

History of ABATE

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Reprinted from the May 2001 ABATE of California Bailing Wire

This is a tough one. I've been trying to get the dates straight from-a California ABATE Board member for months. My memory is fuzzy and I don't have any documentation to back up the bullshit I'm prepared to impart to you folks. But I can ramble about the early days and you'll get the notion of what ABATE was all about in the beginning.

In 1971 I was hired as the manager of ABATE by Lou Kimzey, who was working on the third issue of Easyriders in a little oceanfront apartment in Seal Beach. Lou was the publisher and, as far as I was concerned, the creator of the magazine. But there were two other partners: Mil Blair and Joe Teresi. Prior to my arrival, there was another organization called the NCCA, National Custom Cycle Association. It was made up of industry manufacturers and customizers who were looking at laws being enacted to prevent modified motorcycles from rolling into the streets. This organization was short-lived but highly effective. At the time, the manufacturers got together with an engineer named Bill Otto who tested front ends and frames. He wrote articles about long front ends and raked frames, basically proving that custom motorcycles were absolutely street safe and legitimate. Bill tested various front ends, including the Paughco Springer and the Durfee Girder.

This group of guys suspected that if they did not govern themselves that the government would legislate them off the road. I went to a couple meetings with Lou. We could see that this group of mad-capped biker freaks was never going to govern itself and that the organization was rapidly unraveling. Many of the components represented would not pass any test, so infighting began. On the other hand, D&D, Durfee and a couple other manufacturers built some bikes and had the NHTSA test them. They passed with flying colors. Along with Bill Otto's reports proving that choppers were safe for highway use, legislation against custom bikes was virtually eliminated. That testing and information still stands today, and we are basically free to build what we want, unlike many European countries.

Since the industry organization was stumbling, Lou took it out of the magazine and replaced it with a grassroots organization called ABATE, which he created. We always thought the name sucked and the meaning behind it was even worse: A Brotherhood Against Totalitarian Enactments. You can imagine with the conspiratorial mindset in the early '70s that the government immediately thought we were some subversive organization destined to control the world. That was hardly the case.

I was 22 at the time, a part-time college student who was inexperienced in legislative matters and trying to recruit state leaders for this organization from a small apartment.

We were bikers, not promoters. Perhaps that was the best side of the organization. We had a couple of guys like Bill Otto and there was a doctor who came forward and began to write articles against helmet laws. I became the dispenser of information to individuals who had the balls to confront the government on these issues. Believe me, it was not my skill, knowledge or charisma that forwarded the goals of freedom. It was the magazine's ability to reach a vast number of bikers, along with Lou's willingness to find experts to write on our behalf and riders who stepped forward to lead. We began to grow.

By 1972 I was associate editor of Easyriders, writing the ABATE news and trying to spread the word from state to state. I'm painting a down-home picture, yet we were very effective in a grassroots way. If a brother contacted me from a state, I tried to get to know him, work with him and send him information. Then, if I got a good feeling, I afforded him or her the information to open an ABATE chapter there. We had accumulated enough information to help that rider and his people beat almost any law he might face. The custom issue seemed to evaporate, but helmet laws became a major issue. At the time, if enough riders came forward the state governments surmised that there was no reason to enact a helmet law, or there was strong rationale to repeal it. Swarms of riders made their presence known to legislators and governors all over the country and some 13 helmet laws were repealed. This camaraderie was infectious and more and more riders got involved. When I took the job, we had 500 members. By 1981, we had 28 chapters and some 20,000 members.

Of course as an organization grows, it changes. Easyriders was the figurehead, and we had never exerted any pressure on the states to do anything. We abided by the states rights doctrine. Each state did it's own thing. From time to time there were power struggles within chapters and I would do my best to mediate. Keep in mind that the leaders of these organizations were scrappy bikers who believed ardently in freedom of the road. Some would have died or gone to jail to maintain that freedom. These people were born leaders, they were politically savvy and most became articulate speakers. As the organization grew, leaders wanted more recognition and it became unruly. Lou Kimzey decided that perhaps the organization should be turned over to a proven entity capable of creating a structure that could control the largest motorcycle rights organization on the planet. It was discussed with the Modified Motorcycle Organization. But due to affiliations among the ranks, there was an uproar and a meeting was called in which the rank and file chapters voted to maintain their anonymity. That historic meeting took place in 1979.

If there could have been a structure formed at that point, ABATE would have become the largest, most powerful grassroots motorcycle organization in the world. Lou was disillusioned at that point, and so were some of the chapter leaders. In addition, the public burden theory was launched by the NHTSA to overcome the popular vote against helmets. The fight against helmet laws left the streets to become a money issue waged against the riding public and helmet laws were enacted again. At that point, helmet protests became a thing of the past, which meant that the rank and file didn't have the clout they once had. Easyriders set the organization free to go its own way and we continued to report the news, but not from the perspective of ABATE only. We reported

on the successes and failures of all organizations. Many ABATE chapters changed their names to something more motorcycle oriented or politically correct, but many remained true to the heritage.

Those were interesting times and they produced strong leaders who learned the way of the political world. From ABATE came the MRF, NCOM and more support from world-wide organizations. Face it, we're bikers, rebels, stark individualists who don't like any degree of regimentation or control. We fight it with everything we have. It's the nature of the beast, the code of the west.

There you have it. The history of ABATE from the beginning.