

Circus Cowboys

“It was just one of those Utopian situations, where we were all over there, doing what we wanted to do most, and getting paid for it. We didn't make a lot of money, because travel expenses ate into the budget, but it was just such a wonderful experience.” – Keith Bryen

“We had a bloody good time!” -- Eric Hinton

Text:

Some towns mark the arrival of spring by the first call of a migratory bird. In the coal-mining town of St Wendel in the 1950s, there was a distinctive sound in the streets and parks that signalled not so much the coming of spring as the first rustle of excitement for the town's largest annual event.

Bernd Bouillon and his school mates would take a clothes peg and attach a piece of cardboard to the forks of their bicycles. You've probably done this. It creates a “motor” sound as the cardboard flicks against the wheel spokes. As they rode, “cardboard” motor revs rising with wheel speed, the boys would claim the names of their heroes.

“I'm Gary Hocking!”

“I'm Ernst Degner!”

They also made race-bike style number plates for their bicycles. The annual St Wendel road race was still six weeks away, but already the boys were excited. Bernd remembers visiting the office of rennleitner August Balthasar in mid March to ask if the race programme was ready. Balthasar kindly suggested he come back at the end of April.

Bernd Bouillon attended his first St Wendel race* in 1955, barely a month after he started school. The son of a local coal miner, he was hooked from the start. As a schoolboy, he was friends with Balthasar's son. That didn't stop Bernd and his mates jumping the fence to avoid paying for race entry.

Interest in the race was officially encouraged. School teachers took their students to the paddock on the Friday before the race, to see the men and machines.

For the town's youngsters, the coming of the racers was a highlight. It was the equivalent in an Australian country town of the annual show, with tent boxers, sideshow performers, ferris wheels and rodeo riders. For the young women, perhaps the interest of a dashing young rider. For the adults, an influx of money to the town; perhaps some direct income from accommodating race visitors or selling food on race day.

Normal business was shut down and St Wendel burst with visitors, including a top German celebrity to parade before the races and perform at the race presentation dinner-dance. The registration plates on their motorcycles and cars showed many travelled hundreds of kilometres to be there.

On race day, Bernd Bouillon Snr photographed the riders. Bernd Jnr still has his pictures of the Hinton brothers and Gary Hocking with their winner's laurels. In 1958, however, young Bernd was captivated by a newcomer from Australia, Tom Phillis. He saw Tom in the paddock. It wasn't so much that Phillis finished fourth in the 350 race and third in the 500

class on debut. It was the idea of someone from halfway around the world racing in Bernd's town.

Phillis had come to St Wendel for the first time in the closing days of April 1958. He was 24 years old and just beginning his European adventure. Unlike established star Keith Campbell in 1956, there was no Cadillac. Tom and Betty Phillis had sold virtually everything they owned to buy their boat tickets, two Manx Nortons and an old furniture van. It was their entrée to the Continental Circus.

“The first time I noticed Tom 1958 when he was working on a Norton. My favourite rider was always Tom Phillis. With our cycles and ‘motors’, I was Tom!” Bernd told the author in 2006.

“The first time (in 1958) Tom was my favorite rider because he came from so far away (Australia); it was not his personality. As a little boy, I thought that the moon must be nearer than his country.”

In 1961, young Bernd rode his push bike just beyond to the far north-west corner of the circuit, to the new paddock in a former French army barracks. There he found Phillis in his van. He nervously approached his hero for an autograph. He was delighted and surprised by the reception.

“My first encounter with Tom was in 1961 in the paddock in St Wendel. He was working in his van (he changed oil for the suspension strut I guess). I watched him, in one hand the program and a small booklet for the autographs. Tom noticed me and gave me the autograph. I was over the moon!

“I was a little boy, but he was so kind to take time and give me an autograph. A treasure to me. It was absolutely different to Jim Redman. I was waiting a very long time in front of his caravan. He had seen me and that I was waiting for an autograph, but he did not come outside. Then his wife saw me and I heard her something say to Jim that I did not understand. But I guess it was: ‘look at the little boy, he is waiting for an autograph’, because suddenly Jim came out and gave me an autograph. I was waiting a very long time for it.”

Phillis' act of kindness, to a boy of 12, has stayed in Bouillon's heart.

“When I heard of Tom's (fatal) accident on the Isle of Man (in 1962), I was determined to go to the IoM sometime and to visit the place where he has been killed. It took a long, long time, but in 1997 I visited the Island for the first time and went to Laurel Bank.”

Bernd Bouillon still has his Tom Phillis autograph, in blue ink on a slip of white paper. It's his reminder of his hero, one of the many visitors who once a year came from so far away to thrill the crowds – young and old. They were the circus cowboys.

Extract from a book of Mr. Don Cox, Australia (the book is still in progress, it will be published in 2010)

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