

Free soul

Tavern owners smiled when they rode into town last weekend; proprietors of more delicate businesses winced. Ken Kesey put them between the Shriners and the bagpipe players. They partied, raced slugs and generally enjoyed the Rhododendron Festival.

FLORENCE — The bikers looked somehow out of place parading down main street, sandwiched between the Shriners and the 30-member Florence bagpipe team.

But the Free Souls didn't seem to notice. They idled their Harleys past the cheering crowd, flashing an occasional grimace and looking like the offspring of Clint Eastwood and Bigfoot.

No one remembers exactly how a killer bike team and a flower festival first came together. But for the last 10 years the Eugene Free Souls have opened their biking season with a pilgrimage to the Florence Rhododendron Festival.

"We come to watch the parade," explains Free Souls Vice president Marv (Free Souls don't use last names).

"The bikers are an institution," explained a Florence booster club member. "They make the festival."

Yet, though the bikers have become more a part of the festival than rhododendrons, downtown businesses have



either tried to ignore the bikers or remove them from town. Bikers dump between \$6-\$8,000 a year into Florence's

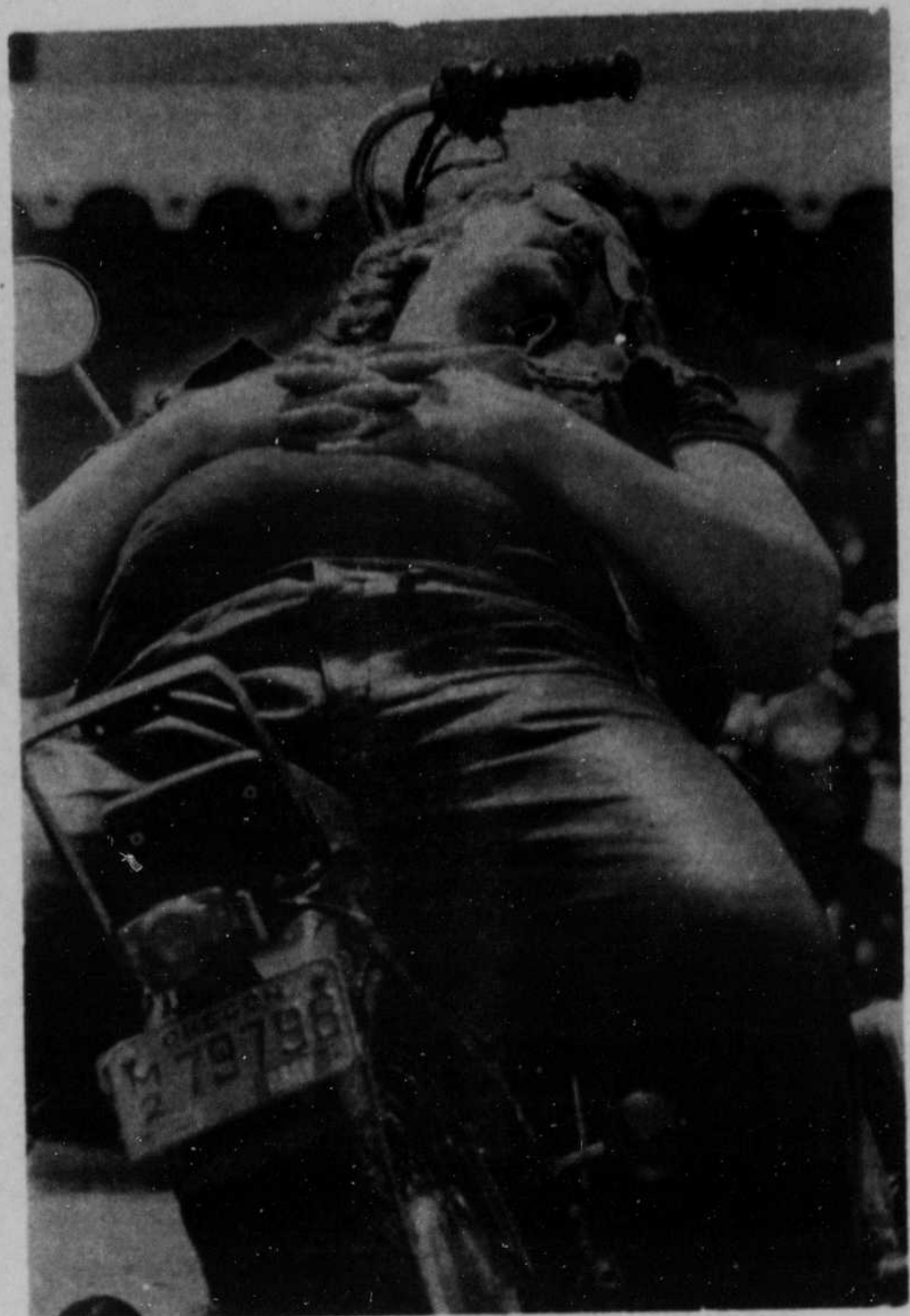
economy, but some businesses, like knick knock shops, do not draw biker trade.

"They do scare away business," observed the owner of Paint Patch, who said she doesn't want motorcycle gang business. "They just disgust me with the things they do out there. The taverns do great business, but everyone else is out in the cold."

No one, however, can remember the bikers breaking a law. This year Ken Kesey, master of ceremonies for the parade, decided the bikers deserved formal recognition. He gave them a place in the parade for the first time and even arranged for "best bike," "oldest bike" and "rattiest bike" awards.

As a result, more bikers roared into town Friday than ever; their stabled machines filled an entire street for three days. They walked the Florence streets wearing tatoos instead of clothes, motorcycle chains for belts, nazi insignias and small blonde women.

The Free Souls officially condone a philosophy of rampage. They are the type of men who, given the choice between silence and speech, will hit something.



This Free Soul took advantage of a lull in the action at the annual Florence Rhododendron Festival Sunday to catch a few winks. More than 100 Free Souls, Gypsies and Dead Men took part in the celebration.

"If people step on us, we don't mind using violence in return," explained one Free Soul member. "We aren't bound by traditional laws." But at the Rhododendron festival they have always practiced restraint. "We don't want to cause trouble," explained Marv. "We have a real good relation with this town."

"They've always done a good job of policing themselves," admitted a booster. "They've always maintained their cool."

But by the third day of this festival, and with increased numbers of bikers, tensions grew. "All it takes," said one biker's old lady, "is for someone to bust one of their bikes and they'll be at the fighting."

A Free Soul occasionally

collided verbally with a Gypsy of "Dead Man," rival bikers. "You damned near got 15 of your brothers shot, you came that fucking close," a Free Soul told a Gypsy Sunday. Usually a rival will just be called a "booger."

The festival ended with the traditional slug race, in which contestants enter slugs and urge them to move. The bikers remained calm during the reading of the rules: "Trainers are liable for any slug crashing into the crowd" and "No uppers. Urine samples will be taken." They became restless when the slugs were placed in the circle and didn't move.

And when the contestants started to dry up, one biker, "Rat," lost control. "See that slug over there?" he said, gesturing wildly at a gooey banana slug. "When that fucker crosses the finish line I'm going to eat it." He lunged madly for the ring.

"This is quite a shindig," said an independent biker who gave his name as Fonseroid Herkmore. "I think maybe I'll return next year if I ain't dead or somebody ain't hanged me."

Story by Jock Hatfield
Photos by Ed Warren

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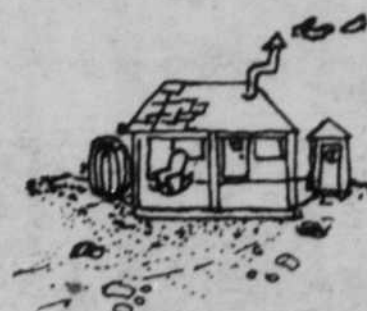
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