400 STORIES PROJECT

Onni R. Erkkila
Photo courtesy of the Erkkila Family
ONNI RUDOLPH ERKKILA
1914 - 1981

Onni was a first-generation Finnish American and youngest son in a small family with immigrant parents from Finland. Throughout life, he was very active with music, various sports, and other activities such as the Lanesville Boy Scouts. Onni used wonderful penmanship, the Palmer Method, learned during his Lane School days. Graduating from Gloucester High School in 1932, he played the trombone with the ROTC Band and the School Orchestra. At various times, he also played with the Waino Band, Rockport Legion Band, Union Bands, the Cape Ann Symphony, and marched in several parades. Quite often, Onni became his own “float” with an antique bicycle-built-for-two in costume and a mannequin partner. He was often in the Clown Band during the 4th of July parades.
Always interested in old cars and motorcycles, especially Harley-Davidsons, Onni hosted many old car club gatherings and motorcycle club events. He was a Harley-Davidson motorcycle rider since age 16. After various minor motorcycle accidents over the years, Onni met his untimely death on his Harley. Not a candidate for a hospital stay or rest home, Onni most likely wanted to go that way.

In 1972, he shipped his Harley-Davidson to Finland where he joined up with it and rode all over Finland and into Norway and Sweden. Onni met many relatives and was written up in a Helsinki newspaper. He said he even dreamt in Finnish while in Finland.

With a great interest in antique cars, especially Model A Fords, the family always had one or more antique cars on the road. Finnish and Finland were very important to Onni. He loved music, even taking a recording of Finnish music into the deep woods to his favorite blueberrying spot!
When Onni met and married wife Barbara (Howell) Erkkila, they left on the Harley-Davidson for their honeymoon trip. Later, Barbara operated her own white Harley bike to match his! But when the children came along, Barbara rode only with Onni on his bike.

Known as “Pete” to his friends, he was a co-founder of the “Random Riders,” a motorcycle gathering of various riders who met weekly and rode to many destinations. Onni, surprisingly, rode his Harley through many winters in his snowmobile suit, as long as the roads were clear.

Always ready to help others, Onni would grab a snow shovel from an older person and dig in! He was often seen at the Annual Lanesville Congregational Church Fair giving rides to kids on his motorcycle and side car. Onni helped organize the Lanesville Community Center in 1954. He was always involved in ANYTHING Finnish, such as food, music, sauna, and meeting other Finns and joining Finnish organizations.

All and all, a real Finnish American!

- Submitted by John W. Erkkila, son of Onni R. Erkkila

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