

## **Harley Davidson**

**Keywords: United States; Motorcycles; Transportation**

The Harley Davidson Motor Company (H-D) was co-founded in 1901 by William S. Harley (1880-1943) and Arthur Davidson (1881-1950), sons of English and Scottish immigrants who arrived in Milwaukee in the early 1860s. Harley, serving an apprenticeship at a Milwaukee metalworking company, became fast friends with Arthur Davidson there, and together they carried out entrepreneurial efforts to motorize bicycles in the basement of the Davidson home. Possibly because of Harley's engineering and drafting skills, his name appeared above Davidson's on the door of the company's first building, a small backyard wooden shed erected in 1903. Two older Davidson brothers, Walter and William, joined the company and went on to become company president and vice president, completing the quartet of developers. In 1907 the company was incorporated, and four years later the iconic H-D "Bar and Shield" was trademarked.

Although Harley-Davidson was actually preceded by similar vehicles known as "motorized bicycles" or "Motor Cycles" in Europe and the United States, the pursuit of more powerful engines, stronger frames, innovative engineering and simple styling propelled H-D into leadership of the emerging motorcycle industry. From 1905 to 1910, H-D's production soared from 8 motorcycles per year to over 3000. Ten years later, Harley rose to become world's largest producer of motorcycles with worldwide sales in more than sixty countries.

As competition among manufacturers intensified, so did motorcycle engineering and design innovations. Replacement of leather belts with chain-driven engines, formulating clutch-drive that provided more control over starting and speed variations,

and a promise of “guaranteed horsepower” all engaged the attention of the buying public for the motorcycles as transportation, but also for sport and fashion. Engineering innovations, such as the two cylinders 45-degree v-twin engine, a company standard from 1909 – 1929, doubled power output, and produced the syncopated classic “potato-potato” resonance. Harley began outpacing their business rivals with aggressive recruitment of new dealerships, advertising their latest innovations, and the publication of H-D’s long-running magazine *The Enthusiast* beginning in 1916, with illustrated writings designed to inform and capture the attention of the buying public.

Included in the production of revered H-D bikes are the 1936 EL “Knucklehead” overhead-valve engine, with teardrop fuel tank and art deco graphics; the 1948 FL “Panhead” which became a prototype for many future H-D designs; and the 1957 XL Sportster, the machine deemed “king of the street.” Machines such as these became “supporting cast” in popular post-war Hollywood films, such as bad boy Lee Marvin in *The Wild Ones*, 1953, and Peter Fonda’s chopper in *Easy Rider*, 1969, to be followed by Michael Parks riding a Harley Sporster in the TV drama *Then Came Bronson*, of 1969-70.

The arrival in 1963 of Willie G. Davidson, direct descendant of the founders, brought not only key future design and styling direction, but also a leadership style that would be crucial to H-D’s future. Although a 1969 merger with AMC brought some necessary financial stability and an advertising power-boost, it was as seen by many as a mixed-blessing, especially for those enthusiasts who associated the company with personal freedom and resistance to the kind of cultural conformity promoted by

AMC.Harley managed to dissolve the relationship in 1981, and emerge strong after the buyback, boasting a confident assertion: “The Eagle Soars Alone.”

-----

Bibliography:

Herbert Wagner. *At the Creation: Myth, Reality, and the Origin of the Harley-Davidson Motorcycle, 1901-1909*. Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2003

Encyclopedia Entry  
Bloomsbury Encyclopedia of Design, London  
Expected publication date: May 2015

Author: James Slauson  
Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design