

# Danger money: the daredevils of south-east South Australia sidecar racing

[ABC South East SA](#)

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Mount Gambier sidecar rider Ian Hogg racing in the 1950s with passenger Des Hastings. (Supplied: Colin Thompson )

Skimming the ground and clinging white-knuckled onto a skinny strap, being the passenger on board a motorcycle sidecar going like the clappers does not look like the world's safest ride.

But in the 1950s and 60s, sidecar racing in the south-east of South Australia was all about the guts and glory.

Delving into Mount Gambier's early years of motorcycling history, former sidecar racer and historian Colin Thompson said the sport was a finely tuned balancing act between rider and passenger.

"I tell you what, I've been a rider and I've been a passenger once and you must have a lot of faith in the ability of your rider," he said.

A skilled passenger shifts his weight according to the twists and turns of the track to keep the bike grounded, all while hanging on for dear life.

"The rider knows where he's going, the passenger has to work out what position he has to be. If he's in the wrong place, the bike can tip over," Mr Thompson said.

## **Hard to find good help**

When Mr Thompson first started riding in 1964, his brother started riding pillion for him, but he did not last long.

"After about four or five meetings, he smashed his ribs because we had no suspension in those days, nothing to soften the blow," he said.

"Bang! Like a mule kick. So that was the end of him," he said.

After that, Mr Thompson would just rope in a likely suspect on the day of the meeting, sometimes with varying degrees of success.

"I had a lad Charlie, we called him Monkey Bignell, and he rode for me at Nairne one time," he said.

"But during the halftime break, we had a half inch of rain. We were going up the hill and he was alright when we were climbing up, but as soon as we got up the top, all he saw was straight down into a creek."

"He froze and I'm yelling, 'Monkey, get over, get over!'"

"He wouldn't, so I had no drive and the bike just went straight into the blooming barbed wire fence."

As spectators rushed to the spot, a bleeding Mr Thompson was pulled from the bike with his foot at right angles, and his wife watching anxiously from the sidelines.

"I've still got the helmet with the scratches on it," he laughs.



Mount Gambier's Laurie Fox rides shotgun for his brother Bruce at a sidecar race in the 1950s. (Supplied: Laurie Fox)

## **Little recognition for team effort**

Even though sidecar racing was a team effort, it was riders that scored the glory and a write-up in the daily paper.

According to Mr Thompson, most of the time passengers did not even get paid.

"They rode for the fun of it, they never received the accolades," he said.

In recent years, Mr Thompson wrote to the Point Pass Speedway at Kapunda asking them to add his passenger's name — Woof Warnest — to the sidecar track record he recorded in the mid-1960s.

But he never got a reply from the track.

"Passengers are an integral part and that's the sad part, often you find they are not mentioned. Yet, you are a team," he said.

The sport was inherently dangerous and many good riders and passengers were killed during the years.

Mr Thompson was there the night a rider was killed at Adelaide's Rowley Park Speedway, the track's first sidecar racing accident.

In his vast collection of old photographs is an incredible action shot of Mount Gambier rider Ian Hogg with Des Hastings as passenger, but the image has a sad foot note.

It was the bike Hogg was riding when he was killed on the Mount Panorama track during the Bathurst Tourist Trophy sidecar races in April, 1972.



Maurie Von Einem lines up for the start of a sidecar race at Bucks Hill, Mount Gambier's first scramble track in the 1950s. *(Supplied: Colin Thompson)*

## **Those who lived to tell the tale**

Then again, some of the south-east's daredevils from the 1950s and 60s are alive and still happily kicking about the motorcycle world.

Mount Gambier's Laurie Fox, now 89, was one of the south-east's most well-known motorcycling families with his brothers, Mel, Bruce and Graham.



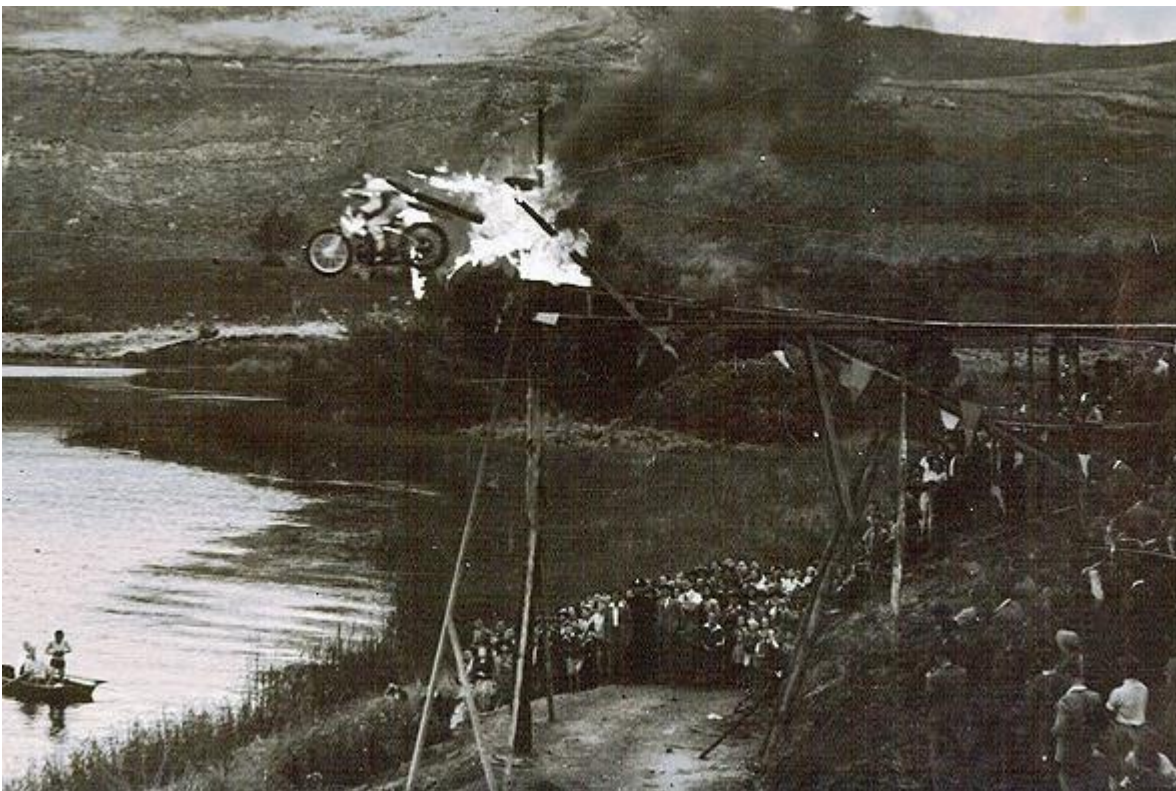
Mr Fox won sidecar championships right across South Australia and Victoria during the 1950s, and one of his most successful sidecar passengers was an enterprising young lad called John 'Wilkie' Wilkinson.

"John was a fantastic passenger," Mr Fox said.

"One time we were riding at Tasmania and broke a petrol pipe," he said.

"Wilkie jumped off, snapped a little twig off a bush, and poked it in to the end of the broken pipe and we restarted and got third."

Mr Wilkinson, now 87 years old and living in Victoria, was known as the south-east's own Evel Knievel after a [famous 1949 public stunt](#).



In 1949, John Wilkinson plunged through a flaming barrier into Mount Gambier's Valley Lake on his stunt bike, much to the delight of thousands of onlookers. (Supplied: Les Hill Collection, Mount Gambier Library)

Wearing just a pudding basin helmet for safety, Mr Wilkinson charged down a 3-foot-wide homemade wooden ramp on his stunt bike and barrelled through a flaming barrier 30 feet above the city's Valley Lake.

Both men have offered their time, memories and photographs for Mr Thompson's research, which will eventually become a book focusing on Mount Gambier's motorcycle history from 1902 to 1962.

Recently, Mr Wilkinson dropped off a box of old papers and photographs and hiding inside was a historical gem.

"There was this roll of film, hard as the hobs of hell," Mr Thompson said.

He warmed up the film by sitting it in the sunlight and carefully rolled it out.

To his delight, on the film were pictures of some of the south-east's best riders tearing up hills and down tracks at events, unseen for more than 60 years.

Potholes, Paddock to Park, a history of Mount Gambier's motorcycle history from 1902 to 1962, will be held on June 15 at Mount Gambier's City Band Hall.

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-10/danger-money-the-daredevils-of-south-east-sidecar-racing/7499900>