

HOW IT STARTED
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I am a motorcyclist. I have been riding for over 40 years. I have ridden motocross, dirt bikes, dual sport, sport bikes, sport touring, and heavy cruisers. I have earned many tickets, but only got one. I have been thrilled, relaxed, refreshed, enlightened, surprised, and occasionally, scared silly. I have fallen, and gotten back up. I have enjoyed the solitude of the ride, and the camaraderie of the biker brother and sisterhood, even though I never got into the leather and chains side of it. Since moving to the Upper Cumberland, I have found wonderful roads for motorcycles in all directions. While I take advantage of them, I sometimes reflect on what got me started riding.

It was that big pile of dirt.

It was 1966, and two doors down from our home, someone had started to build a house, and got as far as digging a partial basement and pushing the dirt into a big pile before they quit. It sat there for a fall and a winter, collecting leaves, growing weeds, hiding under the snow, running back down into the excavation during heavy spring rains, becoming covered with wildflowers during the spring. When summer came, it waited, a mountain 15 feet tall on the uphill side, almost 30 on the side over the hole it came from. It was good old Middle Tennessee dirt, broken and shifted, finely sifted, artfully piled, waiting to see what our young imaginations could make out of it.

A few of the kids brought out Tonka trucks to reshape the mountain, while some brought out toy guns and plastic grenades to see who could take the mountain. A couple of girls wanted to have a tea party on top of the mountain with parasols, napkins, and crumpets. We were appalled. Maybe we would have allowed them if we had known a crumpet was something to eat. All that changed when Ronnie showed up.

Like the rest of us, Ronnie was 12 or so. Unlike the rest of us, he had no dad; just a very busy mom who owned a successful nightclub and indulged her boy in almost anything money could buy. That summer, the indulgence was a new Honda, a black and chrome S-65 Scrambler, a relatively primitive bike with 5.5 horsepower, very limited knee-action front suspension, and a really cool high mounted pipe. Ronnie lived behind the nightclub on the highway near our street, and knew us all from school. It was inevitable that he bring the Honda down our street to see who was outside.

So there we were; trying to decide what was the best way to make use of that big pile of dirt, when Ronnie came along and showed us. He just rode that bike right up to the top of that dirt pile, grinning that irresistible grin, and took off flying down into the deep recesses of the basement that never was. We expected him to crash, slide, or at least get stuck, but he just let out a yell and kept on going across the grass in a sweeping turn and headed back. There was no way he could make it up that gigantic dirt pile, not on the steep side. We scrambled out of his way; half expecting to see him flip over backwards or spin out and run through the tea party halfway up the side. Ronnie gunned it and rode that thing right up to the top again, stopped, and cut off the motor, still grinning.

The crest was so steep the wheels were hanging off either side while the motor rested on top. Ronnie kicked the Honda to life, rocked himself off the crest, and took off, flying down the field, back onto the road, and over the hill towards the highway, while we just stared after him. The girls were a little upset, but from then on we guys knew what the proper use was for that pile of dirt. We scrambled home, retrieved our bicycles, and spent the rest of the summer trying to recreate Ronnie's carefree ride over that dirt pile. Deep down I knew it would never be the same until I had a bike of my own.

Ten years later, while living in Oak Ridge, I finally bought my first bike, a Suzuki TS185 Enduro. It didn't do anything really well, but I rode it all over the hills and mountains of East Tennessee until the thing was "wore slap out" as they say in Rockwood.

One crisp October Saturday morning in Oak Ridge, I swung a leg over my Suzuki and rode over the ridge into Morgan County. I rode through the tiny village of Petros and up the mountain on TN 116. At the crest almost 2000 feet above the village, I took a fire road up to an old fire tower on Brushy Mountain. I looked almost straight down into the confines of Brushy Mountain Prison, 3000 feet below, and slowly lifted my eyes. Stretched before me was a vista of row after row of beautiful blue mountains rising from the mist as the sun rose behind the Great Smokies some 70 miles to the south east.

Sitting on two wheels, at the top of that mountain, with God's handiwork stretched out before me, I listened to the ticking of the cooling engine, the brush of a gentle morning breeze, and the morning birds greeting the day. This was an experience that could be had no other way.

And so it began.