

OLD BIKES, YOUNG HEARTS

JUNE 2019

This month's story is a tragic one. It is about a young man whose life was cut short while racing his motorcycle in Headingley.

Did you know that there was a horse race track in Headingley? Yup. Our Holy Trinity Anglican Church, along with the land of the Headingley Community Centre, would be generally where the south turn of the track was. It was on land that had been donated by John Taylor for community recreational purposes. It was initially used for fairs and exhibitions. The race track came later. It was a quarter mile track, built with an over 6 foot high fence all the way around it. No sneaking peeks at what was going on, on the other side. There were traditional bleachers and a grandstand. It was THE destination for Winnipegggers who could come all the way out here thanks to the streetcar. The race track operated right up until the time that a new (and closer) race track was built at Polo Park in 1925.(As an aside, Polo Park operated until the mid 1950s. By that time, Winnipeg was really growing and land prices in that area were too high to justify using it only for summer racing. The track moved out to Assiniboia Downs in 1958.The mall, as we know it today, opened on the Polo Park site in 1959.)

After the horses moved out, the motorcycle guys moved in. It became the racing home of the Canada's oldest motorcycle club -the Manitoba Motorcycle Club (MMC) (which was founded in 1911 and still exists today as an amalgamation with the Antique Motorcycle Club of Manitoba).They held regular flat track races of varying lengths -one mile, 5 miles, and endurance races over longer distances.



Fred Noakes and his girlfriend on the 1936 Ariel 500

Joseph Frederick Noakes, born in 1914, was a keen motorcycling enthusiast. He undoubtedly looked up to his older brother Chuck who was a dispatch rider in WW2 and became Manitoba's top motorcycle racer for many years. When I hung out with the MMC nearly 50 years ago, Chuck Noakes was a legend. There was also brother Alf, an aircraft engineer who drove a tank in WW2.And sisters Nancy and Lil. Lastly came Eddie, the baby, born in 1931.

As you know, I love old motorcycles. I have been interested in all things motorcycle for many many years. I knew Chuck from hanging out at Tiny Robbins Motorcycle Shop back in the 1970s. So I felt a connection with Eddie when he joined the Antique Motorcycle Club. As eventually did his son Gord.

Eddie's daughter Lynn helps with his business -Eddie's Sharpening on Wallasey Street in St. James-which he has been operating since 1983.Talk about a work ethic. Eddie worked 38 years for the CN Railroad.

The 4:00-12:00 shift. He had Thursdays and Fridays off which allowed him to also have a 40-year career, at the same time(!), as a commercial pilot with Stanier Airlines. He flew amphibious aircraft, Cessnas and Piper Twins. Eddie told me he used to go for a \$100 cup of coffee every now and then. A flight to Brandon, drink coffee, come home. At 88 years of age, Eddie is still working full-time hours. Eddie was married to Lila for 54 years.



Eddie Noakes who was the youngest brother standing in the rec center parking lot pointing to the turn where his brother was killed in 1936 right behind the church.

I always knew there was a race track in Headingley but no one could really tell me specifics. Until Eddie. Eddie Noakes. Of Noakes motorcycling fame. So I asked him to tell me about his brothers and their love of bike racing.

Freddy ran the racing circuit of the MMC and competed in everything that the club offered. He raced his 1929 Harley JD at the Killarney and the Miami Hill Climbs. If you have never seen a hill climb, believe me when I say it is a white-knuckle event. It sounds simple -a race to the top of a hill. But not just something like Garbage Hill. No. Think of riders facing a rugged hill, hundreds of feet up, with an incline sometimes as steep as 40 degrees. One wrong move and the rider, along with his motorcycle, could come tumbling down. Indian Motorcycle used hill climbing as a way to test, and showcase, its new models. You have to be just a little bit crazy to want to try that! TT

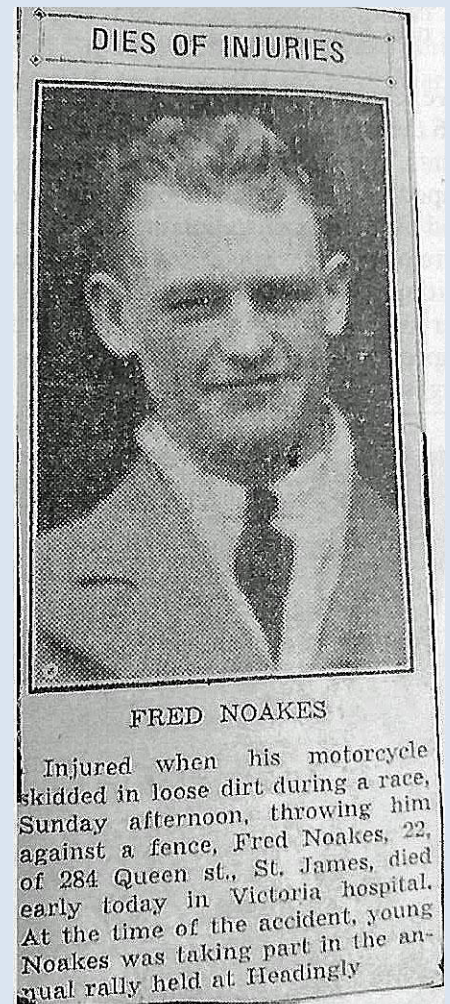
Race day. June 22, 1936. Freddy was the man to beat that day. He had a brand new 1936 500cc Ariel. Upswept pipes. Purchased from Northwest Cycle on Logan Avenue. He was out in front when he hit a rut on a turn of the old horse track at speeds of 70 miles per hour. The bike crashed. Freddy was thrown from the bike. He broke his neck. He was rushed away by ambulance and passed away later that day at the old Victoria Hospital in Osborne Village.

The MMC suspended all activities for a month. Black ribbons and arm bands were distributed to each member. Eddie reports that there were over a hundred motorcycles in the procession for Freddie's funeral at Bardal Funeral Home on Sherbrook Street. They had his motorcycle -the crashed one -on a trailer, draped with a black cloth. Freddy is buried at Brookside cemetery.

To this day, when you say the name Noakes in a motorcycle crowd, motorcyclists in the know refer to them as racing royalty of the pre-War/ post-War era. The next time you are enjoying a ball game on the Headingley baseball diamonds, try and imagine a world class race track on the premises. Think back over a 100 years ago when fairs and exhibitions flourished and then when at-the-time Manitoba's top race track was built. Pause to reflect that a young man lost his life racing on a track doing what he loved.

No one knows exactly when the race track was torn down but young Eddie says it wasn't around in the late 1940s when he began racing. The MMC were then holding their races at two tracks in the St. James area. One was where the Grace Hospital is today and the other one was down behind the St Charles Catholic Church.

I would like to thank Jean Ammeter for some of the original obituary literature on the Noakes. I am sure the Headingley Historical Society would love a copy of an original picture of the Headingley race track if anyone has one.



Ross Metcalfe