

AMCA Pioneer: Bob Stark



As the AMCA celebrates its 60th anniversary in 2014, AMCA Pioneers highlights some of the volunteers who have helped build the Club from an idea in the minds of four founders in 1954 to a 10,000-member organization today.

Bob Stark is one of those guys who has been around antique motorcycles since before they were antique.

Bob grew up in Akron, Ohio, where he was the son of the man who ran the Indian dealership. So it's no surprise that Bob's first bike was a used Indian that cost him \$50.

But it's his second bike that really makes the point about Bob Stark's lifelong relationship with motorcycles—particularly Indian motorcycles. It's a 1948 Indian Chief that he bought in 1951, when it was just three years old. Today, Bob still has that machine, which has become known as "Big Red." And over the 63 years he's owned it, he's put more than 240,000 miles on it.

That gives Bob a unique perspective on old bikes, and on the antique-motorcycle movement that has been fostered by the AMCA for the last 60 years.

Bob's father sold his Akron Indian dealership in 1952, just one year before the original company went under. Five years later, Bob and his brother reopened the same shop, selling the rebadged Royal Enfields that were marketed as Indians from 1955 to 1959.

Bob moved to Florida, then back

to Ohio, and finally, to Southern California, where he worked on the team that guided the Surveyor 1 spacecraft to the first successful soft landing of an unmanned American craft on the moon in 1966.

Throughout that time, he continued working on Indian motorcycles. In Florida, he built bikes in the living room of a home he rented. And in California, he worked in his garage, eventually building a clientele that included actor Steve McQueen.

During those years, the motorcycles made by the original Indian company went through all the stages you would expect of orphan machines. First, they were contemporary bikes, still sitting on showroom floors. Then, they were used machines, still with plenty of life in them. Slowly, though, they turned into relics of an earlier time, exactly the bikes the AMCA was founded to preserve.

"I first came into contact with the AMCA in the mid-'60s," Bob says. Back then, the AMCA was mostly a regional group, based in the Northeast. Old-bike fans on the West Coast tended to belong instead to the Classic and Antique Motorcycle Association (CAMA). Eventually, though, CAMA faded away, and the same group of enthusiasts became the core of the AMCA in the Golden State.

Bob was involved with the Southern California Chapter, which ran some early AMCA events in the state.

Bob and Big Red: Bob Stark has owned and ridden this 1948 Indian Chief, known as Big Red, since 1951. He says he's put 240,000 miles on it.

"We had our own style of meets," Bob says. "The Club had rules they would send out, and we would look at them and say, 'This part will work, but this isn't good.' So we'd make our own rules."

Through that time period, membership continued to grow in California, until it now contains more AMCA members than any other single state.

For his part, Bob remained focused on a critical aspect of the antique-motorcycle world. Through his work on old Indians, he realized that the survival of these machines would depend upon having an ongoing supply of parts to keep them running. And with the manufacturer out of the picture, that meant the enthusiasts would need to make their own.

In 1970, Bob quit his job in the aerospace industry and founded Starklite Cycle so he could devote his full-time efforts to working on Indians. Over the past 44 years, Starklite has grown into a major company, supplying more than 4,000 parts and accessories to the antique Indian motorcycle community.

These days, Bob's son, Gary, is Starklite's CEO. But Bob hasn't lost his enthusiasm for the brand, or for

keeping old motorcycles running.

In addition to the 240,000 miles he's put on Big Red, Bob has logged more than 190,000 miles on his "Rainbow" Chief, with a distinctive paint scheme pioneered at the Akron shop owned by Bob's dad and subsequently adopted by the factory.

Plus, he continues to foster racing of antique Indians. Bob himself raced for 58 years, mostly flat-tracking a 1949 Indian Arrow, the 220cc single the company produced in an effort to break into the lightweight market after World War II.

Eventually, he built a whole fleet of the Arrows—enough to fill an entire racing class. When his doctor told them he would have to give up racing himself, he gave them to Mike O'Neil, who continues to stage Indian Arrow races on dirt tracks in various parts of the country.

All of it—the riding, racing and wrenching—stems from Bob's belief that motorcycles don't have to be parked when they get old. Instead, they can keep on rolling through the years.

"I want to keep these bikes on the road and keep people using them," he says. "I can get 100,000 miles out of a bottom end, and 50,000 miles out

of a top end. If you put them together properly, they're as reliable as modern bikes."

It's a point Bob Stark has been proving for more than 60 years.—*Bill Wood*

Bob and Mary Lou Stark have shared a love of old Indian motorcycles for decades.

