

The Harley (from Wisconsin) Left at The Wall

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Click on bike for expanded view. (Photo: Claudio Vazquez)

“We wanted it to be from the people of Wisconsin, not from a biker organization”

When Robert Thompson returned home to Wisconsin in 1968 after his tour with the Marines in Vietnam, he became an avid motorcyclist and soon earned the enduring moniker “Hogman.” As a member of the motorcycle safety and rights organization ABATE, Thompson began organizing rides to Rolling Thunder in 1991. It was after a late night visit to The Wall in 1992 that an idea popped into Thompson’s head that would lead to another unique component in the phenomena that surrounds the black granite memorial.

“After seeing all the stuff people were leaving at The Wall, I started thinking maybe we should leave something from Wisconsin. Since we all ride motorcycles, I thought, let’s build a motorcycle to leave there.”

Thompson admits it was a crazy idea, and when he shared it with his buddies, they concurred. “You want to do what?” But the more they toyed with the idea, they began to ask themselves, “Why not?”

Thompson said they didn’t want it to be just from a biker organization, but wanted it to be from “the people of Wisconsin.” As word began to spread, parts and donations began rolling in. “We decided that the bike should be a ’60s-era chopper,” he said, “because everybody drove choppers back then.” They took the parts to Willie Kiefert’s recreational vehicle shop, and he began to assemble the bike in 1994, with the goal of getting the bike to The Wall for Rolling Thunder in 1995.

“When it came time to take the bike to The Wall in 1995,” he said, “we had about 160 riders with us. As we always did, we rode across the country to meet up with everybody on Memorial Day weekend.”

By that time, tens of thousands of objects had been left at The Wall since 1985, but nothing came even close to what was headed its way from Wisconsin, unbeknown to anyone at the National Park Service (NPS), which maintains the memorial on the National Mall in Washington.

“We didn’t want anybody to know, because we didn’t want anybody to stop us,” Thompson recalled. “We figured, once it was there, the worst that could happen is we would have to remove it.” So, when they arrived in Washington, they took the bike and parked it alongside The Wall, guarding it around the clock.

Early that morning, Duery Felton, curator of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection [the objects left at The Wall], got an urgent call from a Park Ranger. “Some fools have left a motorcycle at The Wall,” the ranger said. At first, Felton thought it was a joke.

During that 1995 weekend, Thompson said it was unclear what the bike’s fate would be. Finally, Pam West, who was in charge of the NPS’s Collection facility, asked him, “So, what are you going to do with it?” Thompson replied: “It’s your bike, Pam. What do you do with the rest of the stuff left here?” When West told him she had no way to get the bike to their facility, Thompson told her, “We’ll take it over and drop it off for you.”

A labor of love for more than a year, the bike was a hard thing for Thompson and his comrades to leave, he admits. The group didn’t see the bike again for a number of years, until Thompson called West and “requested visitation rights.” Since then, he and others have occasionally visited the bike at its storage site in Maryland. Over the years, the bike has also traveled to events across the country, most recently back to

Wisconsin in May 2010 for a large veteran event. While back in the neighborhood, Thompson said the bike got new tires, some paint touch up and a detailed cleaning.

The Harley left at The Wall 16 years ago might, down the road, be seen by more than NPS conservators and the occasional visitor. While a final decision remains to be made, early designs for the new Education Center at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial suggest a spot for the bike at the very entrance to the subterranean facility to be built just steps from The Wall.

"We are very proud," Thompson said. "I still don't know how it all came together, but it did."

As for Duery Felton and his NPS colleagues, they seem to be only half-joking when they say, "We're waiting for that early morning call from the Park Rangers down at The Wall, telling us to come and pick up the Huey someone has left there!"

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