

# An American Biker



## Saying Goodbye To *IronWorks*' Quiet Founder

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lives in Daytona. I quite clearly recall just how relaxed the evening seemed, hootin' and hollerin' and tellin' jokes and talking with our hands. In light of Dennis' critical surgery 10 months previous, the evening to me was flesh and blood proof of a fast, full recovery.

I last saw him at the Indianapolis dealer show. He might have seemed a bit subdued, but I'm sure I took it for the same fatigue everyone feels hauling show bags full of new catalogs around the hall for three days. We talked a few times after the show but missed each other at Bike Week. What the hell, there's always another event, show, gathering.

He called in June to say he was stepping down as editor. It was our final conversation. Then he was gone.

**Some time back, I'd pestered** him about my goofy concept, Project OLAF. One Lap Around Florida. I still hear his practical response, "Why?" Well, I live in the only state with a perimeter that can be ridden using only US highways the entire route, 1,700 miles give or take - a long run that takes in everything from Deep South swamps up on the Georgia border to the emerald Caribbean waters of the Keys. When I do this ride, now it'll be with Dennis in mind. And Bob Langille, Mike Cavinis, and a bunch of other cats that I sure hope can remember to save me a space out front, and a seat at the bar.

If we're showing up on your fax and you'd rather we wouldn't, please let us know and we won't.

Our business, for its relatively small size, is fairly well served in print. The titles are familiar to most everyone, and we can usually anticipate the rotating topics. Daytona. Sturgis. How to. Why not. Within the family, a handful of editors wrestle with too small budgets, too few advertisers, and too thin a staff. Here's what I'll remember about one of the best.

The first time I met Dennis Stemp face-to-face was in Cordelle, Georgia. I was heading home to Florida from Natchez. He was on his way southwest to Montgomery from North Carolina. The country ham served for breakfast at the Ramada Inn there is one of I-75 Through Georgia's few highlights.

We'd arranged a meeting to visit on the business of motorcycles and their relationship to our mutual interest in the aesthetics of graphic design and typography. I remember the outcome well because of the number of times I'd been to Plains hoping for a glimpse of Jimmy and Rosilynn Carter. He won the quinella on his first pass through. I hasten to point out that this only occurred after I told him the former president he'd end up shaking hands with that day lived only 30 miles or so west of where we sat finishing our bisquits and grits.

Over the years I've especially enjoyed seeing his columns progress from good through better to outstanding, under his acknowledged tutelage by Marilyn and her professional background in journalism. His candor, enthusiasm, and full measure of integrity are what make ad departments shudder. It wasn't without basis, or indignation, that he wrote what he believed.

I didn't know him back when he lived in Indian Rocks Beach, just a few blocks from where I still get my mail, in a collection of quaint cottages that was then, and is now, referred to as "the ghetto". Some ghetto. Sunsets over the Gulf of Mexico just a few yards from the front

porch. Pelicans. Terns. Sandpipers. Dolphins. That was when Zen And The Art Of... was vogue. He worked for a time at a printer I used. We knew some of the same front office folks.

Another mutual irony includes our being charter members of the Original Skinny Guys XL Cafe Racer Owners Society, an elite group that, in the late seventies, rode the hippest H-D offering in a fad that had already fled. Sometimes he'd reminisce about his, but never with enough nostalgia to take me up on my offer to sell the '77 XLCR that's still sitting in the garage.



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We've got a little land in Louisiana, on US 61 between Baton Rouge and Natchez. Dennis, curious, would ask about the region and the routes we took getting to and from. So I sent him a package of travel clippings and maps on that sugar sand and raw oysters stretch of Florida's Big Bend, the Gulf Coast running east of Pensacola that recalls the culture and climate I knew growing up. After his first surgery, he and Marilyn took the kids and each other on an adventure, using the maps and info as a starting point for discovering what I love most about the South. He told me afterwards that he enjoyed the trip. I felt really good about that.

In a serendipitous collaboration, I was able to hook him up with an engine builder client for his spectacular Fossil Flyer build, unveiled at last year's BiketOberfest. Instead of just another ho-hum heartless Evo, he birthed the Mother of all Knuckles - the most feral (to me) bike project, both in scope and execution, I've seen.

We had a couple of beers together then, Dave Ramsey, his publisher, Paul Holdsworth, IW sales rep, and a high school pal of mine who

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