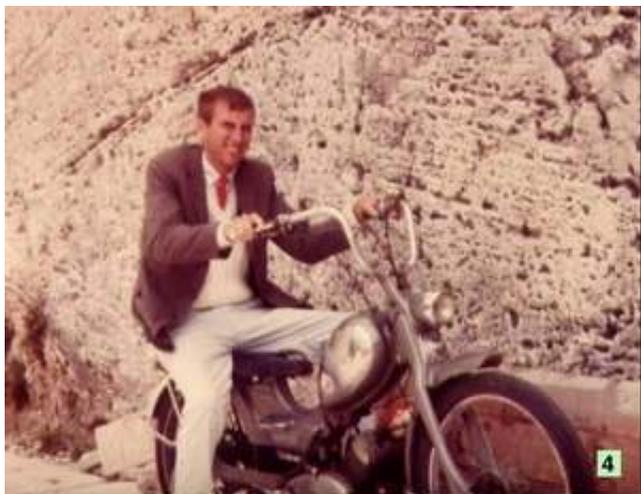


Riding into the past Our love affair with the moped and motorcycle



Gooseneck King, Edward (Sprockett) Harris, about 1965.

HERITAGE MATTERS by Dr. Edward Harris

The Diddly Bops with their gooseneck handlebars

Zigzagging through the motorcars

Come round the corner four in a row

Up on the sidewalk I had to go.

— **Stan Seymour, ‘King of Calypso’**

If you would care to look, most of Bermuda’s heritage lies about you, in the landscape, in private homes and in the instance of single-person vehicles, on the roads from Dockyard to St Catherine’s Point. If all heritage were confined to museums and historic buildings, life would be rather dull in the outside world. Fortunately, this blessed place has not been subjected to the ravages of war and the

depredations of rampaging invaders and our homes are of such strong construction in stone that family heirlooms of many types have survived down the ages of our 400 years of settlement, and many a winter gale and hurricane.

Much potential heritage is lost in the normal flux of life, particularly things considered contemporary and of no historical value. Take my beautiful ‘Princess Gray’ Zundapp of the early 1960s, said to be the fastest bike in Bermuda, or at least it looked that way. The rear was ‘chopped’ down and a smaller back wheel emplaced, which gave the vehicle a look of leaping forward, as the backward sloping mast gave to the classic Bermuda Sloop, which was one up, being the fastest boat afloat in the Atlantic world of the 18th century. My Zundapp, with its ‘gooseneck’ handlebars, would now be a museum piece had it survived, not only because of the workmanship that went into altering the bike from its manufacturer’s configuration, but because the motorbike became a central feature of Bermuda life after its introduction to the Island in 1946, a significant year for another good reason for you, dear readers.

The Zundapp was made by a major German company that went out of business in the 1980s, a fact that immediately made bikes that it produced potential heritage items, as new ones would be no more. There are however many in Bermuda who daily ride into the Past through their wonderful efforts at restoration of motorbikes and ‘mopeds’ (motor assisted pedal bikes). Such a collection appeared with a roar on Front Street a few days ago, most being Mobylettes, out of France from 1949 to 1997: thus as no new bikes are being manufactured from that source either, restoration of old stock is the only way to go, if one is interested in preserving such local motoring heritage.

Some Bermudian men in particular are in love with our motorcycle history and the two-wheeled implements that allowed us from 1946 to be free of former single-vehicle transport, the horse, or in some instances, the ass, to say nothing of ‘Shank’s Mare’. Said of an early form of the motorless bicycle in 1869 in an Iowa newspaper: “A public exhibition of the velocipede was given on the streets last evening by Mr Clark, who managed the vehicle with considerable skill...They are a toy, and will never come into general use in competition with Shank's Mare”, that is to say, your own two feet.

That passion for the moped and motorcycle was amply displayed on Front Street, not only in the flash and glitter of the vehicles, but in the pleasure that the assembled group of owners, riders and admirers took in examining and commenting on the workmanship in chrome and multicoloured paints of the bikes. While Mobylettes, one including a video camera mounted on the handlebars, predominated, there were examples of Peugeot mopeds and larger motorbikes, all lovingly polished to a high gloss. The age group started in their mid-30s; a number of riders were in their mid-40s, a few somewhat older. Some professed that they restored

the bikes to revisit the machines their youth. Missing were the baby-boomers, for whom the Cyrus, Motom and Zundapp were the preferred vehicles, Mobylettes being confined largely to the females in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s.

The Front Street demonstration drew its machines and owners from all sectors of the community, but represents only one part of the heritage-bike phenomenon in Bermuda. There is a major club for members who own Triumph motorbikes, for example, and it is a pleasure to see them passing on their group rides about the Island roads. In particular, it is a delight to hear the distinct sound of the Triumph; in my day it signaled the approach of police bikes and the need to 'pull the setup' to return your multi-gear vehicle to its legal single-gear status. There is also at least one major collection of many different mopeds and bikes that would be wonderful to see on public exhibition one day, perhaps at the National Museum at Dockyard. So when riding in the Present, think of the Past in future, for something of you and yours may 'be History', in the nicest possible connotation of that expression.

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