

Charles and Martha Darling Building the Empire

As the AMCA approaches 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 international organization today.

Charles Darling learned early that if he ever wanted to own a motorcycle, he'd have to be inventive. For one thing, he didn't begin to have enough money to buy a new bike in his early years. On top of that, though, his parents—especially his mother—didn't approve of anything with two wheels and a motor.

So, as World War II was coming to a close, Charles found himself riding a bicycle and dreaming about old motorcycles he could buy to fix up, then trade for something better.

"In September of 1946, he bought his first motorcycle—a 1921 Indian Scout," his wife, Martha, says, checking the crib notes Charles has given her because his hearing is not the best on a telephone. "The Scout had no engine or transmission, but he found a transmission ('For \$16,' Charles adds from his perch by the phone). He gave the bike a fresh paint job, then sold it and a couple of bicycles, raising \$50.

"He took the profits and next bought a '27 Harley JD," Martha continues. "He fixed that up and learned to ride it before he sold that and kept moving up."

Darling liked working on old iron, and developed some great mechanical

skills that he would employ all of his life—both on his bikes and in his job at GM/Delco. He attended the Rochester Institute of Technology, and at a party one night in 1950, he met his future wife, who was attending the nearby University of Rochester.

The two were married in 1953, and eventually settled in Sodus, New York, where Martha caught the antique-motorcycle bug as well. But it wasn't easy back then finding others who shared their passion.

"Charlie read somewhere back in the early 1960s that a club for old bikes had been formed, and we were interested in maybe forming a state chapter in our area," Martha says. "Charlie wrote a letter to (then AMCA) Secretary Ken Jones, but never heard back, until about a year-and-a-half later, when his widow wrote to say that Ken had passed away and she'd just found Charlie's note.

"She gave us the name of the new Club secretary, Ernie Biddle."

The two joined the Club in 1966, at a time when the growing AMCA was beginning to consider forming regions to promote activities in various parts of the country. By 1969, that concept had progressed to Chapter designations designed to bring together local groups of AMCA members. And the Darlings started the slow process (especially back then) of trying to locate other antique-motorcycle aficionados.

In September 1973, Charlie and Martha organized a planning meeting at their Seneca Lake summer cottage, with the intention of forming a New York State Chapter of the AMCA. Only one other couple, Lou and Pauline Lichva, were present, but the die was cast.

"We decided to call it the Empire Chapter, since New York is the Empire State," Martha says.

"We got the New York member list from the AMCA National, and Lou and Pauline designed a questionnaire to see what they wanted in a club. We mailed

Local connection: Charles and Martha Darling of Sodus, New York, own not one, but two of the rare motorcycles built by motorcycle and aviation legend Glenn Curtiss in nearby Hammondsport.



For many years, the Empire Chapter hosted an AMCA National Meet on the clubgrounds of the Electric City Rider in Duanesburg, New York. The shot shows the Judging Field in 1977.

it to all 71 AMCA members in the area, and when we held our next meeting, on June 30, 1974, nine potential Chapter members showed up at the Lichvas' house near Schenectady."

That day, the new Empire Chapter elected officers, including longtime Harley dealer Ed Higgins, who became its first director; Harold Kovarik, vice director; Lou Lichva, secretary and newsletter editor; Charles Pomada, Chapter judge; and the Darlings, who were talked into serving as treasurers, a role they would later take on at the national level, handling the AMCA's finances for five years.

That made the Empire group one of the pioneers of the developing AMCA Chapter system, which has since expanded to include 56 affiliates across the United States and Canada, plus Europe.

The Empire Chapter's first meet was held in August 1974 on the clubgrounds of the Electric City Riders, a longtime motorcycle club in Duanesburg, New York.

Over the years, the Empire Chapter has put on a variety of events, from road runs to National Meets. It also has established a close relationship with the Glenn Curtiss Museum in Hammondsport, New York, where the group gathers for rides and even a mid-winter event to chase away the cold New York weather.

That connection to the American motorcycling and aviation pioneer is personal for the Darlings, who own

two very rare and original Curtiss machines—a 1908 and an '09—both of which are on loan to the museum. Their collection also includes a 1924 Ner-a-car, a bit of motorcycling history made in Schenectady.

Meanwhile, the Empire Chapter the Darlings helped create has made more than its share of AMCA history. Since its inception, two of the members who hosted early Chapter events—Lichva and William "Doc" Cleveland—have gone on to become AMCA Honorary Members, while another—John "Doc" Patt—served as AMCA President.

That list of prominent Empire Chapter members also includes Curt and Dot Bunce, who have known the Darlings for many years.

"Charlie and Martha have been champions of restoring old motorcycles and will help anyone who comes to them with a problem," Dot says. "Charlie's knowledge is incredible, and he goes out of his way to help keep old bikes on the road.

"He hasn't ridden for a number of years due to age, but they try to come to Chapter meets, and both have always worked hard for the Club. They are wonderful members, wonderful people with good values, and we love them."

It's safe to say the feeling is mutual with the Darlings.

"Probably the best part of the AMCA and especially the Empire Chapter," Martha says, "is all the great friendships we've made over the years. That stays with us forever."—Greg Harrison

