

100 YEARS OF THE AMA

BY KEATON MAISANO AND JOHN BURNS
PHOTOS: AMA ARCHIVE

Motorcycling has had its boom years, the '60s/early '70s and '90s/2000s being the most recent...but also during the late '40s/1950s, largely a result of the end of hostilities in Europe and the Pacific.



That wartime's-end scenario also played out in the late teens and into the 1920s, which aren't called the "roaring '20s" for nothing. Also called "The Jazz Age" and, in Europe, the "Golden '20s," the decade of the 1920s was as crazy, creative and turbulent as any, with all sorts of post-war happenings aside from astronomical – for the time – growth of the motorcycle industry.

You had prohibition (which put a damper on things, at least for a while), the 19th Amendment (giving women the right to vote), the opening of the Panama Canal (which shrunk the globe and turned sleepy Los Angeles into a major transportation hub and future megalopolis), Charles Lindbergh's first Atlantic crossing in 1927, *The Jazz Singer* (the first talkie) that same year, and a more economically positive – and just-plain-positive – populace, many of whom wanted to *move*.

It all must've been a lot to take in. Say, how can I inject that sort of swashbuckling action and adventure into my own life? We've got just the thing, kid: Nothing says motion like a motorcycle.

You really did have to want it in those days. Every ride was an adventure ride in the 1920s, when most roads were still unpaved. But none of it deterred folks from riding, or even racing. You had social events, club gatherings and Gypsy Tours for the former, and dirt tracks and board tracks and motordromes for the latter, with all of it focused on fun, camaraderie and adventure.

BRACKETED BY WWI AND THE GREAT DEPRESSION, THE 1920S WERE A DECADE-LONG MOTORCYCLING — AND NATIONWIDE — CELEBRATION

THE 20S

For Americans on the cusp of the 1920s, America was on the rise, and the future was about to be very bright indeed...right up until it wasn't. Following the great stock market crash of October, 1929, the Dow Jones took until 1954 to recover its losses. But let's live it up while we can, eh? The '30s are a story for next month.



THE DEATH OF MOTORDROME

In the 'Teens, racing around banked wooden tracks was all the rage. You could sit in the stands and see the whole lap! As it turned out, 400-pound motorcycles hurtling around small tracks at 90 mph nearly within arms' reach of packed grandstands wasn't all that safe. After a few fatal accidents involving racers and spectators (and foot-long wooden splinters), the M&ATA no longer sanctioned motordrome racing after 1919. Which led to...

BOARDTRACK RACING!

Beverly Hills Speedway might be the most famous of the big boardtracks that were built after WWI. BHS hosted its first automobile race in 1919, and its first motorcycle event the following year. Located on 400 acres where the Beverly Wilshire Hotel now sits, the 37-degree banked 1.25-mile track was 50 feet wide and constructed of 40,000 board-feet of Oregon pine. At least 24 boardtracks were reportedly built around the country, and the sport was not without its problems. When the great Otto Walker's front tire blew out in 1915 in Chicago, a magazine reported "there was scarcely an inch of his body that was not filled with splinters."

1920

1920 INDIAN SCOUT

The original Scout's 37-inch (606cc) sidevalve V-twin had its transmission bolted to the engine casing, allowing a geared primary drive instead of the usual problematic chain. Irish immigrant/engineer/racer Charles Franklin's new bike used a short double-cradle steel frame and had a claimed weight of just 370 pounds – making it light and agile. In 1927, the engine grew to 745 cc (45 ci), and in 1928, we even got a front brake! The Scout was a huge success.



THE HARLEY-INDIAN WARS

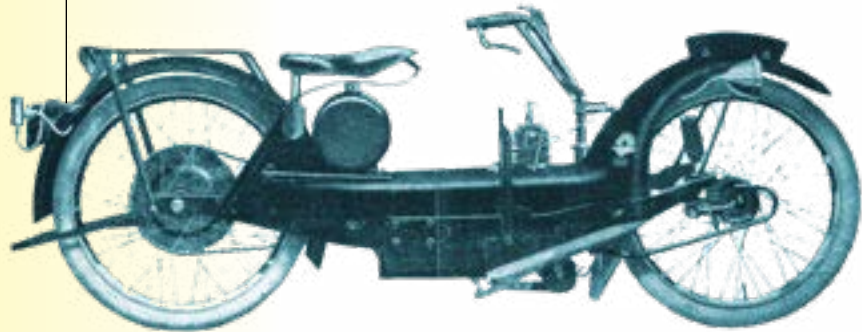
These preceded the '20s by more than a decade, but poured the foundation on which we still stand. The V-twin had already been around for a while, but when Indian (the Hendee Motorcycle Company, actually) produced its first one in 1906, and Harley released its new F-head V-twin in 1909, the battle was truly joined in what once was, and maybe still is – depending on who you ask – one of the most famous brand rivalries in capitalism.



ST LOUIS MOTORDROME

1921 NERACAR

Carl A. Neracher began manufacturing these first in the UK, and then in Syracuse, N.Y., in 1922. Its funky box-frame construction reportedly gave it a low center of gravity and hub-center steering (later to reappear in the Bimota Tesi) gave great, easy handling. The frame also partially contained the 221cc two-stroke single, which gave the Neracar a top speed of 35 mph and a claimed 85 mpg. It almost looks like the first scooter...hints of Burgman...



rpm, turning the front wheel 600 times per minute at 60 mph. With no clutch or gearbox, best not to stop. Some 2,000 were produced, until Germany's chaotic post-WWI hyper-inflation ended production about 1926.

1922 MEGOLA SPORT

File this one under directions we probably won't be going; the Megola mounted its 5-cylinder, 640cc radial engine inside the front wheel. That engine spun merrily along at 3600

1922



GIRDER FORK SUSPENSION

"Ever try to push a wheelbarrow over a curbstone?" asks Henderson in its 1921 ad for its new fork design. "Hard work, isn't it? But reversing the operation and pulling the wheel over the same curb is surprisingly easy. That's exactly the principle behind Henderson (and Excelsior's) new front suspension!" The new fork will also withstand stresses and strains that crumple other forks, natch. Between that and Excelsior/Henderson's 3.5-inch tires (most of the competition are 3-inch), you get real riding comfort and great mileage.

1922 HARLEY-DAVIDSON SPORT TWIN

Who knew the Harley-Davidson factory built an opposed twin a year before BMW? We're guessing no one. It was really four years earlier, since the 36 cubic-inch (584cc) Sport Twin was launched in 1919 as a more gentlemanly, economical alternative to Harley's bigger V-Twins. The opposed twin's cylinders ran fore/aft rather than transversely, as on the BMW, and generated about six horsepower. The 1920 Sport Twin reportedly introduced electric lighting (vs. acetylene), along with a fully enclosed drive chain for leg safety and cleanliness. Harley-Davidson employee Hap Scherer rode a Model W Sport Twin from Canada to Mexico in record time, which H-D used in various promotions.



MOTORCYCLE GEAR

In its earliest days, motorcycling was a sport of well-heeled gentlemen (and some ladies), who turned themselves out in tweed suits, flat caps and equestrian boots. As speeds increased, the need for protection slowly became evident, and some, but not all, began wearing leather helmets and protective goggles. By the late '20s, some progressed from woolen sweaters to leather.

TIRE TECHNOLOGY

Tire sizes were all over the map, as you'd expect, leaning toward taller sizes no doubt in search of stability on dirt roads and race tracks. Your Brough Superior and Scott Flying Squirrel ran 19-inch tires front and rear, your BMW R32 and Excelsior Super X ran 26-inchers (!), and Harley's Model D used a 26/23-inch combo. By the end of the '20s, old-school "clincher" tires phased out in favor of the wire-bead tires and drop-center rims we still ride on today.



1914-1921 DODGE CITY INTERNATIONAL

The Chicago Motorcycle Club had put on the first Classic National Championship race around the streets of Elgin, Ill., in 1913 - "Classic," because it was inspired by the Isle of Man Classic TT. It drew 11,000 spectators, but the costs for crowd control around the 8.5-mile course, among other issues, made it a losing proposition money-wise. For 1914 the sanctioning FAM contacted the Kansas Short Grass Club, and a deal was struck to replace the Elgin Classic with a 300-mile endurance race on a 2-mile dirt oval just north of Dodge City. The 1914 International Dodge City 300 drew 36 riders from the U.S., UK, Canada and France. By 1920, after taking a few years off for the war, the Dodge City 300 was the biggest motorcycle race in the country.



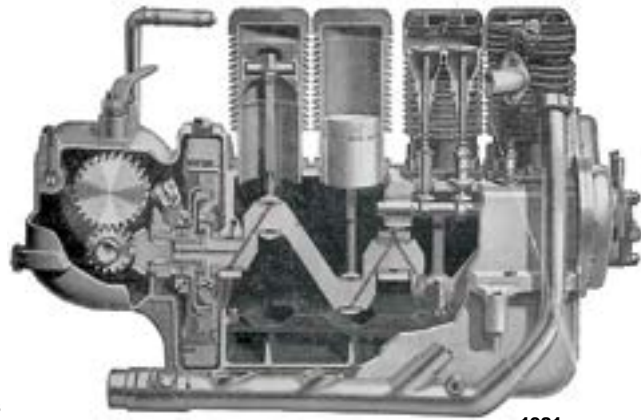
HILLCLIMBING: A HIT WITH THE MASSES

Harley-Davidson factory racer John Grove "going over the top" in 1924. Board tracks were too expensive for promoters to maintain, not to mention dangerous. By the mid-'20s, the Big Three - Indian, Harley and Excelsior - were in search of more economical ways to get their products in front of the masses. Think of hillclimb as early Supercross, then. In *Motorcycle and Bicycle Illustrated*, Grove writes of a hillclimb in Pittsburgh, Pa.: "About halfway up this hill there is quite a bump, and those having a fast machine sure have built up some speed at the point where you hit it. Last season one of the jumps I made was measured and found to be just over 60 feet...I might describe this sensation as a feeling like an airplane had suddenly let out an anchor and pulled me up, then cut the rope suddenly."

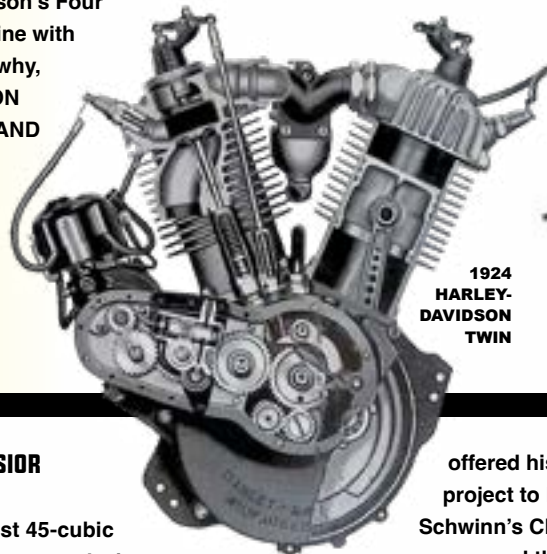


ENGINE TECH

“To sustain life in the human engine, the blood must be maintained in constant circulation, and nature does not drip or splash the blood around to the parts that need it,” says an Excelsior ad. “There is but one method of positively insuring that the oil will reach the bearings — copying nature’s pressure-feed circulation system!” Henderson’s Four was the only engine with it in 1921. That’s why, “THE HENDERSON WILL STAND UP AND KEEP IT UP!”



1921
EXCELSIOR
FOUR
CYLINDER

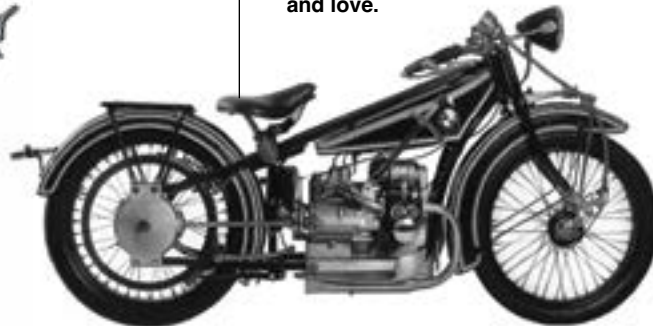


1924
HARLEY-
DAVIDSON
TWIN

1923

1923 BMW R32

At its WWI peak, BMW employed over 3,500 people and built state-of-the-art aircraft engines. After the war, it turned to engineering whatever would keep the lights on, since the Treaty of Versailles banned it from making airplanes. Its first motorcycle, the 1920 Flink, was not a success. In 1922 Max Friz designed the 494cc flat-twin, with three-speed gearbox and shaft drive. It was the talk of the 1923 Paris Motorcycle Salon, a huge hit, and the first of the BMW “boxers” we still ride and love.



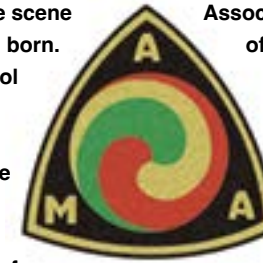
1924 MOTO GUZZI C4V

Meanwhile in Italy, a pair of bored WWI pilots and their driver/mechanic dreamed up their idea of the perfect motorcycle. Having a shipping magnate for one of their fathers had them off to a nice start, and their first motorcycle appeared in 1920. By 1924, they’d come up with the C4V racer. With an overhead cam and four valves, its 498cc single was good for 22 hp and 93 mph, which made it the first successful Italian motorcycle in 500cc racing. Sporting the same external flywheel and original oversquare dimensions, that same basic horizontal single remained in production until 1976 in the form of the Falcone.



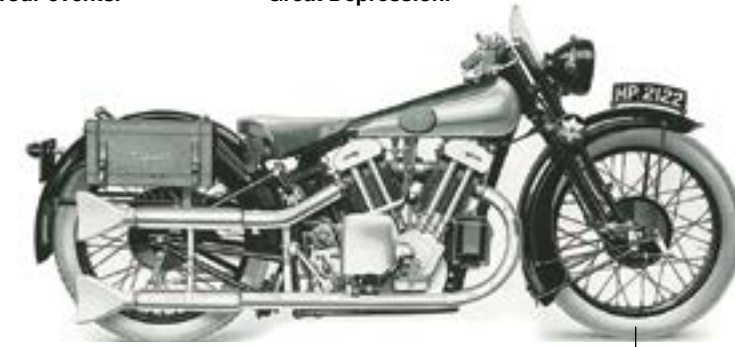
AMA GYPSY TOURS

With roots reaching back to 1913 and an official designation given by the M&ATA in 1920, Gypsy Tours burst onto the scene before the AMA was born. The AMA took control of the Gypsy Tours in 1924, and AMA membership became a requirement for participation in the events. Thousands of motorcyclists joined the AMA as a result, with many doing so at the Gypsy Tour events.



THE AMA IS ESTABLISHED

Initially a racing registration element of the Motorcycle & Allied Trades Association, the American Motorcycle Association morphed into more of a rider-focused arm during the middle and late 1920s, supporting members, organizing events such as the already-established Gypsy Tours, and fighting bad legislation. Membership jumped substantially over the decade, and continued into the 1930s despite the Great Depression.



1924 EXCELSIOR SUPER X

America’s first 45-cubic inch V-twin happened when Arthur Constantine, Assistant Chief Engineer at H-D, drew up plans for a mid-sized V-Twin to compete against the Indian Scout. “When he presented the unauthorized project to Walter Davidson, he was reprimanded for wasting the company’s time,” *Pioneers of American Motorcycle Racing* says. Constantine promptly quit and

offered his services and his project to Excelsior, Ignaz Schwinn’s Chicago motorcycle company, and the Excelsior Super X appeared in 1925. Not long after, 45 cubic inches became the premier class in dirt-track racing, where the Super X proved very competitive against the Indians and Harleys of the day. Sales were reportedly not bad at all either, thanks to the Excelsior’s superior fit and finish. But Schwinn was badly spooked by 1929 events on Wall Street, and in 1931 pulled the plug on Excelsior and Henderson — which he’d also acquired. What might’ve been.



1924

1925

1925 BROUGH SUPERIOR SS100

With its 1000cc overhead-valve JAP (J.A. Prestwich) V-twin, this one was tested and guaranteed to go over 100 mph in the quarter-mile, but the overall package was really the thing. Legend has it that after George Brough had been quoted referring to his bikes as “the Rolls-Royce of motorcycles” to a reporter, a Rolls-Royce executive visited the Nottingham factory to complain. After seeing the Brough operation and its products in action, though, he gave his blessing for the R-R comparison. George Brough didn’t want to make the most motorcycles, he just wanted to make the best. Production ceased at the end of WWII, and word is there are 71 SS100s still in existence.



PORTLAND SPEEDWAY

AMERICAN SIX DAYS TRIAL

On the heels of the aforementioned Dodge City 300, the AMA also took on the challenge of hosting the first American National Six-Days Trial. Inspired by the International Six Days Trial — then gaining popularity in Europe — the six-day-long endurance race spanned from New York City to Columbus, Ohio, and back, and saw 47 of 49 participants complete the race. With the high number of finishers, critics and advocates for the European Six-Days competition declared the American Trial as “too easy.”



The Neracar team took first place in the Lightweight division and the Team trophy. H-D's factory effort included two solos and two sidecars (top). A sidecar, apparently, is a good thing to have when you hit a rough section and/or mud. John R. Yake (center) won the private-owner sidecar class and had the best overall score. J.R. Bruce, identified as “the short one,” held the distinction of being the oldest contestant.

1923 THREE FLAG TITLE

Wells Bennett (below), madman. In 1922, Bennett established a 24-hour distance record that remained unbroken for 15 years – 1,562.54 miles in 24 hours on a Henderson Four, on a board track in Tacoma, Wash. Later that year, he set the transcontinental record from Los Angeles to New York in 6 days, 16 hours and 13 minutes. In August 1923, he took the Three-Flags Run title by riding from the Canadian border near Blaine, Wash., to Tijuana, Mexico, in 42 hours and 44 minutes. Wells was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 2000.

Right: More entrants to the Six Days Trial, including Team Rajah Spark Plug.



SCOTT FLYING SQUIRREL

Alfred Angus Scott had been toying with two-strokes as early as 1898, experienced TT success in 1912, and it all came to fruition in 1926, unfortunately four years after his death. The Flying Squirrel was decades ahead of its time, with a 596cc liquid-cooled, oil-injected, parallel-twin, two-stroke in a rigid, triangulated steel tube frame with a telescopic fork. Quiet, smooth, light (325 pounds) and powerful, it even had a kick starter – no more bumping! Though dogged by money problems and ownership changes, various Squirrels continued to be built for 25 years.



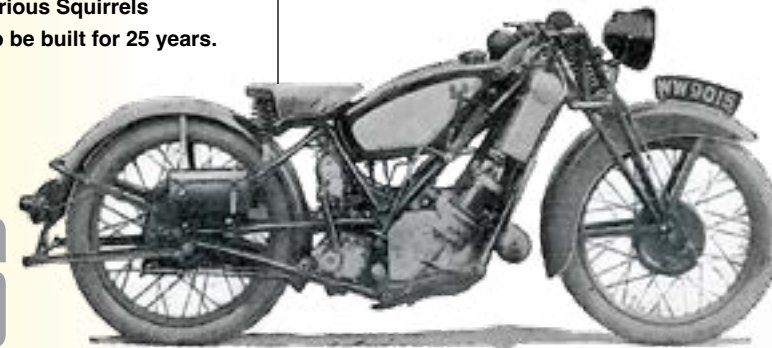
AUTOPED: THE SCOOTER IS BORN

In the nothing-new-under-the-sun category, the first mass-produced motorized scooter in the U.S. was basically a child's toy with an engine mounted over the front wheel. A battery-operated version appeared later, after the Everready Battery Company bought Autoped.

All sorts of people were attracted to the Autoped for all kinds of urban mobility reasons, including the New York Postal Service. Juvenile delinquents, reports *Smithsonian* magazine, saw their own window of opportunity, repurposing Autopeds as getaway vehicles. And California businesses had purchased 50 machines by 1917 so they could be rented out at beach resorts.



1926



1927: THE LAST FORD MODEL T

The first one, in 1909, sold for \$825. By 1922, Henry Ford and the economy of scale had the price for a Runabout down to \$319. We're going to go out on a limb and speculate the Model T did more than anything to make motorcycles more a hobby in the U.S., and less a form of transportation. How many would-be motorcycle buyers, when confronted with the price tag of their dream machine, involuntarily spat out, I could have a car for that! Plenty of people did. Their loss... (Harley's “economical” Model D, new for 1929, had a list price of \$290.)

BREAKAWAY PROMOTERS!

The AMA organized its first race meet in Toledo, Ohio, from July 24-26, 1924. Months later, the AMA faced its first challenge when the owner of the old Ascot racetrack in Southern California announced he would hold an event without an AMA sanction.

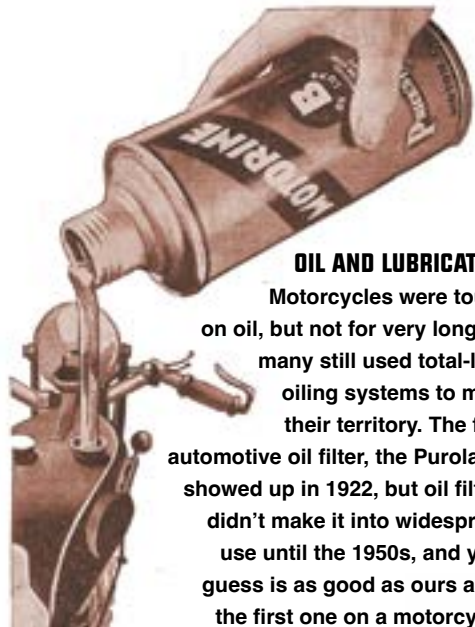
Warning against “outlaw” events such as the one out in California, *Motorcycle and Bicycle Illustrated* magazine wrote, “It won't be long before they discover that without the approval and backing of the controlling body, things will not go very well. The riders will find that with no one to back them up when they have a just grievance against the promoter, that they will be at the mercy of track management. The promoters will discover that the best riders will have nothing to do with them and that maintaining discipline among a bunch of independents who neither owe allegiance to nor are backed up by a controlling body is not as simple as it might seem. No sport has ever amounted to anything without a strong controlling body, loyally supported by its membership.”

Ascot's owner ultimately decided to pledge his loyalty to the AMA and commit to a unified approach to growing the sport of motorcycling. Within its first full year of sanctioning competition in 1925, the AMA awarded 14 national championships and held 56 race meets, the most popular of which involved the discipline of hillclimb.



**O.E.C. BLACKBURNE
THREE-WHEELER**

They did things differently at the Osborne Engineering Co. in Gosport, England. One early motorcycle used a steering wheel instead of a handlebar. This three-wheeler appeared in 1928 as a prototype submitted to the War Office for testing, for use over rough terrain (complete with a caterpillar track carried on the rear fender for “use on boggy ground”). “The performance over shingle and broken ground,” wrote *MotorCycling* in a 1928 test, “was truly amazing, and the machine should have commercial possibilities in the Colonies.” Later, OEC would produce a two-wheeled car.



OIL AND LUBRICATION

Motorcycles were tough on oil, but not for very long, as many still used total-loss oiling systems to mark their territory. The first automotive oil filter, the Purolator, showed up in 1922, but oil filters didn't make it into widespread use until the 1950s, and your guess is as good as ours as to the first one on a motorcycle.

NEW SPEED RECORD

Top speed was a big deal in the 1920s, and Zenith held the motorcycle world speed record on two occasions — the first FIM record of 124.55 mph (200.44 km/h) set in 1928 by Owen M. Baldwin at Autodrome de Linas-Monthéry in Arpajon, France. That's fast! By 1937, Ernst Henne went 173 mph (279.503 km/h) on his streamlined supercharged BMW, “the Egg.”

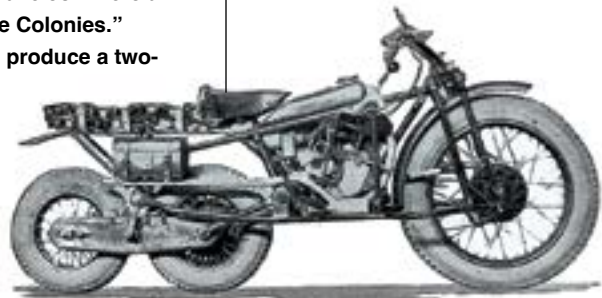
OVERHEAD CAM TECH

This three-valve OHC Cyclone engine, built by Joerns Motor Manufacturing Company of St. Paul, Minn., powered early Cyclone board track racers and dirt trackers. Both fast and furious, that bevel-drive shaft to the overhead cam was costly and complicated to produce, and lack of a pressurized lubrication system up to that OHC also did the Cyclone no favors in the longer races common at the time. This engine evolved into a 61-cubic-inch V-twin, of which maybe six are left, making the Cyclone among the rarest of vintage motorcycles.

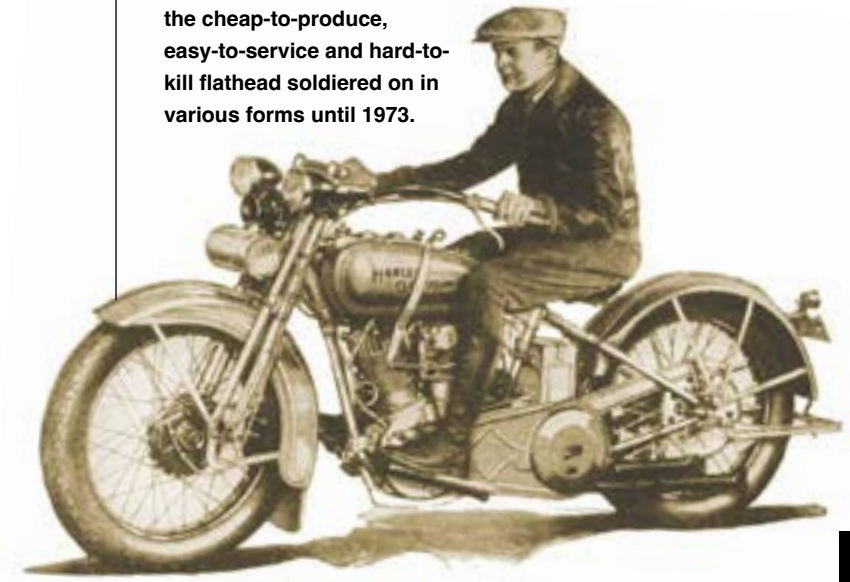
1929 HARLEY-DAVIDSON MODEL D

Harley's first 45-cubic-inch model was a direct result of needing a bike to battle the 1928 Indian Scout 101 and Excelsior Super X in the popular middleweight 750cc class. The side-valve V-twin originally produced 15 hp, with a three-speed hand shifter and chain final drive; higher spec versions up to 20 hp were available via increased compression ratios. At just \$290, the Model D set H-D up well to weather the Great Depression (whether anybody had seen it coming or not), and the cheap-to-produce, easy-to-service and hard-to-kill flathead soldiered on in various forms until 1973.

1927



1929



AMA HIRES E.C. SMITH

Smith, a former referee for the Federation of American Motorcyclists and the M&ATA, was hired as a full-time secretary in October 1928, beginning a 30-year run in the role. Then-President Jim Wright hired Smith with the orders to move the AMA offices from Chicago to Columbus, Ohio.

With 14 years of exposure to competition in his role as a referee, Smith had confidence the racing side of motorcycling was in a healthy spot, so he sought to grow club activity and improve the public's perception of motorcycling.

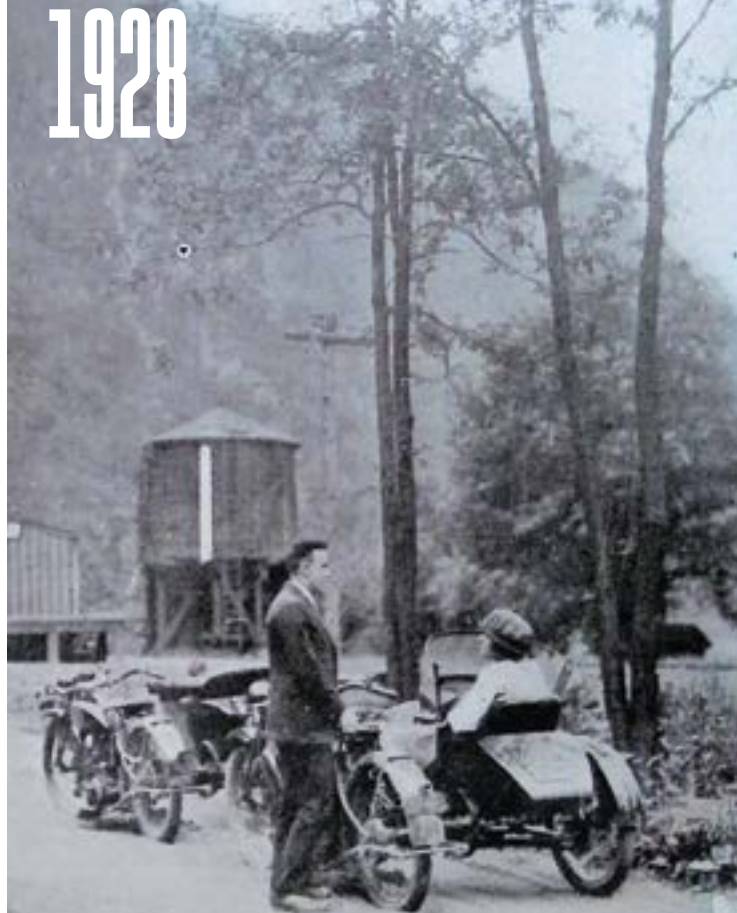
To accomplish these tasks, Smith packed up a movie projector and traveled throughout the country to show a film made by Firestone and Goodyear tire companies.

Smith (on the left) stepped into his role when membership sat at 4,200 people and 62 AMA-chartered clubs, and over the next decade — during the Great Depression, mind you — he saw membership quadruple, and the number of AMA-chartered clubs climb above a thousand.



E.C. SMITH

1928



“Dud” Perkins and the Harley-Davidson riders win 5 firsts, 5 seconds and 3 thirds at the San Francisco Motorcycle Club Hill Climb.

HARLEY-DAVIDSON MOTOR CO. MILWAUKEE, WIS.

HARLEY-DAVIDSON

RACING LEGENDS!

The mid-1920s saw AMA Motorcycle Hall of Famer Oscar Lenz become the first rider to top the Lansing hill in Lansing, Mich. Lenz went on to organize the famous Jack Pine Enduro.

Out West, a young “Daring” Dudley Perkins was dominating the hillclimb scene as part of another chapter in his AMA Hall of Fame career. Replacing track racing as the most popular, hillclimb had become a staple of AMA competition in the '20s. In 1925, the Peoria Motorcycle Club held its first hillclimb, and that same year a boy named Jules Horky began his job as delivery boy for the U.S. Mail. Horky, who was gifted a four-cylinder motorcycle from his father to help deliver the mail, went on to work for the AMA for nearly three decades, helping guide the AMA's competition efforts.

AMA Motorcycle Hall of Famer Joe Petrali won his first dirt track title in 1925, and followed the accomplishment up with a hillclimb championship in 1928. He added several more championships through the early 1930s. AMA