

## **Wheelin' in the years: Reading Motorcycle Club self-publishes a book that tells its story**

Revved up to observe a 100th anniversary, members of the Reading Motorcycle Club, with club headquarters in Oley and boasting about 1,200 members, decided more than five years ago to self-publish a book that would tell their story.

It took them until November 2011 to complete the job, a hard-bound historical compilation (208 pages filled with color and black and white photos and accompanying text, \$37.10) that not only tells their story, but is a window into a multitude of social and cultural changes in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The club was founded in 1911 and officially incorporated in 1914.

"We are about the sixth-oldest member of the American Motorcycle Association that is still active in the nation," said Doug Strange, 61, of Kutztown, a club member and one of a nine-member history book committee that shepherded the "History of the Reading Motorcycle Club: 1911- 2011" to completion.

"In its day (early 20th century), Reading was a hotbed of bicycle and motorcycle production," Strange said. "Motorcycling was the way to get off the farm, see the world. It was the cheapest form of transportation until Henry Ford came up with his Model-T."

But it was even more than that.

It represented speed, competition, excitement and craftsmanship.

"Speed sells it does now; it did then," said Randy "Razz" Ravel, 64, of Earl Township, another history book committee member.

And, for many, the chance to race along at 35 miles per hour was simply a human embrace of the newest mechanical transportation innovation. Some motorcycles were even advertised to go as high as 50 miles per hour when less than 4 percent of America's roadways were paved.

Even more significantly, what Strange and other committee members discovered when they undertook their task was an outpouring of community contributions, especially quality photography and stories that have stayed with many Berks County families for decades.

Two panoramic photographs of club members and their bikes in particular, one taken in York in 1911 during a club run, and another taken in 1912 in City Park, are historical treasures that depict the people and style of an era.

"We ran ads for the book, and we started getting people from all over sending in material," Ravel said. "It was unbelievable."

Other members of the book committee who helped with graphic design, research, text and ideas are Rich Keller, Dennis Christman, Jeff Homan, Steve Goggins, Paul "Pop" Frey, Paul "Rocket" Royer and the late Peter Keiser.

To realize that Reading was a hub of motorcycle manufacturing in the early days (Reading Standard started production in 1903) speaks to the local enthusiasm and interest that led to competitive hill climbs and cloverleaf and endurance runs on 200- to 300-mile courses that covered areas from Reading to Pittsburgh.

Dealerships, tire companies and fuel distributors all supported the growing motorcycle mania.

But club historians also tracked the ups and downs of motorcycle enthusiasms, noting a drop-off in interest during the world wars and the Great Depression.

"There is a lot of history here (in the book) from day one to the present, even if you are not a motorcycle rider or fan," said Bobby Evans, 56, of Exeter Township, club president.

Perhaps some of the most intriguing aspects of the book are references to the motorcycle revival post-World War II, with a new generation of young veterans who may have been suffering from depression and were entranced with the thrill of speed and the escapism motorcycling on the open road provided.

Later in the 1950s, a new generation who hadn't experienced the war firsthand, but had seen Marlon Brando in the "The Wild Ones," gave motorcycling a jump start even though some negative stereotyping of motorcyclists also began.

Different generations put their own cultural imprimatur on motorcycling, but new riders with the demise of the Indian motorcycles and rise of Harley-Davidsons weren't always greeted with open arms by the old guard.

The book points out there were growing pains.

But from those pains the Reading Motorcycle Club, once down to only seven active members in the 1960s, blossomed in the late 20th century with drag and dirt-track races, fun runs, time trials and anniversary celebrations that drew hundreds.

There were even motorcycle polo events, beer-barrel races and outhouse drags.

Motorcycling enthusiasts also reached out to the greater mainstream community, raised money for those with medical issues, supported community projects, adopted sections of highway to keep clean and stood up to be counted, contributing \$10,000 to the Vietnam Memorial Fund for the monument in City Park at a time when many veterans, some of them motorcyclists, felt forgotten and abandoned by their nation.

"Every year, in August, the RMC hosts the annual POW/MIA for Freedom from Womelsdorf to the Vietnam Memorial in Reading City Park," according to text in the book surrounded by photographs.

"Over the years, the Reading Motorcycle Club has become more than a club," Ravel said. "It's become a family for many."

That it has survived so long also makes it an historical institution, but not an old, fussy one, especially with bumper stickers displayed on one page that read: "How Much Fun Can You Handle?" "Bikers Have More Fun Than People," "Never Too Old to Have a Happy Childhood" and "If You're Not Living On The Edge, You're Taking Up Too Much Space."

For the Reading Motorcycle Club, it's been quite a ride.

One hundred years just seemed to zoom by.

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**Members of the Reading Motorcycle Club include, from left, Jeff Homan of Leesport, club President Bobby Evans of Exeter Township, Denny Christman of Ruscombmanor Township, Rick Keller of Centre Township, Steve Goggins of Pikeville, Doug Strange of Kutztown and Randy "Razz" Ravel of Earl Township, with a book the club published to mark its 100th anniversary.**

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