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27th Oyster Run draws thousands

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by Marta Murvosh

* Police estimate 27th Oyster Run was biggest yet

ANACORTES – The roar and rumble of a motorcycle takes Jules VanAcker back to her childhood and the sound of her father’s racing boats.

“The (motorcycle) headers make the same noise,” said VanAcker, 33, of Kirkland. “It kind of takes me back to growing-up.”

The throaty growl from a bike’s engine has lodged in VanAcker’s heart and soul, and she said she can’t wait to buy her own bike, hopefully sometime next year after she finishes her degree in forestry and can afford one.

VanAcker has ridden motorcycles on and off since she graduated from high school – first, in Arizona with a motorcycle club, and then after moving to Seattle and dating a man with his own bike.

The sound, the freedom, the experience of the ride and camaraderie with other riders are reasons that people gathered Sunday for the 27th annual Oyster Run in downtown Anacortes.

Ten blocks of Commercial Avenue were blocked off to cars and trucks and filled with parked motorcycles, riders and people interested in the run. Vendors – selling clothing, motorcycles and biking accessories – filled the side streets just west and east of the city’s main thoroughfare.

“Limp” Lee Ashbach started the run in 1981. He said he and a few friends rode their bikes along a scenic route from Marysville to Edison to celebrate the end of summer.



Cary Wallace of Shoreline fastens his helmet Sunday afternoon as his cockatoo, named Scooter, perches on the handlebars before they leave the Oyster Run in Anacortes. Wallace said he nestles the bird in his jacket at higher speeds.

The run on the fourth Sunday of September grew in size as riders invited new people each year. Eventually, the run moved to Anacortes, where Ashbach grew up.

Now 27 years after that first run, the city closes off Commercial and organizers use the Web to promote attendance and inform participants of biker-friendly establishments.

This year, Ashbach said he's seen riders from Utah, Idaho, Oregon and British Columbia, as well as from all over Washington. Hotels in Skagit County and Whidbey Island are full and so are the campgrounds, he said.

Sunday's crowd estimate ranged from 15,000 to 20,000, said Anacortes Police Capt. John Small.

"It's hard to tell. People come in, pass by and leave," Small said. "It's the biggest one we've ever had."

The run attracted dozens of biker clubs, and members proudly wore their affiliation on leather jackets and vests. Present were several Christian groups, war veterans from the Korean War to the current Iraq war, groups associated with specific motorcycle brands and even one for deaf bikers.

Bikers window-shopped or bought gear and clothing, and groups, such as the Seattle Cossacks Stunt Drill Team, performed, building human pyramids on their bikes and using their bikes to do a slalom run.

Oysters – grilled and raw – were the food of the day. Waitresses at the Island Cafe said they sold hundreds of oyster shooters at \$1 a slurp.

Before the Cossacks performed, Dave Lahr, 47, of Bellingham, explained how he started riding when he was 9. His family had moved from San Diego to the Mojave Desert and his parents bought him a bike so he would have something to do. For Lahr, riding a motorcycle has a long-lasting allure.

"Freedom, the smells, just getting out in the air and the ride itself," Lahr said.

Don and Jan Bearteet, 72 and 70, respectively, rode from their home in Eatonville, near Mount Rainier, to visit their grandchildren. He's been riding on and off since he was 10 and she started four years ago when the couple met. Don Bearteet said he enjoys the camaraderie he has with other riders.

"I get to go places I've never been," Jan Bearteet said.

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