



## Sporting Motorcycle Club Geelong Lionel Frank Pratt Founding Member

Lionel Frank Pratt was born in New Zealand in 1901. He came to Australia to work for his brothers joy flight business. Frank as he is known would go on to become one of Australia's most unique sportsmen and a founding member of the SMCC. Below is a history of Frank Pratt's life and how the SMCC was born compiled by former SMCC member Wayne Berry.

Frank lived with his mother in Ngaio, Wellington until her death, his father died at the age of 49. Frank's family consisted of brothers Charlie, Alf and Percy who all moved to Australia and a sister who stayed in New Zealand.

In his youth Frank was a keen hunter and shooting was an activity that he continued to pursue later in Geelong as a member of the Small-Bore Rifle Club which was situated next to the train line opposite the Gordon College in Little Malop Street (Now demolished). Frank also became interested in motorcycles and started racing grass-track events.

Charlie Pratt was a pilot and instructor in the First World War and purchased new planes in Egypt at the end of the war, to ship back to New Zealand. Unfortunately for him when the ship reached Melbourne there was a delay (possibly a strike) at the wharf with getting the plane on another ship to New Zealand. Charlie decided to assemble the plane and have a look around the district. On one flight he landed on the Belmont Common and decided this would be a good place from which to conduct joy flights.

Frank came over from New Zealand to join Charlie who had taught all his brothers how to fly. Frank and Charlie then flew charter work for Lt. Parer in the Owen Stanley Ranges in New Guinea until Frank became ill with a fever and returned to Geelong in 1925. New Guinea is a particularly hazardous place to fly planes with cloud closing in rapidly around the mountains and tropical storms. The only instrument in the plane was an oil pressure gauge so they had to be able to see where they were going and there were very few places to land safely.

Again both Charlie and Frank set up a flying school from a hangar erected on the Belmont Common. (Believed to be the site of the Recreation Centre opposite K mart)

One of Frank's close friends was Eric Morris who Frank had taught to fly and often-hired Frank's plane. Eric had a battery business in Yarra Street and was known as Exide Eric. He was a bit of a character and one occasion found himself in court for by passing the meter box to get power for charging the batteries. One day when Frank was riding home on his motorcycle he noticed his plane flying in a strange manner and headed for the Belmont Common. When he arrived there the plane had crashed and his friend was dead. Eric was buried in the East Geelong cemetery and his tombstone has a large aircraft propeller attached to it. (The nearest corner along Ormond Road)

On Boxing Day 1928 Frank and some friends went to Phillip Island to see the TT (Tourist Trophy) races held on a 6 1/2 mile dirt road circuit and he decided that he would like to try it but needed a suitable machine. The circuit was rectangle and included 4 corners called Young & Jacksons, Gentle Anne, and Heaven and Hell. The Needles Eye on the back straight sent the machines airborne at full speed.

There is a historic marker showing the track layout at the side of Ventnor Road near Cowes. In those days there was no bridge to the island and machines and spectators had to be ferried from Stoney Point on the Mornington Peninsula to Cowes

Frank was an excellent mechanic and could repair planes, cars and motorcycles. He had been tuning and repairing motorcycles for friends and demand for his services grew to the point he decided to go into business as a sub agency for Sunbeam motorcycles. Initially he worked from a shed on the property where he boarded with the Ibbotson family in South Geelong.

At the 1931 Phillip Island event Frank entered the sidecar event on his Sunbeam 500cc machine with his good friend Percy Coleman who had been assisting the Pratt's with aircraft maintenance and was also a keen motorcyclist.

The story goes that when Frank asked Percy to sit in the sidecar he neglected to mention how rough it would be in the bumpy, hot and dusty conditions.

The most successful rider in the world at the time, 12 time Isle of Man TT winner Stanley Woods was brought out to Australia to race at Phillip Island. He was absolutely staggered to be racing in Australia's premier event on a non paved surface which he described as nothing more than a dirt track with large potholes.

Frank and Percy finished second in their 25-mile race and Percy vowed never to climb back in the sidecar. For him a terrifying and exhausting experience.

Frank returned to Phillip Island on the 1<sup>st</sup> February 1932 with a new passenger Alick Smith. They won the Australian Grand Prix for sidecars on a model 90 Sunbeam. Alick was an accomplished solo rider and later had a falling out with Frank after he crashed at a Warragul Grass Track meeting badly injuring his leg. A nurse called Nancy at the Warragul Hospital who finally became Mrs. Smith impressed both.

The event alternated between Grand Prix and TT on a yearly basis giving other states the opportunity to run the Grand Prix.

Less than a fortnight after the 1932 event he established L F Pratt Motorcycles at 245a Moorabool Street, Geelong (now a Pizza shop) at the top of the hill and was an agent for Sunbeam motorcycles.

In early March 1932 Frank invited some friends to come to his shop one evening to view some movie footage of the Phillip Island Grand Prix motorcycle races taken by Charlie Pratt and discuss the formation of a club for sporting events. That evening the Sporting Motor Cycle Club Geelong (SMCC) was formed and it has run continuously since then with a brief hiatus during World War II.

The foundation members were:

Robert Anderson	Bert Blair,
Percy Coleman (elected President)	Bert Dickins
ADF (Peter Griffiths)	Colin Rankin
Harry Shoebridge	Alick Smith
Dave Walter	Ron Walter
Eric Williams	Frank Pratt (Secretary/Treasurer)

There had been previous Geelong motorcycle clubs and groups for touring and even hill climb events on the Midland Highway at Batesford back in the early 1900's.

Bert Dickins recalled that Frank's shop, which had previously been a bakery, was small and the ovens still there were used to store motorcycle parts. With the confined space they decided to hold their weekly meetings at Pratt's aircraft hangar at the Belmont common.

Membership fee was 5 shillings to join and with three pence per meeting they acquired funds for the purpose of leasing property for a racetrack.

One of the first events Frank organised for the club on the 17th April 1932 was a Reliability Trial where riders would cover a 74 mile course in the country leaving the Service Station at the corner of Ballarat Road and Church Street at 2 p.m. The route went along Ballarat Road to Lovely Banks Road down Separation Street to Melbourne Road, the You Yongs, Anakie, Durdiwarah, Meredith, Steiglitz, Maude, Darriwill to Anakie Rd, Ballarat Road back to the Service Station.

Every competitor completing the course without loss of points will receive an award in the shape of a silver cup. Should no riders in any class finish with a clean sheet the award will go to the competitor losing the least points. Unfortunately for Frank and the Club the sun was shining and 9 out of the 12 entrants completed the course without loss of points and earned a silver cup. Hardly a financial success for the club Frank was not happy and vowed future events would be far more difficult.

He wrote to the weather bureau to find out the worst weather weekend and they replied the second week of August. From then on the annual event was held in the Otway Ranges on muddy bush tracks through flooded creeks over 100 miles in length on the second weekend in August. Mention was made of the lack of mechanical failure on British machines and the absence of American machines from the event. Also noted was the large crowd of onlookers at the start of the event showing an increase in the popularity of motorcycle racing.

On a training flight near Point Lonsdale in 1932 Frank spotted some land that he thought would be suitable for racing and contacted a Mr Wilson who used the land for horse training. This Bonnievale circuit was used by the club regularly from the 8<sup>th</sup> June 1932 until the start of the war and again until it was sold to Lakers for shell grit mining in 1950.

It was a flat oval track and riders reached speeds of about 70 plus mph on the shell grit surface. It was situated on the right hand side of the Queenscliff Road, at the bottom of the hill from Suma Park, toward Pt Lonsdale and was prone to flooding in winter. The land is still vacant with housing development now growing there. Frank generously offered joy flights in his plane for race winners.

In those days most riders racing machine was also their daily road transport where they removed the lights added race number plates and then reassembled to ride home.

As the speed of machines increased over the years changes were made, putting doglegs in the straight to slow the track.

Frank and Alick repeated their 1932 win at Phillip Island in the 1933TT. Frank also finishes 4<sup>th</sup> in the Senior 500cc solo TT race with the best riders in Australia competing.

By 1934 Frank had relocated his shop to 225 Moorabool Street and was expanding the range of machinery he sold. Around this time another Club was formed called the Western District Motorcycle by Tom Moloney who also had a motorcycle shop in Moorabool Street (site of Mahoney Picture Frames) before relocating to the other side of the street. Generally customers who purchased the brand of machines he sold joined his club however it was amalgamated into the Sporting Club in 1938.

Phillip Island 1934 and Frank wins the Sidecar Grand Prix with Alick Smith and the Lightweight Grand Prix 250cc machines which incorporates the Victorian Centenary TT's for both classes.

He again wins the Australian Lightweight TT at Phillip Island in 1935.

Frank entered both classes in 1936 but does not show in the results suggesting he either crashed or had mechanical problems.

1937 and Frank was now an agent for Sunbeam, BMW, DKW, Utility, New Imperial and Coventry Eagle with the DKW the only motorcycle to have a self-starter.

He was particularly impressed with German engineering and was now competing on a BMW.

The speed of machines was increasing and flying 1/4 miles were a popular club activity where they would mark out a section of straight public road and time the machines over the distance to establish their speed. This was highly illegal. They often used the Ballarat Road near Lethbridge and Hamilton highway and included a picnic lunch with extra fuel carried in Frank's sidecar. Speeds from 70mph to 102 mphs were recorded from 250cc to 500cc.

It was not all about racing and there were many social events to theatres, Luna Park and touring to Lorne, Warrnambool, Grampians, Werribee Gorge, Victorian Alps and interstate.

Frank reclaims the Australian Sidecar TT title in 1937.

In 1938 Frank was the major force behind the move to establish the Western Centre. It consisted of clubs from Hamilton, Horsham, Ararat, Casterton, Camperdown, Colac, and later Ballarat, Stawell, Mortlake and Mt Gambier.

It gave country riders the opportunity to compete closer to home as they found it hard to compete against sponsored riders from Melbourne on the dearer specialised machinery. Riders had to own the machines they rode with limitation on modifications and fuel used. The arrangement was adopted by other parts of Victoria.

Frank remained President of the Western Centre from 1938 until 1951.

Frank also became heavily involved in the Auto Cycle Union of Victoria, which controlled all open motorcycle events and regulated licensing, permits, rules, prize money, and the safe running of events.

Alf Pratt was the first aid officer at the race meetings and ran a Parcel delivery business taken over by his son Robert on his death. Charlie Pratt continued to fly and started an aerial photography business and Percy Pratt constructed gliders down at the Belmont Common.

Other early events the Sporting Club ran included a hill climb at Drysdale and flag racing on the beach at Torquay which would never be allowed today but still continues in parts of the UK and Europe.

A visit by German Champion Edwin Kluge in January 1938 with a supercharged 250cc 2 stroke DKW machine so impressed Frank that he had to have one. The ear shattering noise from the

machine no doubt created a hearing problem for him! They were constructed in the same factory as Auto Union cars (now Audi) They held the world speed record for that capacity.

A British Secret Service agent was also sent out to observe the German team.

Frank again won the Phillip Island TT with good friend Alan Philpott in the sidecar. Alan also raced the 100mile Senior Solo TT and managed 3GL-radio station. Unfortunately he was later killed when being transported as a prisoner of war when the ship was sunk.

Frank continued to win with the sidecar at the Phillip Island Grand Prix event in 1939 then the war started and racing ceased. The car event had already ceased on this circuit due to an unfortunate incident where a car left the road and killed some spectators. Racing resumed there in the early 1960's when a specially made racetrack was constructed.

Franks third shop at 233 Moorabool on the corner of Myers Street had been a butcher shop and offered a larger showroom, workshop and spare parts storage upstairs.

In 1948 Frank invited Norm Osborne to come to Geelong and become a partner in the business and Pratt & Osborne remains in the same premises today. Like Frank, Norm had been very successful as a racer winning the 1932 & 1933 Senior TT's at Phillip Island, came second in the 1936 event and was leading the 1934 Centenary event when it was abandoned with rain. Norm's son Allan and his son Donnie both Geelong residents went on to become Australian Motorcycle Champions.

The Australian Grand Prix for cars on the 26<sup>th</sup> January 1948 was being held locally at the Point Cook RAAF Base. Frank entered his BMW 328 sports car but a few weeks before the event he was injured in a crash while competing on his Vincent sidecar at Ballarat and he made arrangements for a driver. Just prior to the race Frank decided he was well enough to drive even though it was an extremely hot day.

Although his car was under powered compared to the special and exotic race cars he was competing against the BMW kept going when the heat proved too much for many of the other competitors. The car bore the Number 28 as he could not get his usual number 14 and as the car had twice as many wheels as a motorbike he doubled 14. Frank in his usual style even had time to have a smoke while he raced. To everyone's amazement Frank won the

race and later told his workshop foreman that he found car racing a bit boring compared to racing motorcycles.

In addition to his remarkable Phillip Island successes Frank also had many wins at various circuits including Victoria Park Ballarat, Fishermans Bend Melbourne, Lobethal and Victor Harbour South Australia. In 1951 he won the Sporting Clubs Reliability Trial sidecar class and the following year he won the 125cc solo class.

1954 saw Norm Osborne running the Geelong shop while Frank opened another shop in Elizabeth Street, Melbourne selling new BMW 's and Jawa's.

Frank had devoted his life to motorcycling and married late in life to Myrtle Ibbotson (De Henzel). Who had been widowed and it wouldn't have been right for Frank to share a house. They lived on the corner of Gheringhap & McKillop Streets, and sold the house to the RACV (now GRTA) when they shifted to Seaholme on the bay near Altona so they would be close to both businesses.

On the 27<sup>th</sup> February 1957 Frank left for work on his sidecar and after a short distance felt ill and returned home. Myrtle put him to bed and he died. Ironically he had a doctors appointment for later that day. Frank was a quietly spoken gentleman who always wore a collar, tie and waistcoat even under his leather jacket when racing. He had been a very heavy smoker and always had a cigarette, a holder and lighter tucked in his pocket. His good friend and fellow motorcyclist Colin Rankin a Pharmacist said he was the only man he knew who could light and smoke a cigarette while riding a motorcycle.

He died at the age of 55 the only man to win Australian Championships on 2, 3 and 4 wheels. Frank was cremated at Faulkner crematorium and his ashes were scattered over Port Phillip Bay by his brother Charlie from his plane.

At this time there is no memorial to this man who achieved something that is probably unique in the whole world.

A special Thank-You must go to Wayne Berry who did a great job putting this piece together.