

Harley-Davidson ..Vroom! Vroom!

by Mike Prero

"Harley-Davidson" = Hell's Angels? The stereotype notwithstanding, "Harley-Davidson" just means the best motorcycles built. Yes, the "biker image" went along with the name, but most bikers aren't gang members! I used to have a bike, myself, a Honda 500 [*sorry, I couldn't afford a Harley!*], and thoroughly enjoyed it [*although it was dangerous as Hell, which is why I finally hung up my leathers!*]

In our culture, 'Harley-Davidson' is synonymous with 'motorcycle,' probably going at least as far back as the old Marlon Brando-Lee Marvin movie. But, the company, itself, goes much further back than that.

In Milwaukee, 1901, William Harley, 21, and Arthur Davidson, 20, began experiments on "taking the work out of bicycling." They were soon joined by Arthur's brothers, Walter and William.



Many changes were made to the engine design before its builders were satisfied. After the new looped frame was finalized, they were ready to begin production in 1903. That year, they made three bikes! Harley-Davidson erected its first building at the current Juneau Avenue site in 1906, and they incorporated in 1907, cranking out 150 bikes that year.

The trademark 45 degree V-Twin engine, introduced in 1909, displaced 49.5 cu in and produced seven horsepower. Top speed was 60 mph. 1909 production: 1,149 motorcycles. By 1913, the original 28' x 80' factory had grown to 297,110 square feet. Harley began to dominate racing events. 1913 production: 12,904 motorcycles.

After Harley-Davidson motorcycles had proven their military value in border skirmishes with Pancho Villa, they were quickly called to duty when the U.S. entered WW I. Some 20,000 cycles would see duty before the war's end. By 1920, Harley-Davidson became the largest motorcycle manufacturer in the world, boasting dealers in an unheard of 67 countries! 1920 production was up to 28,189 motorcycles.

In February 1921, on a Fresno, Calif., board track, a Harley-Davidson

became the first motorcycle ever to win a race with an average speed over 100 mph. The Twenties were a decade of innovation for Harley- Davidson, including the 74 cu in. V-Twin (1922), the Teardrop gas tank (1925) and the front brake (1927). After the stock market crash of October 1929, Harley-Davidson sales suffered with everyone else's in the industry. By 1933, production in Milwaukee had dropped to 3,700 motorcycles. But, Harley-Davidson wasted no time building momentum out of the Depression, introducing its EL model, featuring the 61 cu in. overhead valve engine, also known as the "Knucklehead." 1936 production: 9,812 motorcycles.

Almost immediately after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Harley-Davidson's entire motorcycle output was produced for Allied use. By the end of World War II, 90,000 WLA army-version motorcycles had been built and shipped. After the war, motorcyclists were eager to get back to their sport. To feed their desire for more motorcycles, Harley-Davidson introduced a new 74 cu in. engine with hydraulic valve lifters and aluminum heads. The "Panhead" was born. 1948 production: 31,16 motorcycles.

As Harley-Davidson celebrated its 50th anniversary in 1953, its oldest and closest competitor, Indian, went out of business, leaving Harley-Davidson as the sole survivor in a once overcrowded American motorcycle marketplace. 1953 production: 14,050 motorcycles. The Sportster, father of the superbikes, was introduced in 1957, followed in 1958 by the Duo Glide, featuring a hydraulic rear shock suspension to go with the hydraulically damped front fork. Also in 1958, Carroll Resweber won the first of four consecutive AMA Grand National Championships.

In 1963, when it became apparent that fiberglass was becoming a versatile material for golf cars and motorcycles, Harley-Davidson purchased and converted a fiberglass boat company in Tomahawk, Wis. George Roeder set a world land speed record of 177.225 mph for 250CC motorcycles on a modified Harley-Davidson Sprint. Bart Markel, aboard a Harley, won the second of his three AMA Grand National Championships.

With the addition of an electric starter, the Duo Glide became the Electra Glide in 1965, which was also the last year of the "Panhead" engine. The "Shovelhead" engine took over the V-Twin mantle in 1966. 1966 production: 36,310 motorcycles. After going public for the first time in 1965, Harley-Davidson took a new turn in 1969 by merging with the American Machine and Foundry Company (AMF). Joe Smith, riding a drag bike powered by a single Harley-Davidson motor, was the first to break the nine-second barrier in motorcycle drag racing. 1971 also marked the introduction of the Super Glide. Chassis manufacturing and final assembly operations moved to a plant in York, Pa. Engine and transmission operations remained in Milwaukee, along with the corporate headquarters. 1975 production: 75,403.

To get Harley owners more involved in the sport, the company formed the Harley Owners Group (H.O.G.), now the largest factory-sponsored motorcycle club in the world. Also in 1983, tariffs were imposed on Japanese motorcycles 700CC or larger in response to unfair trade practices. In July, Harley-Davidson was approved for listing on the New York Stock Exchange.

To mark the company's 85th anniversary, a cross-country ride was held, benefiting the Muscular Dystrophy Association. 1995 was a record year for the company, with record sales from the production of 105,104 motorcycles.

[A note of explanation on the cover shown on the first page. All the regular Harley-Davidson covers I happened to have on hand were metallic and would not scan well, so I had to use this restaurant cover!]