

THE BLACK TRUNK

OLD FORT YORK SECTION HISTORY

In March 1999, Scott Dixon arrived at Old Fort York's penthouse clubrooms above McBride's Cycle in Toronto with a large black trunk. The purpose of the trunk was to store OFY's valuable historical records, photographs, meeting minutes, and a coffee maker. The archive remained there until September 2006.

The Myth of Origin.

All societies have versions of the myth of origin, a narrative describing the creation of the group or culture. Usually the narrative is written long after the events described and it depends on folk memory. Old Fort York has not only a narrative based on folk memory but also documentary evidence of its foundation.

Bengt Sormon, a founding member, says that "the OFY section sprang out the womb of the Great Pine Ridge section for essentially the same reasons that spawned what you termed the Dark Star in 2015. Geographically the enthusiasts in Toronto needed a section that would serve them better location-wise." The cohesive element for the group was motorcycles, in a dense urban setting. As Mike Mehak has said, "Mike Johnston started the Old Fort York Section of the CVMG. The first meeting was in the kitchen of his and Lynda's house on Glen Ames, *the house with all the motorcycles*. I knew the house but not Mike." Farther north in mid-town Toronto, Dan Graham moved into his current house in the early '90s, brother Jim Graham says, "and his next-door neighbour, Harry Roberts [an OFY founding member], was over like a shot when he saw Dan and all his bikes moving in."

It is surprising in retrospect that there was not a Toronto section before 1994. The CVMG had 16 sections by then but only Montreal was in a large urban area. The CVMG has always had a strongly rural and small-city character. Vintage bike enthusiasts who lived in Toronto had to choose between the Toronto-Hamilton section (which changed its name to Golden Horseshoe shortly after Old Fort York was created) and Great Pine Ridge (GPR). Neither of these sections ever met in

Toronto. Analysis of the 1993 Roster shows that Toronto CVMG residents were pretty equally divided between Tor-Ham to the west of Yonge Street and GPR to the east of Yonge. Toronto members thus could find themselves having to ride west to a meeting in Waterdown or north to Keswick, each more than an hour outside the city.

By 1993 Mike Johnston of GPR (and a resident of the Beach) had become frustrated with the distance factor and decided to form a Toronto section. There must have been preliminary get-togethers in the fall of 1993 to consider forming a section, and one of those, at a GPR meeting in November 1993, is referenced in Ernie Olivo's "foundation letter." A decision was taken to try to establish a Toronto section; since only ten signatures were required by the CVMG to start a section, this was going to be easy.

The Documentary Evidence.

There is no paperwork in the CVMG files about the founding of OFY but there are numerous mentions in the *CVMG News*. The "Foundation Letter" appears in the January 1994 issue (p.4). In it, Ernie Olivo wrote that the two area sections "do not geographically service those who live in the city proper. Traffic conditions and distances make attending meetings difficult. . . ." Initial meetings would be held in the Beaches area, but could move depending on the membership's wishes. That letter also establishes the credo OFY has always followed: "the business part of our meetings will be absolutely minimal, with *the aim being to have fun with our friends and our vintage bikes.*"

The initial section meeting is thus identified: "Our first meeting will be held in Mike and Lynda Johnston's kitchen, 11 Glen Ames, at 7.30 PM on Wednesday January 12 [1994]." Section contacts were listed as Ernie Olivo, Mike Johnston and Ron Pope, all Toronto members of GPR.

Events moved quickly. By the February 1994 *CVMG News* issue (p.11), Toronto-Hamilton is already thinking about a name change in light of the "new CVMG Fort

York section”. In March (p.6) the Executive meeting minutes of January 16th say “our newest section is already well on its way to being set up. Fort York section now has 15 members signed up.” In the April issue (p.3), the CVMG Executive notes (of 27 Feb. 1994) report a motion to approve the establishment of OFY: **“The Old Fort York section of the CVMG is now an official section.”** This is also the first appearance of the word “Old” in Old Fort York.

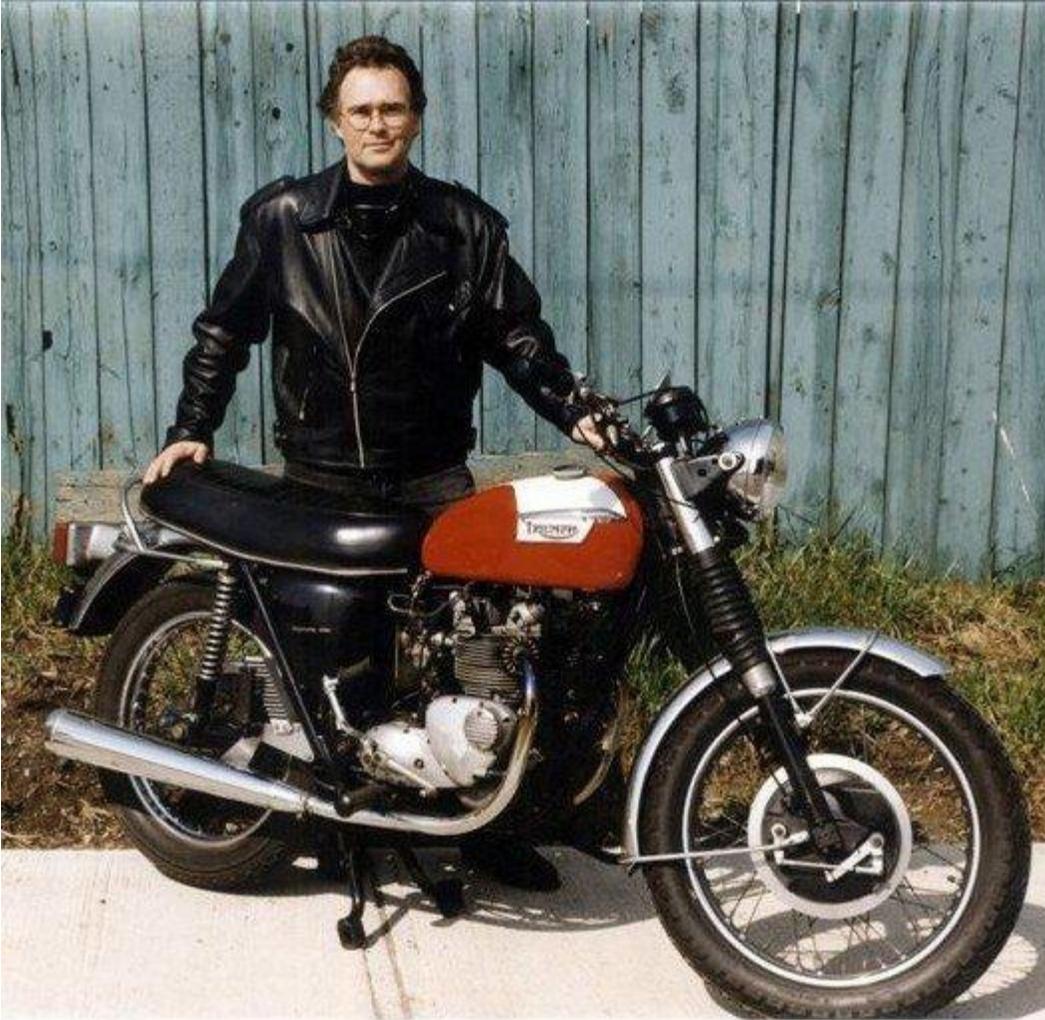
The first OFY section report, written by The Guv’nor, the late Harry Roberts, appeared in the May issue (p.8), commenting on the April section meeting. By this time the section had “25 to 30 members.”

The Founding Members.

Who was there first? is a question of the highest order of contention in all narratives of origin. Apart from the issue of what exactly is the date of the start, there is also the traditional prestige accorded to founders, from Adam and Eve to the Fathers of Confederation and the Mothers of Invention. Since we do not have the original CVMG document setting up the section, we cannot determine who was on that list, but the CVMG rules were followed. Joan Brewster was certainly one of the first; she remembers signing the document. Ken Turton confirms that he was at the first meeting.

Instead, the fallback is to go to another official publication, the 1994 CVMG Roster. Phil Goldsmith compiled this members’ list from the ’94 Roster:

Pat Archer, Graham Bell, Joan Brewster, Paul Chink, Phil Goldsmith, Robert Guillemette, Mike Johnston, Mike Mehak, Keith Morgan, Winfield Morris, David Neal, Ernie Olivo, Ron Pope, Robert Rivers, Harry Roberts, Kenneth Royds, Tom Saask, Andy Schywiola, Gordon Skerratt, Albert Skinner, Bengt Sormon, Ken Turton, Archibald Wright.



(Two of the Founding Members: Mike Johnston and Joan Brewster. The photographs are part of a series by Phil Goldsmith, taken just across the street from the Canary Restaurant in 1996. Mike displays his trusty Triumph Daytona 500. Joan's pride and joy ride is a 1977 Honda Super Sport 400, with the distinctive four-into-one exhaust.)



Since the Roster was produced in the early summer of 1994, this is as close as we can likely get to naming the Founding Members. Some of them came with CVMG experience, too. At that time, Robert Guillemette was on the National Executive, Mike Johnston was part of the CVMG Newsletter distribution team, Ron Pope had been the Secretary of GPR, and Joan Brewster, OFY's first female member, had been the Secretary of Toronto-Hamilton.

Of those 23, only Mike Johnston, Mike Mehak, Bengt Sormon, and Ken Turton are still in OFY. Goldsmith went on to found Ganaraska section, while Olivo started Rideau Lakes (and the Old Bastards Motorcycle Club). Harry Roberts (d. 2002), Win Morris (d.2016), and Archie Wright (d.2017) are no longer with us. Pope has transferred to the National section, Royds to Credit Valley, and Skerratt to Long Branch. Joan Brewster is still very active with Olde Norfolk.

Name and Logo.

An essential requirement for newly established groups is to project an identity, thus separating it from the parent group. Perhaps the first step in this process is to find a defining name. “Old Fort York” was one of the options, but was not preferred by all. Bengt Sormon: “I favoured a different name than Old Fort York as I deemed it not macho enough. Don't remember what it was, unfortunately.” Mike Mehak recalls that “the choice of names was discussed and I am not sure who suggested Old Fort York, but I do remember Ernie [Olivo] suggesting it had to have an easy-to-remember abbreviation! We had a brief and conclusive discussion on whether the “Old” should have an ‘e.’ The vote was no ‘e.’” So Old Fort York it was. The advantages of the name are obvious: it says Toronto without being Toronto-obvious and the historic reference aligns well with the idea of “vintage.”

Next to come would be a badge, the outward and visible sign of membership in the section, something to sew on your leather jacket. By one of those famous quirks of memory none of the early members recalls who designed the badge, only that it was approved by all. The *CVMG News* issues reveal the artist. In fact he is mentioned in that very first section report by Harry Roberts (May 1994): “we’ve decided on a name and *Paul Chink* came up with a logo.” It was probably just a drawing at this point, but it was ready in embroidered form by the December 1994 meeting (*News*, Jan. 1995, p.6): “Our new crests had arrived! Paul Chink had pulled off the most eye-catching design since Ron Pope’s GPR effort Look for them at the International Centre [Motorcycle Show]—we’re nothing if not flash.”

A present-day examination of the two badges shows how similar they are. Both are in roundel form with an identifying ring around the circumference giving the section name around the top and CVMG (or C.V.M.G. in OFY’s version) on the lower part of the ring. The central ground gives the symbolic identifiers: both have a stylized vintage motorcycle in the bottom quadrant (GPR’s is in silhouette) and replacing the GPR’s open road in a forest is OFY’s Fort York blockhouse. The predominant colours for OFY are red and black (vs GPR’s green and yellow) and OFY’s badge lacks the large ribboned banner with the section initials across the centre of the roundel.



The badge comparison suggests not only the connection of OFY to GPR but also the beginning of OFY's independent life. The creation of OFY had involved separating from the "mother section" (as GPR was then referred to) but the split was amicable. OFY members continued to help out at GPR's annual Fall show at Vandorf for some years after this.

There were other ways to mark OFY's identity. In the early years, badges, hats and T-shirts seemed to be ordered at yearly intervals, helped by the organizational skills of Ron Pope and the fortuitous discovery that Win Morris's son-in-law operated a regalia company. There will be more to say on this topic when we consider the Lucas Push, below.

In the October 1994 issue, the *CVMG News* editor asked, with a quaintness enhanced by the succeeding twenty-three years of progress, "Is anyone on Internet?" The section report writer mentioned that OFY was discussing "developing a webpage on the internet" (March 1998, p.23). By May 2000, the section report noted that "an email update was available for computer geeks." The webpage oldfortyorkcvmg.org finally came into being in October 2000, and thus OFY's *virtual identity-making* was complete. (That website remained largely unaltered until the newly renovated one was premiered in January 2017.)

Restoration, Racing, Riding.

The restoration of old motorcycles is a given in OFY, although not to the exclusion of all else. Section reports over the years do not tend to highlight renovation projects in print, but the physical evidence has always been on the road, from the beginning. The December 1994 CVMG *News* report, for example, prints some handy hints for OFY restorers. In January 1995, members are urged to “keep working on your restorations.” A 2003 report highlighted Mike Mehak’s Kawasaki H1 triple resto as better than new. The section reporter for July 2001, Ron Pope, listed no fewer than eight bikes of section members in various stages of renewal, from a 1935 Norton 16H to a 1975 Trident T150. In more recent times, OFYers such as Chris Chown, Phil Goldsmith, Glenn Holdbrook, Matthew Manton, Craig Smith, and Dave Smith, to name a few, have produced beautiful machines.

The point of having old bikes is to ride them. If you like to ride, then chances are you like to go fast, and some riders compete to go faster than anyone else, so they go racing. OFY has had a significant number of members who raced, some in the pro ranks before the section existed and some later in Vintage Road Racing. A partial list includes Jim and Dan Graham (of Team Truck), Dave Jackson and Fraser McAninch (both of whom were in the Canadian Moto GP in 1967), Alex Loizou, Paul Haines, Dave Jones, Ernie Olivo, Rob Guillemette, and Glenn Cochrane. Dave Smith has done speed trials on the Bonneville Salt Flats.

In the March 2000 issue of CVMG *News*, Ron Pope’s section report starts with this sentence, which could be considered both accurate but understated: “OFY continues to emphasize riding and having fun.” For many OFY members, the two are one. The September 1994 report, compiled towards the end of the section’s first riding season, gives a massive list of journeys, first to Quinte, then evening rides to Applewood Cruiser nights in Mississauga, a whole encyclopedia of history rides, and a run en masse to the Paris Rally.

History runs were common to both OFY and other sections, and were encouraged by the CVMG’s awareness of the millennium year. Shorter runs were taken by OFY every Sunday, first just to breakfast at the Canary and later the Queensdale in downtown Toronto, but later out in the country to find rural breakfast spots.

Perhaps the wildest idea was that proposed by Dave Jones, who February 1999 suggested “night runs to Montreal.” This was indeed curious, but Dave being a racer, perhaps he thought night-time was the right time to break the sound barrier on the 401 and not get caught. This was never followed up.



(The first group photo is from the Spring Ride of 1997 to Chandler Point Lakeside Lodge on Lake Kashagawigamog. L to R standing: Harry Roberts, Hassan Javaheri, Joan Brewster, AnnMarie Frisby, Wanda Neal, Dave Neal, Terry Sorman, Phil Goldsmith, Bengt Sormon, unknown, Win Morris, Alistair Frisby, Ken Wren, John Alldredge, Scott Dixon.

Front: Mike Johnston, Lynda Johnston.

The bike is Bengt Sormon's Triumph, '70 Frame, '73 Motor.)

(The second group photos dates from the Haliburton Spring Ride of 1998. A copy of this used to hang in the Queensdale. Standing, L to R.: Unknown, Harry Roberts, Ray Engel, Doug Sanderson, Bev Klestorny, Phil Goldsmith, Jim Graham, Bob Rivers, Terry Sormon, Scott Dixon, Bengt Sormon, unknown.

Front, L to R: Dan Klestorny, Tim McNamara, John Walters, Ron Pope, Dan Graham, Ken Wren.)



Almost every culture and group establishes its processes and traditions in the early years. These are later modified, but more rarely are they abandoned. The tradition of OFY's Spring Ride (later to be bookended by a Fall Ride) was started for 1995 by

Phil Goldsmith, route planner extraordinaire. That May 1995 trip went to Mt Julian Lodge on Stony Lake, northeast of Toronto (*News*, June 1995). Thereafter there were rides to Chandler Point Lakeside Lodge on Lake Kashagawigamog near Minden, to Tweed in eastern Ontario, and eventually over the years the itineraries covered the whole of Southern Ontario.

A hardcore in the OFY list has specialized in the ultra-long-distance ride. The first in the section to do so was the late Harry Roberts. The Guv'nor retired from teaching in May 1998 and promptly set off for Dawson Creek on his 1971 BMW 75/7, landing back in Toronto in exactly three weeks. Three years later Phil Goldsmith did a round trip to Newfoundland; exactly a decade later (2011), John Pepper reached the most easterly point in Newfoundland on his 1956 Norton ES2 single. Phil later (August 2004) led a ride with Kevin Conboy and John Walters to the Yukon. Two years before that, Walters had ridden Route 66 all the way to LA. In 2006, Michel Mersereau rode to California and back on his 1975 Triumph Bonneville, definitely an act of bravery, which he said he would never repeat on a Triumph, having very nearly died of heat stroke in Death Valley. In winter 2017, Nancy Irwin rode her mid 80s R80GS Paris-Dakar, solo, to a BMW Rally in El Salvador, and back.

The long distance rides were not merely in North America. Ursula Foster has put 220,000 kilometres on her 1982 BMW R65, venturing solo not only all over North America, but also all over Europe and the Near East, from Norway to Turkey. Terry Buckley has ridden from John O'Groats in Scotland to Land's End in Cornwall as well as all over eastern Australia, while both he and Paul Martin (on his Honda CBX shipped from Toronto) have ridden extensively in the Italian and Swiss Alps on several occasions. Finally, we should mention Dorien Berteletti, who competed in the 2004 Motogiro in Italy, one of the most famous motorcycle events in the world, on his 1971 Nuovo Falcone 500; a full report is in the *CVMG News*, July 2004.

The Golden Age.

As part of their narrative of origin, many groups have a “golden age,” characterised by harmony, stability, and peace. After the foundation of OFY in 1994, meetings were held in members' homes. When the group reached thirty members, this proved unwieldy, and so OFY moved to the Beaches Recreation Centre on Williamson

Road for a time. Then on 4 October 1995, OFY held its first meeting at McBride's Cycle near Keele and Dundas. For motorcyclists this was like being in paradise, to be able to meet once a month surrounded by the sight and smell of dozens of brand new motorcycles. Our McBride's tenancy was organized by member John Alldredge, a Honda mechanic and employee; we even had our own clubrooms on the third floor, where OFY's famous Black Trunk was kept.

Sunday breakfast meetings were subject to a similar process. The first location, the famous Canary Restaurant on Cherry Street, was authentic Old Toronto, but rough-edged. Mike Mehak recalls "that the first breakfast was at the original Canary. . . . It was reasonably priced but a little tired as it relates to décor. In fact the first time I took my 3-year-old daughter there, as soon as she walked in she asked "what's that smell?" Judging by the hole in the washroom floor, it was just a little basement must Unfortunately the Chef was not that reliable so we switched to the Queensdale, which was a great place for many years." The Queensdale, on Queen just west of Broadview, became a very popular meeting place and quite a few members joined because they saw all the bikes parked outside.

After the Golden Age.

Harry Roberts. Meetings at McBride's and the Queensdale continued happily into the first decade of the new century. In golden-age narratives, happiness abounds and while people grow older they do not appear to age. But equally so in such narratives, nothing lasts forever. The first inkling of this was the death from leukaemia of the soul of the section, Harry Roberts, at age 62, in January 2002. This struck the members profoundly. OFY member Dan Klestorny, then the Present of CVMG, wrote a funny and touching editorial in the March 2002 issue of the *News*. In that issue's section report, Harry's closest friend, Ernie Olivo, wrote that "in the vintage bike crew we say that something rare and hard to replace is made of unobtainium. Harry Roberts was made of pure unobtainium." The following September, OFY members organized a Harry Roberts Memorial Ride, whose route took riders past Harry's home and eventually to the old GPR breakfast place at Ringwood.

The Queensdale breakfast joint went well at first, despite an altercation in 2001 over the new city non-smoking by-law between a member and the management, who were

not enforcing the ordinance. The restaurant was heavily fined. Then in late 2003, as the area began to gentrify, the Queensdale's lease expired. It was replaced by a pretentious gastro-pub and OFY began to look for a new location, a search which ushered in two years of pointless debate over where to have Sunday breakfast, the so-called "breakfast wars." The subsequent choice, Leonard's on Laird Drive, continued along nicely until 2016 when it too closed under development pressure following the death of the owner.

McBride's. Meanwhile, things were not all rosy at McBride's. In part this was again because of development pressure in the big city, a fact of life for OFYers, and in part a result of family disagreement. Some of the McBride family wanted to continue operating while others wanted to cash out. In May 2006, OFY held its last meeting there and over that summer the business was wound up. On a rescue mission, Chris Chown retrieved the OFY Black Trunk and bundled it home. At the September 2006 meeting, "we purged items deemed non-essential." When Scott Dixon reclaimed the Black Trunk, it was empty. The paper history of OFY had thus ceased to exist. McBride's stood empty for two years then was torn down. As is so often the case in Toronto, a condominium building was eventually built on the vacant lot.

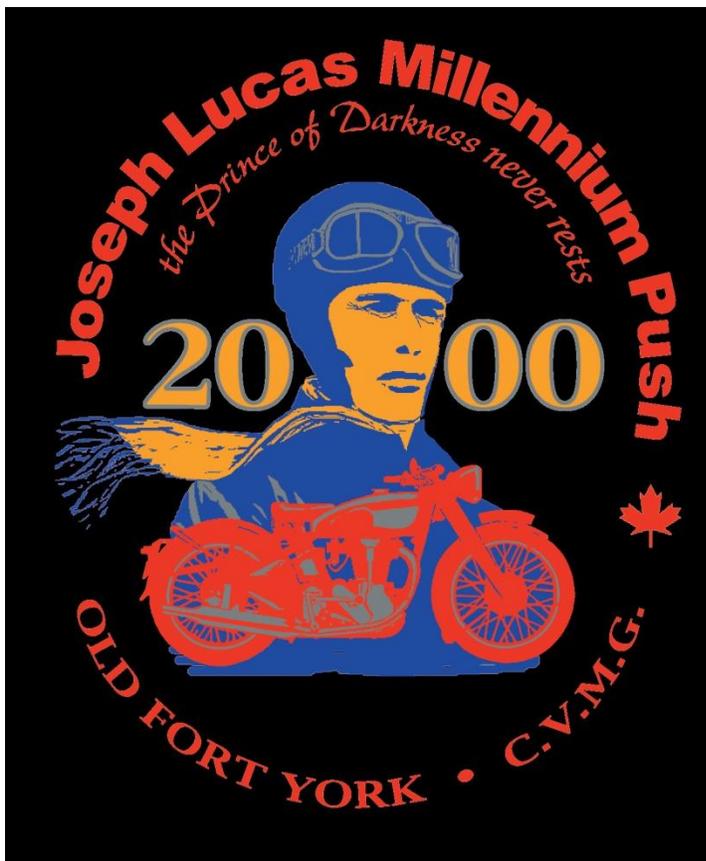
Royal Canadian Legion Branch 101. When you are tossed out of paradise, where do you find a home? With the help of OFY member Ken Turton, we gained access to the Long Branch Legion starting in February 2007. According to the section reports of the time, the move to this location was meant to be temporary, for one or two years, until we could find something more central. But inertia set in and there was no organized will to change at first. However, although worthy and welcoming, the Legion was a gloomy and somewhat run-down facility. This was bearable, but some members eventually began to feel that a monthly meeting location in the extreme southwest of Toronto was not serving the geographical needs of the section, which was exactly the reasoning in the creation of OFY out of GPR and Toronto-Hamilton back in 1994.

This situation finally blew up in 2015, when a reformation group proposed a more central location, a long established pub, the Madison, near Bloor and Spadina, close to the geographical centre of Toronto. This was trialled and seemed to be workable, but a counter-reformation group including two members of the section executive

tried to block it as a permanent location for OFY's monthly meeting. The members voted and when democracy prevailed the two executive members resigned. In short order they returned with a small group to the Legion and established the new Long Branch section.

It was unfortunate that this acrimonious event split the section. What started as a simple dispute over where to hold the monthly meeting (centrally located pub or Legion on the periphery), gradually came to represent the pressures and complexities of satisfying CVMG members in a very dense urban scene. What was later interpreted as a conflict of "vintage" philosophies was supercharged by strongly held personal opinions which did not cohere with those of majority of OFY members. Altogether, this is yet more evidence that CVMG sections in very large urban settings are affected by forces beyond their control, forces that make riding and meeting very challenging.

Continuity. Twenty-four years ago, OFY's "Foundation Letter" promoted the aim of the section: "to have fun with our friends and our vintage bikes."



(The Millennium Lucas Push T-shirt was designed by Ron Pope.)

That is nowhere better seen than in OFY's most famous tradition, the Lucas Push.

The Lucas Push. In the *CVMG News* of September 1994 Harry Roberts observed that “my '68 BSA fell to the spell of Joseph Lucas and ran on twisted wire. To honour said Joseph Lucas, we are going to have a special run—stay tuned.”

Presumably by this point, some of the details had been worked out. As Mike Johnston says, “the original idea came out of a discussion between Harry, Ernie [Olivo], Ron [Pope] and I at Feathers on Kingston Road. Harry's idea, we fleshed it out as we drank!” With a context like that, it was inevitable that the idea was going to involve beer and motorcycles.

And so was born the Joseph Lucas Memorial Push, OFY's signature event. The Push combined a pub crawl with a British bike disabled by Lucas electrics, which necessarily had to be pushed, all to take place in February in the deep dead of winter, when there typically is no riding in Toronto. Perhaps it was a little unfair to drag Lucas into this as he was a teetotaller and merely established the family oil and paraffin business before it turned to electrical matters. Nevertheless, it was sufficient pretext for OFY and so on Saturday 25 February 1995, the first Push was held.

Harry Roberts wrote a very funny account of this for the May 1995 *News* in which he mischievously blamed Keith Morgan for the event. Keith Morgan provided the bike, an orange BSA 250, and also designed the commemorative T-shirt for that evening, thus starting a tradition which has carried along with the Push every year since then. But he did not originate the Push, which was Harry's idea. The route of the first Push was set up by Dan Graham, who was an Inspector for the Toronto Dept of Health and knew the King Street West area well. We started at the Wheat Sheaf, which had been associated with the soldiers at Fort York since 1842, moved on to the Left Bank, then to the Bovine Sex Club, which had and still has several motorbikes as part of its décor, and finished by returning to the Wheat Sheaf (*CVMG News*, May 1995).

About a year before he died, Harry, wearing his OFY secretary's cap, wrote (Feb. 2001) that “it's very gratifying that a totally silly suggestion that I made is being taken

up for the seventh year—someone must enjoy it.” That “totally silly suggestion” is heading for its 24th version in 2018 and the route will be starting at the Wheat Sheaf once again.

The Future. Self-examination is a continuous process in the CVMG and Old Fort York. In February 1999, Bengt Sormon noted that a discussion topic was “What will CVMG look like 20 years from now?” In 2003 Terry Buckley reported on discussions at the CVMG Annual Meeting, which included the “general observation that there is a lack of younger members in the CVMG . . . [and] perhaps GSXRs are the vintage bikes of the future in the same way 70s and 80s bikes are being sought after now. Food for thought indeed.” As the GSX-Rs were first produced in 1984, they are in 2017 well and truly vintage.

OFY is still considering its future and asking the same questions. We don’t have the answers yet and may never have them, but we continue to get together, having fun with our friends and our vintage bikes. The Black Trunk is a virtual one now, where we can keep this history for future members of OFY, whoever they may be.

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