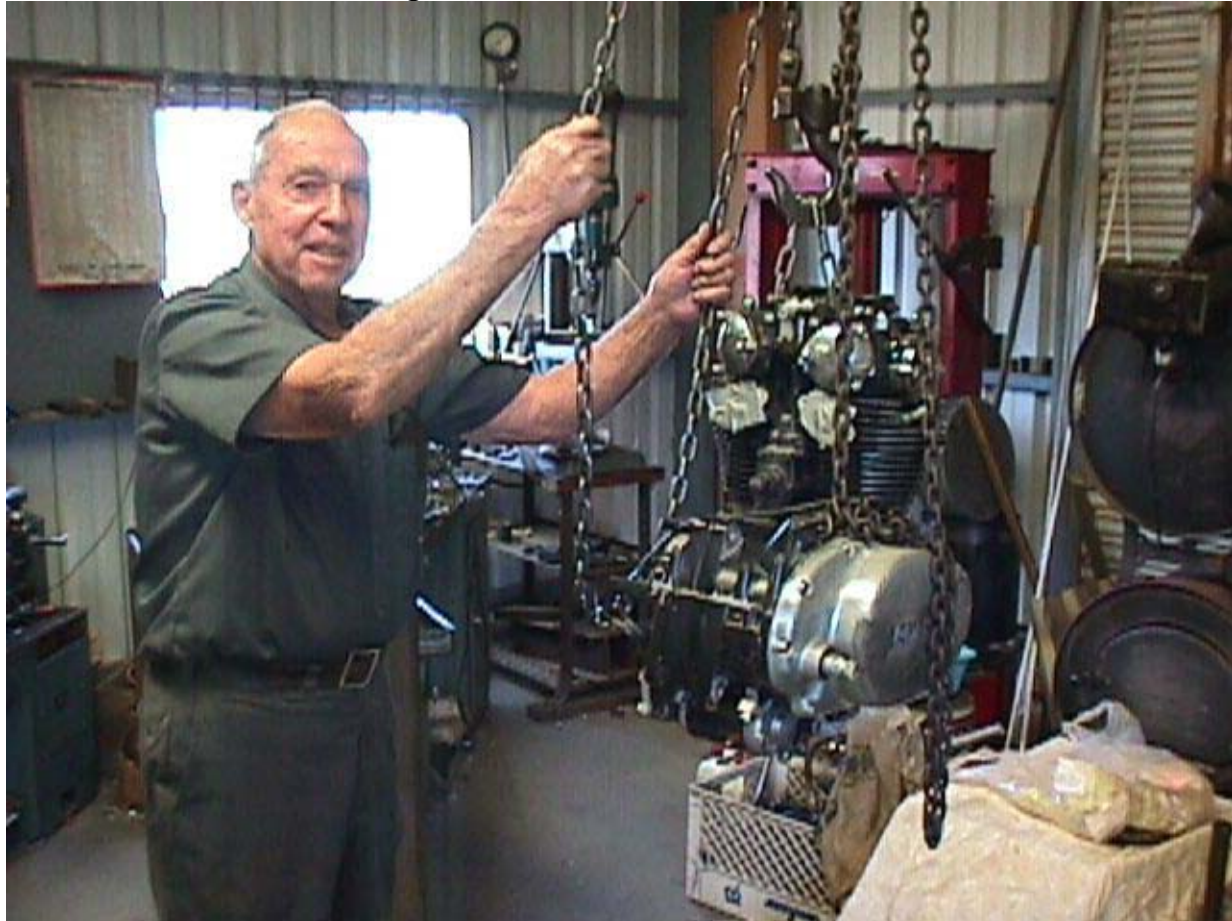


CHAPTER ONE – Meeting the Master



I had talked to some fellow racers of mine about doing a series of articles, which amounted to a tribute, to one of motorcycle racing's great tuners, Shell Thuet. I contemplated whether or not I really had much to contribute, as I have only been a customer of his and known him for less than two years. In all honesty, prior to 1998, when I got back into dirt track racing, after quitting in 1971, I had never heard of the man. Back then I was just out of Vietnam trying to race a Yamaha DT-1 that I brought back on the aircraft carrier, USS Coral Sea, from Japan, a Montesa Cappa and a stock Norton P-11 at South Bay Speedway near San Diego. I was racing at the Expert Sportsman level, and was oblivious to what was happening in the pro ranks. When it appeared that my marriage and attempts at a

racing career weren't mutually compatible, I headed back home to Colorado to use my GI Bill and try to get some college. For 27 years I had not followed the sport or subscribed to any magazines, so I arrived back into dirt track racing, knowing only what I knew back in 1971. I was unaware of the events and people of the past that are now such a large part of my present enjoyment. This is how I met the gentleman.

In the summer of '98 I was looking around for a twin four-stroke flattracker that I could start racing in vintage events, 'cause they had old dudes on old bikes, and I didn't want to race against 18 year olds. I started by looking at Norton's, then the other Brit' bikes, and saw a few Yamaha's along the way. As I was sucking information out of everyone I talked to, the consensus was that if I wanted to race and I wasn't a purist about British iron, Yamaha twins might be the way to go. Lee Parker (VDTRA #5G) told me they were plentiful, parts were still available, and you could make them fast and reliable. Matter of fact his engine was built by Shell Thuet. Well, that was just another name that didn't mean much at the time, but I had to find a bike! I was at the mid-Ohio at the AHRMA event a few weeks later when I met up with a very hospitable fellow named Rusty Lowry. He had a Champion Yamaha with Shell (?) motor in his trailer all apart, that he was selling for \$1800. It was a project bike (I've learned a LOT about 'project' bikes since then), but I needed something NOW. So I walked away from it (dumb, dumb, dumb). Later in Colorado I ran across another Champion Yamaha that was put together. I was told it had a 'Shell' motor in it. Okay, that must mean something after all, and I gave up \$3200 for it. Again, I was talking to a local racer, Bill Anderson, about where to get stuff for it, and Bill wrote Shell Thuet's name on the back of his business card. "Who IS this guy I keep hearing mentioned? Is he any good," I ask innocently. With rolled eyes, Bill replied, "He built the bikes that Kenny Roberts rode to two national championships in '74 and '75!" Okay, NOW I'm impressed. I've heard of Kenny Roberts. Matter of fact I have a picture of me racing behind him when he came down to a race at South Bay Speedway. He was 16 at the time and just becoming well known, while I was 22 and just getting ready to quit.

My first race with the Yamaha was at Steamboat Springs, and it had some teething problems, but I was able to figure them out by cleaning the carbs. Also, it seems my compression was a little low, but seemed okay. The big highlight of the year for me would be the Sacramento Mile. This would be the first race my wife,

Becky, would see me in so I was looking forward to it. Unfortunately, during the heat race at Sacramento, my engine started running on one cylinder, so I shut it down and parked it. One of the riders pitted next to me said that Shell was at the track with his riders. "He is? Shell Thuet is here?" I exclaimed. "Maybe he can help me fix it!" I hobbled (as all flattrackers do with their steel shoe on) down pit row and asked someone if they knew where Shell's rig was. Well, there it was right in front of me where I saw this old guy on his knees busy changing a sprocket on a wheel. The bikes had #40 and #55 on them. I waited patiently while he got it mounted on the bike, and then approached him. I told him I had a problem and I was told that it was one of his motors and ... could he come take a look at it for me? He walked with me back to my bike and while still 20 feet away, states flatly, "That's not my engine." We pulled the plug and it appeared I had broken some rings on the right side. I was done. Not knowing anything about these engines yet, I asked him if he could rebuild it for me. He said if I took the engine out of the frame, he'd haul it back to his shop and have it ready in a few months. I was still able to race with a Bultaco I had brought.

After the race I commenced to disassemble the Champion Yamaha, yanking out bolts and whatnot until nothing left was holding the engine in. But try as I might, I could not get that turkey out of its frame. Finally I wheeled it down to Shell's pit area, and looking like the rookie I am, asked for help. A couple of Shell's riders grabbed the bike, one of whom was the late Art Fredenburgh and the other I think was Tom Horton, and with a slight twist of the motor, it fell into Art's hands. He then carried it and placed it in Shell's motor home. I never asked a price on what it would cost and Shell never offered. Either you want him to do it or you don't. I



asked him if he needed a deposit or anything, but he said it was not necessary. So Becky and I headed back to Colorado 140 pounds lighter.

I called Shell when we got back home, because I was wondering what he was actually going to do to my engine. Some riders put in my head that Shell's motors put out so much power that I would be going through tires, right and left (or should it be front and rear?). When I expressed to him my concern over my rider ability, and said, "I'm no Kenny Roberts, you know". Shell replied with feigned surprise, "You're not? Well then, you better let me figure out what you need".

Two months later, in mid-December, I found myself traveling over a thousand miles across the Colorado Rockies, past the stunning mesas of Utah, through the gaudy brightness of Las Vegas and into the morning beauty of the Mojave desert, of California. In the back of my Ford pickup there were three stock Yamaha XS650 motorcycle engines of various vintages from 1971, 1974 and 1983. I was looking for the Bear Valley exit, on Interstate 15, at the south end of Victorville, CA. I found it and headed east where slowly the road goes from a divided four

lane, to four lanes, then down to a two lane paved stretch that is starting to get potholes. I left the town behind me a mile back, and arrived at the end of the paved road where it T's with another. I continued across the intersection onto a dusty washboard road that headed off into the endless desert. I glanced at my fuel gauge in apprehension. Fortunately my destination was not more than a half mile from the intersection. I turned

left off the road and pulled in front of a Spanish style ranch house with a red tile roof. There was a shop to my right, and in between the shop and the house was a concrete walkway with several Yamaha flattrackers parked on it. One had a number 40 on it. When I entered the shop I found Shell Thuet sitting at his desk, hand writing an invoice for a shipment of parts for a customer that UPS was about to pick up. I noticed he was jotting down the prices from a 1980 Yamaha price sheet on the invoice.



When he finished he gave me a tour of the place. I saw various machinery: milling machine, lathe, boring bars, presses, welders, etc, all with that thin rust that accumulates on iron in California over the years. He had a hand-built dynamometer in a side shed with a stock XS650 frame bolted to it. He showed me an OW engine and the differences in the stock head and what the Yamaha factory eventually put out. On the top shelf of a work bench I saw a very tall first place trophy that Kenny Roberts brought by at one time, but forgot to take back with him. The telephone rang. It's hooked up to a very loud buzzer because Shell's hearing isn't all that good. He's 86 years old (at that time) after all, and had been tuning motors way before OSHA ever got involved in businesses. Pretty soon it was 12 noon, sharp, and Maggie came out to say, "Mike, tell Papa it's time for lunch and to come in." Maggie is MUCH younger than Shell (how is that Maggie?). She walked carefully, as she has trouble seeing. We had a couple of tuna sandwiches with some coffee and I got to talk to the delightful lady about the time Shell was working for the Yamaha factory race team "...because they wanted the championship and they came to Shell to get it." She is obviously very proud of her husband and talked about his accomplishments, non-stop. She complained a bit that Shell doesn't charge enough for his parts. Shell on the other hand, just nods his head and looks anxious to get back to work. Getting him to talk about himself is like pulling teeth. Back in the shop I loaded up the engine that Shell rebuilt for me and left him with two others. One would be put into a stock frame, a roadracer, and the other to be a future spare. A third one I brought is destined to be an open twin motocrosser (yeah, I was getting carried away, forgetting my priorities, but those are different stories). Shell showed me how to install an ARD ignition on the MX motor, which would otherwise be stock. I put the 34mm Mikuni's on it that were previously on my flatracker. Shell elected to put 36mm round slide carbs on that one now. It turned out the 'Shell' motor I bought with the bike had, in fact, Shell rods and was a 750, but everything else was stock. So Shell put his number one cam in it, filled the big holes with J&E pistons, ported the head, put an ARD CDI ignition on the left side and placed Barnett clutch plates on the right side. Along with the rebuilt flatrack motor and the MX motor, I also loaded three sets of pipes and silencers, air cleaners, throttles and cables, and even a stand for the frame that he built. My exuberance to help and my endless questions drove Shell nuts, as he likes to do everything himself and the questions I asked were so elementary to him. Plus, it is hard to get out of a parent-child relationship with him, and he was probably tired of

hearing me ask, "Why?" One time he said he needed to get a part for my engine. So I offered to go get it for him. He looked at me with one eyebrow up and he said, "Okay, go get it!" Sheepishly, I replied, "I don't know where they are." He came back with "Then why did you say you could go get it?"

At four o'clock Shell started wheeling in the bikes that were outside and closing up the shop. It was time for happy hour with Maggie so we went into the house, being careful to shut the gate so the dog couldn't get out. There's a danger of coyotes that might want the poodle as dinner. Maggie's home is very comfortable; the walls decorated with a 3D type of artwork that she did before her eyes became weak. She is a



big fan of the old western movies, as she grew up in Texas. She has her TV set up in the living room on the coffee table just two feet in front of the couch. This allows her to get close enough to see her videos. Shell watches TV in another room, and his hangout is definitely more masculine, with lots of western statues. His videos are of past races recorded off of ESPN2. He also enjoys watching ball sports.

Back in the immaculate kitchen, Maggie got us each a beer and Shell pulled a brick of cheese from the local grocer, along with some saltine crackers. I made a big deal over the tasty cheese because they do not sell it in Colorado. Shell only drinks a beer at this time to keep Maggie company, never at any other time. Shell is his usual quiet self and Maggie told me more of what racing was like in the 70's and how Yamaha had honored Shell at the Yamaha dealers banquet after they had won the championship. They had hung Shell's racing motorcycles from the ceiling of the banquet hall for all to see and the occasion was very extravagant. He talked kindly of his many friends, sadly but without malice of those who took advantage of his good nature, and fondly of the many riders that went on to notoriety. He talked about those riders that were real nice guys like Wayne Rainey and Hank Scott, and I slowly began swapping out, in my mind, some of the racers that I had placed on pedestals in the past with new ones. Those were the best of times for them.

At 52 years old, I was feeling like I was about done making any significant changes in my life and there is not much time left to start any long-term commitments. Listening to Maggie and Shell, I realized that at the time Yamaha hired them in 1974, he was 62 years old! Since then he has continued to build motors and sell parts to the present day.

I spent the night at Shell's house that evening, and left the next morning. When I got back home, I realized I needed some additional parts, and called Shell. He sent the parts I requested, on account (on account of he trusts everybody to pay him, so he does not bother with C.O.D or prepaid orders). When I opened the box, I found not only my parts but also a brick of that cheese I liked so much! It's no wonder all their riders treat them like Mom and Dad. As spring rolled around I made another quick 2000 mile trip back to Shell's to pick up my road race engine, and dropped off another one, just in case.

Back in Colorado the season rolled by and as usual, the bikes needed continuous maintenance. I would call Shell at times of difficulty to get his advice. One time I called to say that I put together my TT500 motor but I couldn't get it to start. It would just backfire on me (very LOUDLY). He told me I put the sprocket on the crank that drives the cam chain on 180 degrees out (he was right). I've learned to keep my questions short and to the point, because if I start passing the time of day he does not hear it all and it makes conversation difficult. So I just talk motors and he knows what's being said. I made the mistake of challenging him once on a technique, after I asked him how I should do something. After he told me what to do, I said, "But the manual says to set it, ...etc." Shell came back with, "Then do it that way. If you don't want to do what I tell you, don't ask, 'cause then you're just wasting my time as well as yours!" (Ouch ... Sorry ... Dad).

As I progressed back into racing, I would meet many racers, and we would talk about our bikes. Eventually, the conversation would focus on the 'Shell Racing Specialties' decal on my engines, and then we would compare what Shell had done to our engines. Craig Weeks, who races a Yamaha XS650/750 in vintage roadracing out of the Northwest recently shared with me, "My introduction to Shell was in 1985. I purchased a race-ready, 750cc Yamaha twin engine from him complete with carbs, exhaust, and ignition components to power the vintage roadracer I was constructing. As I completed the bike Shell was very responsive to my occasional 'How to...?' questions. When it came time to install the ignition, I designed and built a somewhat complicated vibration-resistant bracket made out of

aircraft aluminum to hold the coils and condenser. When completed, the bike fired right up. I rode it on some backcountry roads to break the motor in and was dismayed to discover that the vibration had already torn apart my ingenious coil/condenser bracket. I dialed the, by now memorized, phone number, once again seeking advice from the master builder and tuner, sure in the knowledge that he had successfully dealt with this problem in the past. I was anxious to hear about the ultra trick, 'Works' mounting system he would recommend to me. Shell listened patiently. I heard an audible sigh followed by a long pause. "Stick 'em on the frame with duct tape," he said. So I did ... and still do. It has never failed for 15 years."

Dennis Burkman recalled this story. "In 1991, my son's 500 Yamaha flattracker was at Shell's for repairs. My son picked it up and drove off, forgetting the portable bike stand. My son was probably two or three miles from Shell's house, traveling about 60 mph, when he noticed a motorcyclist riding along the driver's side of his truck and waving his hand. My son then noticed that the rider was Shell. My son stopped and Shell told him he had left the stand back at his shop. They then returned to pick up the stand. What is incredible is that after Shell had realized that my son had forgotten the stand, he had to go start his street bike and catch up with my son's truck, which had already traveled fairly far. Shell had to have hit close to 100 mph. He was already nearly 80 years old at the time, and ...he was not wearing a helmet."

Don Rickard, who owns R\D Springs and who's shop is in the neighboring town of Hesperia, says that Shell normally rides his XS650 over to his place to pick up engine parts. One time he remembers that Shell pulled up to his shop on his bike with a giant grin on his face. Don asked him why he was so happy and Shell exclaimed proudly, "I'm 80 years old today and I'm just glad I made it!" Don said he had just recently restored a Royal Infield motor for a customer using rocker arms made from tooling loaned to him by Shell that was made over 40 years ago.

During the 1999 season in June, I had a free weekend between VDTRA nationals and headed off to Indianapolis to race the famous mile at a conjunctive AMA/AHRMA event. When I pulled into the parking lot of the fairgrounds, I was excited to see Shell and Maggie there in their motorhome. He was busy barbecuing hamburgers and chatting with the other early arrivals. They had come up to watch and help his riders Art Fredenburgh and Tom Horton, who also made the long trip out from California. Once we got into the pits on race day I parked next to them



(fame by association) and was amazed at all the riders who were coming out of the woodwork, who had never met Shell, but who had always wanted to meet him. Ex-pro riders, like Gary Davis, were also dropping by and passing time with him.

During practice, my clutch, which worked fine on half-miles up to this moment, was slipping on the long straightaway. Shell had heard it as I was going by and new just what it was, and of course how to fix it. Another rider, in close proximity of our pit area, had extra XS650 parts and Shell pulled out a single steel clutch plate from the box and had me add it to my clutch plate stack to increase the spring force on the plates. It worked great in the race and saved my race day.



The 750 Sportsman class had a great dual between Shell's rider Tom Horton #55 and VDTRA champion Mark Gibson #24. Tom lead the race until the last two turns, when both riders had to negotiate around a backmarker and Mark pulled out ahead as they dashed for the checkered flag. Art Fredenburgh #40 was not very far behind all this action. When they pulled in, both of Shell' riders were adamantly apologizing to Shell for not doing better. Art told Shell that his bike was plenty fast enough, but he just couldn't make himself go any faster. I'm glad I stayed in the 50+ class that day! These grown men, ex-AMA national numbers, were like children around Shell trying hard to please him, and were so disappointed that they weren't able to pull off a win for him.



At the end of the season I traveled the long road back to Victorville, spending an entire week with them, at Maggie's invitation, in their home. The purpose was to get the engine rebuilt that I gave him at the time we first met. This tired, '70 model XS1 pre-electric start engine, enabled me to win two VDTRA amateur national class championships in 1999. Up to this time I never knew what he had done to the engine, and evidently, the formula Shell came up with was exactly what I needed, and obviously matched my ability. This time he watched while I took it apart and put it back together again, this time using the crankcases off a '74 model 447 engine that I had left there previously. I needed (desperately) the hands-on experience. This also drove him nuts as he would sit on a stool and fidget about and would want to jump in at every moment when I didn't get something right the first time. It was a trying time for both of us, but the long term benefit of having him teach me about the motor was immensely helpful and unforgettable.

I met another fellow while I was busy fiddling with my bike. Bob Cobb, whose flattracker Shell built had come by to work on Shell's van. Like all riders that have met Shell and Maggie, he considers them as parents. He told me he had had long hair in a ponytail before meeting Shell, but then cut it off when Shell told him he



would get more respect and better jobs without it. One time, when Shell was indisposed, I answered the phone for him, and as odds have it, ended up talking to Craig Weeks, who I mentioned earlier. I asked Shell later what I should say to someone, if they called. “Just tell ‘em you don’t know nothin’!” he said. Ouch, another prick in my ego. Its no wonder that Wayne Rainey described Shell as ‘rough and gruff’ but loved him as a dad.

Shell got injured while I was down there when he was pulling the retaining ring out of one of my pistons. It popped him in the eye. He’s a stubborn cuss, and wouldn’t go see the doctor for two days. When he finally did go, the doctor told him he had internal bleeding in his eye and demanded that he lay down for three days, otherwise he might go blind. This was a bad time for him as his rider and friend Art Fredenburgh was in a coma after crashing during an AHRMA event. Shell was really shook up about it. Sadly, Art died several weeks later. There is nothing you can say to comfort a man like Shell who invests so much of his life in a sport and becomes very attached to everyone he works with.

Shell is from that WWII generation where honor, respect and responsibility override all thoughts of selfishness and greed. A man’s promise is a covenant, and his word can never be questioned. Those of us, who work on our own bikes, do so mainly as a means to allow us to get out there and race. Racing rewards those riders that are great with accolades and publicity and in rare cases, financial rewards. But in the background, there are those who never ride, never cross a finish line, nor are handed a trophy. They are the tuners, the bike builders, the ones who build the machines that the stars ride, and Shell is the epitome, if not the best, of all of them.



Ruidoso Downs, NM, September 23, 2000 -  
Left- Author Mike Konshak on Shell Powered Yamaha



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CHAPTER TWO – Indians and Enfields

To get Shell's history, without him knowing about it, I asked Maggie to jot down some notes. Because lately she is having some health difficulties, Maggie asked Shell's rider, Tom Horton, ex-National #55 and present AHRMA kick-butt, vintage dirt tracker, to gather some information for me. Tom in turn talked to Shell's oldest friend, John Reed, to add some meat to the stew. Dennis Burkman, whose son's bike was built by Shell, provided some more notes. Through Joe Jordan, who used to write for Cycle news, I emailed Hank Scott ex-National #14, who was real hot in '76, winning the OKC National on Shell's motorcycle ... and, some others I'll mention along the way.

Most of those who are reading this understand that flat track racing on oval tracks is pure grassroots Americana. It is the one true American bred motorcycle racing sport, along with hill climbs and TT's. All others, GP road racing, speedway, trials and motocross are European imports. In small towns across the country, if there were a horse track at a fair, motorcycle riders would find their way onto it to challenge each other. Every bike and rider were individual, none looking like any other. They were made from stock production motorcycles, and to the best of their ability, riders and tuners would try to obtain an advantage over their competition. If a rider wasn't very fast, his engine could make up the shortfall, and if his engine wasn't very powerful, a great rider could hang it out to compensate. The mix was as exciting as the variety of the personalities was diverse.

Today, the factories chunk out race bikes one after another, and the riders all look and act the same. All clones from a cookie cutter. There are no heroes today that are able to act as good examples for our youth. The '70's, however, were the glory years of flattrack racing, before the time that the sport became ruled by one factory. Individual initiative and mavericks of the sport reigned. Heroes abounded. This is the story of one of those heroes, a maverick in his own right, an icon of American motorcycle racing.

Sheldon Edmond Thuet was born on August 1, 1912. He was the eldest of four sons and raised in North Long Beach, CA. Shell developed an interest in motorcycles because his father especially enjoyed them. Tragically, Shell's father was killed in an oil refinery accident when he was 12 years old, which left Shell as the head of the family, having to raise his younger brothers. He joined the work

force by starting in the Shell Oil refineries. It was probably during this period that the blood in his veins was replaced by Castrol-R.

In 1939, at age 27, Shell started going to the races. He first got hooked when he was helping Jimmy Kelly who had an Indian factory race engine. The engine was put together by Red Fenwick and belonged to Hap Alzina out of Oakland, CA. Shell just started out as an enthusiast and his natural mechanical abilities helped Jimmy considerably. This early team was very successful. Shell describes himself as a "self taught machinist, mechanic and tuner." That comes from paying your dues and learning by making a lot of mistakes. Shell's and his friends took their Indians out to Daytona to race on the beach, where Shell and the riders were challenged by the 'overhead valve' Nortons.

Shell was an original member, riding an Indian, of the famous 13 Rebels Motorcycle Club in the forties, and it was through Hill Wagner, who was also a member of the club, that Shell met Hill's sister, Maggie Wagner. Shell was enamored with the red-haired blue-gray eyed beauty, would take her for rides on the back of his motorcycle. Maggie was born in Alvarado, TX, and when she was about 12 years old, their family moved to a ranch at Huntington, CA in 1925, where she did most of her growing up. Shell and Maggie were engaged in 1942, but delayed marriage because WWII was just getting started. At that time Shell was working in the shipyards as a welder, where he suffered his initial hearing loss, but because he had critical skills he was given deferment from the draft. Maggie said that several times Shell would get a draft notice, and then the following day he would get a deferment letter. "It made him so mad, because he really wanted to go and fight in the war", said Maggie.

On June 30, 1945 he married Maggie and they settled in Lynwood, CA where they later opened a motorcycle shop, in 1946. The shop was very successful selling and repairing new and used Indian motorcycles. Shell's very first rider was his brother Ray Thuet. Ray and Shell would compete at the Old Pomona Fairgrounds and at the half-mile in Lancaster. Shell worked six days a week and worked on his racers in the evenings and Sunday, racing on the weekends.

Don Rickard recalls that at the end of the '49 race season, Shell had just got back from Florida, campaigning a flat-head Indian scout on the beach at Daytona. He had thought he had a pretty good chance of having his rider, Ted (Slug) Hughes, a Hollywood stuntman, win the race. Dick Klampfoth ended up winning the race that year on a Norton Manx, which had an overhead cam and valves. Shell, mad about

the limitations of the Indian Scout technology, complained to Don that the Norton's were like single-cylinder Offenhausers, the highest performing racecar engines of the era. Even then, Shell's Scout was able to get the land speed record for the class that was held for over 40 years.

His oldest friend, John Reed writes, "Shell has been my best friend, mentor, hero and partner for almost 53 years. I met Shell in 1947 through a mutual friend of my father's who was also a motorcycle tuner. My dad would take me along with my two brothers to all the local motorcycle races. I met Shell at the old Lincoln Park racetrack in Los Angeles and we would root for Shell's rider. After the races we would go into the pits and he used to let me sit on his motorcycle. He was my hero ever since."

"He was one of, if not the best, Indian mechanics around and he had many top racers wanting to ride his Scouts. I was 10 years old at the time and I couldn't wait for the next race. My dad bought me a Doodle bug motor-scooter and we would take it over to Shell's when it broke down while playing racer in my neighborhood." Neil Keene comments, "I visited Shell's shop in the 1950's, because he sold Indian Scouts. Shell Thuet, along with Tom Sifton, who tuned for the great Joe Leonard, were some of the really Great tuners."

After Lincoln Park shut down, the racing moved to Carroll Speedway in



88- Don Hawley  
5- Chuck Cave  
Gardena California 1958

Gardena until Artesia Boulevard cut through the center of the racetrack. Shell had many top riders riding for him during this time and one of my favorites was Don Hawley, who won many races there. After Carroll closed, they opened Gardena Speedway at Rosecrans and Western, and racing became more and more popular with such riders as Hawley, Tex Luce, Chuck Basney, Jimmy Phillips, Brad Andres, etc. during the mid 50's.

Although Shell did not participate in flattracking as a rider, he was known to be "The greatest slow racer of all time." A long time associate of Shell's is Don Rickard, who began hanging around Shell's shop in 1946, and he relates the

following story. Shell would ride his Indian to local field meets and would participate in many of the events. Though not death-defying, the events required some measure of skill. One event, that Shell always won, was the slow race, where riders had to travel from a dead stop to a finish line 100ft away. The last one to cross the line, without touching their feet to the ground would be the winner. Shell's unbeatable technique was to gun the motor at the start, digging a trench with the rear tire, then slam on the front brake to create another similar trench for the front tire. He would then kill the motor and sit on his Indian, adequately 'dug in', and wait for the other riders to eventually fall over or cross the line. Then he would stand on his pegs and kick-start the engine, and drive across the finish line, as the champion. "I've always admired Shell," says Don, "He's a really great guy."

The Indian factory took on the distributorships of Royal Enfields with the Indian trademark. Later, when the Indian factory closed and the Royal Enfield was all that was left, Shell began building Royal Enfields out of necessity, to go racing. He built a 500 single flattracker, using a stock piston, and valves from a "White" truck engine. Howard Forged aluminum rod blanks were used. Then J.C. Agijanian opened Ascot Park in Gardena in 1958 and the racing and Shell's career really blossomed. He had several riders, including Al Gunter and Guy Lewis, riding the Royal Enfields. Certainly, the most famous rider was Elliot Shultz, who won Ascot many times, having exciting weekly duels against the great, Sammy Tanner. Sammy, it is said, also rode one of Shell's Enfields a few of times.

Al Gunter told fellow competitor Neil Keene that Shell's Royal Enfield single was the fastest 500 single he had ever ridden. Neil Keene still remembers that talk to this day and adds, "The Enfield was to motorcycles what Timex was to fine watches. Shell took whatever he had to work with, hired somebody fast, and would win with it, whether it was the Enfield or the Yamahas." Don Rickard adds, "No one could make an Enfield run, except for Shell."



Ascot  
38 Bruce  
27 Elliot Shultz

"Shell had many super riders ride for him, notably Elliot Shultz, who was one of my all time favorites," John Reed remembers. "He was something to watch! Shell and Elliot were the underdogs to the more popular BSA wrecking crew having such riders as Dick Mann, Al Gunter, Blackie Bruce, Sammy Tanner, and Neil Keene to name a few. And there were also the Harley KR and Triumph riders to contend with."

"Aggie would fill Ascot every Friday night with approximately 10,000 fans to see the best racing ever, with all the rivalry and excitement you could hope to see. Shell and Elliot had great success and I remember they held the one lap record of 22.44 seconds for ten years! They also held all the other records, Trophy Dash, Heat race and Main Event records also. Any racing fan who ever saw a race at Ascot would agree that it was the best."

Tom Horton contributes, "Throughout the time that Shell was involved in motorcycling and racing, he was helped by two very knowledgeable and hard working men, John Reed, an excellent machinist and manufacturer of many racing parts in the big 750 twins, and Bud Myers, excellent as a track set-up man. Shell, to this day, remains very close to both of these men as they are like family to him."



"During this time," John says, "I was a machinist and I opened up my own shop in 1956, which I still have. I used to make racing parts for Shell and I really enjoyed doing it as a hobby." John Reed's company is Gear Engineering and Manufacturing Company, Inc. and makes motorcycle parts for the Harley factory and continues to make

transmission gear sets for the vintage Indian Chiefs and Scouts.

Shell continued building business at his shop and eventually became a Greeves and Yamaha dealer, which ultimately brought about his connection with Yamaha racing. Then in 1970, the Yamaha factory contacted Shell to see if he would be interested in building a 650 Yamaha (based on the XS650 four stroke vertical twin street bike introduced in late 1969) to compete on dirt tracks with Keith Mashburn as the rider. Shell agreed to do it but there were many parts to be made to be



competitive. Shell told John what he needed and John would make them. When everything was put together, John and Shell would work on the dynamometer and fine tune the engines until Shell was totally satisfied with the results. John says, "He did an awesome job with a foreign engine that he had never seen before." Shell took the bike to Ascot for the inaugural Yamaha Silver Cup race and Keith won the race in a great dual with Jimmy Odom on a Triumph. Everyone was elated and, with all the Yamaha people there to watch, it was a testament to Shell's ability.

After much success with the 650cc Yamaha, the time came when Shell decided that in order to compete with the factory 750cc Harleys and Triumphs, it was time to make a 750cc Yamaha. Shell and John started making sleeves, pistons, rods, cams, etc., staying up late burning the midnight oil. The culmination of their efforts were to become the basic platform for everyone building XS650 Yamaha twins motors from then up to the modern era of vintage racing.

1972 Boston Gardens  
Yamaha Silver Cup  
Winner Keith Mashburn



CHAPTER THREE – Champions and Championships

Pete Schick, the racing manager of Yamaha, came to Shell in late 1972 to see if Shell would be interested in building, maintaining, and transporting all the equipment for a two rider team for the 1973 season. The season was to start in February at the Astrodome in Houston with the first year rookie Kenny Roberts and former Triumph factory rider Don Castro as the sponsored riders.

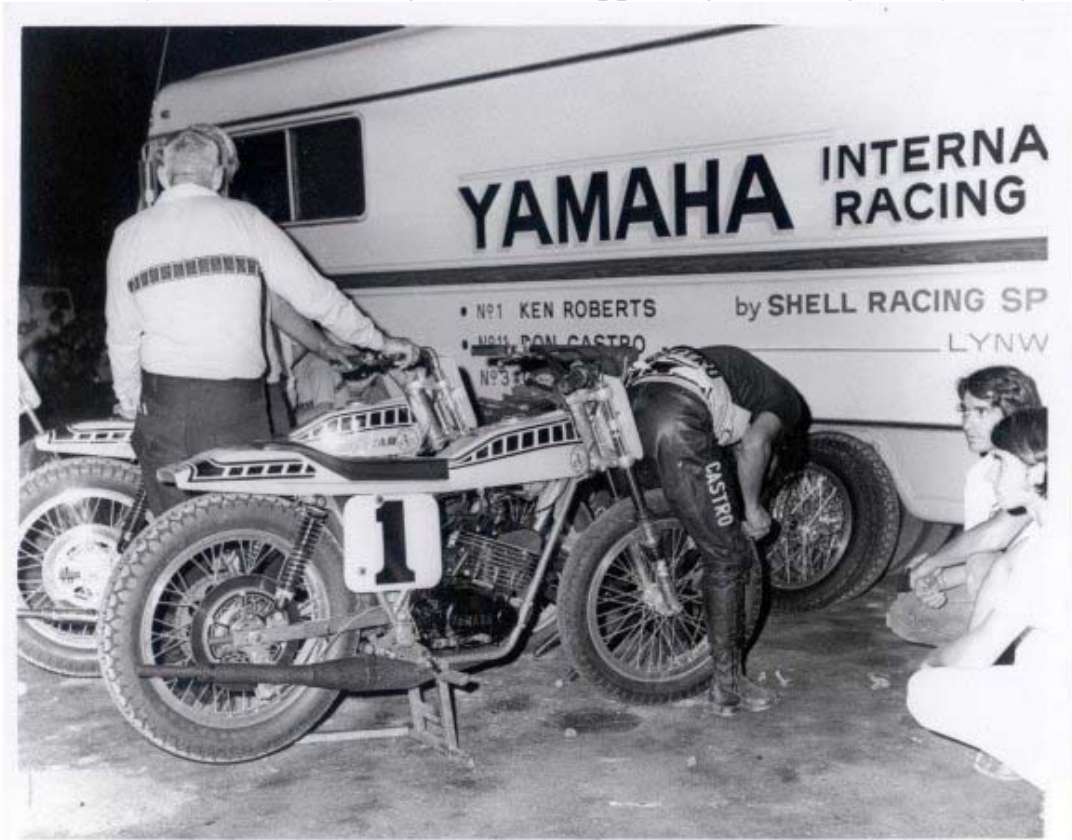
"We had to figure out a budget for the entire year," John relates, " and build four TT bikes and four short-trackers in about six weeks. Shell and I started on a budget so they could agree on a contract, then started from scratch to get frames made, acquire all the necessary engine parts, have a transporter built by King's Highway, and many other tasks." Shell hired Bud Aksland, who tuned for Kenny as an amateur, and Bud Myers, who used to ride for Shell and who was currently working for John at his machine shop. All the late hours and hard work paid off as they had everything finished and arrived just in time at the 'Dome' for the press luncheon on Thursday, the day before the TT. Their efforts were rewarded with a very successful race and it created quite a stir when all the teams saw all the beautiful Team Yamaha motorcycles, all 'puffed and powdered' and obviously very competitive. When they got back home, Yamaha Parts Distribution started inundating them with calls, saying that they had taken requests for many 750 Kits and frames, along with glass (i.e., tanks and seats), and wanted to know when it would be available.

Shell and John formed Shell Racing Specialties and started to manufacture all the parts necessary for a complete racing motorcycle. The race equipment was sold to Yamaha in bulk to be packaged under their logo and distributed to their dealer network. From early on, Shell would butt heads with the Japanese engineers. The newly designed Yamaha twins kept blowing oil out the breather. The specs called for 3000cc to be put in the crankcase. Shell told them right up front it was too much and they needed to put in 2500cc. The engineers would try all sorts of baffles and orifices intended to reduce the oil loss, but to no avail. Shell continued to put in his recommended



amount until finally the factory engineers followed suit. You can look at the imprint on top of the cases and see the reduction in oil requirements over the years until it settles on the amount advised by Shell.

Maggie would ride around the country with the team, making tuna fish sandwiches for the riders and giving them motherly support. Neil Keene says about Shell's wife, "Maggie was a fine looking woman, and between her and June Lawell, they knew everything that was happening in racing." A young Eddie



1975 ? Shell Thuet back to camera was in charge of the Yamaha team effort. Here, at Santa Fe Speedway (Hindsdale, IL) he has Don Castro cutting Kenny Roberts front tire

Mulder, remembers seeing Shell at a race collecting dirt from the track in small movie film canisters. When Eddie asked the intimidating Shell what he was doing, Shell told him it was to help him remember what the track was like. Shell would then place those tins on a shelf in his shop for future reference.

As history shows, 1973 was a very good season for Kenny Roberts and Don Castro. Kenny Roberts won the Colorado Mile National and Don Castro won the San Jose Half-Mile National. At year's end, when the overall points were counted, they finished 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> in the nation and Shell was named the 1973 AMA tuner of

the year. Shell's contract was renewed in 1974 with three riders now being sponsored, Gene Romero joining the team along with Kenny Roberts and Don Castro. 1974 was again a successful year, as Kenny won the San Jose Mile and Peoria TT Nationals and Gene Romero won the Indianapolis Mile National. The Shell-led team finished, in overall points 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> in the nation.



Time Haute 1974  
1/2 Mile Winner Corky Keener  
Applauds Kenny Roberts  
Grabbing his second GNC Title Shell stands behind Roberts in Yamaha jacket  
Dave Aldana smiles on

In 1975 Yamaha cut their dirt track racing budget due to the factory being too busy with their new interest in enduros. Shell's contract was not renewed, but Kenny Robert's contract was still good for another year. Shell had always had his own team, even when he had the contract with Yamaha. Now his team consisted of Hank Scott, wearing orange and white leathers.

Hank Scott, who was national #14 from 1975 to 1988, relates his first meeting with Shell. "I was a twenty year old eager-to-be Grand National Champion of the AMA Grand National dirt track series. I had just recently won my first national at the Syracuse mile riding a Harley. The season had just ended and I was rookie of the year, fresh from a third place finish at Ascot Park in

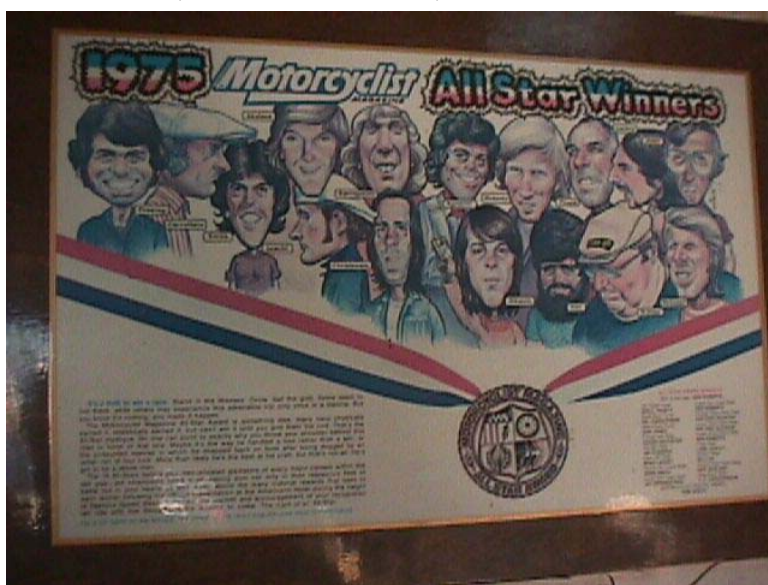
Calif. Although Triumph had made me an offer to ride Nortons, along with Mike Kidd, as a team rider, I had also heard about Kenny Roberts leaving Shell Thuet and taking the factory Yamaha program with him. I had only met Shell previously for a scant moment and knew that he was looking to field a rider on his own equipment in 1975. I have to tell you, I was scared to death to come face to face with the man who gave Kenny Roberts his two number one plates, for without Shell Thuet, Kenny would never have achieved those two-in-a-row number one plates, period. Yea, I know Kenny had to ride them, but he could have ridden another bike as well, but Shell's bikes were winners and that's why Yamaha retained him in '73 and '74. They new it and so did Kenny.

"I finally got up the nerve to call Shell and asked him if he was willing to give a newcomer a shot. Shell gave me directions on how to find his house and told me what night to come over for a meeting. I was so in awe! How could I convince him that I could win for him? I had ridden Yamahas in Champion frames in '73 and went on to be the top Junior in the country with more than 25 feature wins, so I knew I could do it, but to sell Shell and Maggie Thuet on it was another matter.

"The day came that I was to go to his house to have dinner, meet Maggie and convince him I was the 'Man'. After knocking on the door with a giant lump in my throat, Shell opened the door and invited me in. I won't go into all the details of the evening, but, to make a long story short, I had the job. So much went on the first few months, building new dirttrackers, a shorttracker, a TT bike and getting to know each other, that Shell and I developed a friendship far more than just being his rider on his equipment. We became more than just friends, Shell was my buddy. I looked up to him as well as admired him beyond belief for his hard work and determination against the Harley factory as well as against Yamaha because of their betrayal." Hank began his term of racing for Shell by winning the 1975 Hinsdale Short Track National.

Though Yamaha seemed to be disinterested in traditional American racing, Motorcyclist Magazine published a list of renowned people involved in racing in the U.S. who they considered the 'All-Star Award Winners of 1975'. This prestigious list had 14 riders and three tuners, which of course, included Shell Thuet as 'Dirt Track Tuner of the Year'. Kenny Roberts, who had a different tuner now, but still riding equipment based on Shell's formulations, received not only The 'Expert Dirt track Rider' and 'Expert Road Race Rider' but also the 'Man of the Year'.

In 1976 Shell, with Hank Scott as his rider, attacked the indomitable Harley-Davidson factory at the Oklahoma City National half-mile. Hank won



the race on the Shell prepared Yamaha 750, the last time that Yamaha would win an AMA Grand National event. Hank wrote, "He worked so hard, pulling more and more power out of this standard street bike engine, unlike the pure breed XR 750 Harley's designed for racing. This resulted in many engine failures, because he pushed these street engine's to their extreme's, and I rode them to the limits."

Like a father and son relationship, the desire that Shell's riders had to make Shell proud of them is evident in Hank's rendition of one of the races. "I tried so hard to win Louisville Downs in '76 for Shell", Hank recalls, "that I came very close to winning the day time regional race by posting the fastest lap ever turned there, a 22.923. It will stand as always being the fastest lap, as the track was later torn down. When Kenny rode for Shell he hated the Downs, because he could not get the Yamaha's to work for him. Shell and I did. We posted a third there in 76 at the national. In actuality we really got second, as they didn't have camera's back then and they gave it to Springer. Jay knew it and so did I, as we nipped him at the line. In '77 we led the national pulling away until I noticed a vibration, the motor started to slow down ever so slightly, allowing my brother to catch and pass me. I pulled in behind Gary only to blow a rod through the cases a lap or so later. That destroyed me inside, because I knew we had that one, and the fact Shell would have won the Louisville Downs with a Yamaha."

Hank showed up to the Ascot opener four years later in 1981, not having ridden since 1976, and won the race on a Shell Thuet Yamaha.

Shell helped many riders besides Hank, such as Skip Aksland, Hank's older brother Gary Scott, Tom Horton, Eddie Wirth, Rick Hocking, Art Fredenburgh, and the inseparable pair of

1975 Gary and Hank Scott  
at the AstroDome



Eddie Lawson and Wayne Rainey. There were many others. "All of his riders went on to very fine careers," John Reed recalls, "and I am sure that Shell Thuet had a very big impact on their lives and their future success. Those gentlemen are still very close to Shell and Maggie, just as my wife Carol and myself still are."

"When I rode for Shell Racing," Tom Horton says, sharing some personal experiences, "John Reed and Bud Myers, along with Shell, were a great help to me. I'm quite sure that anyone who ever rode with the Shell Racing Leathers felt very proud to race with the man. My first meeting with Shell, although he swears he doesn't remember, occurred when I was ten years old. I used to walk over to his shop in Lynwood, climb on the motorcycles and occasionally drop an ice cream cone on the floor, which promptly got me kicked out of the shop, only to return for another day. That's when Guy Lewis was working at the shop. It was one of the high points of my professional racing career to eventually ride Shell's motorcycles. He still tunes all of my Yamahas, which we have ridden to many victories in AHRMA, including the Sacramento Mile." Tom, who owns Antelope Valley Kawasaki and Yamaha in Lancaster, CA, and a VDTRA Pro member, continues on with, "If you go into his shop today, he's still out there working as hard as ever. He still builds excellent Yamaha engines and still travels to the races with his wife Maggie, after all these years. Shell was, and continues to be, a very up-front and honest type person, and he will always tell you what's on his mind. I have asked him many times who was the best of all the riders, he always answers with the same "I'm not going to say!" At least he didn't say I was the slowest!" As the years continually pass by, racers competing in modern and the ever increasingly popular vintage events, still solicit Shell's expertise and services, although he prefers to sell his parts now, and not do too much engine work.

It becomes apparent that young men, who have met Shell at an early age, were somehow destined to greatness, as the first contact led to higher levels of achievement. The list of riders, who rode under the Shell banner, is large. I.e., Dewayne Keeter, Eddie Wirth, Galin Brookins, John Allison, Rick Hocking, and Elliot Shultz. Kenny Roberts, Gene Romero, Hank Scott, Don Hawley, Tom Horton, Jimmy Kelly, Eddie Lawson, and Chuck Basney. Art Fredenburgh, Keith Mashburn, Wayne Rainey, Bud Meyer, Don Castro, Gary Scott, Bob Shirey, Tex Luce, Al Gunter, Bill Heins and Guy Lewis. (The contributors apologize if any were left out). If you get a chance, read Wayne Rainey's book, My Own Story, as

it has many references to Shell and Maggie. Shell received a personal copy from Wayne as soon as it was written.

The Trailblazers, a well-known California social organization of pioneer motorcycling enthusiasts, which was founded in 1940, is comprised of antique motorcycle racers, dealers, manufacturers, tuners, support people, desert riders and the like, inducted Shell into their hall of fame at their 1997 banquet.

At the 1998 AHRMA year-end banquet, the highlight of the evening was a lifetime achievement award presented to Shell Thuet, by Gary Davis, for his involvement of over fifty years in America's unique, grassroots form of motorcycle racing. The list of racers who rode Shell's mounts is a who's who of flat track racing, and their numbers were put on a plaque and given to Shell.



But what about the many part-time privateers that have been touched through Shell's parts and labor of love? It would be impossible to count the hundreds of riders that successfully win or ride for fun using Shell's handiwork. Today, most riders racing vintage motorcycles are aboard Yamahas. Why? Because with Shell's expertise putting Yamaha on the dirt track annuals of American History, Yamaha sold more XS650 motorcycles than any other model they have ever manufactured.

The momentum carried the sales 14 years through 1983, until they discontinued the model because it was infringing on sales of their new model designs. Consequently, used whole and running XS650's are in wide abundance, and anyone who fancies turning one into a racer can still get the same parts that the champions of the '70s used to win with. And the gentleman selling the parts, boring the cylinders, porting the heads and handing out the advice, is still the same Shell Thuet. He moves slower now, and he doesn't heal as fast as he used to, and you may have to repeat yourself a couple of times, but the light in his eyes still shines for another tomorrow and another way to win a race.

His life long friend John states, "His competitive spirit and love of racing will always burn deeply in his heart. He has always been shy and low key when it



comes to all of his enormous accomplishments and everyone mentioned here will agree he is the Icon of Motorcycle racing."

Tom respectfully adds, "There are so called legends and there are real legends in the sport of motorcycle racing. Shell Thuet has been around during all of the great days of flattrack motorcycles. He has seen tragedy and greatness and through it all he still does it for the same reason...he loves the sport! He has had the greatest riders ride for him and experienced success that others could only hope for, and remains a humble person...without a doubt deserving of all the praise he receives now." Tom told me later, "Maggie was always a big race fan, and was a big driving force behind Shell."

Hank Scott, emphasizes, " I could go on and on about my relationship with Shell and Maggie Thuet, and I would have to write a book to cover all the little things that went on that make Shell such a devoted engine builder. The AMA should put this man into the hall of fame, as I can think of no one more deserving than Shell Thuet." Hank continues with this personal note: "Shell, you were my friend, my away from home father, my tuner, my engine builder, and I am a better man for having known you. Better yet, I am honored to be your friend with the added honor of having raced for such a great man."

My own snapshot in time of the life of Shell Thuet is only two out of eighty-eight years, far less than those of his riders that contributed to this article, yet, I am overwhelmed by the simple humanity of his existence. In today's egocentric economy, I am awed by the respect and renown given of a man like Shell, who has patiently endured life's obstacles, never seeking fame or fortune but working for work's sake each day at a time. Life didn't always go the way they planned it, and I know they wish some things never happened at all, but that's a part of our daily struggle. Shell continues along the path that destiny has chosen for him, making each day count as much as the last, adoring his wife, providing for her since his youth, and keeping the memories alive for the rest of us to enjoy. Thanks, Shell and Maggie, you've both done a great job and have been good and faithful servants of the sport of motorcycle racing. We all wish we could have met you sooner.

