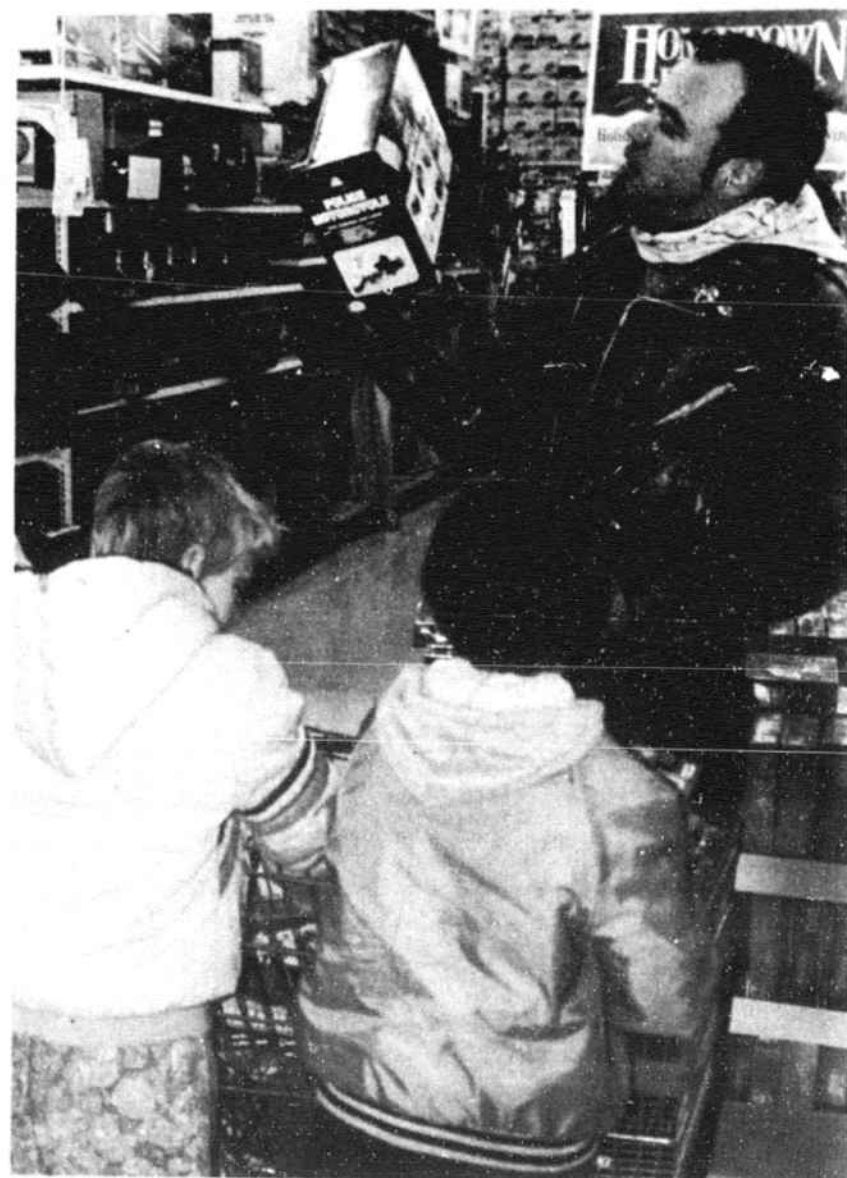




JEROME MUNNA, organizer of the first annual Brunswick County Motorcycle Toy Run, distributes some of the Christmas gifts that were collected for local foster children.



MOTORCYCLIST Keith Klimas of Holden Beach keeps track of the battery needs for two local foster children on a \$100 shopping spree.

## Local Bikers Rally To Take Foster Kids On Christmas Shopping Spree

BY ERIC CARLSON

More than 50 Santa Clauses in black leather jackets rode a herd of thundering "reindeer" into Shallotte Sunday afternoon and made the Christmas season a little brighter for local foster children.

It was called the "First Annual Brunswick County Motorcycle Toy Run." And judging from the enthusiasm it generated among the participating motorcyclists, children, social workers—and even bystanders—it won't be the last.

More than \$2,000 in cash and dozens of toys were collected through donations from the riders and contributions from area businesses in an event that was hurriedly organized in less than three weeks by Supply sign painter and Harley-Davidson rider Jerome Munna.

"I am so tickled that so many people showed up on such short notice in that cold weather to help these kids have a better Christmas," Munna said. "I think everybody who took part was touched by the experience."

A total of 33 motorcycles—many with passengers—rumbled into Shallotte to participate in the benefit rally. While most came from Brunswick County, several of the bikers rode all the way from Little River, Myrtle Beach and Conway, S.C., to take part. Many had flashy, customized Harley-Davidsons. Some cruised in on cushy touring bikes. Others rode standard Japanese motorcycles.

Each participant donated \$10 or a toy to join in the run. Most paid another \$8 for a commemorative T-shirt. More than 45 area businesses kicked in at least \$30 each to have their names printed on the shirt, with all proceeds going to needy children.

"Everybody likes an excuse to ride on a nice day. But nobody wants a good excuse to ride when it's 40 degrees outside," Munna said. "I thought some of these folks might want to make a donation and forget the ride, but they all wanted to go. They all wanted to help the kids."

Riding two abreast, the long line of bikers braved near-freezing temperatures on a 65-mile ride from Shallotte to Southport to Bolivia and back to Shallotte. There, they were met by a group of foster parents, children and employees of the Brunswick County Department of Social Services.

Each of the children was paired with one of the riders for a shopping trip through the Wal-Mart department store, where each youngster was allowed to spend \$100 on anything he or she wanted.

With peals of laughter and shouts of excitement, the children followed their leather-clad chaperones up and down the aisles. Most of them



STAFF PHOTO BY ERIC CARLSON

PREPARING for a cold ride, motorcyclists Dwayne Smith and Trinity Harris of Conway, S.C., secure a new soccer ball to their Harley-Davidson before embarking. The bikers collected more than \$2,000 and numerous toys for local foster children.

bought toys. Others picked out shoes and clothing. Some of the girls bought dresses and jewelry and perfume.

"The store had a special register set aside to give us a discount on everything they picked out," Munna said. "When we got there with the shopping carts, the kids were looking around wondering, 'Is this really going to happen? Are we really going to get out of here with all this?' It was just great!"

In all, a dozen foster children went along on the shopping spree. The remainder of the donations were given to DSS for distribution to other needy children.

Munna said the spirit of giving was contagious.

"People in Wal-Mart asked what we were doing. When we told them, an elderly lady came up and handed us \$20," he said. "Another man gave \$10. A guy in the parking lot pulled up with an electric organ in the back

of his truck and asked if we wanted it for the kids. We said, 'Sure,' and put it in with the other donations."

"While we were getting ready to go, a lady came in (to Mickie's Doughnuts, starting point for the run) and saw all the commotion. She went out and bought a toy and brought it back!"

Overwhelmed by the response, Munna said several of the bikers offered to help with next year's toy run. There was even talk of organizing a mid-summer motorcycle rally and barbecue, both to raise money and to provide a day of fun and games for local foster children.

Munna also expressed his appreciation to all the businesses who helped in the toy run and for the assistance of the Shallotte Police Department, the Southport Police Department, the Brunswick County Sheriff's Department and the N.C. Highway Patrol for providing traffic control at intersections along the way.

"It really opened up and warmed a lot of people's hearts," Munna said. "They all got into the spirit of giving. And that's what Christmas is all about."

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This weekend the children of our church performed a Christmas play. It reminded me of many things from my youth. I remember my cousin and I finding two brand new bikes one day before Christmas. Of course those bikes were under the Christmas tree Christmas morning. Christmas took on a different meaning after that. And there was a man named Israel who during the holidays would roast oysters for us and I remember the wonderful corn fritters and watermelon and pickles that my Aunt Catherine made for those oyster roast. We always went to Grandmother's house for Christmas. I remember all of those wonderful meals, the presents piled under the tree, reaching the age when I no longer had to pass out the gifts, and playing touch football with my cousins on the front lawn. I also remember a Christmas holiday when everything wasn't so innocent and wonderful. I remember how a kind word and a gentle touch, from someone I hardly knew, helped me to have a happier holiday. We here at Coastal Drug wish you peace, hope, and happiness as you prepare for the holidays.

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