



TODAY MY MOTORCYCLE IS A MONTH SHY of two years old. The speedometer reads 16,603; a year ago at this time, it read almost 13,000 miles , and I realized from the schedule in the maintenance manual that I was using the little jewel up at just about twice the programmed rate. The CB400F has made it a joy to return to a motorcycle after an absence of almost 10 long years.

My first and only motorcycle before this one was an English twin bought in partnership with a fellow G.I. while I was in the Army. We bought it from a dealer in Kentucky who is, to this day, the only person I have ever met who actually appeared to have contracted rickets. It was either that or he was a walking genetic accident. We didn't ask. Naturally, the motorcycle was delivered in a mechanical state that approximated his condition.

That motorcycle was simply... well, a motorcycle. We bought it because the idea of owning a motorcycle struck us as funny at the time. We kept it in the kitchen of a mobile home we lived in, an arrangement that invariably alienated any focal talent we could manage to lure home of an evening. It got conversations started all right, but always in the wrong direction.

Now I am a bona fide grown-up, or so people tell me. I was attracted to this Honda not because I had set my mind on owning just any motorcycle or because I wanted to impress girls; no, it was the impracticality of traveling around California on business in a car of nearly two tons with only me and my wallet for cargo, coupled with the fact that the CB400F was the first motorcycle I'd ever laid eyes on that expressed in its design and persona, if you will, the lean austerity that I respond to in machinery. To me, it was when I first saw it, and still is now, the elemental road motorcycle. There is nothing in it that appears obviously prone to early obsolescence. Like my car, which will soon be 10 years old, the CB400F will become a permanent part of my stable of possessions. I value durability more than I do newness.

I have changed almost nothing. Two Koni shock absorbers replaced the original Honda simulated shocks as soon as the ridicule of my peers became too much to bear. A pair of handlebar-end mirrors replaced the stalk-mounted factory mirrors because the originals gave me only closeups of my own elbows. Unfortunately, the new mirrors turn out to amplify and resonate the only vibration the engine produces: right around 5,000 rpm, which exactly coincides with freeway speed in sixth. At 12,000 miles or so, I changed the plugs and points, though it was probably unnecessary to have done so. I felt I owed it to the engine. The kill switch (a term that will take on novel meanings now that capital punishment is back in vogue) broke during an innocent brush with some shrubbery, displaying in its failure an alarming fragility, which I hope has cost the designer his job. (One of the fixes used while I hunted for a new switch was a copper shunt across the switch terminals; the arrangement blew innumerable fuses, and finally, the rectifier. In the process, I learned that motorcycle dealers have not changed much in 10 years.)

Aside from my hard use of the motorcycle on business travel, which has made of me something of a curiosity, I value it also for the occasional weekend ride with friends. At first, I was quite aggressive about my sport riding, and I practiced arduously until I could grind metal off the foot pegs like the big boys. I don't do that anymore. Having ground metal off the pegs. I have concluded that the angle for peg grinding exactly coincides with how far you can lean the motorcycle and still be riding it. For me, there is no more to learn about that.

On business, it delivers 50 miles per gallon without fail; at play, it runs slightly richer-but who's counting? I have been profligate with oil, both in the engine and on the chain, the reward for which is a clean engine and little black stars all over the back of a nylon jacket I use for riding.

Once it became known that I rode this motorcycle very heavily, it became a ritual whenever I parked for my friends to gather around so that they might worship at the windows of mileage. Together, all of us stand silently in awed regard as the miles pile up, staring in wordless homage at the tidy, crystalline 408-cc four, the engine I've come to feel an honest affection for after the CB400F revealed to me that I was right to have come back to a motorcycle after too long gone. -George Larson