledge our brotherhood by gesturing with the left arm toward the pavement with two fingers extended.

Having missed the opportunity to ride a Harley with my Daddy, I was delighted when my son Phillip called with intentions to rent a motorcycle from Asheville Motorcycle Rentals (AMR) on the Saturday after Thanksgiving 2023. Phillip didn't have a motorcycle license, so we planned for him to ride The Scooter. He asked me to choose which bike I wanted from the impressive selection at AMR. Brian called to say the BMW 850 I had reserved on the website was in the shop, so I chose a 2021 Harley Softail Heritage instead, which turned out to be Phillip's top choice.

We left Spartanburg about 8:30 am. We towed The Scooter behind Brittany's Jeep to AMR where Brian had parked a shiny black Heritage outside the shop. After signing some paperwork and a quick review of the features of that Harley (6 speed transmission, antilock brakes, keyless start, cruise control, etc.) we put on all the clothes we had with us and embarked at about 9:50 am on a cold cloudy day. We followed Brian's suggestion to get to the Parkway via Town Mountain Road. This entailed navigating a section through downtown Asheville that made us nervous. Town Mountain Road was very nice with sweeping curves ascending the mountain past spectacular homes. This was a fine introduction to mountain riding for Phillip. By the time we stopped at the intersection with the BRP, our hands were already numb even though we were both wearing gloves.

With me always in the lead setting the pace, we rode west along the Parkway. The Harley was a smooth ride. I liked the flat footboards. I appreciated having a windshield on this chilly day. Gaining higher elevation west of the I-26 overpass, we encountered fog and even colder temperatures. My feet, legs, arms, and torso remained comfortable. I had on thermasilk underwear, insulated athletic pants and hiking pants, three layers of shirts plus a yellow Columbia rain jacket. My motorcycle gloves, so comfortable even in hot summer weather because of the vents, allowed the cold air to numb my fingers to the point of unpleasantness. When I pulled over for our first stop just east of Hwy 276 on the BRP, we swapped bikes. We were about 30 miles into this adventure and agreed to descend to Brevard in hopes of warmer air without fog. I was happy that Phillip was now on the Harley with a windshield. I was happy to be back on my \$3000 Scooter, which I realized was just as much fun as that \$20,000 Harley.

When we stopped for lunch at about noon at Hogwild Barbeque at the Hw 64/276 junction, our phones said the temperature was 42 F. We speculated that it was at least 5 degrees colder up on the Parkway, where the wind chill factor and fog made it even more unpleasant. Phillip had on only one layer of pants. His legs were numb. My leather work gloves were not keeping his hands warm.

When lunch ended at about 1 pm, we were not eager to go back up to 4000-5000 feet elevation in the cold fog of the BRP. Instead, we rode west along Hwy 64, stopping at a Hospice Thrift Store in Brevard where I bought a pair of white lady's gloves for \$3 that fit nicely inside my motorcycle gloves. These provided enough insulation to make the ride more tolerable. We stopped briefly at the Outdoor Center at the Hwy 64/215 Intersection. We ascended seventeen miles on 215 Supreme. It was a glorious ride. We pulled over just before the Parkway to plan the rest of our day. Phillip agreed that this section of 215 is very well suited for motorcycles. After crossing the Parkway, we drove another 6 miles north to the big waterfall on 215 and then returned to the Parkway, motoring east. By now the fog had cleared and there was feeble sunlight. Phillip recognized Graveyard Fields where he and I had camped many years ago. There were nice views of Looking Glass Rock and The Cradle of Forestry, but we didn't stop at any of the scenic overlooks until we got to Pounding Mill Overlook where a nice woman with her partner and four kids vacationing from Florida asked me to get a picture of them

on her cell phone. In return, she took a couple of pictures of me and Phillip with Phillip's cell phone.



Phillip on the Harley Heritage at the Pounding Mill Overlook, BRP.



GR and Phillip at the Pounding Mill Overlook.

I figured Phillip had gotten comfortable on the Harley by now, so we were ready to tackle The Devil's Drop, the label given to the upper section of Hwy 151 on the

Wild Mountain Rides Motorcycle Touring Map. Phillip said he had been watching my brake lights to know when to be extra careful. I kept an eye on my mirrors to make sure Phillip was mastering the curves on The Devil's Drop. It made me proud to see him leaning so far over on that Harley. Several times I had to slow down until he appeared behind me. This indicated that he was not being too aggressive, a welcome indication of maturity! After about four miles, the road flattened, and we were now on the most dangerous part of the adventure; four lanes with lots of traffic and stoplights on a route that took us toward Asheville to return the Harley. While waiting for a light to turn green, I imagined Daddy rolling his truck window down to listen to the deep slow idle of those big V-twins!

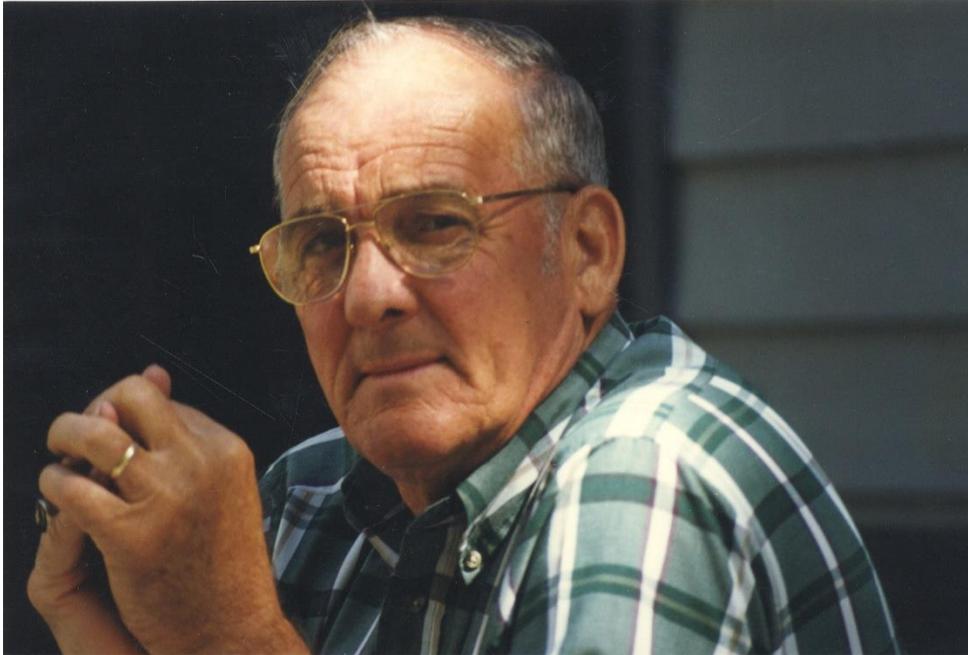
At the intersection of 151 and 19/23, we drove east on Hwy 19/23, arriving at Krispy Kreme at 4 pm, just six miles from the rental return site which closes at 5 pm. We had plenty of time to relax and warm up with a soothing hot chocolate. We each got a blueberry glazed donut, and I feasted on lemon-filled while Phillip ate a donut stuffed with cookies and cream wearing a Santa suit topping. It was here that I switched to back to the Harley and Phillip got on The Scooter. Within sight was a Shell station where 2.47 gallons of premium topped off the Harley. I missed a turn at the massive 19/23/26/40/240 interchange, but I quickly recovered, and we made our way back to Asheville Motorcycle Rentals just off Broadway at 889 Riverside Drive.

Brian, who moved to Asheville from England, watched as we strapped The Scooter on the trailer. He said many renters come from Florida to enjoy our Blue Ridge and Great Smoky Mountain roads. Indeed, this region has some of the best motorcycle routes in the United States. I'm lucky to live only an hour away.

It was getting dark as we left Asheville with me again at the wheel of Brittany's Jeep. We had ridden these motorcycles 148 miles on a cold November day. Thirty-five-year-old Phillip had logged 112 miles on a Harley Heritage Softail. Sixty-six-year-old GR had a dream come true! I'm thinking Daddy would nod in approval. Because we had been uncomfortably cold, he would add his sarcastic, "Good motorcycle weather!"

What a glorious father-son day on two big powerful motorcycles! Let's put a check by that entry on the Bucket List!

G.R. Davis Jr.
28 November 2023



Daddy often has this expression when I told him of my plans. It means, “Do you really think that is a good idea?”