

In Memory of George Rahn

December 6, 1934 to July 24, 2016

By Ron Hurlburt #37390

IF YOU EVER TRAVELED THROUGH Fairbanks, Alaska, in the last 50 or so years and needed BMW service or advice, you met George Rahn. His dealership, Trail's End BMW, was located down Westwood Way, off College Road, on the banks of Noyes Slough, the last driveway on the left and identified by a single BMW roundel on a post. The facility was unconventional by BMW corporate standards, but not unusual for Fairbanks.

Turning into the driveway led you past a cluster of old bikes, a couple of Isettas and maybe a car. Beyond that, when you found a BMW motorcycle displayed in a picture window, you knew you were there.

Access to the showroom was by several steep steps leading to the front door where a clipboard hung on a nail to one side. If George was gone during business hours he left a note, and you were invited to leave one, too.

The showroom was small with no more than four or five bikes, including whatever was displayed in the window as well as the piano. Between the showroom and the trailer's kitchen was a narrow hallway full of parts bins. I never saw how George got the bikes up the stairs into the showroom, but in 1990 when I bought a new K 75 S, George had me keep one foot on the end of a 2x6 while he coasted the bike down the steep incline.

The rest of the property was a scattered mix of sheds and small

outbuildings, at least one with a wood stove to allow service work in cold weather and a pit dug into the permafrost to store tires, keeping them frozen solid until needed. The surrounding black spruce forest held a treasure trove of BMWs, some pristine, some cannibalized for parts, some awaiting a rebuild during the off season. Some bikes were covered with tarps, some gathering dust. To me the arrangement seemed cha-

generation of boxers. I guess I passed muster, because when I later offered to buy a new R 60/7, we shook hands, and I wrote a check.

George didn't suffer fools, gladly or otherwise. If he didn't like you, he wouldn't sell you a motorcycle. Period. Show up with a dirty bike and you'd hear about it. Ask for something he didn't think you needed and you probably wouldn't get it. But if he saw

that you treated the motorcycle with the respect it deserved and you were willing to listen and learn, quite likely you'd be welcomed back.

Running a one-person dealership was a constant balancing act. If George trusted you with tools, you might find yourself under a shed roof or in an outbuilding, wrench in hand, doing something you'd never done before, with just a bit of guidance from the master. He did all the servicing and selling and adhered rather strictly to the shop hours he'd set, but if tourists from Europe dropped by or an old friend happened to be passing through, he always made

time to go get a beer or coffee.

George wasn't a tall man, maybe 5' 6", but he had an incredible sense of balance on a motorcycle, and seat height never seemed to be a problem. When I'd leave the shop in summer, once in a while he'd offer to ride along as I returned to Goldstream Valley, where I had lived for a couple of decades. He'd grab the nearest bike, usually a R 100 RS, and we'd be together until we hit Ballaine Road. Then he'd take off, flat on the gas tank, and disappear in the distance. When I met up with him at the top of the hill, his grin said it all. He was a professional rider on the ultimate riding machine. No way could I keep up with that man,



George, center, with his son (standing).

otic, but somehow George had everything cataloged in his head.

Just about everyone in Fairbanks knew of George. He was the guy riding the R 65 or the sidehack downtown for coffee when the ice fog was nearly at ground level and the temperature hovered around -30 Fahrenheit. I met him in the mid-70's when my assistant professor's salary increased just enough to allow me to upgrade from Nortons and BSAs to BMWs.

I had been warned that George could be a little bit gruff, so all through the dog and pony show I paid close attention as he explained the smoothness, low center of gravity and other features of the current

especially on the R 60/7.

One of George's personal bikes was an older sidecar rig, maybe an R 60, with just a flatbed for the car. One day when visiting the shop, I found a note on the clipboard that said he'd gone to the North Pole to a garage sale and gave an ETA for his arrival, so I sat on the steps and waited. Before long, I heard him coming down the driveway with a 15-cubic foot chest freezer strapped to the platform. He'd wedged some rags between the freezer and the handlebar end. Steering was a little tricky, he said, but he got a great deal on the freezer. That was George.

When the K 75 S was introduced, I decided I had to have one. George had a red 1987 model in stock, maybe the first one in Fairbanks, and he offered to take my R 100 S in trade. He'd deliver it in the morning, he said, after warming it up overnight. I was living in town temporarily, maybe three miles away, and sure enough, the next morning the shiny machine turned in by the garage. He rode the trade-in home. It was about -30 Fahrenheit. He warned me that if I went out on the new bike to be careful because the engine braking was more than I was used to on the boxers and a big deal on icy roads. I stayed home.

Our friendship continued after I left Fairbanks. I rode up from Juneau for the 1990 K 75 S, trading a 1977 R 100 RS I'd bought from Ozzie's BMW in Chico, California. I don't think George ever charged retail price for anything because the deals he gave were incredible. I suspect that new K probably was not much above his cost.

Time passed. I moved to Homer for the first decade of this century, a destination for summer travellers. I knew George used to go there sometimes, so I called and extended an invitation to visit. By that time, though, I think his trips were closer to home. On another call he told me BMW had dropped him as a dealer because his facility didn't meet the standards the company now demanded. Okay, be that way. He became a Royal Enfield dealer and remained one until the end. If I had been living closer, I might have owned a Royal Enfield. ☺

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