



Tanks for Listening

KEN SCHMIDT

I'm a changed man.

Early this summer, I found myself riding alone on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, being taunted by a glowing "low fuel" indicator, desperately searching for an exit, cursing myself for not stopping earlier, and picturing myself stranded and embarrassed by the side of the road. (There seems to be a disconnect that turns some of us – mostly men, I fear – into morons and allows us to watch our fuel gauge drop dangerously low while blasting right past gas stations. "There'll be more.")

Anyway, at the sight of an upcoming fuel stop, the stomach butterflies dissipated and, after swiping a card through the pay-at-the-pump slot (second greatest invention since internal combustion), my well-sated beast brought me effortlessly to my journey's end. Gas tanks, I've long witnessed, speak to us in the clearest language. Yet at the worst possible times, we too frequently choose to ignore them.

Peeking at an early plan for the very *Hog Tales*® you're now holding, I saw that tanks would get their due and found myself reflecting on their obvious and perhaps not-so-obvious importance. In particular, my mind drifted back to an incredibly pleasant conversation over coffee with Harley-Davidson's Styling king, Willie G. As is normal with him, when discussing the importance of the aesthetic elements that make us love our motorcycles more than is perhaps healthy, he was able to make his point succinctly and dead-on accurate. "There's a ton of emotion in our tanks. People see the shape of that teardrop tank and know immediately that it's one of ours. That's sacred. And the sides of the tank where our logos appear, man, that's hallowed ground."

Whoa, now. Sacred? Hallowed? To the uninitiated, those might seem like inappropriately pious words for a piece of stamped, welded, and painted metal, no matter how beautiful. Given a little thought, though, you soon realize that, as usual, Willie knows of what he feels and speaks. Had we been speaking of fuel tank utility, instead of appearance, my guess is he would have put on a robe and torched some incense.

What could inspire such reverence for a gas tank? A great place to look for clues, of course, is back, way back, to the very earliest days of our sport. Gas stations? There weren't any! You bought a jar of gas at the hardware store! On the rural roads of that time – glorified farm paths, really, where any gasoline-powered vehicle was a rare and possibly even frightening sight – running out of gas had to have been monumentally inconvenient. Only a total fool (probably bearing resemblance to yours truly, only with a tie and handlebar moustache) would pass up an opportunity to refuel.

But there's so much more than history. I don't think it's a stretch to say that the gas tank that looks so good in your lap (or is hidden so slyly under your V-Rod™ seat) has been a catalyst to some of the greatest memories of your motorcycling life. Consider that magical feeling of anticipation when you and your riding buddies are filling up just prior to a long ride, like maybe to a H.O.G.® rally. Before you rode a Harley-Davidson®, could you ever have imagined having a leisurely and pleasant time at a gas station? Even the greasiest and scariest of bathrooms can't quell the feeling that something wonderful is afoot. Look through your photos and, if you've been riding a while, you'll find shots taken at gas stations. Your non-riding friends just wouldn't understand this (and you like it like that).

How do we love Thee, Gas Tank? Well, who among us hasn't tapped his or her tank in a loving gesture, just to hear it thump, the way a horseman taps his steed? "There, there, Girl." If you've got custom paint on your tank and somebody – anybody – tries to touch it, you become like a rabid cub-protecting grizzly. Because to you, it's ... sacred.

Gas tanks, I've long witnessed, speak to us in the clearest language.

Just look at its elegant simplicity of purpose, crafted so true to the heritage we Harley-Davidson owners hold dear and, thanks to the loving eye of Willie G., his incomparable design team, and those who came before them, perfectly gorgeous in every detail. I've displayed a black and creme Heritage Softail® tank in my office for 15 years, like it's a fine art piece. Because it is. As Marty so rightly concluded on Page 14: These things really are "art that works for a living."

We speak fondly – indeed, righteously – of our tanks because they toil so effortlessly, look so beautiful, and speak so thoughtfully to us. It's only logical, then, that we honor them and return their favors by listening to them. And top off every chance we get. And never fool ourselves into running on E.

I'm a changed man, now. I swear I am. I've seen the error in my ways. Can I hear an "Amen"?

Ken Schmidt is a H.O.G. Life Member and long-time Harley-Davidson enthusiast.