

The story of Uncle Fred (Tanner).

I was brought up by my mom and her parents. My grandfather (Claude Hayman) was as good a father to me as anyone has ever had. Some knew him as 'The Colonel' with his western hat and gold tooth smile. A master machinist back in the day. In the deep south we had 'uncles' and we had uncles. All uncles were not uncles as really defined but possibly relatives in one way or another. Well anyhow, Uncle Wesley (Robles) was related somehow but was still Uncle Wesley. He was an Indian motorcycle mechanic back in the day. Uncle Fred (one of my grandfather's brothers) was a long time Harley Davidson Mechanic. So, for the historians here it is obvious that some family reunions got kind of interesting to me, the kid who was still wet behind the ears while still riding a Western Flyer.

Anyhow... Uncle Fred, The Harley Mechanic, was well known around the Tampa area for being an excellent rider on and off road. No one could run with him and he made going fast look easy. Keep in mind we are talking flat side tanked hardtails way back. As time went on it became a big deal when the pro racers came to town. These were the professionals of the day. Every year all the locals would almost beg Uncle Fred to enter the races. He always refused and shrugged it off. Year after year this went on. Finally, one year Uncle Fred caved in and filed an entry into the fray. I am not totally sure but assume these races were at the historic ½-mile Plant Field or possibly Speedway Park. No matter really. Well the stage was set. The stands were full to see how the local, Fred Tanner, would do against the 'big boys'. They ran qualifying heat races through which was decided who got to run the main event. Uncle Fred did well enough to qualify for the feature race and the crowd, being mostly local, went nuts. Due to him not having any points in the series he had to start in the rear of the 25-lapper. Story has it that even then Uncle Fred almost refused to run the feature telling the guys that they should be happy he did okay so let's go home. Somewhat of an argument began and the guys won out by telling Uncle Fred that he had to do what he had to do for the local towns people in the stands. They said Uncle Fred was upset that he had gotten himself into this mess after all these years.

So...bikes were lined up on the front chute and introductions of the riders took place. When the announcer came down to "Ladies and Gentlemen, starting in last place, hailing from North Tampa, let's welcome our very own Fred Tanner on a Harley Davidson' the stands totally lost it with a deafening roar. It was said that even the traveling officials applauded.

Engines were started with a roar and some smoke filling the air. The attendants rushed off the track to the infield pit area. Engines revved up as the on-track starter held the green flag high in the air. Down came the green and off they went with a loud roar with dirt flying and a huge cloud of dust making it hard to see. Into turn one all searching for traction they went. Left foot on the track right elbows high while engulfed in a cloud of dust from the mixture of clay and Florida sand. Out of turn two and onto the long back chute they came. To everyone's amazement uncle Fred was now in mid-pack already. The Story went that Uncle Wesley in the pits said " Well, I guess we pissed off Fred." and laughed.

Lap after lap went by with Uncle Fred still picking off another and another bike. With four laps to go Uncle Fred was in fourth place. Uncle Wesley told me as a kid that it was hard to say what was making more noise: the bikes on the track or the locals in the stands. Uncle Wesley was a tough old guy, but he had no shame in saying that at this point in the race he was actually getting kinda teared up. Four laps to go and Fred Tanner is in fourth.....three to go in third, and heading for the white flag Fred Tanner is sailing like a pro into second place.....THEN.....On the backstretch uncle Fred slows down almost to a stopthe back gate is open and he pulls the bike off the track. checkered flag falls and the crew rushes out the back gate to see what broke on the bike.....uh....no bike there and no Uncle Fred. What the heck happened here?

Monday comes and Uncle Fred does not show up at work. Tuesday....No Uncle Fred. Finally, he shows up at the shop on Wednesday, and was said to have walked up to the owner and asked him if he was fired or not. The owner said of course not but asked him what the heck did he do. Well first off, he said he went fishing up on the river. Now the boss got a little upset. By now a crowd had formed around them. Uncle Fred then said. Okay guys you begged me to run that race for years and I finally did it. Ya ought to

be happy, but you ain't. Well, I ain't happy either but I did it. I did it hoping it would make you quit begging me to do it. They just stared at him with mouths open. Uncle Fred then said "Look I have a job to do here and those boys got a job to do there. They travel all over the country racing motorcycles to put food on their tables to feed their families. I keep my family fed working here and it is not right for me to go out there and take food off their tables. So, I did what I did and as the laps went by, I felt more and more guilty. Did we win? Yes, we did because we did the right thing. Now quit asking me to race these things and let's get some work done here."

Uncle Fred went home to be with the Lord while sleeping in a tent up in Gulf Hammock during a hunting trip a few years later. I have heard that this story still circulates down Tampa way from time to time. I am just happy to be able to tell it still today. Rest in peace, Uncle Fred. :-)