

Lowell graves tell history of violence

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Editor's note: In light of the May 17 shootout among rival biker gangs in Waco, Texas, that left nine people dead, several Sun readers inquired about Lowell's notorious Hells Angels of the 1970s. Here's an update.

By Lisa Redmond

LOWELL — Every spring, the two dozen or so members of the Lowell Hells Angels Motorcycle Club, all wearing leather jackets adorned with club-logo patches or "colors," roar into West Lawn Cemetery on Harley Davidson motorcycles to pay homage to six fallen comrades.

The bikers place a flower wreath at a massive black headstone. The headstone has the inscription: "Hells Angels M.C. Lowell. The Earth is Hell and on it there are Hells Angels. They lived the life they loved and they loved the life they lived. Yea Hells Angels."

Under the inscription are the names: Martin "Greek" Martakos, 1943-1970; Edwin T. R B Riley Jr., 1940-1974; "Whiskey" George Hartman, 1946-1974; Lionel "Lye" Poliquin "LBG," 1946-1981; David "Swave" Johnson, 1952-1978; and Harry "The Hat" Stinson, 1962-1989.

Riley and Hartman, both Lowell Hells Angels members, were murdered in a 1974 gang-style execution in Florida by Outlaw motorcycle gang members. The murdered men were shot in the back of the head and their bodies dumped. Officials speculated they were in Florida to buy drugs.

Gang turf wars and biker violence between rival gangs still exist as seen in the May 17 shootout between the Bandidos and the Cossacks in Waco, Texas, that left nine dead and 170 bikers facing organized-crime charges.

For retired Massachusetts State Police detective Bob Long, the Texas incident triggered memories from the 1970s of the Lowell Hells Angels and its violent past.

“The city was out of control,” said Long, who runs his own private investigations business. “The gang was ruthless.”

Law enforcement was at war with the biker gang, Long said. He worked closely with Lowell police on raids of biker hangouts, seizing drugs and stockpiles of firearms. Most of the worst gang members from that era are either dead or in prison, he said.

The Lowell chapter, which began in 1966, was the first East Coast chapter of the Hells Angels. Members were called “1 percenters” after the American Motorcycle Association stated 99 percent of bikers were law-abiding. Hells Angels boasted about it, saying they represented the 1 percent who were law-breakers.

The Lowell Hells Angels of the '60s and '70s was notorious for drug dealing, violence and an obvious disdain for law enforcement, said retired Lowell Police Superintendent Ed Davis, who also served as commissioner of the Boston Police Department.

If a barroom brawl turned into a bloody battle with rival bikers or the police, Angels who fought would be rewarded with a patch for their leather vests or jackets.

Davis recalled a “big brawl” at the former Nicky’s Bar on Gorham Street involving a number of Hells Angels members. The fight spilled onto the street and stopped traffic. One biker landed on the hood of then-Lowell Mayor Ray Rourke’s car, Davis said. (Rourke’s son, Richard Rourke, is now the proprietor of Ricardo’s Trattoria restaurant, located at the former Nicky’s Bar site.)

“Everyone went to the hospital,” Davis said. The chapter rewarded members with special patches.

Davis also remembers a drug raid in the 1970s at a Hells Angels’ hangout in Lowell where methamphetamine was being made. “I saw bottles of dangerous chemicals being removed from the basement,” Davis said.

“We would have flare-ups and then things would go quiet for a while,” Davis said.

When Davis became Lowell police superintendent in 1994 he assigned Capt. Russ Taylor as the police liaison to the Lowell Hells Angels to keep tabs and develop intelligence on the group. Part of that surveillance involved a police escort to the gang’s annual spring pilgrimage to the Westview Cemetery and funerals.

Dave Brow, a now-retired photographer for The Sun, recalls covering a funeral at the McDonough Funeral Home for a Lowell Hells Angel member in the 1970s. Brow said was shocked when he was allowed inside the funeral parlor, where bikers poured beer into the casket as part of a ritual to pay homage to the fallen member.

When they were ready to ride to the grave site, 200 to 300 bikers started their engines at the same moment.

“It was like a freight train,” Brow said. “The vibration shook the ground.”

John McDonough, owner of McDonough Funeral Home, said he has performed three funerals for Hells Angels members over the years. The first was in 1975 when the local chapter president rang his doorbell asking McDonough to bury his friend because no other funeral home would do so, he said.

Despite ongoing tensions between law enforcement and Hells Angels, McDonough said both sides have always been respectful toward each other at funerals.

Taylor noted that over the years, Lowell Hells Angels have transformed from “raising Hell to becoming an organized-crime entity with leaders and structure.”

As the biker gang evolved, Davis said, its leaders learned that the group needed to keep a lower profile.

“About 15 years ago they went underground,” Davis said. “The last thing a club wants is to draw police attention, which is a detriment to making money.”

As various biker hangouts have been closed over the years, the Lowell Hells Angels currently have their meetings at “the church” on Carter Avenue, a red building with a large security camera mounted outside.

No one answered the door at the Carter Avenue building recently when a Sun reporter paid a visit. Nor did anyone respond to the reporter’s business card taped to the mailbox. Former Lowell Hells Angels president George Caruso, of Shirley, could not be reached for comment.

Taylor said club officials promote the Hells Angels of the new millennium as kinder, gentler bikers. He said the gang publicizes its charitable donations such as buying out Walmart’s stock of bicycles last year and donating them to a homeless shelter in Fresno, Calif. The club also annually donates to Toys for Tots, Taylor said.

But he remains skeptical.

“They say and do the right things, but it’s still a criminal organization,” he said.

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