

Freedom and a Quick Escape

The Mischief and Memories of Lake Rats on Minibikes



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Credit: Courtesy

The kids at the lake seemed different. It was difficult to put my finger on it, but they seemed bolder. Not more mature, but more experienced, more independent. The adults around the lake weren't so amused. Called them "lake rats." But as a little kid, it was cool first meeting them.

What was it? I wondered. It took me a while to figure out.

I grew up in a small, rural community in a county with fewer than 10,000 people. Six hours south of Chicago. Three hours east of St Louis. Middle of nowhere. Everyone knew everyone.

My dad was the chief of police of our little town. And though the 1960s were an unsettling time in the nation with the Vietnam War and campus unrest, not there. It was a simpler time. Even as a youngster, I mowed my neighbor's lawns to supplement my allowance and had a paper route. Walked and rode my Stingray bike with my friends all over town.

My dad also chaperoned dances at a lake pavilion about 15 miles outside of town, and that got our family free access to the lake's public swimming area. A former gravel pit, the small lake was lined with cottages and trailers. Summer homes and a number of slightly nicer, permanent ones.

We loved the lake, and every year, we spent all summer there. By the time I was in middle school, we had a place. A few years later, we sold the house in town and moved there permanently. My four siblings and I became lake rats.

We quickly learned the one thing that set the lake kids apart from our in-town friends — rather than bicycles, the lake kids all had minibikes and motorcycles. The lake was surrounded by farmland and wooded areas. And it all became our new playground. There weren't many rules.

Back then, a minibike freed you from the confines of the street and offered you unfettered access across lawns, fields, and sidewalks; through woods; and more. Hills or stairways — no problem. Our friends group expanded to farm families miles away.

You learn quickly when you're 14 and miles from home — the limited patience of a farmer or which fishermen leave beer in their refrigerator on their dock. The world is yours for adventure, discovery, and mischief. Your motorbike gives you independence, freedom, and a quick escape. It changes you in ways your parents never imagined.

Those were the days of my youth. Wouldn't trade it for the world.

My wife and I were recently walking up State Street on our way to the Saturday farmers' market. It was a beautiful day, and the street was busy with kids on e-bikes. I stopped and took a picture of a young boy doing wheelies on his electric dirt bike — not even pretending to be a bicycle.

He stopped, glared, uttered a profanity, and quickly rode away.

I grinned, remembering those days.

Not many rules.

Freedom. And a quick escape.