Among the several types of motorcycles built by Ossa od Spain, it was especially known for its slim, bare-bones trials machines. (Photo by Roy Furchgott)

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JUNE 2016

ONE MAN HOOKED ON AN OBSCURE SPANISH BRAND

By: Roy Furchgott

In many ways, Mike Slate followed in his father's tire tracks.

His father, Wayne, put Mike on a motorcycle at an early age, the pair riding observed trials together by the time Mike was 10. At age 12, Mike took to the woods on a 125cc Bultaco Lo Vito while his dad rode his first purpose-built trials bike, a green-and-yellow 1970 model made by Ossa, a Spanish company.

And in a way, Mike's father also got him started restoring and collecting bikes. Sure, Mike had resurrected two old Ossas for his dad, just to get them running, and then fully restored an Ossa for a friend. But it was just a hobby. At least until a family friend, Jim Foster, intervened. Then it became personal.

Around 2003, Foster bought two dilapidated 1970 Ossas. Foster called Mike Slate, offering to give him one of the bikes if he would restore them both. The kicker: The bike he offered Mike had a title, and it showed that the bike was Wayne's long-gone green-and-yellow Ossa, sold in 1972.

“That was the one that sucked me in,” said Mike.

He hasn’t looked back or slowed since. In fact, he and three friends have built a collection of nearly 60 bikes, concentrating on ’60s and ’70s Spanish dirtbikes, including 27 Ossas, eight Bultacos, and two Montessas as well as an assortment of British iron, including six BSAs, a Rickman and a dozen Triumphs.

Ossa began as a film projector manufacturer but turned to motorcycles in 1949. Production ceased at one point, but the brand has been resurrected in a line of off-road machines. The Ossa logo looks like a green four-leaf clover, but that may allude to its origin. “Everybody has a different story about that,” Mike said. “Supposedly it isn’t a clover, it’s a film projector part.”

For Mike, the Ossa connection was familial, but it was fostered by an accommodating Ossa parts dealer, Alex Snoop, in Monroe, N.Y. “That definitely makes a difference,” Mike said. “I didn’t think so at the time, but I’ve learned to really appreciate what he does.”

Though he can spend years restoring a bike, and is exacting about the details (with 25 trophies as proof), the bikes aren’t purely museum pieces. Sixty bikes are on display in a private museum (open to visitors on the third Thursday of each month), but another 10 are usually out to be ridden. Mike still competes in trials on his vintage bikes, primarily an Ossa of the same vintage and livery as his father’s.

The Ossas developed a reputation for durability, which helps explain why they remain readily available “When you are in the clique, they just find their way to you,” Mike said.

The Baltimore workshop holds collections of parts for various project bikes. “I like having 10 projects at one time,” he said. “When you hit roadblocks on one project, whether it’s money or a missing part, then you can pick up one of the others.”

Mike finds it hard to say exactly why he has such a connection with Ossas, but parental approval isn’t one. His father, 82 and no longer a rider, didn’t react much when he saw his restored bike.

“Did a tear come to his eye? No. He’s more impressed with what we have done with them in events,” Mike said.

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1 **Charles**
NJ
July 12, 2016 at 01:41

Thank you for the excellent and interesting article!

2 **Tom Giffen**
New Hampshire
July 12, 2016 at 17:03

The Bultaco was actually a Lobito, which means little wolf. Lo Vito is actually Yo, Vito, which is the way Mr. Corleone's best friends often greeted him.

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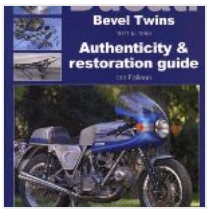

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