

The Widomaker Hill Climb

-Jeff Thurmond

I recently had a nice Saturday lunch at The Ridge, an exceptionally good restaurant at the top of South Mountain on Traverse Ridge Rd. The men's restroom is worth the visit as the walls are covered with great pictures of a motorcycle hill climb. I asked the restaurant owner if they were from the original Widomaker hill climb in Utah. He said yes they were from the Draper Hill. I was going to explain to him that the original Utah hill climb was not in Draper, but the food was ready and thought it prudent to just let it pass. Indeed, the hill climb event started long before it moved to Draper.

I grew up on what is now called the east bench area of the Salt Lake valley. Back in the 1950's and early 1960's, there were few homes beyond the Holladay area. Until 1951 the state prison was where Sugarhouse Park is now. Draper was mostly farm land and no one did paragliding at the Point of the Mountain. You took Wasatch Boulevard from the south side of the mouth of Parleys Canyon across to Millcreek Canyon and then onto Big and Little Cottonwood Canyon. There was not much east of Highland Drive or south of 4500 S. Log Haven was at the top of Millcreek and there was no "gate" or fee to use the canyon. Alta and Brighton were the only two ski resorts. The gravel pits were north of the entrance to Big Cottonwood, the gun club was on top of the north hill above the gravel pits, and the only restaurant I remember beyond Holladay was the Canyon Inn at the mouth of Big Cottonwood.

For the record, the original Widomaker hill climb was on the north side of the road leading to Millcreek Canyon, about 1/2 mile east of Wasatch Blvd heading up Millcreek Canyon Rd, which is 3800 S. You can still see the dirt gouge from the hill climb in the mountain side.

No one seems to know exactly when the hill climb event in the Salt Lake area started. I would speculate that the event started in around 1948 or 1949. WWII was over, some of the boys who made it back were buying motorcycles and looking for adventure. The Marshall Plan that encouraged trade with the UK and Europe after the war was bringing in many British bikes which were lighter, had better ground clearance, and were more nimble than the Harleys and Indians.

The event was on Memorial Day weekend. I recall first going to the hill climb in 1953 or 1954 with my dad. He was helping a buddy of his who had a motorcycle from England; I have no idea what kind it was. The hill ⇒



probably was not an official event back in the early 1950's as much as a loosely organized challenge. The hills above Wasatch Blvd were weeds and rocks and scrub oak; perfect for testing the ability to take a jeep or a motorcycle up a steep incline.

Back then there were no houses at the mouth of Millcreek. The Olympus Hills Shopping Center did not exist. The area was not called Olympus Cove. To get to the start of The Hill, there were some dirt jeep roads north of Millcreek Rd and you had to go from Wasatch Blvd or Millcreek Rd (3800 S) up to a flat area of what is now a road called Choke Cherry Drive. This somewhat flat area was quite large and could handle the pickups and trailers and serve as a starting staging-area where that road is now, and the trail or route of the hill climb ran northeast up the mountain side. You can still see the start of the hill in the backyard area between two of the houses, at what would be about 3700 Choke Cherry Drive, the trail on the mountain side is visible from Wasatch Blvd looking north east at around 3900-4000 South, and the hill climb trail is clearly visible on Google Maps Satellite view as a scar on the mountain side.

The base elevation of where the hill climb started is 5120. From the base, you could not see the top. The path went up for about 80 or 100 feet and that crested a small hill, then you went down for 20 feet or so then started up the real Hill which was about 800 feet to the top at about a 45-50 degree angle.

The name Widowmaker was put on the hill climb event by the Salt Lake Tribune newspaper. It seems that for a number of years of the event, at least one person was killed every year. The cause of the death was almost always a broken neck as the rider would tip over backwards as often as sideways when they fell. And often the rider was married, hence the wife became a widow. The first few times I was at the event I was too young to appreciate the skill needed to even attempt the event. I do recall that many of the motorcycles had tires that looked like aggressive snow-tires and some even had snow chains. Few of the motorcycles had any muffler on the exhaust. Fenders had been removed to cut weight and add wheel clearance. Remember that back then there were no purpose-built motorcycles and what was used for the hill climb were stock or modified bikes designed originally for everyday pavement riding. The rider's gear was Levis and sometimes authentic chaps, engineer boots, t-shirts and leather jackets, and most everyone wore roper style gloves.

Dad and I went on Memorial Day Sunday afternoons for a few years of these events to help my dad's buddy, though neither dad nor I had a motorcycle. It was just a fun thing. I remember the noise, the dust, the people, lining both sides of the trail as it rose in a straight line up the mountain side. By the early 1960's I had started riding, and got my first and only dirt-bike, which I sold at the end of that summer. Being young and stupid and knowing that Memorial Day Weekend was the hill climb, I tried my hand at the Widowmaker. I was a true novice, had no business being there, barely knew how to ride and had zero skill off road, and in my one run did not get near the top, but at ⇨

least I can say I rode part way up that hillside.

The Salt Lake valley was really growing by the early 1960's. Land developers were moving south as fast as basements could be dug. New streets were being created ev-

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mill opened in June 2003 and consisted of three different hills, with the ↗