Early CHiPs

By A.E. Allen

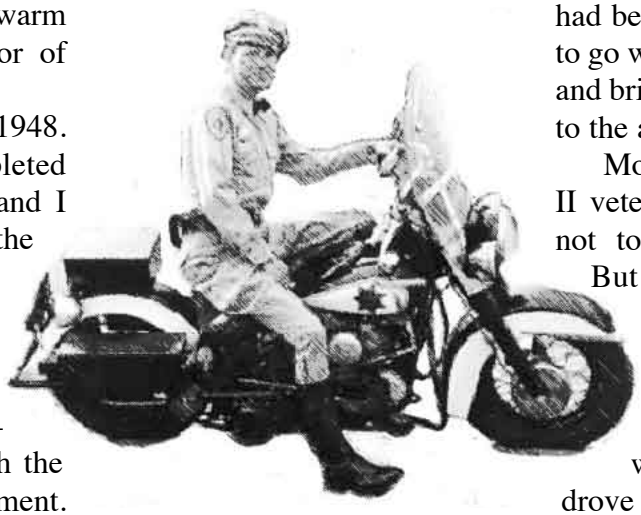
My wife and I were driving north on old U.S. 99 in our 1946 Ford convertible, en route to Sacramento, Calif. Our twin daughters were not yet 2 years old, and we stopped several times to warm their bottles on the radiator of the Ford.

The date was June 7, 1948. I had successfully completed the written and oral tests and I was scheduled to report the next day to the California Highway Patrol Academy for three months' training as a cadet.

I had resigned my position as a motor officer with the Long Beach Police Department. I had some anxiety about starting a new career. I had been making $210 per month with the police department, and my starting pay with the CHP was $165.

We arrived in Sacramento and checked into a cheap motel—$2 per night. There was no air conditioning and it was 90 degrees at midnight.

The next morning, my wife drove me to the Department of Motor Vehicles, where I met Sgt. Dick Langner. He was dressed in britches and boots and was all spit and polish.



There were six other new cadets there, and we all climbed into a command car (about the same thing as a modern SUV) and drove to the CHP Academy at the old McClelland Air Force Base.

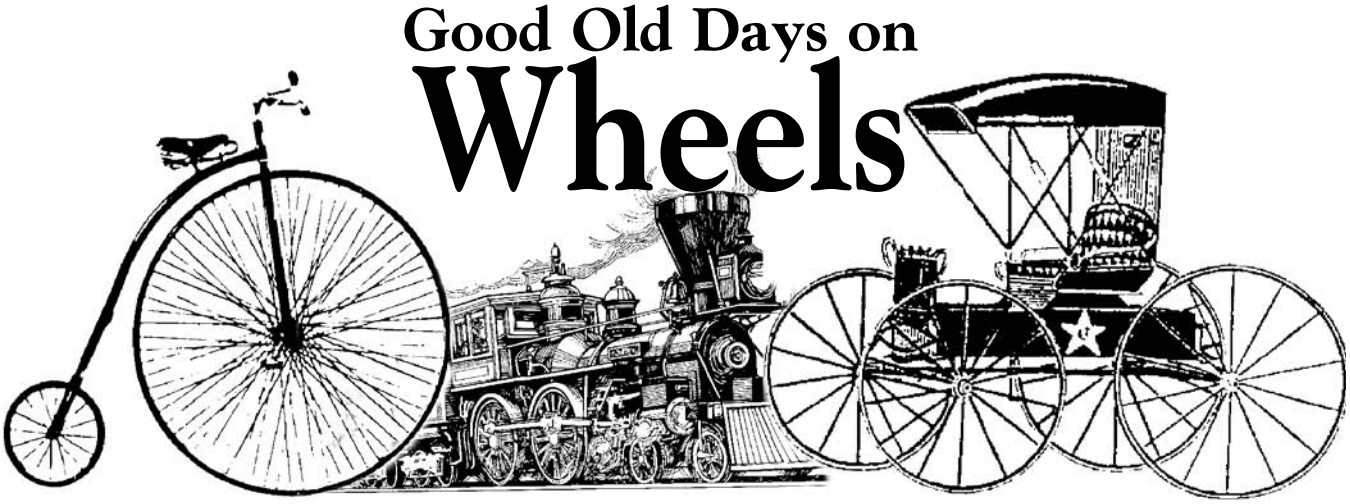
Some old two-story barracks served as our housing and some one-story buildings were our classrooms. The other buildings had been torn down, although the old concrete foundations were still there.

After we were assigned our bunks, Sgt. Langner came in and asked for three volunteers who had been motor officers in a city to go with him to the state garage and bring back three motorcycles to the academy.

Most of us were World War II veterans, and we had learned not to volunteer for anything. But when he asked again, Don Jones, formerly of the Sacramento Police Department, and I raised our hands. George Goodwin also volunteered. We drove to the state garage in the command car. There, we saw the three motorcycles, backed up to the curb in front of the garage.

Sgt. Langner gave the order, "Fire them up!" Don and I climbed on our bikes and kicked them over. (This was long before electric starters.)

I noticed that George was watching me very carefully. Then



he kicked over his bike a few times and got it started.

The sergeant had gone into the garage. When he came out, he looked down at the rear tire on George's bike and said, "Goodwin, you have a low rear tire. Go in the garage and get some air in it."

Those old Harley-Davidson motorcycles had a very peculiar clutch. It was a rocker type, but it was not spring-loaded, and you could not depend on it to stay in the disengaged position. George gave it his best shot, but it was not quite good enough.

He made his left turn up the driveway OK, but when he got to the sidewalk, the bike leaned over a little to his left and he panicked and gave it full throttle. The sergeant was standing on the sidewalk, and when he saw George heading for him at full throttle, he turned and started to run full tilt with George right behind him in hot pursuit.

Fortunately, after about 20 feet, George veered off to the left. Then the bike ran off the curb and turned over with George underneath, the engine racing, and the back wheel spinning.

Don and I ran over. We shut off the bike and lifted it so that George could get up.

We all looked over at the sergeant, who could decide if we all got bus tickets home or could continue as cadets.

Then, in a loud voice, Sgt. Langner said, "*Goodwin!* Why did you tell me you could ride a motorcycle when you can't?"

George replied, "Sergeant, I didn't know if I could or not. I never tried."

Don and I rode our bikes back to the academy. George, obviously, rode back in the command car with the sergeant.

This was not the end of the sergeant's frustrations, which he certainly did not deserve. Later that month, during motorcycle training for the 96 cadets, we were working with some of the slow learners to teach them to make left turns around a course we had laid out.

Some of us who were experienced riders were assigned as coaches for the slow learners. We instructed our trainees to start out very slowly in low gear, then disengage the clutch and take it out of gear, and then engage the clutch before making a U-turn to their left.

My trainee was Al Cooper. He started out too fast and I couldn't keep up with him, running alongside. At the end of the alley, where he was supposed to turn, Sgt. Langner had parked his brand-new motorcycle. He was sitting on the bike, watching.

Al disengaged the clutch, but he did not take it out of gear. When he tried to make his U-turn, the clutch engaged and he ran head-on into the sergeant's brand-new motorcycle. Then he fell over, with the engine roaring and the back wheel spinning.

I helped Orville Johnson, who was the immediate supervisor of the motorcycle training, shut off Al's bike and get him up. We used a pry bar to pry out the front fender—which was against the front tire of the sergeant's bike—so it would turn. Without a word, the sergeant started his bike and left the area.

We continued training, but we were afraid we would all get sent home this time. Fortunately, Sgt. Langner was a reasonable man, and nothing was ever said about the unfortunate incident.

Believe it or not, there was more to come in the trials and tribulations of Sgt. Dick Langner.

We were allowed to go to Sacramento after our weekly motorcycle rides. One evening I was getting ready to go to Sacramento when Officer Johnson came into the barracks and asked if I would go with him to Grass Valley to pick up a motorcycle. The other platoon had ridden to Grass Valley and one of the bikes had broken down.

I was the unofficial motorcycle mechanic, since I had some practical experience in that area, and no one else had a clue about the mechanical peculiarities of the bikes.

I told Orville that we should take a set of spark plugs just in case. We didn't have any parts, and only a few tools, so we borrowed the spark plugs from Sergeant Langner's motorcycle, intending to replace them when we returned.

We got in the old Hudson and headed for Grass Valley. As I remember, I believe it was about an hour's drive. We found the bike on a trail on the side of a hill. I put in the new plugs and re-gapped the ignition points and kicked it over and it started. I rode it back to the academy with Orville following in the Hudson.

The following Monday, Sgt. Langner said that he was going to show the class how to make an enforcement stop. Orville was going to drive the Hudson and take the part of the traffic violator, and the sergeant would make

the stop on his motorcycle.

The sergeant got on his motorcycle and kicked it over. Not only did it not start, but the engine just spun with no compression. He tried it again, and it just spun again. Orville and I looked at each other and realized that we had forgotten to replace the spark plugs. Neither of us had any idea what to do, so we said nothing.

The sergeant tried to kick it over again with the same results. This time he looked down at the cylinder heads and saw that his spark plugs were missing. Without a word, he got off the bike and made a dignified exit.

Only Orville and I knew what had happened. If we had been asked, we would have replied honestly—but luckily, no one asked.

This was the end of Sgt. Langner's motorcycle trials and tribulations.

He later became a captain, and he was one of the finest area commanders in the state. George Goodwin also became a captain, and Al Cooper ended up as the assistant commissioner. ❖

FROM ***GOOD OLD DAYS*** MAGAZINE, JUNE 2006, VOL. 43, NO. 6, COPYRIGHT © 2006 ***GOOD OLD DAYS*** MAGAZINE