

The following story was written by a past member of the Townsville Restored Motorcycle Club by the name of Jack Dillon and is from our Club Archives, Jack passed away in August 1992 and his wife Louise who gave our club copies of some of Jack's old records and historical data, I thought that it might give your younger readers an insight to motorcycle riding in the olden days. The following story is in Jack's own words:-

SOME EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF A 1942 HARLEY DAVIDSON.

By Jack Dillon.

Townsville.

Before owning the WLA Harley, I had previously owned a 1926 2 ¾ H.P. Harley, single cylinder "Pup" and a 1927 Harley Outfit (usually ridden solo). This was known as a 7-9 H.P. V twin and had one side and one pocket valve in each cylinder.

I first bought the 1942 Model new, from the Army in November 1945, and has now clocked up an incredible 120,000 miles. Due to traffic conditions, I discontinued regular riding the machine about 1960 (when averaging 10,000 to 12,000 miles per year.) In accumulating 120,000 miles in about 15 years, it has only been occasionally ridden to 1968. Over the years as I have lived all around Australia, the Harley has been registered in Perth (twice). Melbourne, Sydney (twice) Brisbane, Townsville (twice) and has had two major overhauls. The Harley has also done trips as an outfit or solo: Melbourne to Sydney and return; Melbourne to Brisbane; later trips to Brisbane and Sydney, Sydney to Melbourne, and return and numerous long distance country journeys in N.S.W.

I converted the Harley from Army to civilian trim in 1946 and decided to ride across the Nullabor Plain from Perth to Sydney – if I could obtain enough petrol coupons. The allowance for a large H.P. motorcycle was 3 X 1 gallon coupons issued every two months. The bike was involved in a few adventures and I will mention only some of these, all of which occurred in what is known to the young of today as the Olden Times (i.e. before they were born) and with me being an "Oldie", all distances are in miles.

After obtaining, with difficulty a very minimum number of coupons from the Rationing Authority, plus a few black market coupons, I departed in January 1948 traveling via Kalgoorlie, Norseman, Eucla, Penong, Ceduna, Port Augusta, Adelaide, then Melbourne to Sydney, a journey of around 2,500 miles. I believe the present sealed road deviates considerably in places from the track that I traveled on, which was for the most part a formed, unsurfaced road (put through, I understand, for military traffic during the war). There was a stretch of 750 miles between Norseman, W.A. and Penong S.A., with Eucla on the border, the only place where water and petrol could be obtained in the 750 mile stretch, so it was necessary to drag a side box. Shortly after the War everything was in short supply but I managed to buy a steel side box and a Goulding chassis. (This later proved too light and eventually broke up between Emerald and Charters Towers en route to Sydney to Townsville and was replaced by a medium weight Dusting chassis.)

An average of one vehicle a fortnight, sometimes less, traveled the East-West road, which had not been maintained for three years at the time of my journey and in places, surface scrub was growing on the track. The road ran through plains, over ridges and stony desert; in those places, the surface of the road was covered with ironstone and granite "floaters" (stones) – very hard on tyres, whether they be truck or motorcycle. A further hazard was the bull dust which concealed holes, some up to three foot square and two foot deep; the dust being the same colour and appearance as that on the road. These holes were difficult to identify when approaching, and falling into one threw great strain on the out-fit as well as risking loss of control.

Rabbit trappers with big refrigerated semi's had at one time been operating on the South Australian section supplying the Adelaide market. There had been heavy rain about two years earlier and the big trucks had frequently bogged on the formed clay surface over the distance of about 100 miles and in digging the vehicles out, deep ruts and great mounds of clay had been left in the road, these had baked as hard as concrete and made negotiation over that section with the out-fit slow and difficult. It was not possible to deviate around this section due to scrub and small trees. From the foregoing, readers who were not then drivers may gather an idea of motorcycling in "the good old days".

Between Norseman and Penong I came upon two separate groups, one in each state towing caravans. They had suffered breakdowns and were completely out of water. Both groups had been stranded for some time. There was a third family at Eucla when I duly arrived there.

For about 30 miles out of Eucla on the W.A. side, the road passed through scrubby, sandy country and this track had apparently been formed by graders pushing down or breaking off the scrub, then building up sand to form the road. Over previous years, the sand had blown or washed out leaving stumps of the scrub protruding through the surface in places.

The back wheel punctured. The front tyre was better than the spare that I carried, so the loaded outfit was pulled up onto the back stand, and the front wheel lifted clear by packing the bike up with stones. The front tyre was then placed on the back wheel and the spare on the front. All in a temperature of 110degrees Fahrenheit (43 Degrees Celsius) with no shade anywhere around.

Eucla was originally an overland telegraph station; the solid stone houses were slowly being engulfed by sand hills moving in from the nearby sea. I was informed that there was only one family at Eucla with about eight children. (Well they had to make their own fun somehow.)

As I rode into Eucla in the late afternoon (still over 100 degrees Fahrenheit) a group of people came streaming out from some of the half submerged houses. Firstly a man, then a woman followed by three children, all waving their hands & shouting. I kept on slowly towards the rest house area. The runners reached me and ran alongside shouting out what sounded like to me, half deafened by the Harley Motor; 'Have you got the valves, have you got the valves?' (Valves were used in radios before the modern transistors.)

I felt that this was a bit queer and thought that the heat had finally got to me. It's all a hallucination! There was only one family here and they are not living in one of those half buried house and, if they are real, has their radio blown up or what? Why should they, all five of them, be shouting about valves so earnestly? It's not real!!!

They were real people all right and they wanted valves. Later, I heard the full story. They were a family, traveling from Kalgoorli to Iron Knob, in a Ford Panel Van. During construction of the road, whenever it cut through a station property boundary fence, a cattle grid was constructed by setting railway lines in concrete. The big high clearance military trucks hit the grids, landing heavily on the other side, the result being two deep ruts with a ridge, the original road height in the centre. The driver of the panel van ran over the grid too fast and as both wheels dropped into the ruts on the other side, the diff landed on the ridge, smashing something in side it. This was about 30 miles east of Eucla. The driver found that, although the van would not go forward, it would reverse spasmodically. So he reversed the van along the winding track to Eucla. This took over a day to do. The family had been there for ten days.

Well, what you may ask had the valves to do with it? The people at Eucla owned a big Bedford Truck and the idea was to load the Ford panel van on to the truck and transport it to Adelaide from the nearest rail siding about (I think) a hundred miles North.

The engine on the Bedford was being overhauled and it was found that some of the engine valves had to be replaced. These valves were available in Norseman. Before departing East or West on the track at that time, the intending traveler had to report to the Norseman or Penong police stations. If the police were not satisfied that either the vehicle or its operator could not safely make the trip then the journey would be prohibited by the police on the grounds that the police would be involved in the search and rescue or collecting the bodies. If a person was stranded on the road requiring parts, then these would be handed to the next traveler to bring out to the stranded motorist. (I was unaware of this until being informed of it at Eucla.) The police at Norseman had omitted to pass on the valves for me to transport. As the Bedford owner had no other vehicle, the people with the Ford were still stranded indefinitely when I left the following day.

After several other eventful occurrences, including bogging in the sand dunes at over 100 degrees F on the track between Penong and Port Augusta, the bitumen was eventually reached and most of the hard work on that leg of the trip was over.

In 1949 I rode the outfit from Sydney to Townsville and, from North of about Bundaberg, over tracks which the State Government called "Highways" these became progressively worse the further North that one traveled, however that's another story.

JACK DILLON.