

FAREWELL, JOHNNY HELMS

On 5th November 2009, the local and national cycling fraternities lost their well-loved cartoonist Johnny Helms, at the age of 85 years. Johnny was born in 1924 in the Cheshire village of Grappenhall (moving later to Sutton Weaver), the grandson of a German who was working in London in 1914 and interned as an enemy alien during the First World War. One of his sons (Johnny's father) was nevertheless conscripted into the British Army to serve in the trenches. Luckily he survived and settled in Cheshire where he found work as a railwayman; so much of Johnny's childhood was spent in a trackside signalman's cottage.

Johnny began riding a tricycle at the age of three, and later graduated to a bicycle which he rode to school; for his eleventh birthday his parents bought him a junior Hercules bicycle. His first hundred mile ride was into the Derbyshire hills. Johnny left school at fourteen and continued the cycling theme by becoming a Delivery Boy for a butcher's in Frodsham, although he was able to have weekends out on his own bike. Later he worked at I.C.I. for over forty years.

During the Second World War Johnny served in the Royal Signals, training as a Wireless Operator, from 1942 to 1947. During Operation Overlord he worked as an Intelligence Gatherer with the Canadian and American forces, finally reaching the River Elbe and linking up with the Russian army.

Johnny began writing for his army unit newspaper, but realized it took up too much time that could be spent with friends, so he started drawing cartoons instead. He had been a fan of cartoon characters since he was three or four, when his parents bought him, at one old penny each, two comics, 'Chips'(printed on pink paper) and 'Comic Cuts' (on green paper). When the magazine 'Cycling' (later Cycling Weekly) lost their cartoonist, Lewis, who drew a character called 'Bim', they held a competition to find a replacement. Johnny sent in several cartoons which were eventually accepted, and his first cartoon appeared in February 1946.

This was the start of a record-breaking association with the magazine, overtaking artist Frank Patterson's fifty-eight years. Johnny's first cartoon character was called 'Baz', later to be replaced by 'Honk', although eventually his characters were unnamed; but his unfailing imagination continued to produce an endless stream of humorous situations for each weekly drawing.

Johnny's cartoons also appeared in the CTC's 'Cycletouring' and in a series of books such as 'Transport of Delight', 'Round the Bends', 'On your Bike', 'Twicer's Much Fun' (about tandem riding) and 'Do you mean to say you have never ridden a bicycle? – The World of Johnny Helms', which was

a compilation of cartoons published in 2006 to celebrate 60 years of contributions to Cycling Weekly. He also generously allowed his cartoons to be reproduced in many local club magazines, including those of Merseyside DA and Chester & North Wales DA.

In the meantime Johnny was cycling 16,000 miles a year, including 2,000 miles to club dinners (in all weathers), where he was a sought-after guest speaker. He had joined Warrington Road Club in 1946, and won the Fastest Novice Award in 1947. He served his club in many capacities – Treasurer, Chairman, President, Magazine Editor and Press Secretary. He also found time to organize road races and inter-club time trials.

Johnny was also a keen CTC member, always ready to give his time to help. He presented Slide Shows (with donated original drawings for raffles) for Liverpool (later Merseyside) DA. In 1985 he was the guest celebrity at the BCTC final which was jointly organised by Chester & North Wales DA and Merseyside DA. The photo (below) shows Johnny in 1985 starting off riders in Kelsall with two guests from CTC Headquarters, Bob Carmichael-Riddell and CTC President, Ivy Thorp.



Johnny Helms starting riders off from Kelsall in the BCTC Final 1985, assisted by Ivy Thorp (National President) and Bob Carmichael-Riddell

He delivered Merseyside DA newsletters to CTC members in his area for many years, and was awarded the John Carline Memorial Plaque for his services in 1992. In 1995 he was made an Honorary Life Member of the

CTC, and in 1997 he was awarded the Bidlake Trophy for his 'sense of humour that had delighted cyclists for more than fifty years', and he was invited to join the Golden Book of Cycling.

Johnny loved cycle touring as well as time-trialling, and when he met his wife-to-be Ruth they started riding tandem. Later their daughter Janet was born and travelled beside them in a sidecar before graduating to kiddie cranks, until finally they all rode solo bicycles. Johnny and Ruth were also keen walkers, and enjoyed hiking and camping in Norway, Iceland and Alaska. His hiking cartoons appeared in the magazine 'The Great Outdoors', and some of these are included in 'On your Bike'. He also drew for chemical journals through his work.

When Johnny retired from I.C.I. he celebrated by going on his longest ever cycle tour, across China, sleeping in various exotic locations including a temple and a former royal palace. In later years his cycling was somewhat curtailed by back problems and other ailments, but he and Ruth still managed gentler rides.

Johnny's final two cartoons were posted to Cycling Weekly the day before he suffered a stroke, ending sixty-three years of brilliant cartooning. He will be sadly missed by his many fans, but most of all, of course, by his wife Ruth, daughter Janet and family, to whom we send our deepest sympathy.

(The above obituary is reproduced by kind permission of Merseyside CTC)