

You never forget your *best one*

By Francie Healy



“Either the bike goes or the wife goes,” says Hilton Browne, age 84, a twinkle in his eye.

Looks like the bike won. Hilton Browne is a confirmed bachelor.

Until recently, his best bike had its own spot in the front room of his house, sitting there immaculately clean and polished like a piece of fine art.

Motorcycles have been part of his life since 1944, when he was 16 and could legally drive. They have been his friends, his children, his world. He knows them literally inside out. He loves the way they work, sound, perform. Like a great maestro, he knows every sound in the symphony of the motor, and precisely what tweaking it needs.

He rode his bikes on the back roads and highways, through Lanark, around Calabogie, up to Renfrew, even to Toronto and back in a day. He took his bikes apart and put them back together again. He washed and buffed and fine-tuned them.

He has stopped riding them now, but only recently. They're still fresh in his mind. He talks about them with passion and knowledge.

Hilton Browne is a legend in the world of vintage motorcycles. He's friendly, funny, enthusiastic, knowledgeable and full of stories. You like him the moment you meet him.

“Everywhere you go with Hilton,” says his long-time friend Leighton Brown, a fellow vintage motorcycle enthusiast, “you run into someone who knows him.”

Part of that is likely because of Hilton’s former job as a popular wholesale confectionery salesman to all the little country stores throughout Eastern Ontario. And besides, he’s just the kind of guy you want to say hello to.

He grew up on a farm south of Russell, Ont., “out past the pine trees at the end of the village...some of those trees are probably still there”.

He remembers those years fondly. Well, mostly.

He didn’t much like watching his father, who was a butcher, do his work. He didn’t like the killing. An animal lover, he refused to go hunting with his dad. (“I’m not a hunter,” he says. “No sir! I wouldn’t kill an animal for anything.”)

He raised his own pigs, and loved them, and would scratch them behind the ears “until they lay down like babies”. And that made it all the harder on him when they came to their intended end.

But he and his dad (“a big man with strong hands”) did enjoy fishing and spending time together at their hunt camp near Flower Station, north of Hopetown in Lanark Country. (The gravel roads were not a good place to take a bike, he says. Made them too dirty.) His Dad died at 92. He had gone completely blind, and yet he still liked to go up to the hunt camp and stay there for a week all by himself. Hilton took him there.

He speaks respectfully of his father, highly of his mother, and with unabashed sweet affection for his grandmother.

His grandmother used to knit so much and so often that she developed a knitting callus on her thumb, which Hilton remembers as if it were yesterday. His mother loved and grew flowers, and, says Hilton, used to bake the best rhubarb pies in the county. She would stay awake at night, worrying about him, until he got home on his bike.

“She knew when I was out girlin’,” he says, grinning.

He had an older brother who later became an Ottawa policeman and provided him with a nephew, Jimmy. He’s proud of Jimmy.

Hilton never, ever, in his whole life, took a drink. He hates alcohol and always has. However, he used to smoke Winchester and Buckingham cigarettes. They were unfiltered: “I wouldn’t give you five cents for a crate of cigarettes with filters,” he says rather righteously. He loved cigars and said he could inhale “right

down into my lungs” without it ever bothering him. (He quit many years ago when he developed pneumonia.)

The only thing he loves almost as much as motorcycles are candies. He used to buy jellybeans, put them in his desk at school, get caught, have them confiscated, then bring more back to school the next day. He loved black licorice and Bungalow chocolates. And pails of Patterkrisp, in the green pail with the picture of a happy child on it.

As he talks about his love of sweets, he pulls two candies out of his shirt pocket and holds them up as evidence that he’s still equipped.

His first bike, when he was in his early 20s, was a Whizzer – a bicycle with a motor attached. It was built by the Schwinn Bike Company.

“That little engine was so smooth,” he says, sounding just like a teenager. “Oh, it was so nice!”

He kept a stick of rosin in his back pocket “for a little rub” on the drive belt, which would sometimes slip. He’d reach down and rub the rosin along the belt while he was riding.

“It’s a wonder I didn’t get my fingers taken off,” he says.

He sold the Whizzer for about \$60. “That was a lot of money in those days.”

He always liked small motors, particularly the gasoline-powered Iron Horse engines that farmers used in order to pump water from old dug wells. And he liked Gravelly tractors so much that he’d pick up old abandoned ones, restore them like new and then often give them away.

He wishes he had dropped out of school sooner and had just gone to night class to learn more about engines. But with his tremendous facility for anything mechanical, he probably taught himself far more than any teacher could.

He takes it in his stride. “When you take something apart once,” he says, “you never forget.”

On Sundays, he’d wax his bike with Cadillac’s “Blue Coral” paste wax (he bought it by the case), and woe betide anyone who touched it and left handprints on it after that.

On Saturday nights he’d wash his bike with Fab soap and clean the castings with Harley-Davidson *Gunk*.

“It smelled like creosote,” he says,” and it just about took your skin off. I’d go for a ride and could smell that Gunk everywhere. It’s a wonder it didn’t kill me. It was like acid, that stuff. I shoulda wore rubber gloves. It looked like molasses.

“You’d paint it on and then let it sit, then spray it with the garden hose. But it made the metal castings come out so nice and bright – oh, it was nice.”

Leighton, his friend, likes to tell about the recent auction at Hilton’s house – the one Hilton had lived in since he was born and where he kept his cache of motorcycle “stuff”.

“Hilton never throws away anything,” he says, “so people were paying \$100 for empty Gunk and old oil cans. They’re apparently collectors’ items now.”

Hilton kept all the service records for each of his bikes and also a logbook for each. In it, he recorded what he did, when he did it, what kind of oil he used, when he changed it, what the mileage was, when he changed the spark plugs, and so on.

That’s the thing about respecting your bike, he says. “If you’re good to it, it’ll be good to you.”

Hilton tended to have one motorcycle at a time, to be a one-bike, BMW-kind-of-guy, but over the years he had his fair share of beautiful machines.

He wasn’t sad about selling his home of 84 years. He felt it was time. Now he reminisces with friends and talks about bikes.

“I’ve had a wonderful life,” he says, popping a peppermint into his mouth. “And I’ve still got a good heart.”