



## Harley Owners Group Chapter #5218 History

Primarily taken from past newsletters – volume 23 issues 3, 4, and 9 and volume 26 issues 1 and 2 -  
authored by Laura Clayton and Marie Boutin, including portions of an interview with Charter Member Joe Benning in 2010

### How it began:

**Barre resident Harry Wilkins** was stationed in Guam with the U.S. Army Corps when he pondered establishing a dealership for Harley Davidson motorcycles. His time in the service was nearing the end and he knew he would need something to do for income, so he wrote to a letter to the H-D Motor Company in Milwaukee. (Harry's first experience riding a motorcycle was as a kid – a 1931 Harley!) After he returned home from the service, he was granted a dealership (on January 28, 1947).

Harry began selling motorcycles out of his mother's garage on Merchant St. in Barre while working in the granite quarries. He eventually took another job at Prosperity Dry Cleaners and that is where he met his bride-to-be, Barbara Corey. They married, built a house on Farwell St. in Barre, and moved the dealership there. Years later - after working several jobs and raising a family – Harry and Barbara had built up the business to the point they needed a bigger location. The next move was to 663 South Barre Rd in 1955, where the dealership is presently located. In 1987, Barb and Harry Wilkins celebrated their 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and their 40<sup>th</sup> year as owners of a Harley-Davidson dealership. This was the cover photo of the July 31, 1987 issue of 'Country Courier' - a publication of *The Times Argus*.



Eight months later, they decided to start a chapter of H.O.G. at their dealership.

*Background history of H.O.G. - Before H.O.G. was created, a national motorcycle club, back in the '70s, had started out in California called the Harley-Davidson Owners Association (HDOA). It was not until 1983 that Harley-Davidson CEO, Vaughn Beals, announced the beginning of Harley Owners Group and its acronym (H.O.G.).*

At the first meeting of the fledgling chapter (held at the Barre Elks Club on April 18, 1988), four founding members agreed to be officers: Jan Otto, a mechanic at Wilkins (president); John Ballard (vice president); Diane Pratt (secretary); and Barb Wilkins (treasurer). Other early members were: Joe Benning, David Bryan, Myron Degenhardt, Roger Gilbert, Doris and Domingo Gomez, Dick Powell, Dick Pratt, Dick Stambaugh, Tom Thompson, and Allan Wilkins.

In the beginning, meetings were held in members' homes where lots of baked goods were consumed. ("Is that where we got [our motto] 'ride to eat and eat to ride'?" - Marie Boutin mused in her newsletter article of February 2013). As the chapter grew, the meeting place needed to be larger, so they started using the shop.

Barb and Harry's twins, Allan and Ann, were active in the chapter. Allan often organized short rides for the members. One of the first big rides was a charity ride to benefit Muscular Dystrophy. Joe Benning recalls that first 'really big ride' –

"Harley was working in conjunction with Jerry Lewis to launch H.O.G. on a mission of public service. It was a wise move. Participants were expected to collect donations for the cause, and our chapter raised several thousand dollars. We began the ride in Rutland. My wife, still a reluctant participant, and my young daughter Emily, a wide-eyed toddler who melted the hearts of every one of those black leather clad bikers, conducted the registration desk from the back of our pickup truck. From there we rode up to Lake Elmore for a picnic and party. We had one unfortunate incident when a dog ran out in between the pack of bikers. One biker went down and injured his foot. Other than that, it was a great day. On Labor Day, Harry and Barb Wilkins were asked to appear at a television station in Burlington for an interview during the Jerry Lewis telethon. They asked me to come along because the producers wanted a bike on the set. I proudly rode my new FXST Softail Custom into the studio and got to hand over the donations check to the interviewer live on the air. That segment appeared around the globe, putting CVHOG officially on the map."

The bike rally in Laconia was a chapter-favorite annual event to attend. Most of the first group rides were not formally-planned rides – people just followed whomever was interested in taking other riders someplace. The introduction of unified hand signals and specific ride formation was new to riders. Eventually, leaders of rides were designated as 'road captains'. Always interested in history, Joe Benning organized a 'Vermont History Tour Ride' while he was serving as Chapter Historian.

In the April 2010 issue of the newsletter, Joe Benning shared his thoughts on the changes he had observed in the chapter between 1988 and 2010:

"Without question the biggest change has been the internet. It seems quite remarkable to me that the computer we take for granted today just simply didn't exist in 1988. We always had a tight little group, but the internet has given us the same 'tight' feel with a much bigger group. It has also established our chapter's presence in the public's eye. We remain dedicated to public service. We have the same family atmosphere. We all feel the same attachment to riding. Although we've lost Harry and Allan, the Wilkins family's welcoming warmth remains. I first met John [Lyon] when he was still in elementary school. I chuckled when I heard that he was going to law school, felt his pain when I knew he was taking the Bar Exam, and thought he made the best move of his life when he decided to join the family business. I'm sure we all agree that he is now a mainstay in that institution. The business itself has given him the ability to let his creative juices flow, and boy do they flow! Wilkins has come a long way since the little shop on Upper Farwell Street!"

And finally, in 2010, Joe shared his thoughts on what he found most enjoyable about group rides and why new members should become involved in the chapter and participate in group rides:

"I enjoy group rides because of the camaraderie. I'm people-oriented, so traveling together is one of my favorite activities. I get especially excited planning a trip with a group. All winter long I cruise the internet ordering maps and brochures for places I've never been. My living room frequently smells like highlighter as I map out the lesser-traveled roads I want to see. [Member] Tim Nisbet and I have come a long way since our first trip to Laconia. Several of our chapter

friends have joined us in annual rides to various places. You bring back a lot of great memories. More importantly, you form a special bond with people, especially on those long-distance rides together. How can one possibly explain the bond that is formed when seven bikers cram themselves into four bunk beds in the cabin of a ferry boat being tossed about on a trip to Newfoundland? Developing such friendships are what I enjoy most about group riding. New riders should become involved for two reasons. First, you develop important riding skills by watching more experienced bikers. That could save your life. Second, the friendships you develop will last a lifetime."

**In preparation for this 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary newsletter**, I asked members to share their thoughts on membership in the Central Vermont HOG Chapter. Members Rick and Marie Boutin (former Chapter Historian) shared this story:

In July 2008 the CVHOG chapter took an overnight camping trip. Our leader was Joe Benning, our chapter historian at that time. There were about 15 people on this ride and we traveled down to Charlestown, New Hampshire and visited Fort No. 4. This fort was built around 1743 to protect frontier settlers from Native Americans who were trying to reclaim their land. The tour of the Fort was very interesting. We camped at Wilgus State Park in Ascutney, Vermont. We set up our tents and some went swimming in the Connecticut River. We had a HOG member that came down in his pickup truck and met us there, he brought down BBQ supplies and a grill and we had a great cookout. Around the campfire that night Joe read us a chapter from the book about Mrs. Johnson and her family that were captured by Indians from Fort No. 4 and walked to St. Francis in Canada. (Great book, you should read it!) We had lots of fun and laughter that night! We went out for breakfast in the morning and had a nice ride home. We enjoyed this weekend very much! Marie & Rick Boutin

Brion Muzzy has held several Chapter officer positions and is currently our Head Road Captain. He recalls an early experience on a group ride with the Chapter:

I have been a member of The Central Vermont HOG for about 10 years. Now I don't remember the date, but it was one of the first chapter rides I ever went on. It was an overcast day, there were only a few bikes that showed up, I think 6 or 7. There was a threat of rain but nothing at the start of the ride. I really had no idea what to expect. I didn't really know anyone and they didn't know me. So, we set out and we had not gone very far when it started to sprinkle -- so we stopped to put on our rain gear. (I didn't have any, so I just toughed it out.) A few miles down the road it stopped and so did we -- and peeled off our rain gear. And, so it went. It would start to rain then stop, start again then stop and so would we...LOL! Well anyway, by the time we reached our lunch destination we were all soaking wet, whether you had a rain suit or not. Needless to say lunch was great and so was this new group of friends I had found. We shared stories, laughed and laughed some more -- and soon it didn't matter we were all soaking wet...the warmth and friendship I felt that day really let me know this was a group I wanted to be a part of. Since that day I have made some of the best life-long friends I have ever had. The Chapter has become more of a family to me than just a group of people that ride motorcycles.

Justen Elliott our current Activities Director shares his response to the question 'What does being a Chapter Member mean?':

What does being a "Chapter Member" mean? Everyone has their own definition. The word 'Camaraderie' is often used by Harley-owners when asked 'why do you belong to a chapter', but what does Camaraderie mean? Camaraderie= mutual trust and friendship among people who spend a lot of time together. (Synonyms) friendship, comradeship, fellowship, companionship, fraternity, mutual support, team spirit. I would have to agree with all of these - so yes, camaraderie is a great one-answer response. However, another word comes to mind when someone asks me why I belong to a HOG Chapter and that is, 'Adventure'. Adventure = an unusual and exciting, typically hazardous experience or activity. (OK - we can cross out the hazardous part!) Another definition is 'Engage in exciting activity 'ESPECIALLY THE EXPLORATION OF UNKNOWN TERRITORY'. This definition is exactly why I love belonging to a HOG Chapter. I love leading a Chapter ride, taking folks on twisty roads with switchbacks and hairpin turns, to scenic views they are experiencing for the first time. In return, I have been on Chapter rides with other road captains leading and experienced these same feelings myself. When you're on one of these Chapter rides and you pull over into the scenic overlook and dismount your bike, if the first word out of everyone's mouth is "WOW", then you know you're on an adventure.

April 18, 2018 Central Vermont HOG will be 30 years young. It has been my pleasure to serve as an Officer in the Chapter and I wish the Chapter and its members 30 more years of exciting adventures to come.

SADDLE UP LET'S RIDE!!!

I specifically asked 'Charter member' Joe Benning what made someone a 'Charter Member'. Joe responded with an extensive email chockful of great information – here is what he had to say:

We became "charter members" because we were the very first to organize the official Central Vermont HOG chapter. But before discussing how I became one, let me back up a bit. I had just entered motorcycling in 1985, after a divorce client gave me a Kawasaki 450 in trade for a portion of his fee balance. I fell in love with the sport, but lost appreciation for the Kawasaki after my sister-in-law told me I looked like a trained bear on a bicycle. The very next day I met Harry, Barb and Allan Wilkins after a fellow lawyer rider told me how to find what was then the only Harley dealer in Vermont. Shortly before I met the Wilkins clan a group of investors had decided to rescue Harley Davidson from the abysmal ownership of AMF. Quality had gone down the tubes as AMF tried to flood the market with volume at the expense of quality control, much to the dismay of a very loyal customer fan base. The investors included Willie G. Davidson. They immediately improved quality and took many steps to gain back their loyal followers and win over a much larger customer base. They wanted to energize that customer base by creating networks for people to connect. Their aim was to promote places to visit and products for people to buy when riding there. In rebranding themselves to connect with their customer base, the Motor Company created the Harley Owners Group.

I was still relatively new into riding, even newer into the Harley mania craze, but was suddenly very addicted to all things Harley. As a new lawyer earning a pretty good salary for the first time in my life, I had bought a lifetime national HOG membership when I bought my second Harley in April of 1987. The cost was \$250.00. (It will cost you \$650.00 today!) My first Harley, a Sportglide, was wrecked the year before when I met a nice little old lady in the oncoming lane who decided to turn left without recognizing I was there, but that's another story.

The Motor Company was encouraging dealerships to create local HOG chapters. I can't say whom (between Harry, Barb and Allan Wilkins) actually decided to start a chapter at Wilkins, but I remember Barb talking about it with me to see if I would be interested. I was an easy sell. Then I got an official invitation in the mail to meet at the Elks Club in Montpelier to officially form a local HOG chapter. It was an orange post card with black lettering. (Go figure!) The first meeting was held on April 18, 1988. If memory serves, Harry, Allan and Barb were present along with Jan Otto, their shop mechanic. A friend of Jan's named John Ballard was there. Myron Degenhardt (still a member) was there. I had brought a friend named Tom Thompson. There were a couple others but you'll have to ask Barb for all of their names. Jan Otto was elected president and Barb agreed to act as treasurer. John Ballard would become our second president, his wife making excellent brownies when we met at their barn in Cabot.

If memory serves, our first official CVHOG ride was a ridge run over Appalachian Gap. It was freezing cold. Most of us didn't have official Harley cold weather gear (it hadn't been invented yet!) and I remember giggling at the rider in front of me who wore a purple down parka. Our meetings frequently were held at various members' homes, some of which were hard to find. (This was long before GPS or Google anything, when a "personal computer" was nothing you could carry personally.) Heading for one of them in Cabot, Tom Thompson and I pulled up to a corner at a church where a group of leather clad people were standing. We figured by their attire that we had found the place. We asked if that was where the meeting was and they said yes, so we were glad to have found it. We went inside and suddenly discovered the "meeting" was actually an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, not the HOG chapter meeting. This was the first of many funny stories I've experienced with HOG members through the years.

Our first official benefit ride was in conjunction with Harley's national commitment to support the Muscular Dystrophy Association. The idea was to have riders solicit donations and meet for a day long ride. We met at a hotel parking lot in Rutland. I had brought my reluctant wife and three-year-old daughter to help with registration. My wife was brand new to all this, and a large group of black leather clad Harley riders was something she wasn't quite used to yet. Our daughter, on the other hand, was totally thrilled. We rode north on Route 100. Along the way somebody went down after swerving to avoid a dog. I have a vague recollection that he injured his toe, but I'm pretty sure he continued on. We ended the route at the campground at Lake Elmore for a big picnic at the pavilion there. [I'm hoping I haven't confused the picnic with some other event, but that's the way I'm recalling it now.] During the Jerry Lewis Telethon we were invited to officially present our solicitations check live on the air (my first national TV spot!) in Burlington. I was asked to ride my bike into the studio and, along with Harry and Barb, we presented the check to the local announcer, who was satellite fed to Jerry Lewis. It was quite a thrill. Somewhere around my house I have a framed picture of Jerry Lewis commemorating the event.

One of the rules for being a member of the local HOG chapter is that you also have to be a national HOG member. My lifetime membership from 1987 has resulted in a pin and a patch for every HOG year since now hanging in my garage. I've attended HOG rallies on the state, regional and national level through the years. These include Vermont, New England, Daytona, Sturgis, Oregon, Pennsylvania and the best of all during the 100th HD anniversary in Milwaukie in 2003. At the HOG rally in Sturgis in 1990, which was the fiftieth-year anniversary of the Black Hills Rally, I got a HOG travel toothbrush which is still going strong today.

The best part of my HOG membership has been the friends made and rides taken. It's been a GREAT ride. Before I joined I thought a weekend ride to Portland, Maine was a major lifetime event. Tom Thompson and I, with a couple of others, had taken that ride prior to joining HOG, and I remember us bragging to our friends that we had accomplished a major motorcycle ride. With HOG and the friends I've made, that ride to Portland thirty plus years ago looks like (and practically is) a short trip for lunch. I've logged well over half a million miles since, crossing the continent three times, from the farthest northeast you can ride at Cape Spear, Newfoundland to the farthest west at Anchor Point, Alaska, to Mile Marker Zero at Key West, dragging fellow HOG members along every time. The crowning achievement, as-of-yet (I'm not done yet), was a solo circumnavigation of the North American continent back in 2007 to celebrate my 50th year on planet earth. And right about now, as the snow starts melting, I'm already feeling the itch for another ride! I owe it all to answering that orange and black post card from Barb Wilkins back in 1988. Long live CVHOG!

Joe Benning  
State Senator & Minority Leader  
Caledonia District  
CVHOG Charter Member since 1988

### My own thoughts on being a Chapter member –

My husband, Randy (Lamell) bought his first Harley in 2012 – after not riding a motorcycle for decades. He had *always* wanted a Harley and after we closed our business, he decided it was time! As is always done for all bike/trike purchasers, Wilkins provided Randy with his first year of National HOG membership and Chapter #5218 membership -- and let him know about the upcoming Chapter social. So, we attended our first Social shortly after the purchase (I believe Richard Pitonyak was the director at the time) and we were instantly intrigued with the idea of being part of a group ride. I'm not sure where we went on our first Chapter ride, but I distinctly recall being struck with the feeling that our group of individuals became 'one' as we snaked our way along the route in staggered formation. Subsequent rides with large groups, like the VT Thunder Ride and benefit rides for Camp Ta-Kum-Ta, have magnified that feeling of being part of something really special and much greater than 'just a ride'. I LOVE our 'riding club' and the DEALERSHIP that sponsors us!

## What comes next:

During the first 30 years the H.O.G. Chapter #5218 has been in existence, many monthly socials have been attended, and many rides have been mapped out and enjoyed by many bikers! Community-involvement by members, through volunteering at the Vermont Foodbank and taking part in fundraising rides for non-profit programs like Camp Ta-Kum-Ta, has added an extra measure to the whole H.O.G. experience. It is hoped that all members and future members will follow Joe Benning's lead by taking part in chapter activities and rides and by enjoying the friendships they develop in the process – as he said, **“The best part of my HOG membership has been the friends made and rides taken. It's been a GREAT ride... Long live CVHOG!”**

Compiled for your education and entertainment by Linda Lamell  
(Historian, Editor, Secretary, and Membership Officer) – March 25, 2018