

The wild ones

Every spring, mortgage banker Richard Pratt leads a band of motorcycle enthusiasts on a hair-raising tour of the Utah badlands.

BY ANN MONROE

Southern Utah is outlaw country, where Butch Cassidy, among others, once holed up among red sandstone cliffs. But each spring, the silence of this desolate corner of the West is shattered by the roar of dozens of motorbikes: Merrill Lynch Mortgage Capital chairman Richard Pratt and his buddies have returned.

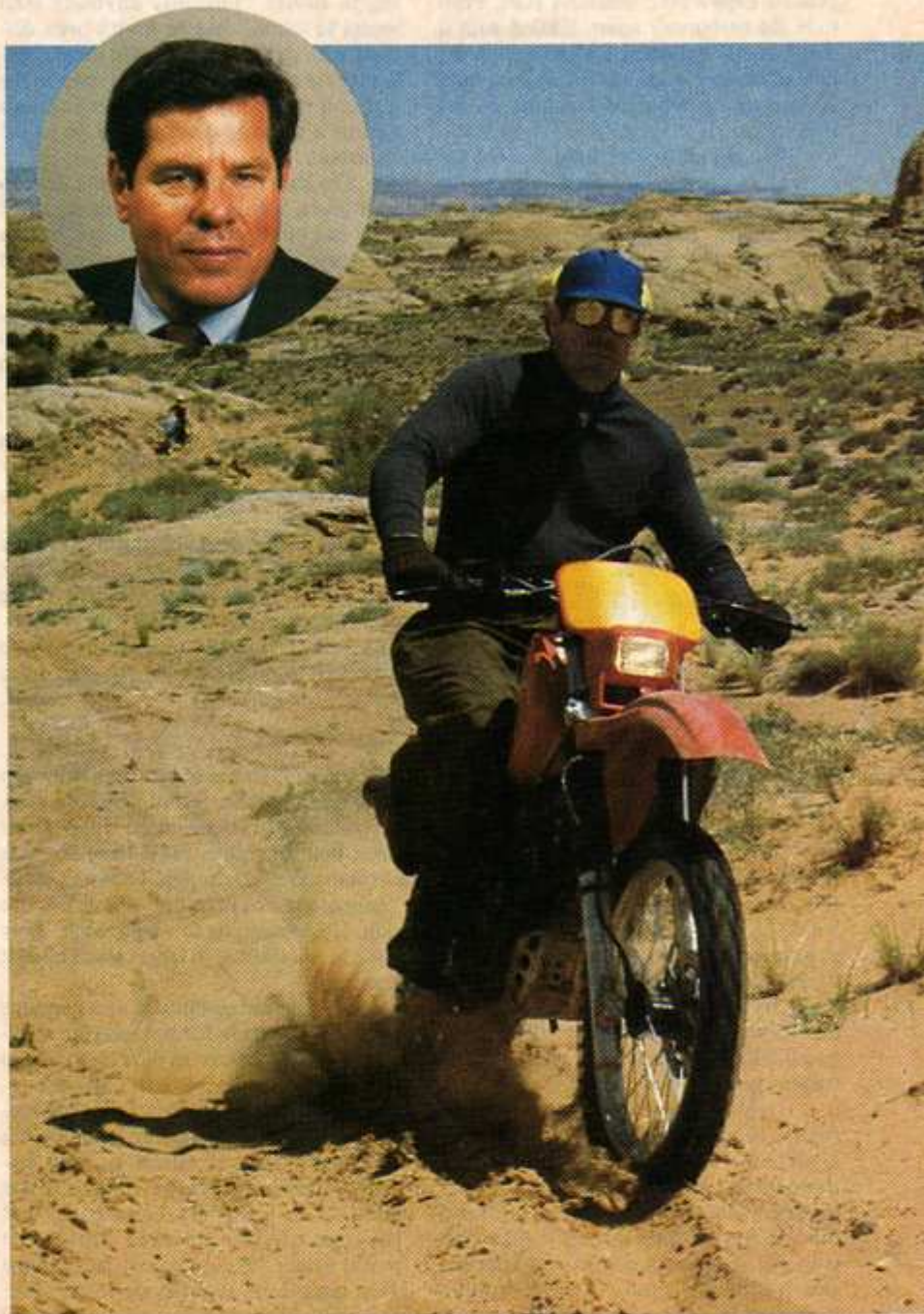
For the past dozen years, Pratt, a self-confessed "Utah chauvinist," has lured a few dozen friends from on and off Wall Street to his home state to ride dirt bikes along an almost 30-mile stretch of an old Mormon pioneer trail. The trail nearly defeated the Mormons. It's pretty rough on the bikers, too. "We've had people ride out with a broken leg and a broken collarbone," says Pratt. In this year's only accident, three riders, speeding across a plateau, missed a turn around a gully and went flying; one suffered a broken arm and was ferried out across Lake Powell on a houseboat.

"One false move, and you could easily be dead," says Pratt, who despite that risk doesn't usually wear a helmet (which he concedes is "stupid"). But though the daylong ride is serious business, it's surrounded by high jinks that seem more like summer camp — without counselors. "A whole bunch of guys get together to drink a whole bunch of beer," summarizes First Boston Corp. thrift banker John Buchanan. "It's the one macho thing I do all year."

This year's caravan, looking like an ad for Budget Rent-a-Truck, pulled into camp on a sunny day in late April. In response to an earlier threat of rain, Goldman, Sachs & Co. partner John Oros stood in the back of his rented pickup, pounded on a souvenir Indian drum and chanted, "No rain, no rain, no rain." It worked — though there was "precipitation" of a different sort. Camp was pitched in a grove of cottonwoods, and every breeze brought a flurry of white fluff. The cottonwoods also seemed irresistible to caterpillars, which dropped onto the tents with a slow, regular plunk, like summer rain.

Since most of the trippers stow their bikes — mostly Honda and Yamaha enduros and motocrosses — in the basement of Pratt's Salt Lake City home between trips, the first afternoon was devoted to warm-ups on the practice hill, a steep incline ending in a kind of rough staircase. Pratt, wearing mechanic's overalls and an Australian bush hat hanging down his back, gunned his 214-pound machine up the slope, bounced up the steps and disappeared over the rim of the hill.

Most of the other riders were slower to mount their bikes, since the amount of protective gear it's possible to wear on a dirt bike rivals that of a football player. What with kidney pads, elbow and knee



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protectors, thick knee-high boots, goggles and heavy helmets, it was a good half hour before most of the party was ready to ride. One by one they roared up the hill, but as they neared the top their bikes stuttered and halted. It took most of the riders — relative novices who ride only once a year — several tries to reach the top.

Pratt was one of the few people on this trip who actually understood how motorbikes work. When Merrill colleague Bowers Espy's bike wouldn't start, Pratt took the carburetor apart, fiddled with it and happily collected \$24 when, in the face of 12-to-1 odds offered against him, he started the repaired machine on his third try.

Pratt got his first motorbike at the age of twelve, when he got tired of pumping his bicycle up Salt Lake City's hills on his paper route. "I ditched the bike," he recalls, "and told my parents there was no sense in my buying another. So I bought an English motorbike. I'd ride it on the side of the mountain." He started going down to southeast Utah with friends from the University of Utah, where he taught corporate and real estate finance from 1966 to 1981. Although some of that original crew still goes on the ride, many current participants are friends from Pratt's days as chairman of the Federal Home Loan Bank Board (from 1981 to 1983) or associates from Merrill.

Campfire ritual

They come partly for the excitement of the ride, but also for a kind of companionship they can't find in Harry's at Hanover Square. Standing by the huge campfire the first night, Goldman's Oros imitated a calliope's reedy whine while groups of campers backed him up with choruses of "oom-pah-pah," "clank-rattle-rattle" and "boom-chug-a-lug." Poetry recitations followed; then Pratt told the story of the Hole-in-the-Rock Trail the group would be following the next day. Planned as a six-week shortcut to a new settlement, it took the Mormons nearly six months to build. Its narrow chutes, steep switchbacks and rock staircases challenge even experienced bikers; it's hard to imagine covered wagons making it at all.

Utah's Mormon history fascinates Pratt, a Mormon himself. "I'm a one-man Utah tourist bureau," he says. He was introduced to the Hole-in-the-Rock Trail by his father, another Utah history buff, and the trip has become a family affair; his youngest daughter accompanied him this year for the first time. "A lot of families have sort of grown up together on this ride," he says. This year's camp included a gang of 6-to-10-year-olds, who rode mini-

bikes, caught frogs and caterpillars and built their own fire on the side of a hill where they roasted marshmallows — and threatened to roast their animal captives.

It's easy to see what the kids like about dirt biking: It's fast and noisy. Adults, however, don't invariably jump at the chance to learn to ride a 200-pound-plus machine that has to be kick-started every time it falls — which for a beginner is exhaustingly often. Pratt says he's willing to invite "virtually anybody who wants to come," but he hasn't been deluged with requests. "There's a limited audience for people who want to sleep in the dirt and ride noisy motorcycles and lean against a piece of sandstone to go to the bathroom."

The long ride itself is wearing. Unlike trail bikes, whose wide tires make them slow but comfortable, dirt bikes offer a punishing ride. They jounce on rocks and fishtail in sand, and which is worse depends on the rider's level of exhaustion. "Going out, rock is your friend and sand is your enemy," because it's easier to slip in the sand, according to Thomas Likovich, a Merrill mortgage trader who rode this year for the third time. But coming back, the riders welcome the sand; "you don't want to be beat up anymore" on the rock, explains one.

Just finishing — proving oneself on a tough and risky road — is part of the trip's attraction. Riders "physically live at the edge," Pratt says, "instead of mentally or financially." Once out of camp, "you have no other resources except what's in the group."

Beginner's luck

So far, Pratt has never lost a rider or a bike, a remarkable record given the high proportion of inexperienced riders. Pratt jokes that dirt bikers must have an extra chromosome. Beginners, he notes, have "enormous courage but absolutely no skill. It's frightening to watch them. They learn at full throttle in large clouds of dust and rock."

Pratt describes himself as a cautious rider — his excuse for not wearing a helmet. But his own stories provide evidence to the contrary. A few years ago, for instance, he was trying to start a stalled motorcycle with a rope tied around his shoulders while still astride his own machine. "The end got caught in my chain at 30 miles an hour," he remembers, "and the rope tried to unwind." Instead, it pulled tighter. "It cut a groove half an inch deep around me and tied me to the cycle, and I fell. It cracked a couple of ribs and left a big scar."

But Pratt has other risky hobbies —

mountain climbing, mountain biking, skiing — and he has to struggle to explain what makes dirt biking the most satisfying of them all. "The sense of raw power really is something," he says, making one stab. But when he finally gets to the heart of it, it's not power he talks of, but something more akin to peace. "If you imagine freedom of flight, like a bird," he says slowly, searching for words, "downhill skiing tries to capture that. But this is much more. This is the closest to it I've ever been able to experience. It's an incredible sense of oneness between man and machine. It's floating, soaring."

The annual outing's days may be numbered. This year when the riders got to the edge of the Lake Powell National Recreation Area, they found a sign barring the trail to any but street-licensed vehicles. Since the trail, a barely visible scrape in the rock, isn't navigable by anything but off-road vehicles, the bikers ignored the sign. Afterwards, though, they talked in a half-embarrassed way about the unpopularity of their sport, which can tear up fragile terrain and madden anyone within hearing distance.

"If you're not riding one, a dirt bike is an unpleasant companion," Pratt concedes. "And in some places, it may be destructive." But he argues that the Hole-in-the-Rock Trail, entirely on sand and bare rock, is ideally suited to dirt biking. "You can be five minutes behind someone, and you can't follow their trail," he says.

The second evening's campfire was quieter. Most of the commotion came from the kids, who didn't go on the ride and whose experiments with fire became more daring as the trip wore on. An old friend of Pratt's who came along (on his honeymoon) to make dinner for the bikers produced something startlingly out-of-character for the desert Southwest: clam chowder, crab claws and lobster tails. Full of seafood and beer, most of the bikers headed early toward their tents.

It seemed about as far from the canyons of Wall Street as anyone could get. Business conversations were few; unlike Pratt's popular midwinter thrift-and-skiing conference, this trip is for fun. "I don't use dirt biking as a business thing in any explicit sense," Pratt says, "though I do adventurous things [with business contacts], and some turn out to be useful."

But Wall Street wasn't entirely banished. Before heading off the next morning, André Schwartz, a former Merrill banker who now lives in Telluride, Colorado, told Pratt he might come up to Salt Lake City soon to try to do a deal with him. "Are you long any bikes at this point, Dick?" he asked. ■