

WILKINS HARLEY-DAVIDSON Family Bonds

61 years and three generations

by Mike Staudt
Photos by Kim Staudt

Ever wonder how a Harley dealer came into existence when you walk through the front door? I do, and I usually find a unique story behind every one. While planning a trip through the New England states, I checked out the website for Wilkins Harley-Davidson in Barre, Vermont. Looking over the dealership's site, I notice two things—they recently collected three awards from Harley and they celebrated 60 years in business in 2007. When you hear a motorcycle dealer has been in business for that long, you know there is a good story behind it.

Harry Wilkins was stationed in Guam as a B-29 bomber mechanic in 1946. His tour was just about up and he applied to The Motor Company for a dealership in his hometown of Barre. Harry had been around Harleys most of his life. His application was accepted and on January 28, 1947, he began selling motorcycles out of his mother's garage. He also worked in the granite quarries and at a local dry cleaner to make ends meet. He took notice of the dry cleaner's daughter Barbara and soon married her.

They bought a small sawmill and began building a house on the property with their own bare hands. They also moved the dealership to their own garage. Twins Alan and Ann were born to the happy couple. Ann grew up and married William Lyon and they had two children, Kimberly and John.

In 1979, Alan started working for the business and Ann followed in 1980. They worked side by side with their parents. The business was growing so much that a new building was in order. In 1995, they opened the current building and have since added on. They are currently considering another addition to the building. Ann's son John started working for

the family business in 2004. He was an attorney, but wanted to be involved as a third-generation family member to work at the dealership.

Harry passed away in 2000, and his son Alan was diagnosed with leukemia the same year. Alan passed away in 2002. Barbara, daughter Ann and grandson John continue to run the family business today, and Barbara still lives in the house that she and Harry built.

On the day I visited, I learned some interesting things while talking to John and Barbara. While I was there, I looked for the H-D awards, but I couldn't find a single one. The three customer service awards—#1 in Vermont, #1 in all of New England, and #5 in the U.S. out of almost 700 dealers—are all hanging inside Barbara's office. But what I did find means more than the awards.

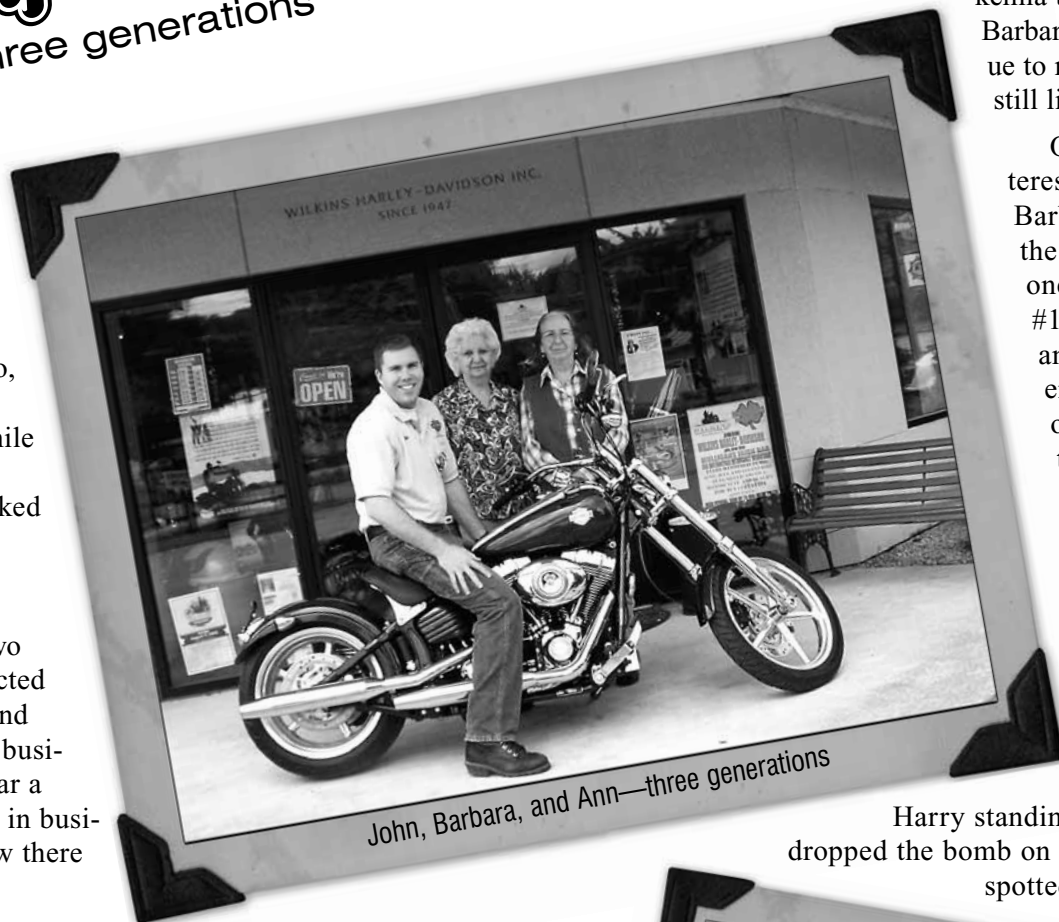
Hanging on the walls and resting on shelves are pictures from the past, photos of the people who made Wilkins H-D what it is today. There is Harry on his 1947 Knucklehead with full riding gear. His initials are clearly visible on the tank. This same image is silkscreened on the backs of some of their shirts. Another picture is of Harry standing beside the Enola Gay, the B-29 that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. I also spotted an aerial picture of the house that Harry and Barbara built with

the dealership right next door.

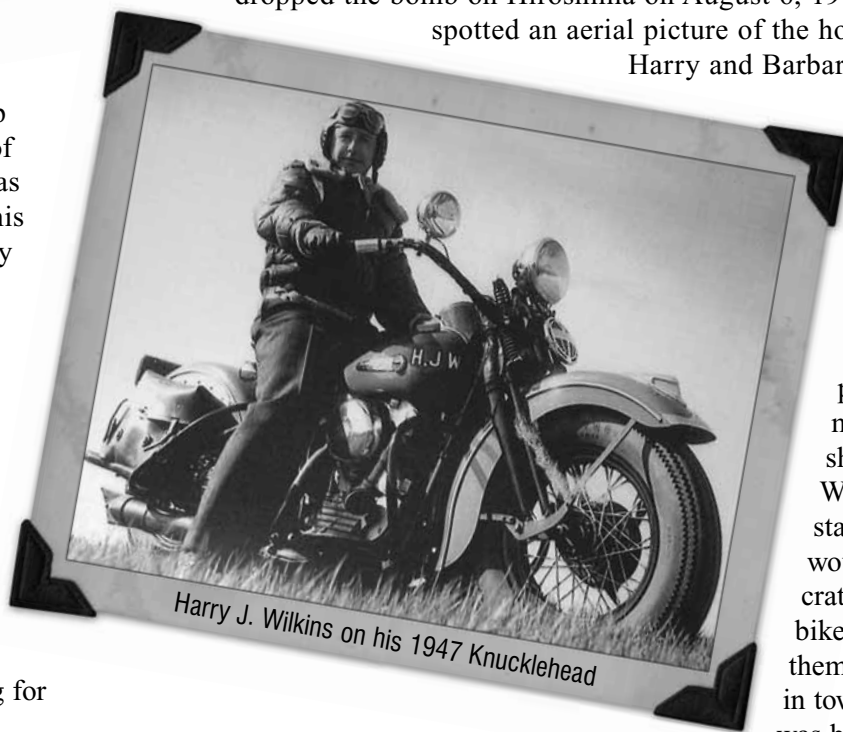
The most fascinating piece of memorabilia, to me, is part of an old motorcycle-shipment crate. When Harry started out, he would save the crates from the bikes and give them to a friend in town. The wood was being used to

make a garage. When it was torn down recently, the owner brought one piece back to the dealership. It was the one stamped No. 1—the first motorcycle delivered to Wilkins H-D. John told me he would have paid anything to have that one piece of crate back and he got it for free, just like when Harry gave the crates to his friend.

So my plan to visit an out-of-state dealer to pick up a shirt turned into a journey back in time. I learned where they came from and how the dealership survived by offering good customer service. Barbara, Ann and John were all there that day, faithfully working away. I even saw Barbara showing a prospective customer a new bike while I was introduced to Massena, their English bulldog mascot. I left there feeling lucky to have crossed paths with this family-owned dealership. I still smile when I think about that place. ▶



John, Barbara, and Ann—three generations



Harry J. Wilkins on his 1947 Knucklehead