

BILLY SOHNS MEMORIES



BILLY SOHNS AND HIS 1967 CHEVY IMPALA LOW RIDER

This is a note just to answer the questions I get everyday about this Kool Krusin '67 Chevy Impala.

The owner was a young man named Billy Sohns. At age 15 Billy started saving his money. In the mid '80s Billy started contacting groups in Chicago and L.A. about this new craze called low riders. He chose the Impala, called a friend he made from going to car shows to see if he could find someone to install hydraulics, do some mechanical work, paint the car, make it a cruiser. So the story began – Oh, I forgot to tell you one important factor.

My friend Billy was a quadriplegic. He could not use his arms or legs. What he could do was draw pictures by using a pencil in his teeth. His work was so good he sold greeting cards, holiday cards for all special occasions. Once I met him, spent a lot of time just talking, we bonded. Billy became our USMA illustrator; we still use many of his car drawings on our flyers.

When Billy passed away his Impala was also put away for ten years. His parents just locked it up in the garage and tried to move on. Well, I was blessed several years ago when Billy's family gave me, through USMA, Billy's car to finish the job Billy would have wanted. I've done everything exactly as we talked. The car was done in memory of Billy Sohns and will be displayed that way for as long as I can.

Now, I must say, I had the plans but not the ability to do the job. So many hours donated to the building of this car by so many USMA members. Just to name a few: Dennis Ziamba, Joe Molnar, Tim Hopkinson, Jerry Benoit, Shelby Trim, Ramchargers Performance Centers, Edelbrock, Mike Oginsky, Mike Watts, Chuck Regnerus, Rod Dotten. I'm sure I missed someone very important and will make it up on the next note. So my friends, memory lives on through us displaying his car. We have been raising funds in Billy's name to build a Memorial for him and our Veterans for eight years.

Ralph Haney

A Wonderful Man

By: Jill Tines

Most people think of heroes as strong people who save lives every day. My hero wasn't like that. In fact, my hero couldn't even lift a spoon.

My hero, my uncle Billy, was quadriplegic, which means he couldn't move his arms or legs. He couldn't go to school with his siblings, and he had to go to a special clinic so he could learn to live with less help.

One day, he decided he wanted to try to draw. My Nana Lou put a marker in his mouth and he began to sketch. He started to slowly improve, and after awhile, he could draw better with his mouth than most people can with their hands. He started to sell his drawings as greeting cards, and he earned a decent profit selling them. Reporters interviewed him for TV and newspapers because of his talent, but it never went to his head.

He wasn't spoiled, and he didn't ask for much. He made many donations to leukemia foundations because he felt the people with that terrible disease needed the money more than he did. He was very generous with the money he earned, but he did buy one thing for himself: a 1967 Chevy Impala. Even though he couldn't drive, he adored that car, and all other hot rods. Billy loved cars so much that he joined the United Street Machine Association, a hot rod club that raised money for charities. He enjoyed being in the USMA, so he offered to draw the covers for the newsletter.

Despite his disability, Billy managed to have a mostly normal life because of his family and friends that loved him, and because of his own will to live. He was playfully teased by his brother, was locked in the attic while playing hide-n-seek with his siblings, and he played other games. He even burned some of his eyelashes and his eyebrow while smoking his first – and – last cigarette. My uncle died in 1987, but his soul lives on through his art. After all these years, people from as far as New Zealand still write to my grandparents' house, thanking Billy for drawing such wonderful cards and wishing him well. My family and I miss him very much, but my uncle Billy will always be my inspiration, my hero.

BILLY & ME

Circa: 1991

It all started while I was working at an old Fisher Body GM plant in Detroit where we made Cadillac limousines. One day a gentleman by the name of Bill Sohns came up to me and said, "Are you Jim?" I said, "Yes." Bill said, "I hear you putter with hot rods and show cars. My son Billy just bought this here '67 Chevy Impala low rider that he earned with his own money. We can't keep it running." "Do you think you could come over to our place and see what you can do?" "Sure", I said.

And we made an appointment I went over there and discovered immediately that the Holly carb was so far out of adjustment that the car wouldn't even idle. After a short period of time I had the car purring like a kitten. Bill said, "Let me go get Billy. He'll be so pleased!" After a few, long minutes I saw Mary Sohns pushing a wheel chair out of the back door with a little guy with a baseball cap on. This 16 year old kid couldn't even hold his head up by himself. Yet he had the biggest smile on his face you ever saw! His dad introduced me, "this is my son Billy." He had such a warm feeling about him that you couldn't help but love the kid. I said, "Billy, I got your car running like a kitten." He was so happy and we started talking cars. That's when I discovered his love for cars and his striking talent.

He subscribed to every car magazine on the face of the earth. He especially liked custom cars and of course we all know Billy owned a 1967 Chevy Impala, custom blue, low rider. His dad said Billy purchased this car with his own money. I wondered to myself how he could possibly earn money to buy a nice car like that. That's when they invited me into their house to show me his special talent.

This seemingly helpless kid would hold a pencil in his mouth, placed there by his mother, and draw pictures of cars. "Unbelievable!" He drew pictures for all occasion cards, birthday cards, etc. and he sold his works for his income to buy his dream car. No handicap on the face of this earth can break a persons' will to achieve his goal in life.

When Ralph met Billy there was an instant bond as he was accepted into the club. Ralph gave Billy a challenge right off the bat. He asked Billy if he could draw some of the members' cars for show flyers and for the cover of our club magazine. I really do believe that this helped keep Billy going longer than he was supposed to. I was privileged to have Billy draw my 1964 GTO which was used on the show flyer for the old Royal Ranger shows back around 1982. I still have the original drawing signed personally by Billy, in my show archives. Boy, what an honor!!! I had four Chevy Impalas myself back in that time frame, so Billy and I got pretty close since we were about the only ones that had Impalas in our club. I remember in 1982 and 1983 USMA used to have shopping mall shows. We ran Eastland Mall, Universal Mall and Northland Mall. Billy and I would team up together and park side by side using my stanchions and chain. I'll never forget waiting outside the mall entry doors waiting for Billy to arrive. His dad drove the car and Billy would be cradled in his Mother's arms, sitting shot gun. His dad would open up the trunk and take out Billy's special chair and Mary would set him in it. After getting him set up he would have a big grin on his face and say, "Hi, Jim." He was always really looking forward to going to all of the shows. The mall shows were always Billy's favorites because he could get out of the house and go shopping in a nice atmosphere in search of new car books, magazines and videos. Heck, I introduced Billy to the Nationals Impala Club and the Late Great Chevy Club which he joined immediately. Here he thought he subscribed to every magazine! Anyway, Billy used to call me Mr. Impala 'cause I had so many.

BILLY & ME (Continued)

There was one sad note for Billy at the Northland Mall show. He had a nice display with 8x10 pictures of himself with his car. The next day when we came back to the Mall all the pictures were gone. Billy was so heartbroken, wondering who would want to steal pictures of a guy sitting by his own car. On a more positive note, Billy used to love attend the Michigan Nationals and the Ramchargers show on Gratiot. Once in awhile you would catch the Sohns' family cruising Gratiot and Billy was riding shotgun in this mother's arms with a big smile and his baseball cap on, checking out the rides.

Then the day came we all dreaded. Billy left us for a better place. When I sent flowers I signed the card from Mr. Impala. Billy's dad had to ask, "Where those from you?" "Billy would have really liked that." Then Mr. Sohns asked me to be one of the six selected club members to carry Billy to his final resting place. I felt really proud and privileged to carry Billy to his new home. We cruise Woodward down here on earth but I just know Billy has the ultimate strip already picked out for all of us to cruise with him when it is our turn to go. You see, Billy wasn't expected to be with us as long as he was. Between Ralph, USMA and us members, he kept interest and had a goal in life.

I saw Billy's Dad two years ago at the Harper Woods Dad's Club car show. He sure looked great. He said that they still have Billy's car in the garage. I guess it hasn't even been moved since. I saw Billy's mother, Mary, and his sister, Kathy, at the Bill Sohns Memorial Cruise on August 25 at Riverland. I was so shocked to see Mary there since I hadn't seen her in years. She greeted me very warmly and gave me a kiss. Bill and Mary and Kathy are just super nice, super friendly people. All of their love reflected in their son. He always had that certain sparkle in his eye and love and happiness in his heart.

I have to hand it to Ralph. The picture of Billy dash plaques for the "Billy Memorial" show were the neatest idea he's had. THANKS RALPH! for a job well done. I'll cherish mine forever.

But my biggest thrill and honor I ever had since being a member of USMA came that same day when the awards were handed out. That day I was awarded the 6 foot "Billy Sohns Memorial" Cruiser trophy. THE ULTIMATE HONOR! I was the happiest and proudest guy on the face of the earth as Billy's mother and sister presented me with this prestigious award. I've been waiting patiently for years and years to receive a "Billy Sohns Memorial" award. My day finally came. I had so many old and new members come up and offer their congratulations after I received the award. Boy, what a high, what a feeling! I would like to thank everyone involved in selecting me for the most honorable award. But deep down inside I think it was Billy who wanted me to have his cruising award. "Cause you see, in our minds and hearts, we will be cruising together forever, Billy and me. Thanks.....Jim Hunawill



UNITED STREET MACHINE ASSOCIATION
CUSTOMS & RODS, INC.

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I received a letter from William and Mary Lou Sohns some time ago. In this letter they asked if I could explain why we present a "BILLY SOHNS MEMORIAL AWARD" at our Nationals. Not only why, but how someone wins such a prestigious award. I've read their letter more than a dozen times and I've also tried to answer it each time. It came after our '88 Nationals when as we all say, "Wow! Another year has gone by already! Where does the time go?" I too feel as the Sohns do, that every one of our members, new and old, needs to know Billy or needs to remember how wonderful he was.

I'll start by saying how much I love Billy and his family and writing this is very difficult for me. I regret each day for not being able to speak at his funeral. I was empty for the second time in my life. I had so much to say but could not speak. I did not understand why God had taken away my friend. I felt pain. I felt bitter. Billy was the best! Why cut such an important person out of my life? Then as Billy had been touched, I realized, "Ralph, take glory in the fact that you knew Bill here and he would now watch over me forever." Bill and I talked alot and I am very happy that we got to spend several hours together just prior to his passing.

I met this young boy and his family many years ago while planning a "Universal Mall" car show. Then my next thought, "Ralph, are you sure?" No matter as to when. Just that I met and had the honor of knowing a very gifted individual who when we talked, just lifted me with his inspiration and confidence. Shortly, as our friendship grew, I knew that each Wednesday was going to be my day to chat with Bill on the phone. "Tell me, Ralph, about the show. Tell me how we did? Any new memberships? Any neat low riders?"

As our friendship grew I could occasionally put a little pressure on Bill to do what he did best. Drawing was his life whether it be his cards or his stationary that he sold to raise money for his car or the money he donated to charity. I would ask Bill to do a drawing of a U.S.M.A. member's vehicle or someone else he was fond of. Never a doubt that it would be in the mail as soon as he could. Amazingly enough to most, until you met Bill you had no way of knowing that Bill did these drawings by using a pencil held in his mouth. You see, my friend was a quadriplegic. His not being able to use his arms and legs just made his mind and heart so much bigger and stronger. Like the rest of us, Bill had his bad days, many an ill feeling day. So many times I saw his parents, William and Mary Lou, pushing his wheelchair across grass fields knowing that they were hot, tired and I'm sure ready to go home. Never a complaint, they were always ready to go that last aisle, take that last picture or movie shot. I sit back thinking of being at the "Car Craft Nationals" in DuQuoin, Illinois. Three thousand cars and trucks, 103 degrees in the shade, cars overheating, people in front of our booth going on and on about the heat and people standing in lines everywhere. Then who shows up, smiling from ear to ear, laying down in the van with Mom and Dad trying to drive through the crowds? The Sohns are here, fourteen hours from home! Ready to take this wonder kid up any mountain. I knew then, at that moment in my life as a parent, the love of family and God was the most important thing in this world.

Bill's drawings are still used as often as I can. His beautiful blue Chevy lowrider has become a symbol associated with our U.S.M.A. logo. Many other clubs and fellow enthusiasts were touched by Bill. I received articles from clubs and show promoters from all over the nation telling of his life's story.

Though his life may have been short his story will continue with all of us. During the sad times of his death I was always listening to so many who came by to pay their last respects. Sadness in our hearts was normal, joy in our thoughts was exceptional! I, along with many other U.S.M.A. members, had the blessing of escorting our friend to his final resting place. Final they say? No! Bill is with me every day, every show, every cruise!!!

This is how and what the "BILLY SOHNS MEMORIAL AWARD" is about. Those who were touched by Bill in person or for those who may receive his award now presented by his family, you are a part of the Billy Sohns life story. May you win it for your efforts in our sport or because Bill and God blessed you with the attitude of caring, loving and being the best person our sport has to offer. Two wonderful people have become family with the Sohns and I by winning this award. Frank Bianco in '88 and the first winner, Dave Manzel in '87.

Billy wanted U.S.M.A. to grow and for us as a team to bring pleasure to others. If ever you're at a show and Bill's parents go by the pleasure you'll get by letting them know how wonderful they are and that the boy they carried into this world as a babe walked out as a well respected leader of men, that pleasure will overwhelm you.

Now you have met my friend. As I told the "Detroit News" on March 10, 1987, "I'm really going to miss him alot. He was the greatest kid in the whole world. He had a big heart and a lot of desire. He just had a constant drive to be involved in the sport." Billy, we love you!

Holiday time is always hard on families that have experienced the sadness of losing someone so close. For William and Mary Lou, I pray to and thank God that we all shared time with Billy. Believing he is still with us makes me feel better each time I struggle forward with my goals.

I hope that I have explained what the Sohns family wanted all to know. I feel so good inside. Thanks again. Billy, thanks for the memories.

Ralph A. Haney

1/9/88



UNITED STREET MACHINE ASSOCIATION
CUSTOMS & RODS, INC.

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September 9, 1991



Bill and MaryLou Sohns

Harper Woods, MI 48225

Dear Bill and Mary Lou,

Boy, has it been a long time since we last talked! I do hope that everything is going great for you.

We're all trying to look to the future. This summer has been better than the last two for U.S.M.A. We all know about that four letter word and car shows.

Frank Bianco and I have been discussing doing an event now for a long time. We want to combine our efforts to do a super show with the participants as the main theme. We want it to be more than just another big car show. Nationals size, maybe, but attitude and principles like everyone is your friend.

We want to call this event the "BILLY SOHNS MEMORIAL FUN RUN". I am currently working with an artist on the application heading and a t-shirt design that tops them all. Your approval for each is requested. You can be sure that Frank and I will only do everything in the best of taste. The other Memorial winners are all going to be a part of the event; their choice of best of show will receive a \$150.00 cash prize for first place and \$100.00 for second place.

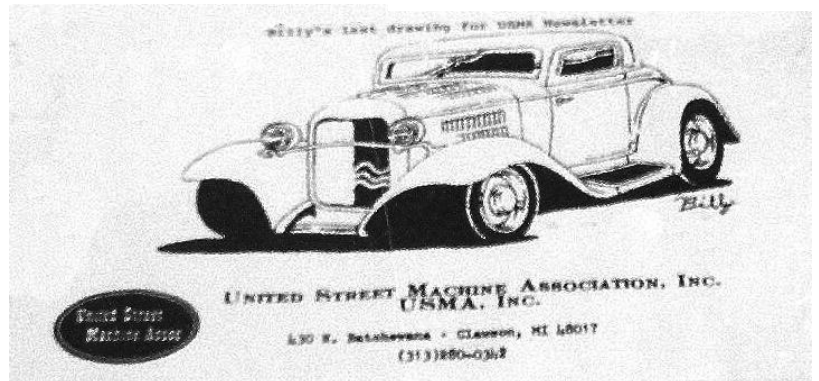
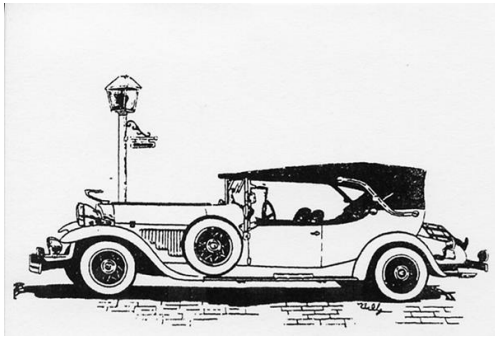
I think that people need to put aside all of the controversy about winning at shows and get back to what brought many of us together in the first place: friendships and a common interest in cars.

As I am sure Bill is in your thoughts every day, he comes to me at all different times. While giving my high school football team a pep talk last Thursday, I explained to them of desire, faith and determination. I was proud to tell them of my friend and how he won by conquering each. We did go on to win 36 - 0. Gee, I didn't know Billy was even a football fan.!

If you have any problem with this event please call or write. Many of the old timers are saying that it would be great. We have all had those bad times, we all get down at one time or another. Remember the old story about seeing the light at the end of the tunnel? That light and his inspiration have gotten me through alot. With your blessings I would very much like to say thank you and show my buddy a grand time together again.

Sincerely,

Below are samples of Billy's Drawings



Billy's Drawings from USMA Newsletters



Billy Sohns Memorial

"Thanks for the Memories"

