

Clem Rorie, Professional Daredevil

A Clark County man became quite well-known across the nation in the years during and following World War I, but today, probably only a few have ever heard his name. With the nickname of “Speed,” Clem Rorie commanded a unit of General John J. Pershing’s dispatch riders in France during World War I. After returning home to the United States, he became an “internationally famous motorcycle rider and professional daredevil.”

Clem Belmont Rorie was born in 1893, the son of Rev. T. O. Rorie, a Methodist minister who served a number of churches around Arkansas. As mentioned, Clem served in World War I.

General John J. Pershing commanded the American Expeditionary Force on the Western Front in World War I, and Clem Rorie was among his dispatch riders. A relatively new contraption—the motorcycle—first saw action in the U.S. military during a border conflict involving Mexico and Pancho Villa. The cycle’s first large-scale deployment occurred in World War I when the U.S. had about 80,000 such vehicles in service. The machines were used for multiple purposes, including delivering messages. With little telecommunication available, dispatch riders sometimes carried orders in dangerous circumstances, “through machine gun and artillery fire, far behind enemy lines, and over or around craters, debris.” Clem Rorie actively participated in the war as one of those riders.

Even with such hazardous duty, Rorie survived the war, and after his time of military service capitalized on his talents and experiences. For example, he became well-known around the nation for motorcycle stunts at the World’s Fair in San Francisco, riding “on the perpendicular wall in the Motordrome.”

Then, in 1924, Arkadelphia’s *Southern Standard* newspaper included this headline: “Former Local Boy in Prominent Role in Six-Reel Movie.” According to the *Standard’s* announcement for the upcoming film, he was “One of the brightest stars of the movie world, in that phase of filmdom devoted to the hazardous and thrilling.” The paper reported the signing of a Classic Picture Corporation contract “for the immediate production of a six-reel ‘thriller’ featuring Clem Belmont Rorie, internationally famous motorcycle rider and professional daredevil.” The movie’s director stated that “It is doubtful whether anyone other than Mr. Rorie would be able or willing to play the principal part, because of the innumerable chances with death the actor is called upon to take.”

As for other members of Rorie’s family, Clem’s brother, Ben, served as a pilot in World War II and was killed in action while flying over Germany. Clem’s sister, Ruth, married Claude Phillips. Claude and Ruth Rorie Phillips are remembered by many as owners of the historic landmark now called the Captain Henderson House, located at Tenth and Henderson streets in Arkadelphia. The home was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1998 and once served as a museum. It is owned by Henderson State University.

Clem Rorie died in 1947 and was buried in Rose Hill Cemetery in Arkadelphia.

