



Meet Your Church Family

Charley and Rita Cherry



A half ton of jet-black Harley rumbles past hugging the pavement solidly as it negotiates a switchback known as *Copperhead Corner* and heads toward *Brake or Bust Bend*. This Hog and its riders are traveling southeast on US 129 along a route known as *The Tail of the Dragon*. Clinging to the cliffside of a mountain pass bordering the Great Smoky Mountains, this eleven mile stretch packs in 318 “curves” - switchbacks, double-switchbacks, corners, loops and twists. Possibilities for serious accident abound. A miscalculation here could be your last. Indeed, a huge tree at the end of the line is festooned with motorcycle fenders and miscellaneous parts - testament to foolhardy, careless, or unlucky travelers from the past. Although thoroughly aware of these statistics in advance, the couple astride this Harley remain unplugged by thoughts of danger to themselves. There are several reasons why.

In fifteen years of cycling experience, Charley and Rita Cherry have traveled thousands of miles throughout our contiguous United States. Riding together on one bike, they have traveled as far northwest as Washington State and as far southeast as Florida. Individual trips have ranged from in-state “lunch runs” to a single trip in excess of five thousand miles. They’ve met bears in the road and been pummeled by hail. They have traveled mountains, canyons, and deserts, on highways and country roads. They have racked up some serious mileage, and in doing so, learned a lot.

Part of what they learned was the importance and effect of their equipment. Always a Harley, the models they owned advanced over time to the apex of comfort, convenience and safety - the Harley Electro-Glide Ultra Limited. This magnificent machine, nicknamed the “Geezer Glide”, was the last one they owned and the one they rode when they confronted “*The Dragon*”. Finally, although both Charley and Rita relish gritty activities such as NASCAR races and zip-lining, once they throw their legs across the Harley, settle down into their seats, and Charley’s fingers grip the bars, they are focused and in control. No games are played here.

On their last ride, coming home thru Arizona, Mother Nature was in a rage. Constant winds of 35-40 mph tilted them over to a perpetual 45 degrees. At one point, while traveling on the inside lane of a four lane road, a mighty gust hit them broadside - and just like that - they were instantly transferred to the shoulder! Struck by an invisible vortex, Charley felt a sensation as though being stung by an angry swarm of bees. When they pulled off-road for a break they found dozens of tiny sticks implanted in his face. Rita was spared only by the full helmet she wore. They battled thru the entire day between Tucson and El Paso, a distance normally crossed in less than five hours. They stayed overnight at Best Western, hoping for a better tomorrow, but the tempest continued to batter them all the way back home. Truly a scary ride.

Charley and Rita today are as tightly knit as a couple could be. Where one of them goes, so goes the other. This level of solid togetherness could not have been predicted prior to their wedding. In five or six years of dating, Rita appears to have soared free like a kite on a windy day. Young, energetic and adventurous, she was not much inclined to settle down. Besides, most of the time Charley was off in the Navy.

Following his two brothers and an uncle into service, Charley joined the Navy barely ahead of the draft. Signing on for a six year stint, he spent four in active service patrolling the Mediterranean aboard the aircraft carrier USS Independence (CV-62) whose official duties, in part, included keeping constant watch on two Russian subs known to be trolling those waters. The ship, equipped with a two-star Admiral onboard, (referred to as The Flag), was further equipped with a TS-2A Tracker - a specialized twin engine plane purposely built as an anti-submarine warfare aircraft. Charley was one of an eight man crew assigned to the care and operations of the Tracker and whose duty it was to transport The Flag wherever he needed to go. Typically, they left the flight deck two to four times daily.

Never in an active war zone, fatalities nevertheless occurred. On Charley's first day, a man was sucked down the air intake on a jet. Another time, a plane attempting to land missed the restraining cables. In executing a recovery maneuver by flying off the opposite end to come back around, the starboard wing caught the water's surface which plummeted the plane to the ocean floor. Of twenty or so passengers and crew inside, only one man escaped. A helicopter pulled him from the surface of the sea.

While Charley was away, Rita completed her studies, graduating from Missouri Southern State with a degree in Business Ed. Her required student teaching hours were spent instructing high school girls in shorthand and typing skills. Gad! That was not the path for her! During this period, for a while she continued to live at home, then moved into an apartment near campus with a group of friends, and finally into an apartment of her own.

When Charley completed active service and mustered out, he was ready to quit dating around and get on with the rest of his life. He knew who he wanted for his partner, but he had to get her attention. He spoke to her as clearly as he knew how - "Rita, either we're married by Christmas or - just forget it!"

On Rita's side, her silent musings went something like this: " Well, he's a really nice guy. I always figured we'd end up together sometime. I know I love him. He says it's married-by-Christmas-or-forget-it. What the heck, let's go for it. If it doesn't work out, I don't have to stay married!"

On December 1, 1972, Charley and Rita stood side by side in the parlor of the Methodist Church. She wore a short pink skirt with matching jacket, he wore the only tie he owned. Her sister was there along with her husband and two young sons. Before them stood the preacher who spoke (with minor irritation), "Well, let's get this one over with in a hurry because I've got a real wedding in just a few minutes!

Charley went back to school, but he was serious about it this time. He would have liked to study architecture but the schools that offered those courses were beyond the reach of his pocketbook. He graduated from the school now called Missouri State with a degree in Marketing. Over the years he worked in a variety of unrewarding positions - part time for Kraft Foods power washing and repainting steel drums, and later as a manager in the accounting department for a company selling Funeral Security Plans. This was followed by years with Roadway Express, then a short while with Management Recruiters (which he hated) and ultimately landed with Eagle Air Freight where he stayed for fifteen years until retirement.

Before their first child was born, Rita and Charley made a decision which reveals a great deal about them both. She was a legal secretary in a large firm at the time. A little child was on the way. The importance of raising this child hands-on from the start was paramount. If they had to live in poverty barely scraping by - well, so be it. Rita quit her job. Little Jessica arrived.

Their second daughter, Kelley, was born in Dallas. It must have been during baseball season, because Rita went into labor on a day when the Kansas City Royals played. Charley was back and forth from labor room with Rita, to waiting room with TV, back to labor room with Rita. Yes, he was in the proper room at the proper time.

Charley was working a sales job when the family moved to Rowlett, a small community not far from Dallas. They had one car at the time, he had to use it in his job which kept him away five days at a time. Rita was home with a toddler and an infant, but she didn't mind at all. Their neighborhood was mostly young families with little kids, she made many friends, and Jessica had playmates. She bought groceries on weekends when he was home. One day, during the middle of the week, it suddenly occurred to her that Charley was home. In fact, he had been home for days. He hadn't mentioned that he had quit his job. Rita was undisturbed. She just doesn't worry about stuff. She knew Charley would take care of his family, and he did.

Years later, when the girls were both in High School, Rita subbed for a while at an elementary school in Houston. For five years she subbed almost every day, liked it so much she took her Exit Exams for High School and Elementary which would allow her to teach full time. She taught 5th grade in Houston. Later, when they moved to the Austin/Georgetown area, she continued teaching 5th grade at Faubion Elementary in Cedar Park. She ultimately retired following twenty-seven years of teaching.

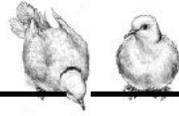
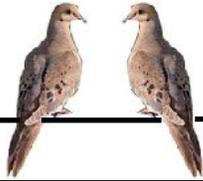
One year, Charley and Rita flew to Washington State to visit a brother. Meeting them at the airport, his brother drove near the Naval Shipyard on Sinclair Inlet. Looking out over the water, Charley spotted carriers moored in the distance. Driving closer, they identified one as Charley's USS Independence, one as the USS Kennedy on which his brother Gary had served. They knew the "tin can" destroyer on which their brother Eddie had served was moored nearby on the other side of the island.

Charley began watching online for reports concerning his ship. She was decommissioned in 1998. Her commissioning pennant was hauled down 39 years, 9 months and 20 days after first being hoisted, and the "Don't Tread on Me" First Navy Jack was transferred to the Navy's next oldest active aircraft carrier. She was sold for scrap to a company in Brownsville, towed by a 350' tug 16,000 miles from the Naval Shipyard at Puget Sound around Cape Horn to Brownsville, Texas. Charley and Rita made reservations to be in Brownsville when she arrived. He wanted to see her one last time and say goodbye before she was scrapped. Neither Charley nor Rita forget or abandon their closest friends. They always show up to bid them farewell.

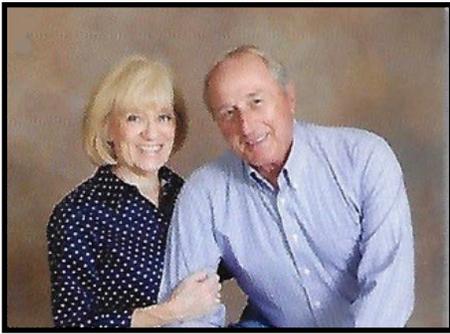
Dorothy Newcomb

PHOTOS FOLLOW ON THE VERY NEXT PAGE(S)

Incidentally, they have eight grandkids now. Jessica has two. Kelley has six. Also, ask Rita for her recipe for "Awkward" and advice on Brandy Snifters for pudding.



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USS INDEPENDENCE

